Ethics and Literature: The Case of Cleanth Brooks

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Abstract: This paper examines the relationship between ethics and literature.It deals with the 'ethical turn' in recent (primarily American) literary-critical thinking.After a period dominated by a variety of methods supposedly oblivious to ethical criticism, Martha Nussbaum and others like her have once again made the inquiry into the ethical powers of literature a crucial concern of literary studies. My argument will be that to understand what is going on in recent debates arguing for or against ethical criticism we really need to investigate the relationship between literary formalism and ethics in literature.I shall approach the question of the relationship between ethics and literature through the work of one modern American "formalist" critic: Cleanth Brooks (1906-1994). Specifically, Brooks will serve as a concrete example of a `formalist´ critic who nevertheless shows great interest in the ethical as well as the aesthetic values of literature. In my opinion, a renewed interest in Brooks is justified because of the ethical turn in literary studies.

This study is motivated by two research questions: (1) Is Brooks a rigorous New Critic who cares only about how the technique called 'close reading' applies to poetry to stress the poem's value and understand its meaning? (2) Will Brooks serve as a concrete example of a "formalist" critic who nevertheless shows great interest in ethical as well as aesthetic values of literature? To examine these questions, I need to discuss how Brooks sees the relationship between himself and the deconstructionists and post-structuralists, as part of his own revaluation of the New Criticism and of his own role in it. There is a considerable overlap

between the technique of reading poetry most commonly associated with New Criticism and the ethics of reading literature. This connection, however, is not always easily traceable.

Key concepts: ethics, literature, New Criticism, ethical criticism, , "formalist textual" approach to literature, close reading, post-structuralists, American deconstructionists, Cleanth Brooks, cultural crisis, Christian approach to literature….

Notable new publications on the value and relevance of ethical criticism began in the late 1980s both in literary criticism and also in works of philosophy. In philosophy, Martha Nussbaum, Alasdair McIntyre, and John McDowell are only a few among recent philosophers who have attempted to link moral philosophical discussions to literary theory and the ethics of reading literature. Much of their work responds to one major concern: the ability of literature, and especially fiction, to foster ethical theory.But the main first figures who are of capital influence to shape this new ethical criticism are Martha Nussbaum and Wayne C. Booth by their famous successive published works. Marshal W. Gregory cited some of the famous and crucial publications that marked the beginning of the ethical return in literary studies. As he put it:

> In 1986 Nussbaum published *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, followed in 1988 by Wayne Booth's magisterial *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, followed two years later (1990) by another important Nussbaum book, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. Two years later, in 1992, Frederick Crews published *The Critics Bear It Away*, which received much attention as a scorching attack on postmodernist inconsistencies and weaknesses" (Gregory 2010: 280).

These publications, and others, Gregory maintains, "create a strong case against postmodernist assumptions", and they mark "a strong case for the intrinsic importance of ethics to human beings (*Ibid*.281). They all stimulate a new way of thinking about ethics in relation to literature and narrative. According to Gregory; the renewed ethical criticism during the first decade of the 21st century, "is expanding as the credibility of postmodernism is shrinking" Gregory 2010: 278).

As Richard J. Bernstein notes, Postmodernity is "slippery, vague, and ambiguous." (Bernstein 1991: 11) That is why it should be treated with much caution. My use of the term postmodernism here is limited to literary theory. More specifically, I focus here on the question of postmodernism and ethics in the north-American literary criticism. Gregory prefers "to use 'postmodernism' as a catch-all term for most of the critical approaches that dominated discourse during what many call, looking back, the 'turn to theory'. (Gregory 2010: 274) In theory, "there is a group of French intellectuals who are usually mentioned as central or original to postmodernism: Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Jacques Lacan." (Dahlern 2012: 35)

Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Post-Modem Condition* (1979) "has introduced the topic of postmodernity to a greater audience and has given much cause for controversy by his definition of the term." (Ibid. 45) The term post-modernism, writes Lyotard "is in current use on the American continent among sociologists and critics; it designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts"(Lyotard 1984: xxiii). In the United States, writesNina Dahlern,"it is usually thought to have had its (postmodernism) heyday with writers like Thomas Pynchon, Donald Barthelme, and John Barth in the period of the 1970s to the 1980s" (Dahlern 2012: 33). In US culture, Rivkin and Ryan explain, "the term "Post-Modernism"[…] "had been used to describe a self-reflexive style of writing that broke with standard literary conventions." (Rivkin and Ryan 2004: 257) Lyotard "borrowed the term

"Post-Modernism" from US culture […]Almost immediately, "Post-modernism" began to be applied to both the contemporary era and to Post-structuralism" (*Ibid*.257).

From the 1930s to the 1980s a variety of methods, apparently unfamiliar to ethical criticism, had dominated the literary scene. As Gregory put it, "throughout the 20th century […] new ideas from all across Europe and America […] swept ethical criticism away […] At the academic and professional levels ethical criticism was killed, crushed, *and* annihilated" (Gregory2010:273-74). From "a clearly Anglo-North-American perspective" (*Ibid*.273) he "presents a historical account that aims to explain the various circumstances that "swept ethical criticism away" (*Ibid*.273). Vincent B. Leitch asserted in "Taboo and Critique: Literary Criticism and Ethics," that ever since the 1930s "a certain taboo on 'ethical criticism' […] ha[d] existed in American Academic literary circles" (Leitch 1988: 47).Gregory upholds that 20th-century 'theory' is responsible for the fall of ethical criticism. He refers to

> such movements and theories as modernism, logical positivism, the writings of Karl Marx, the cultural aftermath of World Wars One and Two, the 20th century elevation of scientific knowledge over humanistic inquiry, New Criticism, post-colonial studies, Freudianism, deconstruction, the work of Michel Foucault, anthropological relativism, changing views of human nature, and, finally, changing notions of truth (*Ibid*.274-75).

While enumerating various theoretical movements, Gregory specifically notes 'New Criticism' and 'postmodernism' as critical approaches that "did more than merely discredit ethical criticism of the arts; they tended to discredit ethics as a general human enterprise" (*Ibid*. 274). Much later, in the essay "What I believe and Why" - published in the *Minnesota Review* in 2009 - Leitch explained that in "Taboo and critique"

> I outlined my own project of cultural critique, fusing post-structuralism with post-Marxist cultural studies. First, I criticized the taboo on extrinsic criticism promulgated by the American New Critics and tacitly conveyed to me by most of my professors. Second, I sketched my own program by working through faults with the 1980s critical projects of Wayne Booth (liberal pluralism), Robert Scholes (structuralism), and J. Hillis Miller (conservative deconstruction), all major critical voices of the time. Where the New Critics focused on the literary text as an autonomous aesthetic object and explicitly forbade critics from linking it with society, history, psychology, economics, politics, or ethics, cultural critics of all stripes, myself included, accepted and affirmed such links. (Leitch 2014: 1)

Sharing almost the same opinion; Leitch and Gregory charged postmodern thinking and American New Criticism "of turning *their* back on ethics" (Tammy and Adia 2014: 199–218).

Both moral philosophers (who connect ethical theory to literary studies), and ethical critics (who defend a return to ethical concerns in literature) have viewed Anglo-American variations on Formalism with suspicion. They often cast, at least in the United States, New Criticism together with more recent literary theories such as deconstruction and post-structuralism as

responsible for promoting a practice of reading and interpretation that is oblivious to ethical concerns in literary studies.

As they sometimes appear to be used, post-structuralism and deconstruction are two movements which riposte to the belief characteristic of structuralist thought. In early twentieth century Saussure's linguistic study contributed to the development of structuralism and put up a method of interpretations of literary texts. According to Jonathan Culler, "[i]n the 1960s and 1970s French structuralism had energized the study of literature as a cultural practice and mode of signification and representation, stressing its self-reflexivity, granting a pivotal role to avant-garde literature (Culler 1981: p xiv).Starting in the 1960s,structuralism"[b]y utilizing the techniques, methodologies, and vocabulary of linguistics…provides a scientific view of how we achieve meaning not only in literary works but in all forms of communication and social behavior. (Bresslers, 1994: 88). Culler makes us understand better this overwhelming interest in structuralism. As he put it:

> One important feature of literary criticism in recent years has been the growth of interest in signs and their modes of signification. In the early 1960s Roland Barthes informed readers who were interested in the latest intellectual fashion that the way to recognize a structuralist was by a certain vocabulary of signification: look for significant and signifié or syntagmatic and paradigmatic; by these signs shall ye know them. … today, doubtless because of the proselytizing activity of structuralists themselves, this vocabulary has grown common. Signifier and signified are no longer reliable signs of a particular theoretical commitment. They appear in a range of critical and interpretive writings and even in works of literary history. The activity of criticism has become bound up with the sign and the debates of literary theory bear upon the possibility of mastering it. (Culler 1981: Vii)

Post-structuralism do not believe in the stability of the sign and its structure. As Robert Young puts it:

> Post-structuralism, then, involves a shift from meaning to staging, or from the signified to the signifier…. In brief, it may be said that poststructuralism fractures the serene unity of the stable sign and the unified subject. In this respect, the 'theoretical' reference points of post-structuralism can be best mapped via the work of Foucault, Lacan and Derrida, who in different ways have pushed structuralism to its limits and shown how its most radical premises open it up to its own deconstruction. (Robert Young 1981: 8)

Post-Structuralism is a reaction to structuralism. It refuses to see language as a stable, closed system. For post-structuralits, the poem or novel is no longer seen as a closed entity. Accordingly, literature is not an endless play of signifiers which can never be limited to a single center, essence, or meaning. Jacques Derrida's paper on "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (delivered in 1966 at John Hopkins University) is seen as strong influence in the creation of post-structuralism. Derrida's critique of structuralism also foreshadowed the advent of deconstruction that--like post-structuralism--critiques the

notion of "origin" built into structuralism. In order to understand Derrida's repudiation of structuralism it is important to understand just what its weakness was that left it so opened to attack. One of the main reason is structuralism's claim to "science" its very aspiration towards certainty and rigor.

By detaching himself from the various philosophical movements and traditions that preceded him (phenomenology, existentialism, and structuralism), Derrida developed a method of thinking called "deconstruction" in the mid-1960s. Deconstruction in Derrida, generally seeks to uncover, and then to challenge, the various oppositions that dominated ways of thinking in Western tradition—presence/absence, speech/writing, and so forth. Deconstruction has two aspects: literary and philosophical. But to understand the literary aspect, the philosophical aspect should be well understood.

Deconstruction, Wellek tells us, "starts with the "death of the author", already formulated long ago by Roland Barthes" (Wellek in Jost 1990: 77). In mid-twentieth century, Roland Barthes continued and reacted to Saussure's methodology and developed a "structural analysis of narratives". (Barthes 1977: 79) His purpose was to question "the reality effect" of narratives. (Barthes 1989: 141). Barthes established a system of understanding narrative and discovering ' truth based on his theory of codes. He thinks of a literary text as a textile produced by weaving. (101-2) Barthes informs us that:

> the text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the message of an Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture" (Barthes 1977: 146).

His landmark essay, "The Death of Author," in his collection of essays *Image, Music, Text*, discusses the problematic concept of authorship. The essay demonstrates that an author is not simply a "person" but a socially and historically established subject. Barthes emphasizes that an author does not exist prior to or outside of language. In other words, it is writing that makes an author and not *vice versa*. "[T]he writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings [...] in such a way as never to rest on any one of them" (146). Thus the author, in some ways, did not write the text. This is to say that Barthes puts the emphasis away from the subject who produces the work and focuses on the writing. As Barthes put it:

> the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning. In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say writing), by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases--reason, science, law. (— Roland Barthes, Image, Music, Text 147)

Then Barthes, as Wellek explains, "draws the consequences" (Wellek in Jost 1990: 78). According to Barthes, "once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile" (Barthes 1977: 147). By giving "a text an Author", means in his view, "to impose

a limit on the Text" (Barthes 1977: 146).The idea of the death of the author has to free up the text and reject to impose a limit on that text. With the death of the author there is in fact no origin, there remains only language to be dissevered. According to Barthes, "disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins." (146). Barthes then describes writing as "the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing."(Barthes 1977: 142). According to Barthes, the absence of the author gives the reader more freedom to decipher meaning in a piece of literary work.

In his 1977 lecture "Signature, Event, Context", Derrida tackles the question of the death of the author; an issue which is linked to one of the main themes of his philosophy: the distinction between speech and writing (écriture). As the author; Derrida argues, is used as a source of the text, the same way speech is the source of writing. Henceforth, the author here represents speech. Therefore, according to Derrida, the absence of the author is an attempt to understand the very nature of the text. "A text" writes Derrida, "is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game". (Derrida, 1981, p. 63.) Dissemination, translated by Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press. As a representation, writing; in Derrida's view, can be considered a center of meaning. Unlike Barthes, Derrida does not substitute the author with the reader. Derrida instead, returns to the author. Concerning Derrida's attitude towards "the author", Sean Burke shows that in practice the deconstruction forces Derrida to return to the author. (Burke Seán. 1992: 138-149.)

The fact that there is no author, no originality, no limit in a text, lets Derrida say that "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte" (Derrida 1967a: 227). "There is nothing outside of the text [there is no outside-text; il n'y a pas de hors-texte]" (Derrida 1997: 159); a statement, Wellek argues, "that denies the whole perceptual life of humanity" (Wellek 1990: 78). The statement "there is nothing outside of the text", Wellek argues, is explained and defended by Derrida's theory, "which says that there is nothing but writing17 (écriture) and that writing precedes speaking" (Wellek 1990: 78). According to Derrida,

> there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the "real" supervening, and being added only while

[1] Language is writing in Derrida. As he puts it:

Writing is the dissimulation of the natural, primary, and immediate presence of sense to the soul within the logos. Its violence befalls the soul as unconsciousness. Deconstructing this tradition will therefore not consist of reversing it, of making writing innocent. Rather of showing why the violence of writing does not befall an innocent language. There is an originary violence of writing because language is first, in a sense I shall gradually reveal, writing. (Derrida 1997: 37)

I would wish rather to suggest that the alleged derivativeness of writing, however real and massive, was possible only on one condition: that the "original," "natural," etc. language had never existed, never been intact and untouched by writing, that it had itself always been a writing. An arche-writing whose necessity and new concept I wish to indicate and outline here; and which I continue to call writing only because it essentially communicates with the vulgar concept of writing. (Derrida 1997: 56)

> taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supple-ment, etc. (Derrida 1997: 160)

"Ecriture," ("writing"), in Derrida, "does not just mean writing but any system of signs, any institution, and any sense of orientation that precedes speech and what all others call and recognize as writing" (Wellek 1990: 78). There is no reality but a gathering of signs and language or 'writing' refers to nothing outside itself.

In her essay "From New Criticism to Deconstruction: The Example of Charles Feidelson's *Symbolism and American Literature*" Barbara Foley intends to draw a certain basic link between poststructuralism and New Criticism. As she put it:

> The continuity between New Criticism and poststructuralism has of course been noted by other scholars. A number of important issues are raised by this affinity between the two critical schools, however, and these issues have not yet by any means been discussed exhaustively. (Foley 1984: 45)

Among the scholars who noted this close continuity between the two theories of critical literary criticism, she cited Frank Lentricchia in *After the New Criticism* (1980); Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary' Ideas in Modern Society* (1979); and Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction* (1982).

New Criticism dominated American literary criticism from the early 1930s to the 1960s. New Criticism, says R. V. Young, "flourished during the thirties, forties, and fifties and remained formidably influential even through the sixties when its dominance over literary study was everywhere challenged" (Young. R. 1993: 38). According to Jonathan Culler, the New Criticism "[i]n the years since World War II, has been challenged, even vilified, but it has seldom been e ectively ignored. The inability if not reluctance of its opponents simply to evade its legacy testifies to the dominant position it has come to occupy in American and British universities" (Culler 1976: 244). The charges against the New Criticism are many. Here, I need consider only the fourth allegation against the New Criticism listed in René Wellek's essay "The New Criticism: Pro and Contra". As he put it:

> Finally the New Criticism is being dismissed as a mere pedagogical device, a version of the French explication de texte, useful at most for American college students who must learn to read and to read poetry in particular. (Wellek 1978: 611)

Most of the attacks confound New Critical formalism with much of the textual formalism adopted by some postmodernist trends, especially poststructuralism or what is known as deconstruction. Actually, one can find some convergence between the New Critical persuasions and some poststructuralist views. The deconstructionists' interest in the poem as such, and their emphasis on the autonomy of literature, their belief that the surface of the text is only apparently quiet, and their method of searching the text for relevant details can be mentioned in this respect. Likewise, we can mention also the poststructuralist notion of the death of the author or the idea that there is nothing outside the text.

This particular accusation against the New Criticism, Wellek is convinced, is "baseless" because of "an appeal to the texts that [he] wonder[s] whether current commentators have

ever actually read the writings of the New Critics" (Wellek 1978: 611). R. Young shares and upholds Wellek's mistrust. As he explains it, "more of the 'current commentators' have probably read deconstructionists like Frank Lentricchia or Jonathan Culler inveighing against the 'formalism' of the New Critics than have actually read the New Critics themselves" (Young, R. 1993: 39).

To deal with the issue of possible resemblances and common points between New Criticism and deconstruction- both in its French and American version-, I need to focus on and highlight some of the two movements' notions and concepts. I shall focus on the 'language as a self-referential system', the notion of the 'death of the author', the 'autonomy of literature' or literary text, and the method of reading literature.

To reconsider if there is any link or close relationship between the New Criticism and deconstruction let go back to 1966. This is the year when Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Jean Hyppolite, Claude Levi-Strauss, and the still young thinker Jacques Derrida, along with others held forth their famous conference entitled "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man" at Johns Hopkins University. The conference happened in the 1960s when

> [l]iterature remained a strong force for many thinkers…. who for all their differences made an impact on many disciplines and areas of thought. What began in France arrived in the United States first at Johns Hopkins, then within French, humanities, and comparative literature departments in the 1960s and 1970s, spreading in translation to English and other fields in the 1980s.
>
> Structuralism and deconstruction arrived in America about the same time, in the late sixties. However, in his essay "Roland Barthes and the Limits of Structuralism" Paul de Man attests that[d]espite the refinements of modern means of communication, the relationship between Anglo-American and continental-especially French-literary criticism remains a star-crossed story, plagued by a variety of cultural gaps and time lags. (Burt and Janie Vanpee, 1990: 177)

To make his point clear cut, de Man notices that Roland Barthes's *Essais critiques* that dated from 1953 to 1963 was only translated into English as *Critical Essays* by Richard Howard in 1972. Despite the resistance to French-literary criticism and theories there were some critics that "were deeply indebted to the French tradition of structuralist analysis." The leading critics are Seymour Chatman, Jonathan Culler, Claudio Guillén, Gerald Prince, and Robert Scholes." Then, "the heyday of structuralism and semiotics among American academic literary intellectuals lasted from the early 1970s to the early 1980s" (p 238). There are other American critics who espoused the theory of deconstruction. Johns Hopkins University included the first generation of deconstructors who became later connected with Yale University. This first generation included Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, Joseph Hillis Miller, Harold Bloom, and others. Later the list included other names of a younger generation, like Barbara Johnson and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The movement spread quickly to other centers and universities, though it was not easily welcomed and was met with strong counterattacks from the traditional camp.

In his first American phase, Paul de Man (1919-1983) was a scholar and critic devoted to Romantic writers. After 1970 he became the leading figure of American deconstruction and one of the founders of the Yale school. In the early seventies de Man turned his interest to

reconsidering the problematic relation between meaning and rhetoric. This concern reached its peak in *Allegories of Reading* (1979). De Man's influence on the American critical stage can be compared to the impact Derrida's thought has had. His deconstructive theory of meaning and rhetoric was meant to create a new kind of criticism.

In his *Blindness and Insight* (1971) de Man discusses the American New Critical notion of form and intent. He intends to draw a rapprochement which insists on "a closer contact" between European methods and the New Critical approach. As he put it

> Whether American or European, whether oriented toward form or toward history, the main critical approaches of the decades were all founded on the implicit assumption that literature is an autonomous activity of the mind, a distinctive way of being in the world to be understood in terms of its own purposes and intentions… Ironically enough, the long-awaited unification of European and American criticism seems to be coming about, albeit in the form of a radical questioning of the autonomy of literature as an aesthetic activity. (De Man 1983: 21)

For de Man "the paradigmatic structure of language is rhetorical rather than representational or expressive of a referential, proper meaning" (106). Meaning was conclusively a function of the linguistic, particularly rhetorical structures. De Man did not deny the referential nature of language, but put into question the nature of the referent. De Man insists that the resulting meaning in an allegory (= it is, according to him, the most general version of metaphor) departs from and even excludes the initial meaning. The fact that there is always a confrontation between one reading and another, "narrates the impossibility of reading", in his view. (77).

Truth is therefore undermined and the literary text "simultaneously asserts and denies the authority of its own rhetorical mode"; this kind of writing is "the most advanced and refined mode of deconstruction", says de Man (17). While Derrida was concerned with language and epistemology in general, de Man focused more on literary language. Since literature is essentially figurative, a literary text can accept misreading. "Some misreadings are good, some are bad: a good one always gives birth to another text, which, in its turn, produces other texts, and so on. Therefore the act of reading appeared to de Man as "an endless process in which truth and falsehood /were/ inextricably intertwined".

Deconstruction became then a famous form in contemporary criticism and the philosophy of language. It is based on emphasizing the fissure between word and meaning, or sign and referent. American deconstruction in its second phase was controlled by the theoretical findings of Derrida and de Man on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the other movements which set up the so-called post-structuralist age, such as feminism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, post-colonial studies, and others.

Another famous American deconstructive critic next to Paul de Man is Joseph Hillis Miller (1928-). The latter was considered to be the spokesman of the Yale School. He follows up the "tradition" of both Derrida and de Man. With the publication of his essay "Tradition and Difference", Miller showed his interest in deconstructive approach to literary texts. According to Miller, who also focuses on language, words themselves have an imaginary presence but they are characterized by difference which is, in his view, the real origin of all similarities and repetitions. The meaning of a word is referred to its remote etymology, and it has no fixed,

"real" meaning, but an endless network of senses.Miller's pertinent role to advocate deconstructive literary theory is in his attempts to repulse the accusations raised against deconstruction, especially those of nihilism or of contempt for social and political issues. Brooks is among other critics who raised the accusation of nihilism against deconstruction in literary criticism.

The method of close reading founded by the school of New Criticism was supposed to pave the way to Jacques Derrida's new theory of language and interpretation. The public of readers in America had already been prepared to accept and understand the theory of deconstruction. The American critics skipped the structuralist phase and Derridian concern with phenomology and turned directly to the deconstructive theory. The "Yale School" deconstructors found it necessary to give a pedagogical function to Derrida's thought, and apply it to the domain of literary criticism proper.

For Brooks, the theories of the French critic Jacques Derrida underlie much of recent American criticism. In the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, deconstructionism spread through universities and colleges in the United States. The basic ambiance of the movement is expressed by pronouncements such as Paul de Man's deeply personal statement that "the human self has experienced the void within itself and the invented fiction, far from filling the void, asserts itself as pure nothingness, our nothingness stated and restated by a subject that is the agent of its own instability" (De Man 1983: 19). The same mood is expressed by J. Hillis Miller when he says that "the representative aspect as in all great art tends to dissolve before the spectator's recognition of the primacy of the medium in its meaninglessness" (Miller qtd. in Nisbet, Ada, and Blake 1971: 150). Wellek explains this 'nothingness' and 'meaninglessness' as the "denial of any reference to reality" (Wellek in Jost 1990: 78). In his own terms,

> If there is no reality except an assembly of signs, writing has nothing to do with reality; it has no referential value and there is no referent … [w]hat the Russian formalists called the emphasis on the medium, the self-reflexivity of much art, is pushed to the extreme by the deconstructionists who argue that every word refers to another word (Wellek in Jost 1990: 77-8).

Deconstruction, then, "embraces nihilism as its basic philosophy" (Wellek in Jost 1990:77). Brooks consistently deprecated Derrida's philosophy, which, in his view, had the underlying goal of "destroy[ing] metaphysics itself – to demonstrate that none of our intellectual systems rests on any firm substratum of reality" (Brooks 1995: 21). Derrida's deconstructionist method, Brooks argues, largely depends upon Friedrich Nietzsche's skeptical philosophy. "For Nietzsche", Wellek explains, "nihilism is a deplorable symptom of the decadence of modern civilization" (Wellek in Jost 1990: 77). Inspired by Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics, "Derrida sees only deception in talk about a pure idea, a thought wholly clear to itself, a being fully present …He finds nothing true or stable in the way things appear to us" (Kierans 1997: 48-49). This leads him to his notion of deconstruction.

To understand Brooks's critique, one needs to understand how deconstructionism, and especially Derrida's version of it, conceives of the issue of metaphysics. According to Derrida "the concepts of play [play of signi$_{fi}$cation], interpretation, and sign (sign without present truth)" were substituted for "the Nietzschean critique of metaphysics, the critique of the concepts of Being and truth" (Derrida 2005: 354). Talking about "destructive discourses" –

including Nietzsche´s – Derrida states that all these discourses are meant to shake metaphysics. Derrida gives us one example from many:

> the metaphysics of presence is shaken with the help of the concept of sign … the signification“ sign” has always been understood and determined, in its meaning, as sign-of, a signifier referring to a signified, a signifier different from its signified. If one erases the radical difference between signifier and signified, it is the word “signifier” itself which must be abandoned as a metaphysical concept. (Derrida 2005: 354-55)

Derrida believes that one side of the thinking of play of signification “would be the Nietzschean . . . affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation” (Derrida 2005: 369). In Derrida´s reading of Nietzschean affirmation:

> [there] are . . . two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher . . . a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism….
> The second interpretation of interpretation, to which Nietzsche pointed the way, does not seek in ethnography, as Lévi-Strauss does, the “inspiration of a new humanism”…
> For my part, although these two interpretations must acknowledge and accentuate their difference and define their irreducibility, I do not believe that today there is any question of choosing—in the first place because here we are in a region (let us say, provisionally, a region of historicity) where the category of choice seems particularly trivial; and in the second, because we must first try to conceive of the common ground, and the différance of this irreducible difference (Derrida 2005: 369-70)

Through an analysis of Derrida’s thought, then, Brooks aims at revealing the basic philosophy that underlies the deconstructionists’ concept of literature. Claims of Derrida’s nihilism are not unique to Brooks. Also other scholars, such as for instance John Milbank in his critiques of Derrida as a Nietzschean, dismiss Derrida´s thought and that of other thinkers as “elaborations of a single nihilistic philosophy” (Milbank 1990: 278). Such a philosophy, Milbank claims, is allied with “postmodernism” and “articulates itself as, first, an absolute historicism, second as an ontology of difference, and third as an ethical nihilism” (Milbank 1990: 278). Also, in Julian Young´s *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life* (2003), Derrida’s work is dismissed as a manifestation of “the nihilism of postmodernity” (J. Young 2003: 196).
Brooks is then one of those critics and thinkers who proceed from “a more Nietzschean conception of deconstruction” (Caputo 2002: 47). Brooks allies Derrida´s deconstruction

closely with Nietzsche's notion of 'Death of God´.[2] Nietzsche, writes Brooks, "proclaimed the death of God and invited the adventurous soul to step fearlessly out into a realm beyond good and evil" (Brooks 1995: 18). Brooks believes, then, that modern literary theorists, in general, seem to "effect a revision of philosophy and the elimination of metaphysics" (Brooks 1995: 19). Derrida, Brooks claims, has promoted a philosophy based on "a deep skepticism . . . [that] can do little more than lend some further structuralism to . . . find some satisfaction in some free and joyous Nietzschean affirmation of his own life" (Brooks 1995: 21). As A. Carl Raschke puts it in "The Deconstruction of God," "Deconstruction, which must be considered the interior drive of twentieth-century theology rather than an alien agenda, is in the final analysis the death of God put into writing" (Raschkle and Scharlemann 1982:27).

Now regarded as "the classic treatment of Derrida and religion" (Smith 2005: 147), Brooks´s approach to the crucial question of the relationship between God and writing in Derrida is underexplored, however. Some very recent works reconsider Derrida's relationship with questions of 'God' and religion. Seen in his later writings from the 1980s, Derrida´s deconstructive reading and thinking are held to be motivated by ethical and religious demands. This is what Simon Critchley argues in "Derrida: the reader" (2007). In his view, "allowing for the considerable philosophical differences between Heidegger and Derrida, the closure of metaphysics is a variant of the completion of metaphysics" (Critchley 2007: 58). The ethical demand in Derrida, Critchley argues, is traced to the influence of Lévinas and "his idea of ethics being based on a relation of infinite responsibility to the other person" (Critchley 2007: 62). John D. Caputo holds that "deconstruction itself is structured like a religion – it lives and breathes a religious and messianic air; like religion it turns on a faith, a hope, even a prayer for the possibility of the impossible" (Caputo and Raschke 2002). Moreover, Brooks´s claim that Derrida´s deconstruction aims at eliminating metaphysics can be refuted as we read Derrida in the famous interview 'This Strange Institution Called Literature.' As Derrida states:

> [m]etaphysical assumptions" can inhabit literature or reading (. . . "reading literature") in a number of ways which should be very carefully distinguished. They aren't faults, errors, sins or accidents that could be avoided. .. In the content of literary texts, there are always philosophical theses. The semantics and the thematics of a literary text carry, "assume"- in the English or in the French sense of the word-some metaphysics. (Attridge 1992: 49)

Literature, J. Miller explains, is for Derrida "any piece of language, oral or written. . . Literature depends on the possibility of detaching language from its firm embeddedness in a social or biographical context and allowing it to play freely as fiction" (J. Miller qtd in Cohen 2001: 60). Literature is for Derrida, Miller continues, "the possibility of any utterance, writing, or mark to be iterated in innumerable contexts and to function in the absence of identifiable speaker, context, reference, or hearer" (J. Miller qtd in Cohen 2001: 59). Here, J. Miller explains,

[2] I refer the reader to Simon David Podmore's PhD thesis The Anatomy of the Abyss: Kierkegaard, Modernity, and the Self Before God. (2011).

> is Derrida apparently saying that literature is an excuse for saying or writing any damn thing that comes into your mind, even the most scandalous or subversive or negative, and then saying when challenged, "I refuse to respond. I am not responsible or responsive. It is my duty not to respond. I must keep literature's secret. That is not me speaking or writing. I am just giving an example of how it is possible to speak or write in that way, and I defy you to prove otherwise." (Derrida qtd in Cohen 2001: 66).

This authorization to say everything makes the author not responsible to anyone or to himself/herself. "Deconstructionists assume that every claim to truth is null and void" (Kierans 1997: 49). There can be according to Derrida, Kierans notes, "no deification of humanity, and no humanization of God" (Kierans 1997: 53). What literature is for Derrida "seems to confirm just what Derrida´s critics or critics of deconstruction in general hold against him (or it): it is irresponsible, nihilistic, and radically relativistic" (J. Miller qtd in Cohen 2001: 66).

Brooks is an American literary theorist allied to the "New Criticism." He co-edited *The Southern Review* with Robert Penn Warren from 1935 to 1942. He spent much of his life at Yale University, where he taught generations of American students how to read poetry and fiction. He contributed greatly to the literary reputation of his fellow-Southerner William Faulkner. Two of his texts in particular, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939) and *The Well-WroughtUrn* (1947), profoundly influenced American literary culture. As Mark Royden Winchell puts it in *Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism* (1996), Brooks is "the most important literary critic to come to prominence during the second third of the twentieth century" (Winchell 1996 : xi). He gained this standing early. In Beating the Bushes (1972), John Crowe Ransom wrote:

> It seems to me that Brooks just now is probably the most forceful and influential critic of poetry that we have. But this does not imply that his authority is universally esteemed and accepted, for it has turned out even better than that. Where he does not gain assent, he arouses protest, and counter criticism. (Ransom 1972: 159)

The New Critics, cultural and ethical critics routinely claimed, were solely concerned with the practice of close reading. As a New Critic, Brooks is seen as a rigorous analyst who cares only about how the technique called "close reading" applies to poetry to stress the poem's value and understand its meaning. As René Wellek puts it, "Cleanth Brooks is usually identified with one method, 'close reading,' and with a search for such devices as paradox and irony in English poetry" (Wellek qtd in Simpson 1976: 255). Chris Baldick, in *Criticism and Literary Theory 1890 to the Present* (1996), writes that "the most persuasive of practical explicators in this school [he means New Criticism] remained Cleanth Brooks, whose book *The Well-Wrought Urn* contains the best-known examples of 'close reading' for irony and paradox" (Baldick 1996: 124).

On the contrary, as I intend to show, with Brooks close reading differs from what other critics believe it to be. As an answer to the question "what is close reading?" Brooks explains in *Community, Religion, and Literature* (1995) that the method helps students "read the work with due attention; to consider the meanings of the words themselves; to treat the figurative

language as also meaningful" (Brooks 1995: 15). The whole idea of close reading, since the publication of *Understanding Poetry*, the (1938) volume that popularized the method for American college education, is "to make an appeal to students' understanding of the poetic process" (Brooks 1995: 16). The purpose of this process is to lead each student to an experience of the poem. That is, students are encouraged to enter into a close relation with their own experience through an adequate reading of poetry.

The literary criticism of Brooks finds its focus not only in the literary approach it advocates, but also in its view of cultural crisis seen as the spiritual crisis of the age. Indeed, Brooks's theory from the very beginning is also concerned with social and spiritual reform. Over the course of many years, literary criticism with Brooks developed into a special activity with religious import. In the standard treatment, criticism is for Brooks an institutional practice; that is a profession. But in the way Brooks yokes critical and religious discussions together in the same pattern of thought, his critical theory extends beyond this.

This is what has led critics such as Monroe K. Spears and René Wellek, but also Winchell, Simpson, and James A. Grimshaw, to believe in the ethical aspect of Brooks's literary theory. Furthermore, to recover the New Criticism, according to Hickman and McIntyre, is not only to draw attention to the techniques of 'close reading' and "reading for form" but also to emphasize "the New Critical commitment to pursuing ethical projects through approaches to aesthetics […] the cultural politics animating their work and methods […] and their pedagogical assumptions and approaches" (Hickman and McIntyre 2012: 6).

In expanding upon the views of these critics, we need to reconsider Brooks´s theoretical stances towards questions such as: "what is poetry?", "what is its function and use?" and "how do its function and nature relate to ethical judgment and evaluation?" In order to do so, we examine Brooks's conceptions of poetry, religion, and the nature of literature or poetry. Brooks emphasizes the moral and religious bias, which is at the origin of the movement of the New Criticism. He emphasizes the importance of the Agrarian principles in this respect. The purpose is to show how Brooks´s work relates to the issue of ethics in literature.

Brooks in his later writings, especially *Community* holds a plea for a more humanistic kind of criticism, which has been offered all along by the New Criticism. In this respect, I propose to reconsider Brooks as a forerunner of this ethical turn by briefly going back to the historical Brooks and showing how many of his ideas of that period compare to more recent ideas on the relationship between literature and ethics, and how his later writings fit this ethical turn. Here I need to sketch or outline the relationship between "religion" and "ethics" for Brooks both in his historical guise as a New Critic and in his later writings as well as for the newer "ethicists" such as Nussbaum and her fellows.

Indeed, modern poetry for Brooks is only one example for dealing with humanity in its universal circumstances and nature. His method for reading modern poets is identical to that for reading poets in general. To show how he uses poetry this way, Brooks does not limit himself to one kind of poetry. He deals with different kinds of poetry from different ages and cultures. He analyzes, for instance, Shakespeare, and the Romantic poets, especially Wordsworth and Coleridge. Brooks uses the works of these two Romantic poets and critics to discuss the notion of a split between man's inner life and the external world.

For practical purposes, however, Brooks confineshis reading to some poems from poets he repeatedly evokes in his writings. He focuses, then, on William Butler Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and Robert Frost, and on his account of some of the themes that figure in the poetry of John

Crowe Ransom and Robert Penn Warren. These all share one central characteristic according to Brooks: their poems involve universal human concerns. They all address the issue of a fragmented world and a divided sensibility current in modern literature. They all dig deep into human predicaments- such as love and death. Finally, they all address man's relationship to history, nature, and God. Critics consider most of these poets as difficult. Many of them are also critics in their own right. Their critical theories help us understand modern poetry. Their criticism helps us to appreciate the sense and depth of their own poetry. In *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939), Brooks justifies his own choice of poets by saying that: "the poets emphasized have been chosen because, in[his] mind, they provide the clearest and most significant illustrations of our modern critical revolution" (Brooks 1939: ix).
At the same time Brooks turns against what he sees as "unhumanistic" kinds of literary criticism, specifically deconstruction as inspired upon Derrida's ideas. In this respect, Brooks sees the relationship between himself and the deconstructionists and poststructuralists, as part of his own revaluation of the New Criticism and of his own role in it.

It is worthwhile to distinguish between two standpoints in Brooks. In fact, I think that in his earlier writings Brooks aligns himself with the traditional avatar of Modernism reacting against the more anti-traditional or even revolutionary kind of Modernism, while in his later writings he reacts against postmodernism, defending the values of the tradition-minded form of Modernism he adhered to in his early writings. That is, in his earlier writings Brooks is writing in a very Modernist vein, recognizable also in Eliot and others, that is conservative and laments the loss of classical values. He reacts against projects and ideology to overthrow old institutions and authorities such as religion, moral values, and tradition. What links Brooks´s developments of New Criticism to modernism is the "seemingly anti-romantic thrust of Eliot's thinking (a new 'classicism'); the emphasis on 'science', 'objectivity', 'impersonality', and the 'medium' as the focal object of analysis; and the notion of a 'tradition' of works which most successfully hold an 'essence' of human experience in their constituent 'medium'" (Peter and Brooker, A Reader's Guide 17) In a sense, Eliot's critical precepts appealed most strongly to Ransom´s claim for 'professional' criticism working from within the academy. In Peter´s and Brookers´s terms:

> [i]t is worth registering – both in the present context and in the later one of contemporary critical theory's assault on the earlier tradition, and of its consonance with postmodernism – that this new criticism had a thoroughly symbiotic relationship with literary modernism, fiding its premises borne out in such works and using these as its model texts for analysis. To put it over simply, perhaps: this new critical movement was 'modernist' criticism. (Peter and Brookers 2005: 18)

But in his later work; that is, from *The Hidden God* in 1963 until his last work *Religion, Community, and Literature* in 1995, the cultural situation with which Brooks have been concerned is essentially that encountered by the postmodern writers. It is a crisis in culture of the post-war era. Brooks indeed writes in a climate of postmodernism. Therefore, Brooks writes out of a postmodern atmosphere that witnesses "the rise of the counter/consumer culture…diversity, fragmentation, superficiality, relativity and the like." (Ikonomakis, *Post-war British Fiction* 5)

If I am right in linking Brooks´s New Critical theory to both modernism and postmodernism, his 'new criticism' of the post-war period should then be reconsidered in the light of some specific concepts and statements. It might be useful briefly to outline the position of new criticism with regard to modernism and postmodernism. If Brooks's theory of New Criticism is written in a climate of postmodernism, then it has been charged of killing and eliminating ethical criticism. Yet, postmodernism has always been involved in and included a sort of interest in ethics together with literature. Contrary to Gregory's assumption, Tammy Amiel-Houser and Adia Mendelson-Maoz "argue that postmodern thinking has actually played – and continues to play – an important role in the renewed interest in the field of ethics and in ethical criticism" (Tammy and Adia 2014: 199).

With Cleanth Brooks, we have a case of a New Critic or formalist critic who involves literature in a large discussion of moral and religious matters. My primary aim in this study is to bring out the main ideas about the relationship between literature and ethics in Brooks's theory of literature. He explored what can be said to have become almost an obsession of modern man: the question of man's moral position in what seems to be a meaningless, if not hostile, universe. The most important theme of Brooks´s literary and cultural criticism was a consideration of the consequences of man's alienation from other men, from God, and from nature. In a critical scenery still branded by post-structuralism, the reassessing of the ethical benefit that literature can bring us lies in the relevance of these questions of evaluation—of the aesthetic, the literary, the ethical— All these elements have to be accounted for in order to grasp the complex interrelations between ethics and literature, which is the topic of this paper.

Discourses such as deconstruction, post-structuralism, and postmodernism have sought to invest textual interpretation with ethical vocabulary and concepts. Many of these theories of reading and interpretation privilege such philosophical notions as alterity[3] and difference, and on these notions, they ground their theories of ethics and responsibility. In *TheEthics of Reading* (1987), the American deconstructionist J. Hillis Miller contends that "without storytelling there is no theory of ethics" (Miller 1987: 3).For Miller narrative is a locus for the ethical event. He asks whether the "ethical act of the protagonist inside the book corresponds to the ethical acts the reading of the book generates outside the book" (Miller 1987: 2).Miller states that his interest "is not in ethics as such but in the ethics of reading, and in the relation of the ethical moment in reading to the sense of giving an account, telling a story, narrating" (Miller 1987: 15).

Critics and philosophers again argue for literature, and especially fiction, as a possible source for ethical theory. One concern of this return to the question of the ethical value of literature is to make clear the relation between aesthetics and morality.

To focus on the ethical aspects of "close reading", and on the ethics of reading a literary work in Brooks's theory and practice, is to show how he puts the New Critical tenet of "close reading" to his own particular use. A renewed interest in Brooks is also justified because of the claims made by many Christian scholars and critics for a Christian approach to literature. The Christian view of the moral education provided by the study of English literature is directly linked to religious beliefs and Christian doctrines.

[3] The concept of alterity is introduced by the ethics of the face:

The face in which the other—the absolutely other—presents himself does not negate the same, does not do violence to it as do opinion or authority or the thaumaturgic supernatural. It remains commensurate with him who welcomes; it remains terrestrial. This presentation is preeminently nonviolence, for instead

There are many writings on Brooks. Still, only few contributions are considerable and worth reading. In the United States, there are two full-length books on Brooks: Lewis P. Simpson's *The Possibilities of Order: Cleanth Brooks and his Work* (1976) and Mark Royden Winchell's *Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism* (1996). Simpson's book is a collection of biographical and especially critical essays by various authors. Winchell's is an extended biographical and critical work on Brooks. Robert V. Young concluded his 1997 review of Winchell's *Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism* in the conservative journal *First Things* as follows:

> Mark Royden Winchell has crafted a fine biography of Cleanth Brooks. He not only presents an effective narration of his subject's life, but he also shows why that life was important to American education and culture. This book provides a real sense of how much Brooks contributed to the academic study of literature, and of what a decline has occurred since he has been displaced by Michel Foucault as the most influential thinker in university English departments.(Young 1997: 52)

Beyond the US, there is *Cleanth Brooks: his Critical Formulations*, a collective volume edited by R.S. Singh and published in 1991 in New Delhi, India. Also in India there appeared *Cleanth Brooks: Theory and Practice*, by S.C. Hajela, published in New Delhi in 2007. Of longer works relevant to my study, though not dealing with Brooks exclusively, there is the recent collective volume *Rereading the New Criticism* (2012). In their introduction Miranda B. Hickman and John D. McIntyre state clearly the need to "recover […] the New Criticism" (Hickman and McIntyre 2012: 4). Their collection, writes Hickman, "aims to resist reductive understandings of what the New Critics did and stood for that have often pervaded accounts of them since their fall from disciplinary dominance" (Hickman and McIntyre 2012: 4). As such, Hickman and McIntyre claim, *Rereading the New Criticism* "participates in the recent wave of renewed attention to the New Criticism" (Hickman and McIntyre 2012: 2).

Indeed, other recent works too show a renewed interest in the works of the New Critics. Garrick Davis´s *Praising it New: The Best of the New Criticism* (2008), gathers pioneering essays by leading figures of the New Criticism "fabled for its formalist approach to literature, and especially for its techniques of `close reading´ that would become integral to academic literary studies in North America" (Hickman and McIntyre 2012: 1). Davis's project "seeks to reexamine in an interrogative spirit the development of the New Criticism, its significance, and its chief lines of thought, as well as to consider dimensions of its work relevant for contemporary literary and cultural studies" (Hickman and McIntyre 2012: 2).

Apart from the longer works mentioned, there are only separate essays, articles, or simply scattered references in books or literary reviews to Brooks's critical theory of literature. Most existing books and articles on Brooks show only superficial concern with the subject of morals in poetry. Moreover, even when critics and scholars seem to pay serious attention to the issue, they never attempt to do so in terms of a detailed and exclusive analysis. Instead, they refer to the problem of ethics in literature while dealing fundamentally with other issues in Brooks's criticism, and especially his method of reading literature or 'close reading'.

The turn to ethics which marks a change, is back in literary studies as it is in philosophy and political theory. Because of the recent ethical turn in the study of literature I think it is not

only interesting, but also worthwhile and even important, to study the `forebears´ of present-day `ethicists.´ The move in ethical theory towards narrative and away from a more general ethics of reading is beneficial for both literary criticism and philosophy. It provides those philosophers who see in literature a source for ethical theory the formal vocabulary and structural insights to consider the homologies between literary and ethical theory. In a parallel way, ethically oriented critics have found a new dimension to their interpretive task by showing interest in the philosophical tradition of ethical enquiry.

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