Stylistics and Ethical Literary Criticism

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Abstract Stylistics is the study of linguistic choices. Ethics is the study of moral choices. Both disciplines attempt to understand and explain the choices individuals make and the significance the most fine-grained choices can sometimes make. The two disciplines, indeed, both originate in classic Aristotelian rhetoric, which fully recognised the ethical import of the words we choose. Choice is unavoidable in language and life, and choices matter. The awareness that comes from engagement in ethical choices through literary reading is one important way into this desirable moral education. Classic English literature of the late 19th century seems particularly concerned with the moral choices characters make and their consequences — fictions like *Lord Jim*, *Heart of Darkness*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, or *Jekyll and Hyde* come immediately to mind. One of the finest discriminators in the English language in that period was Henry James, noted for his distinctive stylistic elaborations as well as for his moral concerns. In a recent *Handbook* chapter I argued that literary criticism could benefit from a closer, more systematic and better informed attention to language.[1] Here I take instances from ethical and stylistic studies of James's fiction to suggest what a stylistic awareness or at the least an awareness of stylistics might offer to literary criticism's pursuit of what Blake valued as "Minute Particulars": "He who would do good to another must do it in Minute Particulars: general good is the plea of the scoundrel, hypocrite and flatterer" (William Blake, *Jerusalem*).

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Stylistics and Ethical Literary Criticism

Literary stylistics may be characterised as a discipline which gives primary attention to the linguistic features of the text or texts at hand, looking systematically for distinctive features or patterns of features from a viewpoint informed by a knowledge of linguistics. Stylistics will hesitate to attribute value to a text or even to a linguistic device though it may attempt to explain why actual readers have valued or tend to value certain features of a text. Interpretations inevitably arise from stylistic analysis but the first object of stylistic analysis is to understand how a text "works," how it is constructed, rather than to explore possible interpretations of the features identified. This is the classic idea of "poetics": *how does it mean* rather than *what does it mean*. For this kind of classical approach to the practice of stylistics, it is a poetic handmaiden, a complementary activity to those of the literary critics.

Literary criticism, by contrast, will characteristically refer to the language of the text only in passing, impressionistically and selectively and with no special awareness of or training in linguistic analysis. Any incidental linguistic points are made as convenient for the development of a larger argument, aiming to get straight to the point of the meaning of the text and to evaluate its worth. They are usually presented as self-evident rather than the complex and critical issues they will present to the linguist reader. For ethical criticism, the first and most urgent question is to explore the meaning of the text as also a search to establish ethical significance. Is this text worth reading / good / bad, why might that be, ie. how can a reading of this text contribute to a better life, whether the critic be a Marxist, an ecocritical reader, feminist or neoliberal, or perhaps some combination of these or other ethical positions. My proposal here is that this urgent agenda tends to skip proper investigation of critical linguistic stages on the way to meaning and interpretation.

Thus both stylistic and literary critical approaches are important and I have argued in various publications (as, e.g., Hall 2014) that they are approaches that need each other to do their work properly. They are not mutually exclusive. I have argued that literary critics would produce fuller and more interesting readings by paying closer, more informed and more systematic attention to the language of the texts they study. At the same time, stylisticians need to engage better with the literariness of literary texts, what specific affordances for understanding and

development literary experience offers, and why such texts are worth our attention at all if we are not linguists interested only in the workings of language use.

The proposal then in short, to recapitulate, is that stylistics and ethical criticism can be brought into fruitful dialogue if we start from the idea of *choice*, which is a notion basic to both stylistics and to ethics. The words used in a text and the words of readers express preferences and perspectives which will often have ethical import. Linguistics and ethics both stat out from the understanding that other words could have been chosen. To say one thing is not to say another. Not to say something, to stay silent, is also an ethical choice of a kind: why did modernist writers in England such as Virginia Woolf or D. H. Lawrence not write directly about World War I, as it came to be known? This is not a blame game, nobody can write about everything, or not directly, but it is a question with ethical import.

Scrolling back to a slightly earlier generation, to what historians have called the age of anxiety, or the "strange death of liberal England," classic English literature of the late 19th century seems particularly concerned with the moral choices characters make and their consequences: *Lord Jim*, *Heart of Darkness, The Picture of Dorian Gray,* or *The Strange Case of Jekyll and Hyde* come immediately to mind. One of the finest discriminators in the English language in that period was Henry James, noted for his distinctive stylistic elaborations as well as for his moral concerns. Only the most attentive readers of James can fully rise to his ethical demands by paying the closest attention to his linguistic choices, just as his characters must be precise readers of each others' words. The later novels have been felt by critics to be particularly demanding (and sometimes to fail) in this respect. In his celebrated essay "The Art of Fiction," James as self-conscious theoriser of story writing refers to "the conscious moral purpose" with which writers like himself write, and the importance of "solidity of specification," that is, precise language use, in the task of pursuing a moral purpose. My epigraph from Blake gestures towards the same idea: it is arguably a claim for value common to many literary texts. Writers, James proposes, in a term somewhat scandalous to our own age, pursue "the truth" of their imagined worlds and characters. They make "a selection," a selection which is intended to be representative and meaningful, as they write. If James has a criticism of the English novel in this essay, it is that of "timidity." They have a moral purpose, why do they pretend they do not or shrink from it? Here James strays into more theoretical areas than I propose to tackle at present. I propose for now only to note and to respect James's idea that novel writers have a "conscious moral purpose" in writing, and the job of the reader and writer is to collaboratively explore the value of that moral purpose, and, moreover,

that they will do it through precise engagement with language use.

What does all this mean in practice and how might such moral-linguistic choices be studied? I proceed with some examples of such work as well as references to more recent extensions of this stylistic ethical critical work. Booth, Nussbaum, Phelan and others arguing for ethical criticism take us some of the way. Henry James is indeed not coincidentally a favourite example for Booth too. He contends that James's writings are suffused throughout with the question of "how one should live," "the complexities of human life," and that this interest of the novelist is inseparable from "the shape and cadence of a novelist's sentences, his choice of metaphors, his use of sound and rhythm" (26). Nussbaum similarly admires the ethical demands of "exacting demarcations" in the late James novel *The Golden Bowl*. The experience of weighing the words of James's narrators and characters, for Booth and Nussbaum, or for Hillis Miller, teaches us the reality and complexity of ethical decisions beyond any simplistic maxims or slogans. Many readers of this paper would surely agree broadly with all these points, but I would contend that these formulations are too vague, and only too characteristic of literary criticism. In place of general assertions like these, we need worked examples and practical methodologies. It cannot be assumed that all readers can read with the subtlety of a Booth or Nussbaum or Hillis Miller, with their analytic principles and procedures left implicit and unstated. Hillis Miller, for example, uses speech acts as a loose metaphorical frame with which to approach selected fragments of his chosen texts, but the principle for selection is nowhere made clear, nor how exactly to use speech act theory beyond a loose and suggestive metaphorical approach to the construct. Phelan's 'rhetoric' would be called stylistics in the UK ("textual signs" drive interpretation, we are told, so that judgments of ethics in literature reading will be made "from the inside out," but frustrates the stylistician by its loose and apparently ad hoc application in examples offered (eg Phelan) though the increasingly principled and empirical study of the experience of literary reading by researchers like Phelan or cognitive stylisticians like Sklar is very much to be welcomed for deepening our understanding of how literary texts work, including the reader's negotiation of "otherness." The unreliable narrators pioneered by James and his generation extended greatly the reach and value of ethical learning from narratives. The learning and thinking, including ethical thinking and learning, prompted by processing of literary discourse is of the greatest interest to all of us as educators, teachers and learners. The classic concerns of narratology directly impact on ethical understandings and positions we adopt as we read fiction: who speaks? who sees? free indirect speech, focalisation and the rest are involved. Such

questions are raised and only to be answered through careful study of the language of these texts. This is particularly obvious in the cases of less experienced or less successful readers, but more experienced professional readers can also benefit from careful consideration of what linguistic choices might be taken to mean with respect to developing interpretations. It has been shown that good readers read actual individual words and linguistic details more carefully not less, and so for example will notice intertextual references bringing to bear their wider reading experience on precise instances of language use. Characters and narrators are understood and judged linguistically in the first instance, even though our understanding must be of language as discourse, ie. fully imbricated in real world contexts and experience not free-floating as less subtle readings of Derrida, say, can sometimes seem to suggest. (More careful uses are to be found in Derek Attridge's work or in Hillis Miller).

How to Study Stylistic Choices?

There are various ways to stylistic analysis, and I would refer the interested reader to Simpson as the best single introduction to the field at the level of the textbook. One useful approach advocated here with no claim to great methodological originality is to study transformations made to original source texts, including changes of perspective, of narrator, of narration and characters. Similarly adaptations, versions, revisions and other "readings" by the author and others could be used for the purpose of the study of choices (compare Sanders). Booth gives a useful example of such an approach in discussing Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady*:

> Gilbert Osmond sees Isabel in the first edition "as bright and soft as an April cloud" (as presumably the author had seen her too). In the second edition equivalent passage, the simile has changed significantly to show Gilbert's attitude to his wife to be: "as smooth to his general need of her as handled ivory to the palm." "Need" rather than "use" still indicates a certain sympathy with or understanding of Gilbert by a generous narrator, but the idea of unscrupulous exploitation is a new and unequivocal message from the later narrator (and actually prescient in the light of present day controls upon unethical uses of ivory). James's revisions and prefaces, working notebook, letters and so on are invaluable sources for such an approach just as (say) we can examine Hardy's revisions for his "Wessex" edition roughly twenty years after the novels were first published, and in the light of the commentary they had prompted at the time and since. (*Mapping the Ethical Turn* 26)

The general point here is that nowadays with ever easier access to drafts, manuscripts and various versions of texts online or in reproduction, especially for modern texts (19th century on), it is easier than ever before to study the genesis of a text into the version most readers will finally become familiar with. We can trace linguistically the genesis and evolution of an idea through the linguistic choices demonstrably made. Oxford University's on line presentation of Wilfred Owen's diary shows successive reworkings of what were to become classic and widely quoted poems in their final versions. This, to take another example from Booth, is what he does himself in the memorable exploration of textual variants to Yeats's poem "After Long Silence" in *The Company We Keep*, though the point would have to be made that once again the evolution of the text is presented in a "commonsense" way which linguistic analysis could make more precise and revealing, particularly if a consistent pattern or patterns of revisions could be identified pushing the account and so the reader's interpretation in a particular meaningful direction.

Stylistic Choices of Henry James: Example 1: Chatman (1972)

To save time and words within the remit of this short paper, let me now suggest the uses of probably still the best stylistic study of James, by Seymour Chatman. "Stylistic," remember, means systematic and principled rather than eclectic impressions, even those of experienced and expert literary critical readers, a fully responsive account rather than a set of local reactions. Note, first, that Chatman used precisely the methodological approach I have just advocated, of studying author revisions, but also that this study is contextualised in statistics and a training in linguistic analysis. In a travesty of a subtle study, let me summarise some of Chatman's main conclusions (but urge interested readers to check carefully the original version for themselves!)

> Her notion was (*Portrait*) vs "She thought" (characteristic James revision or choice)
> The most characteristic activity of a James character is thinking
> second most characteristic activity is speaking
> rare is physical action, movement
> abstractness (James, eg, is measurably more abstract than his contemporary, Conrad)
> counterfactuals "it was as if" — seem, appear, — aspects of perception of
> a single character or narrator, imperfect knowledge or understanding of

another's intentions and motivations

nominalisation: "her eyes sought" ("she saw" etc — usually used metaphorically if at all)

"thoughts are things in James"

revision *The American*: as pale as her daughter / "her consciousness had paled her face" (in embarrassment): more precise, but also a moral point is being made.

regular scare quotes foreground and problematise words and ideas readers should pay attention to

James less interested in things than in the view of those things that characters have and the meanings registering or developing in their minds

"He appeared thoughtfully to agree" (Strether)

in *The Golden Bowl*, a door opens, and Maggie sees not her husband, but "the form, at any rate, of a first opportunity"

James's dislike of adjectives. According to his amanuensis, he rejected the "sugar" of adjectives for the "salt" of adverbs: arguably, this results in evaluation as a requirement forced on the reader, rather than simply presented by the narrator.

Chatman's careful stylistic study yields not just interesting individual insights into detailed features of James's writing, though these are certainly there, but more important we can see the emergence from all those empirically observed and measured details of a wider correlating set of tendencies that amount to a more general characterisation of James's style, based on a full description and accounting for the features observed, and this style itself can be seen as an ethical investigation into the fictional worlds of his characters and narrators. This is a perfect example of the kind of more satisfying meeting of stylistics and criticism I opened this paper by discussing. One more example before I move to sum up what is intended to be a straightforward intervention in literary studies.

Stylistic Choices as Ethics: Example 2: Hoover (2007) (Corpus Stylistics) and the Late Style of Henry James

Stylometry provides powerful computerised techniques for examining authorial style variation. Hoover's study uses several such techniques to explore the traditional distinction between James's early and late styles. They confirm this distinction, identify an intermediate style, and facilitate an analysis of the lexical

character of James's style. Especially revealing are techniques that identify words with extremely variable frequencies across James's oeuvre-words that clearly characterize the various period styles. Such words disproportionately increase or decrease steadily throughout James's remarkably unidirectional stylistic development. Stylometric techniques constitute a promising avenue of research that exploits the power of corpus analysis and returns our attention to a manageable subset of an author's vocabulary. Booth, interestingly (2001 and elsewhere), like many critics, operates with an intuitive and implicit notion of "key words", but nowhere is the construct defined or explained. For the literary critic, "key words", it seems, are what the critic says they are on the basis of his or her careful readings and re-readings. This is a good example of an area where I would propose that the more precise and empirical work of the stylistician will help give more depth and precision to literary critical intuitions. Key word studies are central to corpus stylistics (software informed stylistic analysis). The advantage of such more rigorous and explicit studies is that the more intuitive approach of the literary critic can be tested and explored more carefully (not necessarily "corrected", this is not at all the idea I wish to convey).

The limitations of corpus stylistics are clear. Not syntax (surely crucial for a full reading of James), not phonological properties, prosody etc. are examined, but one linguistic level only, that of the word ("lexis"). Hoover did not even use semantic software because (as often in such work) the form and the language are prioritised. Chatman is much better on James's convoluted syntax and parentheses. There is nothing on punctuation in Hoover's study — surely all those dashes — many added in revision — are important? Nevertheless the study is at least suggestive for critics and can be extended. I would simply suggest here that it is better appreciated for what it shows us than criticised for what it does not. No account can ever be a full and final one (compare Attridge, 2004, after Derrida). In many ways, in fact, adding to its claims to validity, Hoover's study appears very compatible with Chatman's classic stylistic study, adding weight thereby to both. Hoover, then finds in James's later fictional writings:

fondness for "-ly" adverbs
abstract words of thought and speech (cf Chatman)
statistically, "key words" are: *assert(ed), imput(ed), somebody('s)*
verbs of language, perception, mental and emotional processes are unusually frequent
very few verbs of physical movement or actions are used (again, compare

Chatman)

there is increasing use of dialogue, colloquial and slang terms in later James

further keywords increasingly used: *shimmered, hovered, faltered, gaping, ironic, - ly.. (incl "sighingly")*

"Typical" passages of late James according to computerised stylometric analysis (ie. as identified by a computer rather than a human analyst) are therefore:

(1) He's prodigious; but what is there — as you've fixed it — to dodge? Unless, he pursued, "it's her getting near him; it's – if you'll pardon my vulgarity – her getting at him". (*Golden Bowl)*

(2) Cissy, from her charmingly cool cove, had watchfully signalled up, and they met afresh, on the firm clear sand where the drowsy waves scarce even lapsed, with forms of intimacy that the sequestered spot happily favoured. (*The Ivory Tower*)

Interestingly, of course, such unremarkable passages would typically be unlikely to feature in a more literary critical approach to the texts, interested in value (to use shorthand) rather than typicality. My proposal is that both value and typicality are related and a fuller analysis needs to report and account for both aspects of James's writing. The final words of example (2) above are evasive and euphemistic. That is an interpretive comment, but the passage on which they comment has been brought to the analyst's attention as needing explication by a computerised analysis informed by stylistic design. It is perhaps a commonplace to observe that James's late style is hesitant, repetitive, and arguably shows us the Master searching for what Flaubert called the "mot juste". For present purposes, let us emphasise that "juste" means not only "exact", "precise" but "just" as in "justice", judicial and a related set of terms. Once again, the stylistic choice and the moral choice are inseparable.

Conclusion

Revisions to manuscripts, then, (cf. Booth and others above), or alternative endings (*Great Expectations* etc) versions, adaptations, drafts, 'readings' and more (Sanders 2015) are one important way into the kind of work I am advocating here. The mathematics of frequency and "deviance" subliminal to human consciousness but nevertheless not without their effects, are another. Let me turn in closing to a recent study which makes the links between stylistic readings, emotional and ethical

effects for readers, and education, an intervention from what the developing field of "cognitive stylistics", Howard Sklar's *The Art of Sympathy in Fiction* (2013).

Sklar's work is perhaps too easily faulted for a somewhat naive trust in the empirical as advocated by experimentalist psychology, while others will miss any Eagletonian critique of a liberal humanist approach which celebrates the agonised bourgeois reader who can be led to "care" in all sorts of comforting ways but is unlikely to go out and do anything political about poverty, the position of women, race and all the other injustices literature draws our attention to. The pedagogy proposed is not innovatory and again, seems unlikely in itself to make the world a much better place. That's not really the point. (Pedagogy, for example, is a personal relation rather than a set of techniques or an "approach"). We may feel uneasy at the lack of distinction in Sklar's writings between real people and fictional characters; the idea that individuals matter seems to be held at the expense of wider sociological understandings of the needs of groups in society and group membershipping. More awareness of the world of professional literary discourse would clearly have helped produce a stronger publication. At the same time, the value of this work, reminiscent of Phelan (2007 and later) is to investigate how ethics begins from the bottom up, that reading of literature can demonstrably change ways of thinking and understanding, and this begins with the use and processing of language. Many in stylistics beside myself actually now recognise that we need to supplement such textual analysis with readings of the language of literary discussion in education, the media, in reading groups and by the proverbial water cooler, on websites and in prize committees. A literary work has no clear boundaries defined materially by the boards around the print (for those of us still accessing literature primarily through the traditional book). (See, overview of recent relevant stylistic work in Peplow and Carter, 2014). Such discourse analytical work is important but exceeds the limits of this essay but note again that it is first and foremost linguistic material to be analysed. For now, I hope at the very least some readers will now want to reconsider the importance of linguistic approaches to literature and literary reading and update their views (compare, for example, the very badly dated and stereotypical strictures on stylistics of Peter Barry). Stylisticians can only advance by better respecting the literary and the literary critical professoriate, just as literary critics need to understand how unfortunately and unnecessarily their work is vitiated and limited by lack of awareness of advances in linguistics, stylistics and discourse analysis more broadly.

Note

1. Hall, G. "Ch. 7: Stylistics as literary criticism." in *The Cambridge Handbook of Stylistics*. Eds. P. Stockwell and S. Whiteley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

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