

## Alternative Readings

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### Aesthetic, Ethical and Empirical Readings: Revisiting Dystopian Fiction (I)

**Dr. Brîndușa Nicolaescu**  
Faculty of Political Science  
University of Bucharest  
E-mail: [brindusa.nicolaescu@fspub.unibuc.ro](mailto:brindusa.nicolaescu@fspub.unibuc.ro)

*Dr. Brîndușa Nicolaescu is a lecturer at Bucharest University, Faculty of Political Science, where she teaches ESP, Academic Writing and Literature vs. Politics. Her current research interests are creative methodologies of teaching Academic Writing, literary criticism, dystopian fiction as social critique.*

#### Abstract

Based on recent research in literary criticism, primarily a preoccupation for the literary response among the readers (students) in the academic milieu, this article attempts to propose different perspectives and discuss various levels of interpretation of dystopian fiction – going beyond the clichés that for instance have led throughout the years to its confusion with the science fiction genre – reclaiming an increasing need for a specialized bibliography. We contend these literary works entail peculiar ethical considerations and ultimately they require a specific methodology close to a psychonarratological approach, namely empirical.

**Keywords:** *critical response, specialized bibliography, literary interpretation vs. literal reading, aesthetic-ethical, dystopian fiction*

#### Preamble

Dystopian fiction has always given rise to a peculiar interest for both readers and specialized critics. Going beyond the boundaries of science fiction, which literary dystopias can overlap, but never identify with, from the literary critical perspective, they usually point out the lucid awareness of the lack of verisimilitude and the artificiality the utopian projects by definition imply; they may also propose scenarios independent from the utopian thought, by means of bitter eschatological visions. In either case there is a

salient preoccupation with the complexity and ambiguity of the human condition, which consequently leads to an emphatic relation with the reader, based on an ambitious visionary or futuristic chronotope that compels an inclusive approach. The anticipatory scenario reinforcing definitive predictions advances characters that stimulate readers into emotional identification, a typical critical response and reading pattern. Inspired by the Aristotle's terminology, we attempt in this paper to point up the equilibrium between the *poetical* and *rhetorical* functions and moreover, to place an emphasis on the continuum of reception between aesthetic/ethical and empirical. The Aristotelian triads *ethos-pathos-logos* along with *eleos-phobos-catharsis* indicate specific references respectively with a view to open our understanding concerning the reception of this literature from different perspectives and thus leading to an improved analysis of the narrative structure of these texts. Beyond the classic notion of rhetoric of fiction (Booth: 1961), we also considered the transition from poetics to rhetoric (between the text and the reader) with a view to a phenomenology, an aesthetics of reading. (1) The first part of this article deals with theoretical issues, introducing the readers into the ethical approach of the literary interpretation, and will be followed by a second part developing the empirical approach, with actual examples from a psychonarratorological point of view: based on recent theoretical studies, various levels of interpretations belonging to respondents from the academic milieu will be analyzed. The importance of the exposure of readers to appropriate specialized bibliography will be discussed as well; we shall also take into consideration the effects of the access to accurate critical resources on the improvement of critical analysis skills.

### **Ethical Reading**

Speaking from a philosophical perspective, the point of departure, when we consider the ethics related to the artistic, is the ethical value of that work of art ("a work's intrinsic ethical value"), stemming from two arguments: the first implying the attitude transmitted by the work itself through its content, the letter, based on the ethical evaluation of that content, referring to the quality of exploring a subject significantly valuable from a moral perspective. (1) On the one hand, the literary work poses through its very content important questions ethically speaking, either by showing an explicit moral attitude regarding the issues it deals with, or only an implicit one. Thus our research would refer to the quality of the moral content within a literary work, the complexity of the ideas it puts forward, the originality and profoundness they are presented. On the other hand, if the work does not seem to contain an explicit moral part, then, by its value, apparently mostly cognitive, the reader, exploring it ethically, will find moral values, virtues, just actions and dilemmas. In fact the cognitive cannot be perceived independently, as stripped from the power of imagination embedded in the work of art. Likewise, "the ethical value of an exploration in a work depends in part on the quality of the ethical experience the work is capable of providing", in what is already known as "*esthetic-ethical* interaction". (2) It naturally follows therefore that the ethical value of the literary work contributes at least partly to its artistic value. Hence the texts belonging to the dystopian genre almost reclaim an ethical investigation, merely through their content, sometimes subtle, other times with an overt morality, like in political "fables" of Swift

and Orwell. In this case the ethical attitude cannot be separated from the literary quality taken into account, both of them making their contribution to the work's sheer artistic value. As opposed to this opinion, the formalist criticism promotes the predominance of the aesthetic criterion. From this perspective, the fact that a literary work is essentially moral, therefore becoming also a valuable cognitive source - does not augment its literary value as such, according to Robert Stecker. But even the advocates of the aestheticist perspective should acknowledge that these ethical traits enhance the values implied by the work as an experience and this is how the ethical value/role can improve the value of the whole, intensifying the depth of its ideas and significations.

When the text maintains a continuous dialogue with the readers to the same extent as it holds the communication with itself, this conversation can become a motivation, a basis for a reading ethics. We thereby refer to a poetics of self awareness of the author and of the text alike, exercised by writers who are considered followers of the "Emmersonian model". (3) The first reference to the ethical stakes would originate thus into the attention given to the textual configuration, by means of which literature (fiction) becomes aware of its own existence. On the other hand, the text involves a continuous negotiation of meaning(s) - complex and dynamic - the text is a test for our cultural comprehension and social understanding. And the reader participates, together with the writer, in the struggle with words, with language/*logos* but also with the *doxa* typical of the genre, on the condition that the subjectivity of the writer gets reshaped as the literary *expression*, which literally "develops" out of the oblique auctorial trajectory – values and or traditions: consequently in this context ethics suggests dealing with the cultural functions of "paternity", discussing the relation, or rather the chasm writing-reading. (4) The *oblique* space that Richard Deming speaks about (5) could remind of Foucault, for whom there are basically two principles or ethical themes in contemporary writing: it is about a space in which the writing self does not stop disappearing, and the second theme is the similarity of writing with death. (6) The "author function" could be therefore read through the objective lens of the attention paid to the text itself, at the same time as the death of the author as seen by Roland Barthes, and also as a necessary retreat, in an ethical revisiting of the primordial written text. In this regard, the ethics of reading is closely related to what Miller calls "close reading" – very similar to literal reading. Accordingly, apart from the motivation of a sense that is incessantly postponed, the compulsive tendency of reading and re-reading gives proof of an interpretation envisioned as intersection with the proximity of the Other, which only the literary work seems to be able to render. Besides, an ethical approach of reading should take into consideration the three paramount elements of fiction: the figurative, the parable and the performative (which are so evident in dystopian fiction, a genre placed generally under the sign of the allegory / parable). In other words, it is about the unique force of literature that calls things in an oblique way, by means of analogies not connected with the reality; lacking the means of literal expression, regarded as useless, the literary work proposes the trope as fundamental unit and it becomes in its turn an ample trope, an ironical catachresis. (7) The literary work is also a verbal act that founds worlds and meanings: in dystopias the role of space, *topos* is of paramount importance, turning into a character sometimes. The words themselves "perform" the meaning in a parabolic way. (8) And by doing this, the relation with the alterity emerges as a shocking connection, as for David

Goldknopf, for instance: somebody inside the novel gets to talk to somebody from outside the novel. It is precisely within this space, of this inevitable link between two distinct entities, where we may find the possible root of ethics. Reading becomes a “co-respondence”, a “tuning”, a tuned response to the tone set by the text, „das Treffen des Tones”, an encounter between “ergon” and „parergon” according to the interpretation given by Derrida to the Kantian concept: the interpretation is meant to complete the text from within, with that supplement that the text already contains, “parergon” – the law of text, intrinsic interpretation ethical frame. (9) All the more so as the prose has, etymologically speaking, the following function: it is a fluent, ongoing discourse, always looking ahead, avoiding returning to itself but at the same time allowing the necessary change, transformation, perpetual flexibility of getting forward. (10) The reading itself *is* an ethical activity according to Lévinas, an exchange of glances between the reader and writer, the reader is caught by the text’s words that *look back* at him on behalf of the writer; (11) this is how Champagne defines the two concepts so closely connected, ethics and reading: ethics, in the context of (literature) reading, would thus imply the relation of the reading “I” with the Other, and reading as such would become getting closer to the Other. (12) The ethics of reading has also the advantage of being situated under the sign of uncertainty, of possible, of creative doubt, ultimately the privilege of liberty: it would provide therefore the opening typical of dystopias, towards infinite fictional “possible worlds” (Pavel:1986), whose common denominator is the imperfection acknowledged in a tacit agreement between the writer and the reader. Ethical reading hence admits there is a continuous exchange not of information, but of intentions – of faith and doubt – in an imperfect epistemological setting. (13) Fiction will never claim to set itself within finite boundaries, or to hold the ultimate truth or the supreme knowledge of all things, but it deals with the knowledge of human behaviour, a limited one, but which attempts to reduce the distance between the harshness of science and the subtlety of life, in a space of absolute freedom. (14) Significantly enough, the function of science in literary dystopias is pivotal, from Zamyatin and Huxley onwards, but not as a main focus (like in science fiction), but it is essential in order to highlight the contrast with a humanity in the peril of degradation.

Starting from the concept of “ideoculture”, Derek Ardrige reaches the concept of an ethics of reading defined no more no less as an attempt to do *justice* to the literary works, taking into account several characteristics, among which; the respect for the alterity that thus would be assimilated by the reading self, the responsibility for the uniqueness of each and every literary work, the open character of reading, always unpredictable, always oriented towards future. (15) The ethics of reading would therefore entail the “event” quality of literature, a dynamic feature meant to counterbalance the rigidity of such labels as “entity” or “concept”, which fail to reveal the creative, the inventive character of literary criticism. (16)

All these ideas originate undoubtedly in the seminal book on the ethics of reading by J. Hillis Miller, who explains literature is more of a cause rather than effect and the act of reading implies the respect towards the text as the very source of political and cognitive acts. (17) But even earlier in the history of literary criticism there was a preoccupation with the ethical aspect. After the Antiquity – when virtue/*pietas* was the pinnacle - other values began to prevail and after the modernist age, authors such as F. R.

Leavis (1896–1978) drew attention to the pivotal role of ethics, and Emmanuel Lévinas (1906–1995) became a very important reference for the idea of the necessity of ethical critique meant to point up the assumption of responsibility for the Other.

Broadly speaking, although liable to multiple perspectives, there exists a unanimous principle according to which a literary work entails a primordial ethical relation between the writer and its readers. (18) A ground-breaking book in this regard is that by Wayne Booth on the ethics in fiction, where author-reader relation is described as the encounter between their ethoses, whereby positive and negative traits alike characterize both the personality of the author and of the reader who “keeps (their) company”. The two ethical traditions identified here are: recognition and rejection of evil, or the embrace of the good from the respective literary work, therefore exclusion on the one hand and the extreme inclusion of the ‘human(e)’ on the other. Booth chooses the middle way, because no narrative is only “good” or only “evil” for any reader in any context. The conclusion would thus assert that ethical critique cannot rely exclusively on theological, political or anthropological bases, considered rather as useless ‘tricks’, but should resort instead to a “critical pluralism”, within certain limits of interpretations (we know from Eco as well that interpretation *is* limited). (19) Booth had been concerned with the ethical aspect since 1962, when in *Rhetoric of Fiction* emphasized the tacit collaboration between the author and the reader, which is valuable if it generates a mature moral judgment. Consequently, if the literary work is made up of human actions, the logical inference would be that form cannot be separated from its content that necessarily deals with human significances and moral judgments. (20) Henry James was also interested in the conundrum of intertwining the moral with the esthetic issues in the work of art and he noticed that the topics dealt with in great books are profound and usually pose moral questions. (21)

Derek Artridge applies this concept of singularity of literature - perceived as an event with strong effects on the cultural world – to an author praised as exemplary for the idea of “ethics of reading”: J. M. Coetzee. (22) In the preface to this book, Artridge contends the main question the works of this writer pose is: which is our responsibility to the Other, to the alterity? And this is a question we can rightly ask in the case of dystopian fiction, where the projection in either a foreseeable or an unpredictable future, either more distant or more immediate, usually has an ‘epimyth’ - more or less overt, according to the degree of its allegorical representation (from a pure fable teaching a lesson like *The Animal Farm*, to the somehow surrealist vision of *Invitation to a Beheading* by Nabokov). The admonitory effect is aimed at showing concern about the human condition, the humane aspect of the relation with the Other.

This concern for the Other is to be reflected at the level of the characters, in a representation of the second degree responsibility, but also further on it will work as a reflection through the relation assumed by the reader with the respective literary work, in a third degree mimesis, in Ricoeur’s terms. (23) On the other hand, Derek Artridge attempts to illustrate all throughout his book a special need for a literal reading as well, idea taken from Susan Sontag, for instance - who in the 60s acclaimed the performative value of metaphors, against the allegorical interpretation in search for a “sense” by any means – or from Lévinas, who promotes the text regarded mainly as an event through

which the meaning, kept alive, becomes action, in the verbal form. Paradoxically, although apparently the most basic contact with the text itself, probably the most naive, literal reading does not represent necessarily the easiest way of interaction when one looks through a written text. It is, after all, about “close reading”, a technique that eludes any allegorical approach, deemed by the critic a real menace to the text analysis, because it leads to critical opaqueness, drifting away from the literal (meaning), impoverishment of sensitiveness and creative singularity. (24) And this line of thinking could trigger a possible definition of “ethics” (as opposed to moral/morality): on the one hand we are given the option of openness, of permissiveness towards the text as a representative of the alterity, on the other – the well-trodden way of overused significances.

We can mention as noteworthy the book by Colin Riordan, *Ethics of Narration*, on the German writer Uwe Johnson. (25) The author contends morality determined the development of the narrative technique and influenced the evolution from the traditional forms up to the dynamic complexity of the modernity, which, at the level of novels caused the remodelling of the narrative: novels were “shaped by a flexible system of narrative forces, conditioned by an idiosyncratic decentralization of narrative authority.” We deal time and again with the distinction between “moral” and “ethical” (as shown by ethics, a branch of philosophy) placed between a relation of reciprocity: “a set of moral imperatives...amount to no less no more than a code of narrative ethics.” (26) Other critics, such as Kate Douglas, deal with the political dimension of the ethics of reading, in the active and re-active meaning of the word. “To do justice” is a phrase used by both Miller and Artridge from the perspective of the interpretation, reception of literary works; Douglas uses it with a proper, proactive meaning, of direct involvement in the civil society. Hence, the political approach within the ethics of reading would suit perfectly those contemporary dystopias advocating overtly feminist causes or environmental issues (like in Margaret Atwood’s novels).

### Notes and references

- (1) RICOEUR, Paul. *Temps et récit*. Tome III. *Le temps raconté*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983, p. 243-263 (subchapter «Phénoménologie et esthétique de la lecture»).
- (2) STECKER, Robert. Ethics and Esthetics în SKORUPSKI, John. *The Routledge Companion to Ethics*. London and New York: Routledge, 2010. See subchapter Art and Ethical Value, p. 29-533.
- (3) *Ibidem*, p. 531-532.
- (4) DEMING, Richard. *Listening on all Sides. Towards an Emersonian Ethics of Reading*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 8-11.
- (5) *Ibidem*, p. 42-44.
- (6) FOUCAULT, Michel. *Ce este un autor? Studii și conferințe*. Traducere de Bogdan Ghiu și Ciprian Mihaiu. Cuvînt înainte de Bogdan Ghiu. Postfață de Corneliu Bilba. Cluj: Editura Idea Design & Print, 2004, p.38.
- (7) MILLER, J. Hillis. *Tropes, Parable, Performative. Essays on Twentieth Century Literature*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, p. viii.
- (8) *Ibidem*, p. ix.
- (9) HARVEY, Irene E., Derrida, Kant and the Performance of Peragonality. In SILVERMAN, Hugh J., *Derrida and Deconstruction*. New York: Routledge, 2004. p. 70. Cf.

- SCHUTTER, Dirk de, The Parergonality of Reading. Heidegger reading Hölderlin. In VERBEECK, Ludo, PHILIPSEN, Bart. *Die Aufgabe des Lesers. On the Ethics of Reading*. Leuven: Peters Publishers, 1992, p. 125-128.
- (10) *Ibidem*, p. 132. "Pro(r)sa" is derived from "prorsus", abbreviated form of the past participle "proversus" of the verb "provertere" - "to turn forward".
- (11) LÉVINAS, Emmanuel. *Sur Maurice Blanchot*. Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1975, p. 16: „Le regard est saisi par l'oeuvre, les mots regardent celui qui écrit”.
- (12) CHAMPAGNE, Roland A.. *The Ethics of Reading According to Emmanuel Lévinas*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998, p. 1-2.
- (13) WEST, Lori Branch. The Benefit of Doubt: The Ethics of Reading. În RAINSFORD, Dominic, WOODS, Tim, *Critical Ethics. Text, Theory and Responsibility*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1999, p. 187-188.
- (14) BARTHES, Roland. *Leçon inaugurale de la chaire de sémiologie littéraire de Collège de France*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1978, p. 18-19: «La science est grossière, la vie est subtile, et c'est pour corriger cette distance que la littérature nous importe. D'autre part, le savoir qu'elle mobilise n'est jamais ni entier ni dernier; la littérature ne dit pas qu'elle sait quelque chose, mais qu'elle sait de quelque chose; ou mieux: qu'elle en sait long sur les hommes.»
- (15) ARTRIDGE, Derek. *The Singularity of Literature*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 21: "embodiment in a single individual of widespread cultural norms and modes of behaviour". See p. 128-138.
- (16) MILLER, J. Hillis. *Etica lecturii*. Traducere din limba engleză de Dinu Luca. București: Editura Art, 2007, pp. 52-58.
- (17) CHILDS, Peter, FOWLER, Roger (eds.) *The Routledge Dictionary of Critical Terms*. London: Routledge, 2006, p. 74-75.
- (18) BOOTH, Wayne. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics to Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, p. 485-489. "My choice throughout has been instead the rhetorical or pragmatist choice of a critical pluralism – a pluralism with limits”.
- (19) BOOTH, Wayne. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962, p. 300.
- (20) *Ibidem*, p. 397.
- (21) ARTRIDGE, Derek. *The Singularity of Literature*, *loc. cit.*, p. 138: "the literary is impure, without fixed borders, liable to contamination and grafting, an event rather than an entity or a concept.”
- (22) ARTRIDGE, Derek. *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. xii.
- (23) RICOEUR, Paul. *Temps et récit*. Tome I. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983, p. 101-110.
- (24) ARTRIDGE, Derek. *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 64.
- (25) RIORDAN, Colin. *Ethics of Narration. Uwe Johnson' Novels from "Ingrid Babendererde" to "Jahrestage"*. London: University of London, Modern Humanities Research Association and the Institute of Germanic Studies, 1989, p. 3.
- (26) DOUGLAS Kate. *Contesting Childhood. Autobiography, Trauma and Memory*. New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2010, p. 152.