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MORAL COMMITMENT OF THE REALISTIC,
MODERNIST AND POSTMODERN NOVEL

INTRODUCTION

The following paper considers the three distinct approaches to moral issues adopted in novels belonging to the three literary conventions which have dominated the 20th- and 21st-century English (to some extent also European and American) literary scene: realism, modernism and postmodernism. For this purpose I adopt the formalist approach, i.e. on the basis of the theoretical models of the three conventions (their poetics above all but also their cultural context and philosophical interpretations), I try to define the specific quality of their moral commitment.¹ These tentative theoretical speculations are subsequently illustrated with the case study of three novels by Virginia Woolf. The author of *Jacob's Room*, though being first of all one of the most important modernist novelists, wrote also books that are best classified as realistic (e.g. *Night and Day*) or postmodern (e.g. *Orlando*).² The main thesis of the paper is that, contrary to its

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¹ The term “moral commitment” when used with reference to the novel means in the article the novel’s engagement with moral issues (moral problematics). I prefer to speak of “the novel” rather than of “the implied author” as this seems more natural when discussing novels collectively, in general terms (in any particular novel there is little difference, if any, between the meaning that may be attributed to the text as such and to the implied author of the text, who is the ultimate authority of the text). To prevent any ambiguity I would like to add that I do not think that the moral meaning of any fictional text may automatically be attributed to its real author, let alone the text’s reader (whether real or implied). As regards characters, they may convey the novel’s moral meaning by their formal construction, moral choices or explicitly stated ideas, but it is important to remember that the novel has at its disposal also other means of expression.

² In my doctoral dissertation, *Philosophy in Fiction*, I discuss at length the novelistic output of Virginia Woolf and argue that she is indeed a rare case of an outstanding novelist who could very

stereotypical perception, both modernist and postmodern fiction is morally committed, though each in a specific way, consistent with the convention's philosophical dominant (epistemology in the case of modernism and ontology in the case of postmodernism).

The choice of the formalist approach is dictated by two reasons. Although there are various ways in which philosophical ideas may be expressed in fiction,³ I share Umberto Eco's conviction that form is the proper artistic means of communication: "The real content of a work is the vision of the world expressed in its way of forming (*modo di formare*). Any analysis of the relationship between art and the world will have to take place at this level. Art knows the world through its formal structures (which, therefore, can no longer be considered from a purely formalist point of view but must be seen as its true content)," (144). The other reason why in the present essay I limit my analysis to formal means of expression is that since they are common to all the works that exemplify a given convention, irrespective of any specific story, characters or philosophical reflections that a given novel might otherwise offer, they help identify the general tendencies in art.⁴ Finally, I would like to emphasize that although I call the approach adopted in the essay "formalist," the poetics of realistic, modernist and postmodern fiction will be examined in terms of its philosophical (ethical) content.

PRELIMINARY ASSUMPTIONS

Karl Popper, famous for the theories of falsification and the open society, believed that it is in the process of interactions between the human mind and its

skilfully use all the three narrative conventions in question. Further, illustrating the main thesis of the present essay with her fiction prevents the possible interferences that specific, idiosyncratic features of diverse novelists might cause in the overall picture. At the same time, I recognize the need of further research in the field, and, in particular, of subjecting the thesis presented here to further examination with reference to literary material of greater variety.

³ First of all, they may be introduced explicitly as philosophical ideas either verbalized by the narrator or a character (or else presented in some other way, e.g. as a quotation from a philosophical book), secondly, they may be translated into the world presented, which is to be taken as a model of phenomenal reality, and, thirdly, they may be expressed by means of the novel's form: mode of narration, focalization, techniques of metafiction, magic realism and the like (*Philosophy and Fiction* 21-23, 52-3).

⁴ Of course, there may be some exceptions, works that will because of their formal shape belong to a given convention, but will at the same time, by means of the world presented taken as a model of reality or by means of explicit statements of the narrator or characters, convey ideas inconsistent with those implied by the formal features of the convention (the meaning of the novel's form will be at odds with the meaning of its tale).

works (e.g. language, mathematical concepts or poems) that we gain self-consciousness and develop sensibility, i.e. become human (qtd in Teske, “Filozofia nauki...” 40-7⁵). David Lodge, a contemporary novelist but also an underestimated theoretician of the novel, claims that it is in particular the novel (rather than any other kind of art) that helps man examine his or her self-consciousness. In his essay “Consciousness and the Novel” he sketches the history of the novel, from Defoe and Richardson up to Banville and Ishiguro, in terms of the evolution of its modes of narration and ability to represent psychic life. Referring to Ian Watt, Lodge notes the significance of the coincidence of the rise of the genre in question with the birth of modern, empirical and rational philosophy—Descartes, Locke, Hume, Reid: the novel adopts the same critical approach. Further, unlike cognitive sciences, which have recently claimed competence in the area, the novel can offer studies of consciousness which capture its inherently personal, subjective character (1-91). Julian Barnes, another novelist, disappointed with philosophy, which he studied at Oxford for a couple of terms, argues that “literature [. . .] did, and still does, tell us best what the world consists of. It can also tell us how best to live in that world, though it does so most effectively when appearing not to do so,” (151); a surprising declaration of the moral authority of fiction, coming, as it does, from a postmodern writer. Popper and the cognitive, evolutionary view of art’s function in human life, Lodge and the recognition of the novel’s capacity to explore consciousness, Barnes and the intuition that literature may develop moral sensibility—these intellectuals and ideas mark the initial position of my essay. Within this framework I want to argue that the moral commitment of the novel, though constant, takes various forms, depending on the dominant convention of the text—realistic, modernist or postmodern.

MORAL COMMITMENT OF THE THREE CONVENTIONS

—INTRODUCTION

David Daiches, the author of the standard history of English Literature, defining the realistic convention, states that it is specifically concerned with the conflict between “gentility and morality” (1155), and “present[s] a picture of life lived in a given society against a stable background of social and moral values” (1049). Referring to Daiches and to the theory that the dominants of the modernist

⁵ In the essay I reconstruct Popper’s philosophy of art, which he presented mainly in *Knowledge and the Body-Mind Problem: In Defence of Interaction* and in *An Unended Quest: An Intellectual Autobiography*.

and postmodern conventions, as argued by Brian McHale, are epistemological and ontological (3-11),⁶ I ventured in *Philosophy in Fiction* the hypothesis that if one were to identify the dominant of the realistic fiction, it would be ethical (57).

The dominants indicate merely a priority of interests, in other words, the modernist and postmodern novels need not exclude moral issues.⁷ Yet modernism is often presented as an epoch marked by moral indifference and arrogance typical of art for art's sake.⁸ Postmodernism, in turn, is accused of relativism and amorality.⁹ Both opinions seem unfair,¹⁰ though it is true that moral issues, once – together with the rules of social conduct—the primary subject of the novel, have lost that position. This is not only a matter of cultural fashions, but also of the development of social sciences. Since the beginning of the 20th c. we have had to accommodate to the thought that much of our psychic life is unconscious and governed by instincts (cf. psychoanalysis), that most social norms are a matter of convention (cf. comparative anthropology, naturalist theories of morality), while nowadays we need to reconsider the notion of the self and free will (cf. cognitive sciences). The world that is hardly intelligible (this is the key tenet of modernism), or that is contingent upon man's (possibly arbitrary) decisions (the

⁶ The focus of postmodern fiction should perhaps be identified as double: ontological and aesthetical.

⁷ Conversely, the realistic and modernist narrative conventions are by no means devoid of ontological and aesthetic assumptions, while epistemic considerations may well be found in the form of the realistic and modernist novel. All the three conventions may be said to be ontologically, epistemologically and aesthetically committed, but the nature of this commitment and its inner hierarchy will in each case be different.

⁸ Cf. “this method [the ‘experimental’ novel of Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce], the essence of which was to represent brute experience through the moments of sensation, effectively cut out precisely those aspects of the novel where a living tradition can be handed on. **Reflection had to be sacrificed; so did moral awareness;** so did the investigatory intelligence. That was altogether too big a price to pay and hence the ‘experimental novel’ . . . died from starvation, because its intake of human stuff was so low,” (Snow qtd in Lodge, “The Novelist at the Crossroads” 105, emphasis mine). This attack came from the 20th-century realistic writer, C. P. Snow, but also Linda Hutcheon, a theoretician of postmodernism, perceives modernism as self-reflexive, formalist and isolated from life.

⁹ Jeremy Hawthorn, discussing the convention, states that postmodernism involves among other things “the rejection of representation in favour of self-reference” and “the rejection of meaning itself along with the belief that it is worth trying to understand the world (or that there is a world to understand)” (64). Even Hutcheon, who seems to appreciate the convention and who argues that, unlike their predecessors, postmodern writers are highly sensitive to the human experience of life in all its dimensions (political, social, economic, etc.), agrees that postmodernism subverts the traditional empiricist, rationalist, humanist assumptions, revealing that all “truth” is ideological and institutional.

¹⁰ Various attempts to rehabilitate modernism and postmodernism have already been undertaken; two relevant examples are discussed later.

tenet of postmodernism), does not seem to provide the right context for specific moral discussions. Neither the modernist author intent on disclosing human cognitive limitations, nor the postmodern one, who shows art (no longer distinguishable from life, cf. Hutcheon 7) to be a mere conjurer's trick, can easily accept the responsibility of a moral teacher (assumed by the realistic novelist). However, even if the world of human experience, both individual and social (possibly in contrast to the material reality investigated by science), is no longer to be taken for granted, readers and writers alike in their lives need to make decisions, most of which carry moral value. The novelty consists in the necessity to condition moral answers on cognitive and ontological considerations, which once seemed obvious, owing to the authority of the church, society (the state) or science, and now appear problematic.

Incidentally, the very decision of the modernist and postmodern writer to disclaim any moral authority seems to be of moral character (or at least may be viewed as such). It would be dishonest to pretend to know more than one does, or confirm people in what one believes to be misconceptions, taking advantage of one's ability to move their imagination. Hence the choice of silence and game recommended by Josipovici (presented by him as the modernist solution adopted later by postmodernism, "The Lessons of . . ."), the choice, which, however, does not seem to correspond to human needs. As moral awareness continues to shape our everyday life experience, literature (and culture in general), which has helped develop this sensibility, attempts to meet the challenge. Yet, though all the three conventions explore moral issues, it should be noted that they adopt each a different approach. Their moral commitment and its specific quality may be, partly at least, deduced from their poetics.

FORMAL ANALYSIS OF THE THREE CONVENTIONS¹¹

Realism—the convention with which the novel has sometimes been identified (cf. Ian Watt), which dominated the novel's history from its rise through the 18th and 19th centuries and which has not disappeared until our times – is marked by a tight plot (strong causal links between events, chronological presentation of events, respect for the principle of verisimilitude, closed ending), plausible,

¹¹ Presenting the three conventions, characterizing their formal means of expression, I take advantage of their comprehensive discussion in my study of the method of reconstructing philosophical ideas expressed in the novel (Teske, *Philosophy* . . . 54-69).

typical characters shown against a panoramic social background, plain prose and the external narrator who often speaks with much authority. In so far as its thematic content is concerned, realism seems occupied with moral conflicts (sometimes dilemmas), which are resolved with reference to a socially accepted hierarchy of values and rules of moral conduct. Moral ideas are first of all translated into the world presented (taken as analogical to the phenomenal reality), though they may also appear in the discourse of the narrator, who often speaks on behalf of the implied author.¹²

The modernist novel appeared at the turn of the century and reflected the intellectual crisis of the time. The poetics of the modernist novel—the first-person, often unreliable, narration, multiple point of view (co-presence of conflicting or inconsistent interpretations), various stream-of-consciousness techniques (representing the instinctive, subconscious mind), symbols, poetic language, aesthetic design, open construction – expresses the limited subjective comprehension of reality available to man. The modernist novelist is preoccupied with epistemology: cognition of one’s own mind, other people’s minds, reliability of language and the like. This means in practice a growing awareness of the limits of human knowledge. This modernist cognitive skepticism extends to the sphere of morality. Thus the modernist author disclaims moral authority and suspends moral judgment (this is done first of all by means of the unreliable, first-person narrator who must no longer be identified with the implied author). Modernism is further concerned with how limitations of our cognition (with reference to both specific circumstances of a moral action and contemporary moral systems) may affect moral life. It often questions the traditional moral view (its credentials and complacency), exploring its social, religious, existential context. The novel may also examine specific cases of man’s conduct and their moral value but this examination is conducted in the language of moral possibility rather than obligation, because the proper arena of morality is private, subjective experience, of which very little is known, in which it is no longer certain that any universal moral rules obtain.

The postmodern novel began to dominate the literary scene in the second half of the 20th century. The key components of its poetics include metafiction, intertextuality, the narrator-fabulator, magic realism, embedded narratives, trans-

¹² Interestingly, although the moral capability of the convention seems uncontroversial, Kingsley Amis argues that the English realistic novel (but not Woolf, Forster or Conrad) has lost the metaphysical dimension of evil, reducing morality to the question of social manners. “A middle-class view of right and wrong is considered sufficient to explain human conduct. That would seem to me to be one of the greatest limitations that the English novel has fallen into,” (171).

gression of narrative boundaries (metalepsis), typographic innovations, multiple discourses and the like. They all abuse the convention of suspended disbelief to reveal artificial, fictional nature of the text and—by implication—of the world. With its ontological dominant, the postmodern novel discloses the man-made, conventional and arbitrary character of both our selves and our social environment. Simultaneously art becomes self-conscious; conscious, among others, of the risk of the artist's manipulative abuse of his/her position. The distinction into art and reality, as argued by Hutcheon, is abandoned. Moral actions and moral judgment acquire a new status of artistic/aesthetic act in that all reality is now re-interpreted in terms of the text, narrative, fiction: in a make-believe world, morality is also make-believe. But by the same token, if all we have is fictional reality, then fictional life becomes life *par excellence*, artistic decisions become moral decisions. Thus the focus of postmodern art, as regards moral issues, falls on the theory of morality, i.e. ethics (exploration of the nature of moral rules, mechanisms of power involved in their constitution and enforcement, etc.).

The above discussion may be briefly summarized in the following diagram:

Convention/aspect	Realism	Modernism	Postmodernism
The dominant	ethics	epistemology	ontology/aesthetics
Main subject of moral investigation	specific rules of moral conduct seen against the backdrop of social life	critical examination of current moral standards and the possibility of moral knowledge	ethics (the status of moral rules, values), plurality of moral systems, ethics of artistic endeavour
Ethical discipline corresponding to the main subject named above	particular ethics	epistemology of ethics (also ethics of cognition)	ethics: the status, validity, justification of moral rules, (also meta-ethics and ethics of art)
Moral standpoint	objectivism	skepticism	constructivism, relativism
Moral authority of the novelist as suggested by the figure of the implied author	the implied author speaks with authority (sometimes using the narrator as the mouthpiece)	the implied author disclaims any moral authority on cognitive grounds	the implied author undermines his/her privileged position, possibly so as not to abuse the sense of moral authority that goes with authorship
Basic means of presentation of moral issues	the world presented (interactions between characters)	the narrator's predicament, personal experience	construction and deconstruction of the fictional reality, metafiction

Three novels by Woolf will serve to illustrate the above approach. I will briefly describe the form of each novel (so as to make clear that it may adequately

represent the given convention) and then concentrate on the novel's treatment of moral issues.¹³

Night and Day (1919) is a realistic novel, though enriched with some elements of romance and social comedy. Thus we have an impersonal, external, omniscient, authoritative narrator, narrative construction based on the plot, plausible (mostly trivial) events, extensive social background. (At the same time one must admit that the number of introspective passages in which the characters examine their emotional life and the extensive use of symbols are far from typical and herald modernism). The novel focuses on the conflict between personal feeling and social conventions. The nature of the conflict is moral: the main characters in the novel want to know how they should live, whether they should comply with social expectations and suppress their emotions. We have, then, a conflict between two values: personal emotions and social order. Both are perceived as good, the question is which one should be given priority in a situation of conflict. The author suggests that one should seek a compromise: it is right to be faithful to oneself, but one must also respect emotions of other people. This solution is conveyed in the first place *via* the lives of the characters,¹⁴ though it is also expressed directly by the narrator, who seems to represent in the novel the implied author.¹⁵ To

¹³ The formal discussion of the novels presented in summary here is based on their detailed analyses in *Philosophy in Fiction* (104-130, 172-4, 185-188). There I provide the relevant textual evidence and references to various critical works on the subject, to which I am very much indebted in my interpretations. I have decided not to repeat them here, for the sake of clarity and because this general discussion of Woolf's novels is not the main subject of the present essay.

¹⁴ Katharine is engaged to William, with whom she is not in love; William, as the novel progresses, gets more and more interested in Cassandra but chooses to remain officially engaged to Katharine; Mary is painfully in love with Ralph, for she realizes that he is attracted by Katharine; Ralph cares for Katharine but proposes to Mary. The characters try to bend their emotions to fit the situation and discover how painful this may be. In the end all choose to follow their true inclinations. The decision whether and whom to marry is in the novel a significant moment of initiation which will verify or deny one's dream visions, one's right to respect one's emotional life (possibly at the cost of social conventions or family expectations).

¹⁵ Cf. the statement of the narrator which sums up Katharine's predicament: "Like all people brought up in a tradition, Katharine was able, within ten minutes or so, to reduce any moral difficulty to its traditional shape and solve it by the traditional answers. The book of wisdom lay open, if not upon her mother's knee, upon the knees of many uncles and aunts [. . .]. The rules which should govern the behaviour of an unmarried woman are written in red ink, graved upon marble, if, by some freak of nature, it should fall out that the unmarried woman has not the same writing scored upon her heart," (ND 265). Katharine, however, cannot bring herself to obey these rules as: "The only truth which she could discover was the truth of what she herself felt [. . .]"—and, though this is a faint guideline as opposed to the common tradition, she chooses to follow it. The narrator's commentary is enlightening: "To seek a true feeling among the chaos of the unfeelings or half-feelings of life, to recognize it when found, and to accept the consequences of the

conclude, the novel can be taken to illustrate the model approach of realistic fiction to moral issues because of its ethical dominant, its treatment of moral issues (concern with a specific moral problem), the literary means used for the purpose (the characters' lives and the narrator's commentary) and, finally, the clarity of the novel's moral message.

Jacob's Room (1922) represents the modernist novel. Although the book contains elements of metafiction, parody (of the Bildungsroman) or fragmentation typical of the postmodern convention, by and large it complies with the modernist aesthetics, witness the first-person self-conscious narration, marginalization of plot in favour of aesthetic design (patterns of images), stream-of-consciousness techniques, poetic register or the use of symbols. The novel enquires about the meaning of human life, given that human relationships, love in particular, are undermined by our inability to know each other. The book demonstrates also how the social pressure to adjust to social norms prevents people from becoming themselves and enjoying life. The narrative realm most fully dramatizing the main theme is that of the narrator: the reader follows the narrator's futile effort to understand Jacob. The dominant is epistemological: limitations of human cognition such as lack of insight into other people's minds, inadequacy of language, uncertainty as regards the meaning of human life. Yet these are shown in the book to have moral implications. Knowledge (or, more precisely, the lack of it) matters because it conditions human ability to form affectionate bonds with other people, the bonds that might make life meaningful. The frustrated narrator notes that

It seems that a profound, impartial, and absolutely just opinion of our fellow-creatures is utterly unknown. Either we are men, or we are women. Either we are cold, or we are sentimental. Either we are young, or growing old. In any case life is but a procession of shadows, and God knows why it is that we embrace them so eagerly, and see them depart with such anguish, being shadows. And why, if this—and much more than this is true, why are we yet surprised in the window corner by a sudden vision that the young man in the chair is of all things in the world the most real, the most solid, the best known to us—why indeed? For the moment after we know nothing about him.

Such is the manner of our seeing. Such the conditions of our love. (76-7, emphasis mine)

discovery, draws lines upon the smoothest brow, while it quickens the light of the eyes; it is a pursuit which is alternately bewildering, debasing, and exalting [. . .]" (ND 265-66). In brief, the narrator seems to approve of Katharine's decision and to accept the fact that man's greatest challenge is to recognize honestly one's own emotions, and, when possible, to act accordingly.

Another moral point of the novel (related to the theme of social critique) is that people should live by love, not by a sense of duty that comes from any external authority (be it society, the church or the academy). The conventional morality of obligation is thus questioned. So far this is consistent with the theoretical model of the modernist treatment of moral issues. What defies the model is the confidence with which the implied author seems to express her moral opinions (even though the narrator does not seem entirely trustworthy), e.g. about the negative character of restrictive obligations imposed upon the individual in a civilized society. However, as stated above, on the whole, the novel exemplifies the modernist approach to the subject of morality since the novel's dominant is cognitive, moral issues (human ability to love) are perceived in the context of epistemic considerations (shortage of knowledge), the traditional morality (of obligation as defined by social order) is shown as problematic and the area of the narrative most fully involved in the moral discussion is that of the narrator's personal experience.

Orlando (1928) is a clear case of postmodern fiction. It is a mock-biography, in which the biographer eventually turns out to be created by Orlando telling him/herself a fantastic tale of his/her own life (the protagonist becomes the narrator, the implied author turns out to be unreliable). In addition, the author takes full advantage of paratextual elements (preface, footnotes, index, illustrations) to undermine the distinction between the real author, the implied author and the narrator. Also the characters at times seem conscious of their fictional/textual character. Other postmodern techniques include metafiction, magic realism, irony, prominent narratee and omnipresent intertextuality. Breaking all the rules of the traditional novel, *Orlando* celebrates life and human creative/imaginative potential. Playfully the novel demonstrates how conventions (social fashions first of all but also convictions, e.g. that each person may be defined in terms of a single self, or that life and art or the feminine and masculine genders should be perceived as mutually exclusive) are hostile towards life. The novel's dominant is ontological: it deconstructs the notions of gender, art (as distinct from life—Orlando creates the story of his/her life in his/her own mind), the self; shows how they are invalid when confronted with the free experience of life. But again, as in the case of epistemologically-oriented *Jacob's Room*, moral implications of the ontological considerations are clearly spelt out. Orlando's quest is undertaken in the name of life, love and truth. By showing the social, arbitrary character of the notions mentioned above (gender, self, etc), the book questions their validity. Taking advantage of irony, exaggeration and parody, it criticizes their restrictive, destructive impact on human life. People in a civilized society have their lives circum-

scribed by numerous rules and are manipulated into believing that the rules matter, whereas what matters is love, life and truth. This critique of standard morality, however, is undermined by the playful character of the book, which discourages the reader from taking it in earnest. The novel thus seems to fully comply with the model of the postmodern novel's engagement with morality (and ethics) presented above: its dominant is ontological, moral issues are viewed in this (ontological) context (the search for love, life and truth cannot be properly apprehended until one realizes the extent to which the self, gender, and social conventions are constructed and thus open to revision), the novel questions the foundations of the accepted moral system on ontological (not epistemic) grounds, and, finally, the novel's moral meaning is conveyed among others by means of metafictional techniques (the destabilized structure of narrative levels and narrative identities of the characters and narrator included), in a playful tone so that the reader cannot deduce the implied author's intentions with any certainty.

CONCLUSIONS

I hope that the above discussion, though cursory, demonstrates that the three literary conventions under discussion display much interest in morality (and ethics, in the case of modernism and postmodernism) and that the way they approach this subject is related to the interpretation of life that is inherent in their poetics. In particular, neither the modernist nor postmodern novels by virtue of their formal conventions need be seen as denying the importance of moral experience in human life or propagating an immoral/amoral lifestyle. On the contrary, they extend the moral thought present in the realistic fiction so that it includes ethical problems related to the systemic limitations of human moral knowledge and their consequences (the modernist input) and the social, constructed character of this knowledge (the postmodern contribution).¹⁶

¹⁶ It might be argued that, contrary to what I am suggesting here, the realistic convention can also be used to question ethical systems, the case in point being Charles Dickens's critique of utilitarianism conducted among others in his novel *Hard Times*. However, as explained by Hugh Cunningham, Dickens's critique is directed not so much against utilitarianism as such (the idea that the value of an action should be perceived in relation to the number of people it can make happy) but to the current social policy (the New Poor Law concerning the right to relief, child labor, schooling for the working classes, public health, the civil service or the organization of philanthropy), sanctioned by, among others, the name of Jeremy Bentham, that failed to show sufficient consideration for the poor. Cunningham explains: "Thomas Gradgrind himself was the embodiment of Utilitarianism, a body of thought stemming from the work of Jeremy Bentham. At one level,

I also hope that the formalist approach adopted here, though somewhat artificial, may provide a useful frame of reference (indicating the most relevant narrative areas and moral/ethical problems) and thus help retrieve the specific moral/ethical message of any book that either exemplifies one of the three conventions in question or, as is often the case with the contemporary novel, partakes of all the three conventions (cf. Teske, *Philosophy* . . . 219-220, 223). Relevant examples of contemporary and, in terms of convention, mostly postmodern novels with highly interesting moral considerations include B. S. Johnson's *Albert Angelo* (1964), Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* (1995) or Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005). These moral considerations are conducted both on the level of form and the thematic content of the books. Thus in *Albert Angelo* Johnson explores the basic principles of secular ethics as well as the moral dilemma of the artist who desires to tell the truth but cannot eliminate the element of falsification inherent in all story-telling. *Flaubert's Parrot* contemplates the value of unrequited love. Ishiguro's book may be seen either as a study of the compulsive need to help other people, driven by the burden of imaginary guilt and an equally ungrounded sense of one's redemptive powers, or as problematizing the nature of man's duty towards the other, in a way that brings to mind Emanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. The story of Henry Perowne from *Saturday* apart from illustrating in an allegorical mode the topical issue of moral justification of the pre-emptive war on terrorism, poses questions concerning the (moral consequences of the) naturalist denial of free will. Also most drastic postmodern books on evil, such as Irvine Welsh's *Filth* (1998) or Niall Griffiths's *Sheepshagger* (2001), can hardly be called amoral, as they appear to find the issue of evil most perplexing and struggle to explore its causes, reflect on its consequences. In Griffiths's novel *Ianto*, the protagonist who commits cruel murders, was himself in his early childhood abused sexually with extreme cruelty by a stranger. In the novel by Welsh, Bruce Robertson is mistreated by his stepfather for the reason that the boy's biological father was a psychopath who raped the boy's mother; the boy is eventually disowned by his family after his brother

Dickens had no problem with a philosophy that judged human actions, and the actions of government, by the extent to which they contributed to the greatest happiness of the greatest number," (160). The novelist accuses social policy devoid of charity of inflicting unnecessary suffering on the poor (160, 164-5). Even, however, if one agrees that the novel offers a critique of the philosophy of utilitarianism, in particular, its negligence of individuality, imagination, art, emotion, its belief in egoism as human primary motivation, its laissez-faire policy in government and economy, as argued by Anne Humpherys (392), most of the means of expression employed for the purpose are far from typical of the realistic convention, for, as the scholar explains, they include, apart from the plot, the mode of allegory, moral fable and metaphors (392-6).

dies in an accident for which Bruce is blamed. Each time the traumatic childhood experience is revealed to the reader only after he/she learns about the victim's current criminal life, as if making their evil deeds not justifiable but in a way comprehensible (showing that there is a reason for this evil).

The approach I have adopted in the present paper is literary and formalist but it is also possible to examine the moral commitment of modernism and postmodernism from philosophical positions. Herbert Marcuse, for example, adopting the Marxist framework, argues that art, in order to initiate changes in human consciousness that will later result in a new social reality, greater individual freedom and happiness, needs both to represent the world and transform it. For this purpose the aesthetic form is crucial as it conveys the critical perception of reality, appeals to human imagination and defends the autonomy of art. This applies also to art that may seem elitist or decadent (Kafka or Beckett) for under certain social conditions art requires the form of estrangement to defend its truth and autonomy.¹⁷ As regards postmodernism, Robert Eaglestone argues that it is first of all an ethical position because it opposes the traditional Western approach to the Other, which consists in depriving the Other of otherness in the name of one's own freedom. The postmodern approach is to respond to the Other, in the name of one's responsibility, without trying to comprehend, i.e. possess or control, the Other, without reducing the Other to one's own terms. This approach, according to Eaglestone, originates in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas and has been developed by postmodernists, most of all by Jacques Derrida. Such philosophical interpretations, exemplified here by Marcuse and Eaglestone, are not confined to the novel or literature, treating the phenomenon of modernism and postmodernism more broadly; at the same time, because of their scope and abstract character, they might be more difficult to verify, but even so they seem to deserve much attention.

That the novel may contribute to developing human moral awareness can hardly be perceived as an original belief. For some time its most influential advocate has probably been the philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum.¹⁸ However,

¹⁷ Joseph McMinn refers in this context to Bell-Villada's defence of the original moral project of aestheticism: "In its origins [...] aestheticism argued that Art also had a social dimension, a civilizing purpose and a moral responsibility. Those who defend, or ridicule, aestheticism for its seeming indifference to social or political realities seem to have forgotten its special understanding of how Art relates to society, not through a didactic or 'committed' strategy, but through the power of imaginative reconstruction," (qtd in McMinn 84).

¹⁸ For example, in her essay "The Literary Imagination in Public Life" Nussbaum argues that literature and the novel in particular have an important moral function. Illustrating her argument with an analysis of *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens, the philosopher explains that the novel, quite

this recognition of the moral significance of the novel is often limited to the “traditional” realistic novel, whereas it seems important to appreciate the less obvious achievement of the more experimental fiction.¹⁹ As argued by Josipovici, at the bottom of the aesthetic shift from realism *via* modernism to postmodernism might lie the artist’s renunciation of his/her claim to higher (moral) authority (109-112).²⁰ Incidentally, the truth of moral ideas expressed in the realistic convention cannot be taken for granted, either, though their authors might have expressed them with much confidence.²¹ Considering problems involved in the justification of any ideas expressed in art, it seems advisable to view the novel not as providing the reader with instructions how to live (*pace* Barnes), but as a source of information about other people’s minds and their life experience, an opportunity to broaden in contact with fictional reality one’s own life experience and thus develop one’s awareness and sensibility (art through its appeal to the recipient’s imagination may offer very deep emotional, intellectual and perceptual experience), and a challenge to re-consider one’s view of life in the context of ideas expressed in the novel. Naturally, the benefits that man can draw from an encounter with art apply also to the sphere of moral life.

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apart from any particular story, in its very form – “in the telling of the story itself, in the shape and texture of the sentences, the pattern of the narrative, the sense of life that animates the text as a whole” (225-226) and in the way that it engages the reader develops in the reader imagination and moral sensibility, teaching him or her to sympathize with another human being and to appreciate the world for its own sake. Nussbaum goes as far as to see the novel as “a paradigm of moral activity” (qtd in Głąb 140). For a comprehensive discussion of the philosopher’s view of the relationship between the novel and moral philosophy, see Anna Głąb “Literatura w świecie filozofii moralnej.”

¹⁹ It is worth noting that this approach is not entirely absent from moral philosophy, cf. Cora Diamond’s discussion of Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five* (49-50), which she concludes with the following observation: “we should not be derailed by the significance of deliberation and choice within the realist novel, and led by the structure of such novels to think that the moral interest of novels can lie only in how their characters deliberate and choose,” (50).

²⁰ Cf. my essay on the novel’s cognitive potential, in which I quote selected opinions of contemporary British novelists on the matter (“The novel...” 384-385).

²¹ Cf. John’s discussion of the problems involved in the justification of ideas presented in works of art (esp. section on “Moral Knowledge” 335-338).

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O MORALNYM ZAANGAŻOWANIU POWIEŚCI REALISTYCZNEJ,
MODERNISTYCZNEJ I POSTMODERNISTYCZNEJ

Streszczenie

Przedmiotem tekstu są treści etyczne, jakie pojawiają się we współczesnej powieści realistycznej, modernistycznej i postmodernistycznej, a dokładniej – analiza tego, jak poetyka danej konwencji literackiej determinuje sposób ujęcia, ale i treść etycznych poglądów wyrażonych w utworze. Tekst broni tezy o etycznym zaangażowaniu modernistycznej i postmodernistycznej powieści, wbrew obiegowym opiniom, które głoszą, że są one albo amoralne (zdominowane przez postawę „sztuka dla sztuki”), albo relatywistyczne, zgodnie z duchem postmodernizmu. Analiza poetyki tych konwencji pozwala tymczasem sądzić, że każda z nich na swój własny sposób (zgodny z filozoficzną dominantą konwencji: epistemologiczną w modernizmie i ontologiczną w postmodernizmie), umożliwia podejmowanie problematyki etycznej, choć w sposób odmienny, niż miało to miejsce w konwencji realistycznej, niewątpliwie poświęcającej problematyce moralnej (zwłaszcza z zakresu etyki szczegółowej) największej uwagi. Ogólne rozważania zilustrowane są studium trzech powieści Virginii Woolf, z których każda reprezentuje inną konwencję. W całej pracy przedmiotem rozważań jest treść formy (forma jest tu istotna jako sposób ukazania obrazu świata; zasadniczo pomijane są natomiast treści wyrażone w utworach w sposób nieformalny – poprzez konstrukcję świata przedstawionego czy też wprost poprzez wypowiedzi narratora, postaci itp.).

Streściła Joanna Klara Teske

MORAL COMMITMENT OF THE REALISTIC,
MODERNIST AND POSTMODERN NOVEL

Summary

The present paper discusses moral ideas expressed in the contemporary novel of the realistic, modernist and postmodern conventions. More precisely, it tries to define how the poetics of a given convention determines the novel's ethical thought. It is argued that both the modernist and postmodern fiction, which are often perceived as amoral or relativist, are morally committed, though perhaps not as much as the realistic convention. The shape of this moral commitment is consistent with the dominant of each convention (epistemological in modernism and ontological in postmodernism). These theoretical considerations are subsequently illustrated with three case studies of Virginia Woolf's novels (each of which represents a different convention). Throughout the whole essay the emphasis falls on the meaning of the novelistic form, i.e. on the way that the novel's form conveys the novel's interpretation of reality.

Summarised by Joanna Klara Teske

Słowa kluczowe: powieść, moralność, modernizm, postmodernizm, forma.

Key words: novel, morality, modernism, postmodernism, form.

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