



Our Engagement with Literature: On Literature as a Way of Being

Ons engagement met literatuur: Over literatuur als een wijze van Zijn

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Abstract: An ethics of literature is generally related to the subject matter, style or genre of specific literary works, more specifically to the fact that a literary work deals with a certain subject or deals with it in a certain way. Instead, this article explores an ontological approach to the ethics of literature. This ontological approach suggests that literature's ethical dimension lies primarily in a specific mode of being that we call 'literary' and in our engagement with this mode of being, i.e. in the interrelation of the way literature exists for us and the way it lets us exist.

Keywords: ethics of literature, ontology, being-in-the-world, de-realization, Blanchot / ethiek van literatuur, ontologie, het zijn-in-de-wereld, ontrealisering, Blanchot

Introduction

Speaking of ethics within the field of literature is a tricky area to navigate. How to explain away the masses of rascals, murderers, weaklings and utterly disturbed protagonists populating the literary landscape? How to justify the wilful obstruction of univocal meaning, all the loose and open ends in the literary fabric? How to avoid too patronizing a view of both ethics and literature? And, even more fundamentally, on what criteria are we to found an ethics of literature? In this article, I propose to begin this tricky manoeuvre with what I believe should be the shared assumption of both ethics and literature: namely that it is not so much a product – a set of rules, a collection of works – but a *practice*, a way of being, an attitude. It is on the basis of this assumption that I would like to describe an ethics of literature. Unlike many other approaches, this ethics of literature is not primarily related to the subject matter, style or genre of specific literary works. That is to say: the fact that a literary work deals with subject x or deals with it in an x way is, in my view, *not* the most important reason as to why literature might be ethical. Rather, I would like to defend what I shall call, for want of a better word, an *ontological* approach of the ethics of literature. This ontological approach suggests that literature's ethical dimension lies primarily in the *mode of being* of works that we call literary and our engagement with this mode of being, i.e. in the interrelation of the way literature exists for us and the way it lets us exist. I will describe this ethics of literature in four consecutive steps or claims.¹

De-Realizing the Real

The first claim that I would like to defend in my four-step argumentation for an ethics of the ontology of literature reads as follows: *literature is a de-realization of the real*. This claim seems to be grist to the mill of radical aestheticists contesting all forms of ethical purpose. Although this de-realization is not entirely opposed to radical aestheticism, it is subtler than that. Referring to Blanchot, one could say that this de-realization of the real is not so much the creation of an imaginary reality independent of our own, but a transformation of the mode of being of our own reality. As Blanchot rightly observes, literary creation transforms the ontological status of reality: it turns the real into something unreal by the mere fact that the entire reality is at the writer's disposal. I quote Blanchot at length from 'Literature and the Right to Death' (1948):

What is an author capable of? Everything. [...] [But] the truth is that the writer also ruins action, not because he deals with what is unreal, but because he makes all of reality available to us. Unreality begins with the whole. The realm of the imaginary is not a strange region situated beyond the world, it is the world itself, but the world as entire, manifold, the world as a whole [...] It is the world, grasped and realized in its

¹ All four claims have, in slightly different forms, been made by Maurice Blanchot. This article can therefore be seen as a hardly concealed tribute to Blanchot, i.e. to the value and relevance of Blanchot's work for the issues that we are facing in literary theory today. For a more extensive elaboration of the claims made in this paper, see: Aukje van Rooden, *Literatuur, autonomie en engagement: Pleidooi voor een nieuw paradigma* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015).

entirety by the global negation of all the individual realities contained in it, by their disqualification, their absence [...] which is where literary creation begins.²

As stated by Blanchot, a de-realization of the real boils down to a 'global negation' of the real, a disqualification or bracketing of the established facticity of all elements of reality by turning them into potential material for literary creation. This global negation Blanchot refers to is opposed to both the aestheticist idea of the literary work as an imaginary region situated beyond the world and to the idea of the literary work as a concrete intervention in this world – the latter implying only a *partial* negation of the world with the purpose of changing our view of that part. The de-realization peculiar to literature is more fundamental. Blanchot compares literature with a somewhat purified idea of total revolution. Like a revolution, literature is the temporary interruption of the status quo, the shattering of the clocks, the suspension of time, in order to create this instant, this interstitial instant where everything is possible: a nothing full of potential. In this nothing full of potential, Blanchot stresses, all of reality is at our disposal, i.e. the established facticity of daily reality is unhinged and turned into full potentiality. But – and this is the downside of literary freedom – this full potentiality will remain what it is, potential, without finding any concretization, since the same gesture that created this potential – the suspension of all reality – has also suspended the means for realization. By making the totality of the world available to us as something that can be renounced, transformed or intervened in according to one's own will, this totality at the same time loses its self-evidence: the real being de-realized.

Even if the literary realm created is in almost every respect similar to the actual one, the fact that the writer *could have* created a completely different world means that reality as a whole is put at stake. This is the experience evoked, in varying degrees, by all texts that we call literary, varying from fairy tales to historical novels, from avant-garde poetry to literary thrillers. The fact that in modern literature the creative freedom of the act that literature is resides in the possibility to create *everything*³, results in that what is actually created comes across as unreal – because it could just as well have been completely different. In other words:

² Maurice Blanchot, 'Literature and the Right to Death', in *The Work of Fire*, trans. by C. Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 315-16.

³ I refer to the opening lines of Blanchot's above quote: 'What is the author capable of? Everything.' The idea that absolute freedom lies at the basis of modern literature and aesthetics is, however, widespread, although sometimes in different manifestations. In the case of Thierry De Duve, it is called the '*whatever*' or '*n'importe quoi*': '[L]'art, ce qu'on nomme universellement l'art, doit pouvoir être *n'importe quoi* et nommé art par *n'importe qui*. C'est l'impératif moderne mis à nu.' Thierry De Duve, *Au nom de l'art. Pour une archéologie de la modernité* (Paris: Minuit, 1989), p. 135. A similar idea is expressed by Jacques Derrida in terms of the 'to say everything' or '*tout dire*': 'Literature is a modern invention, it inscribes itself in conventions and institutions which, to hold on to just this trait, secure in principle its right to *say everything* [*le droit de tout dire*]. Literature thus ties its destiny to a certain non-censure, to the space of democratic freedom.' Jacques Derrida, 'Passions: An Oblique Offering', in *On the Name*, ed. by Thomas Dutoit, trans. by D. Wood (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 28 (translation slightly modified). It could moreover be argued that this right to say everything forms the basis of modern literature's autonomy, rather than the other way around, as is, for instance, emphasized by Rancière in his definition of modern aesthetics. 'Art exists as a separate world *since anything whatsoever can belong to it*.' Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis. Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. by Z. Paul (London/New York: Verso 2013), p. x. Italics are mine. This idea of the absolute freedom of modern literature is of course not unrelated to the 'anything goes' often critically attributed to so-called purely aesthetic, non-committal literature. I hope to show that one can also value this absolute freedom more positively as the condition of possibility for an ethics of literature.

the contingency implied in the absolute freedom of modern literature is incompatible with the facticity of reality. It is this facticity of reality as a whole that is bracketed by the writer, just by claiming to write literature.

The Role of the Reader

The second claim that I would like to defend is the following: *the reader is the ultimate condition of possibility of literature*. Put in terms of the previous claim, it is the *reader* who accomplishes the de-realization of the real and thereby actually realizes a piece of work as a piece of literature. This is not only to say that literature is simply non-existent without readers, but also that texts have no intrinsic literary features. Of course there is a wide range of factors that invite readers to consider a specific text as literary, varying from textual properties, to the way authors present themselves and their work, to the influence of socio-cultural institutions. But for a text to actually exist *as* literature, as an act or event that de-realizes the real, the reader's attitude towards the text is decisive. The reader who reads *De Avonden* as an historical reconstruction of a depressing post war winter in the life of an adolescent or W.F. Hermans' *Nooit meer slapen* as the report of a scientific expedition is, although completely legitimized to do so, *not* reading it as a piece of literature. Considering literature, not as a product or state or affairs, but as a practice, an attitude, a specific mode of existence, means that the reader first of all conceives of the world evoked in a work as a form of de-realization, that is, as the total negation of the actual world by means of the creation of an imaginary world that may or may not be consistent with our conception of the actual world.

It is important to note that the fact that the reader is the ultimate condition of possibility for a text to exist as literature does not imply that the reader decides whether something is *good* literature or not. The reader's attitude towards a work does not, firstly, concern the *value* of a text but only the *way* it exists, i.e. its *ontological* status, its mode of being. In other words: the reader's attitude initially concerns the *quod* of literature – that it is – and not the *quid* – what it is.⁴

The Ethics of De-Realization

My third claim concerns the ethical dimension of literature's de-realization and is formulated as an affirmative: *de-realizing the real is an ethical act*. An inquiry into the ethical value of de-realization becomes relevant at this point because the question arises as to what extent such a de-realization of the real implies moral indifference, the blasé *anything goes*, and the noncommittal freedom generally associated with radical aestheticism. The answer to this question cannot but be: to the full extent. Considering literature as a practice that demands to conceive of the world created as a global negation of the actual world, cannot but lead to the

⁴ Policy and education aimed at the development of literary literacy should therefore, in my view, not primarily focus on teaching a *normative* sensitivity for distinguishing 'good' or 'great' literature from 'bad' or pulp literature, but on teaching the more basic sensitivity for the de-realization of the real that is proper to all works that we call 'literary' and the ethical relevance (to be discussed in the next paragraph) of that ontological mode of existence for our own lives.

conception of this creation as idle, vain, free of obligation. This is the reverse side of the unlimited creative freedom of modern literature. If literature's creative freedom were not *absolute* but confined to, let's say, educational works or works dealing with moral issues, modern literature would lose the only power it has, which is precisely the power of unlimited creation, of creating a limbo where *everything* is possible.

The relevant question is therefore not to what extent literature's creations are idle, but to what extent these idle creations can nevertheless have an ethical value. In other words: how to attribute an ethical value to the double-edged power of literature's de-realization. As indicated previously, the power of literature is to negate and reshape the world as a whole. Another way of putting this, again by using Blanchotian terminology, is to say that literature opens to 'the other of all worlds'. I quote Blanchot from *The Space of Literature* (1955):

[T]hrough the work there takes place in time another time, and in the world of beings that exist, and of things which subsist, there comes, as presence, *not another world, but the other of all worlds*, that which is always other than the world.⁵

The distinction drawn by Blanchot between 'another world' and 'the other of all worlds' is important and lies at the basis of the ethics of literature's ontological status developed in this article. Most theories depriving literature of ethical relevance conceive of literature as the opening of another world, a world separate from ours, an imaginary world satisfying our need to escape reality. The 'other of all worlds', however, is something different. Certainly, when reading a book, in a way another world opens up within ordinary reality, but this *literary* world is not another realm, another reality. After all, it has none of the characteristics a reality should have for it to be called that way, like material presence, uninterrupted existence, social and temporal dimensions, living inhabitants. As far as these characteristics are evoked, they are done so in a de-realized way. One could say that the literary mode of being is a mode of being *without being*.

This is precisely why an ethics inherent to literature is most probably quite different from forms of ethics valuable in everyday life. I do not deny that literature can contribute to the development of everyday ethical competences such as empathy towards other people or possessing multi-sided knowledge of complex socio-cultural situations. In these cases, however, reading or writing literature is just one of various possible means to develop those ethical skills rather than being a practice that has an ethics exclusive to it. An ethics proper to literature should not be based on feelings, experiences or knowledge that could also be gained from non-literary texts or situations but should instead take into account, or even be based upon, the de-realization of the real that is the exclusive right and power of the literary work. In other words, the ethical relevance of literature *as literature* must lie in the act of de-realization and in this act alone. Or, to be more precise, this ethics of literature should be based on the fact that the literary creation is the creation of a world as pure potentiality rather than as a given. A pure potentiality that, as such, unhinges the given and transforms the exclamation mark that

⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by A. Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 228. Italics are mine. See also p. 75: '[T]rue art [has] its origin, not in another world, but in the other of all worlds.' By repeating the phrase 'the other of *all worlds*', Blanchot stresses that 'the' world in the phrase 'that which is always other than the world' is not referring to the world as a consistent permanency. It is rather the world 'taken as a whole' as explained by Blanchot in a previous cited passage from 'Literature and the Right to Death'.

accompanies everyday reality into a question mark. It is in this questioning of the self-evidence of the status quo, in sensitivity to the contingency of the so-called established facts and values, that the ethical moment lies.

Literature as a Way of Being

The fourth and last claim of this argumentation for an ethics of literature is the following: *literature is a way of being in the world*. This claim might be somewhat counter-intuitive, given the previous claims that literature is a way of de-realizing reality and opens to the other of all worlds. These claims seem to suggest that literature is located at a distance from the world, elevated in the notorious ivory tower or withdrawn in a shelter from everyday reality. This would however be a wrong conclusion, based on two interrelated misconceptions. The first one is the misconception revealed earlier: namely, the idea that literature is an object or a product, a state of affairs. The *product* is the book or the written text: this is an object that we can buy and sell, and that we can decide to read, or not. But *literature* is what happens when we start to read and what happens is, as claimed, not a withdrawal from reality but a transformation of its ontological status.

The other, related, misconception is the idea that *the world* is an object. It might well be the biggest mistake in intellectual history to think of the world as an object that we can take a distance from, and that we can, in doing so, examine, categorize, interpret and comment upon. What we have learned from Heidegger and other phenomenologists and existentialists is that, even in doing so, we can never be separated from the world but are, always already, inevitably thrown into the world: being is always being *in* the world, even if this being, in the case of literature, is a form of being without being. In other words: the connection with the world cannot be cut (except in death); there cannot be *no* connection or *no* engagement with the world, because 'world' is nothing but the set of connections and engagements we live in and live by. And more than that: since 'we' and 'the world' co-emerge and constitute each other, there is not even such a thing as 'the' world: there are only webs of relations between people, things and ideas, more or less consistent wholes that make sense and enable us to live, think and experience at all – and all of these webs are all worlds, or again and again *a world*.⁶

Literature – not as an object but as a practice, an attitude, a mode of existence – is a special way of being in the world, as mentioned earlier: it is a form of being without being, a de-realized form of reality. It is the evocation of (the) world – as being time and again a set of relations that make sense – by means of its simultaneous denial and recreation. Another way of putting this is to say that literature is a way of being at the margins of (the) world, *outside in* it. In the words of contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy: it is the 'coming of the world', its origin. Since (the) world is not an object that came into existence in some immemorial past, this coming is something that can – and *should*, in the ethical sense of this word – be re-enacted time and again to quote Nancy from *The Muses* (2001): 'What has no place *in* the world is the coming of the world, its event. In a sense this is nothing other than the world itself [...] the fact that there is world.'⁷ As argued earlier, such a re-enactment can only be

⁶ In *Literatuur, autonomie en engagement*, I have called this the 'relational paradigm'.

⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. by P. Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 76.

performed in the typical mode of being at the margins of (the) world, because it is only possible from the viewpoint of its totality. Again, what is at stake is not the creation of some other world, above or behind the real one, but the creation of the other of all worlds, that is of the unhinging of (the) world as the established facticity of given states of affairs.

This mode of being might be paradoxical and difficult to conceptualize, but when put in an historical perspective, it may be nothing but the all too familiar mode of being of the Christian monotheist God, the ultimate creator, being both outside and inside the world, at its origin. One could say that at the beginning of modernity – accompanied by the beginning of modern literature – this divine mode of being has been brought into the world. Literature is the exceptional event where this creative outside can take place at the very heart of being, in the everydayness of the world. It is the coming of the world, the neutral line, of being, made present, perceivable, and sensible – from the point where everything is potentially present, and therefore nothing is.

Conclusion

In the introduction to this four-step argumentation, I proposed to develop an ethics of literature that would focus on the ontology of literature, i.e. on the interrelation of the way in which literature exists for us and the way it lets us exist. I have argued that literature's ontological status can best be described as a mode of being that de-realizes the real and that this mere act has ethical relevance since it incites us to question the status quo and raises sensitivity to the contingency of the set of relations that are, each time anew, our world. These ideas are not unrelated to what, in literary theory, is often described in terms of a sensitivity to 'Otherness' or 'alterity'. Nevertheless, such an 'ethics of Otherness' differs, on a very fundamental level, from the ethics of literature developed in this article. Let me, by means of conclusion, emphasize the sense in which this ontological approach to the ethics of literature differs from an ethics of Otherness. Derek Attridge developed an exemplary and quite influential example of such an ethics of Otherness in *The Singularity of Literature* (2004).⁸

In the wake of Derridean deconstruction, Attridge argues that literature's ethical dimension resides in the fact that it is an 'irruption of the other into the same'⁹, that is to say, that it is an event violently disturbing the comfortable set of expectations that is called 'the Same' and fixes our attention to the unheard of, the unexpected that is called 'the Other'. This is to say that the sensitivity raised by literature is a sensitivity to the radical Otherness, to what lies outside our socio-historico-cultural frame of reference. The disturbance evoked by literature is, in other words, a cultural or even epistemological disturbance that ideally leads to an awareness of one's own perspectivism and a suspension of one's prejudices. Since the irruption by this Otherness is interdependent of the given cultural constellation of 'the same', this ethics of Otherness only allocates specific kinds of works that could incite such an irruption, and only in the case of specific kinds of readers. In Attridge's words: 'if a work comforts and reassures by simply confirming prejudices or reasserting truisms according to well-known verbal formulae, it

⁸ See also Derek Attridge's contribution 'Autonomy, the Singular Literary Work, and the Multilingualism of Hermans's *Nooit meer slapen*' (p. 17-32) in this issue.

⁹ Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London/New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 40.

cannot be called literature in the sense in which I [Derek Attridge, AvR] am using the term'.¹⁰ Although literature might be an exceptionally effective way to reach such an 'ethical disturbance', the fact that it is only a small selection of – mostly modernist or postmodernist – works that have this potential can only lead to the conclusion that, either other kinds of works are not literature, or that it is not literature *as literature* that has ethical relevance, but only specific texts that deal with a particular subject in a particular way.

An ontological approach, on the other hand, concerns *all* works that we call literary, varying, as said, from fairy tales to historical novels. As I have tried to argue, in this approach it is not literature's engagement with an Otherness that makes literature ethical, but our engagement with the mode of being that literature is, irrespective of style, subject matter or genre. The ethical sensitivity or awareness raised by the de-realization inherent to all those works is not the sensitivity to an unheard of Otherness, but to the very contingency of our everyday world. In other words, the disturbance evoked by literature is, firstly, not of a cultural or epistemological nature, but ontological or metaphysical. The 'other of all worlds' opened by literature is thus not a radical other world or the world of the radical Other, Other of the same. Rather, the other of all worlds opened by reading or writing literature is the happening of world itself, the same world, the sameness of which, so to speak, is different each and every time. The ethical moment of this happening does not reside in the fact that the reader is confronted with an Otherness – i.e. with the *alius* or *alienus* – but in a confrontation with the *alter* – the alternating, the alternative, the eternal movement of the world that is different each and every time.¹¹ If there is indeed an ethical 'lesson' to be learned through our engagement with literature, it is the at the same time most basic and profound lesson that what we call 'world' can be different each and every time.

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¹⁰ Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, p. 77.

¹¹ See for the difference between the figure of *alius* and that of the *alter* also Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. by R. Richardson and A. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 10-5.

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