Manuel J. Sousa Oliveira
University of Porto

Review of Hale, Dorothy J. *The Novel and the New Ethics*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2020

In recent years, many authors and critics have renewed their interest in literature's ethical value. For some of them, the novel, in specific, has achieved cultural status as the best form of literary production to deliver to the reader an encounter with the other. In her new book *The Novel and the New Ethics* (2020) Dorothy J. Hale takes up cultural views such as these and traces them back to the art of the novel as developed by Henry James. Regardless of whether reading makes us better people or not – something Hale does not think we can prove – this widespread conviction shared by contemporary writers, readers, and scholars alike on the ethical value of the novel has led to the development of a novelistic aesthetics of alterity, which is this book's aim to expound.

The Novel and the New Ethics is divided into five chapters with a preface, and a coda. Three of its chapters focus on a novel each, respectively, Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* (1897), Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005), and J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003); additional novels are considered, notably Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008). Each chapter builds on the previous ones in a way that follows developments in the theory of the novel rather than historical chronology. The first four chapters explore "the consolidation of the aesthetics of alterity as an aesthetic program for Anglo-American novelists that implies a reading practice" (Hale: 45),[1] while the fifth chapter critiques some of the foremost theories that have established the new ethics as an academic discipline.

This monograph is published as part of the Post45 series by the Stanford University Press. Post45 is a collective of scholars preoccupied with postwar US-American literature and culture. One of the key contributions by the group has been its efforts to consolidate the study of the contemporary as a period starting in 1945 and expanding until today – a period that is seen as the triumph of modernist aesthetics rather than a departure from it – which is clearly at the heart of Hale's argument, as well. *The Novel and the New Ethics*, however, goes beyond the rationale of the collective moving with ease between national literatures to study not only American literature but the Anglo-American novel. From Virginia Woolf to Toni Morrison, the

novelistic aesthetics that define the contemporary novel is here seen in relation to the legacy of modernist practices. Crucial to Hale is the figure of Henry James as the novelist whose aesthetics were consolidated by the modernists and which have extended into the contemporary moment.

As an exercise in synthesis, the book brings together and clarifies the aesthetic program that defines a tradition. Authorial statements and scholarly work are brought to the same plane as "to show how the cultural construction of the novel as the literary genre most defined by the ethics of alterity it makes available to its readers fulfills the Jamesian project" (46). This allows Hale first to identify that – despite the disparities between different authorial statements and philosophical positions – there is a shared belief that the novel as an artform stands unmatched in its ethical power to deliver an encounter with the other; second Hale argues that this aesthetics of alterity is in the tradition of James's art of the novel.

Since her *Social Formalism* (1998) that Hale has come to engage with James's novelistic practices. In *The Novel and the New Ethics* Hale largely expands upon her 1998 book in order to participate in a recent trend that considers the relation between literature and ethics – often referred to as the ethical turn. Her efforts are to consolidate disparate ethical views on literature of recent decades as what she terms the new ethics. Already with names as resonant as Martha Nussbaum or J. Hillis Miller, Hale shows what writers, philosophers, and critics have in common despite their disagreements. Hale distances herself, however, from strong theories of affect of which Nussbaum's love may be the most representative. Instead, she "seeks to illuminate how the felt need in the present moment to revivify the social relevance of literature sparks a new ethical description of the novel's particular social value that is rooted in the modernist notion of narrative form" (ix). This new ethical description has largely amounted to a new defense of literature by insisting on novel reading as pedagogic. Conversely, Hale discloses from the start that she herself has no interest in trying to prove "that reading fiction makes us better people" (x). Still, this book asks how this view came to be by taking into consideration how novelists during the twentieth century found the primary justification for novel writing and reading to be its exceptional ethical value. Thus, her object of study is those twentieth and twenty-first century "novelists and theorists who *explicitly* advocate for the ethical value of literature" (xiii, my emphasis). Hale conducts close reading of key novels by James, Smith and Coetzee to argue that the ethics of alterity are achieved by use of novelistic strategies of ethical confinement, in composition, form, and narrative technique – including narration and focalization. The aim of *The Novel and the New Ethics* is to describe how, on the one hand, the belief that an ethical content allied with an ethics of form has established the novel as a distinct aesthetic production, and how, on the other hand, the key ethical stake in form is that of the representation of the other (xi-xiii).

The novelist in the tradition is charged with making use of formal devices that deliver characters as autonomous individuals. Central to Hale's book is the definition of an aesthetics of alterity, "the notion that fictional characters possess a personhood that imbues their narrative representation with ethical value" (5). Grounded in this notion is that the social value of literature, as understood by an increasing number of contemporary novelists and academic

N.o 43 – 12/ 2020 | 311-315 – ISSN 2183-2242 | http:/dx.doi.org/10.21747/21832242/litcomp43r1

theorists, rests on "the ethical encounter with otherness made available through novelistic form", Hale claims (5). At once, three major features of the tradition's ethical logic arise. First, "the tradition's investment in representing fictional characters as particular individuals distinct and different from the authors who invented them", second "the politicized understanding of subaltern subjects as radically other – and thus ethically unrepresentable – from the point of view of social hegemony", and third "the ontological notion of narrative as an ethical order, resistant to and capable of exposing a specific author's ideological investments" (5).

The Jamesian tradition distinguishes itself, for instance, from George Eliot's ethical views of the novel because it is grounded on the mediation of an encounter with a social other (the other as other), rather than the insistence on the universality of human experience (12). Besides James, Hale directly engages with a number of novelists as contributing to this tradition such as Woolf, Faulkner, Smith, Coetzee, Morrison and others; but she also finds worthy candidates for future research in Zora Neale Hurston, Jennifer Egan, and Tommy Orange, to name a few. Still, not all Anglo-American novelists are part of the tradition nor do all the novelists who practice an aesthetics of alterity follow a single model of composition and for the representation of characters. She clarifies that,

> The point I want to make is that the novelistic aesthetics of alterity does not offer a systematic or programmatic way of reading narrative that results in a unanimous view of either the defining properties of the novel understood as a narrative form or the ethical values inherent to in specific novels, but instead positions the ethical value of alterity as the end point of novel reading, however ethics is defined and whatever narrative features are credited with conveying that ethics. This is to say that although the ethical attitudes at stake in a given novel are conflicted or even contradictory, the questions circulated about knowing and representing others make narrative legible and bestow a unifying aesthetic value upon the genre. (24-25)

In her first chapter "The New Ethics and Contemporary Fiction", Hale considers the contemporary Anglo-American novel from the perspective of novelists themselves and the legacy of modernism during which occurred the first sustained attempts at defining the novel as a distinct and valuable artform. This chapter considers non-fictional statements on the art of the novel by contemporary fiction writers such as Smith, Coetzee, and Morrison, as well as Jonathan Franzen, Gish Jen, Ian McEwan, and Marilynne Robinson (1-2). By drawing on modernist views of novelistic narrative, Hale argues that the Anglo-American art of the novel has evolved over the course of the twentieth century into a novelistic aesthetics that presupposes the reading experience as an ethical encounter with a social other (4-5). From the novelist's point of view, it is due to its narrative form that the novel allows for a "phenomenological experience of modes of ontological otherness" (5). By drawing on non-fictional statements on fiction by novelists Hale argues that the narrative techniques used to portray a characterological autonomy are twofold. First is the role of narration in mediating the reader's encounter with characters, and how it consequently restricts the autonomy of characters as individuals.

That narrative creates the effects of characterological autonomy is credited to the narrator who advances "the illusion of physical embodiment, deep interiority, or agential power" of characters (18). The social relation forged between the authors and their fictional individuals is one grounded on an ethical management of narrative techniques (18). Second is indeed the view of the novel as preemptively the representation of character. Launched by James, the art of the novel becomes intrinsically linked with character, and each "narrative element is potentially expressive of character" (27). Although it was James who defined novel writing as grounded on the representation of social others, contemporary novelists such as Smith add a power politics dimension to the relation of the author with their characters.

The racial other is one such subject that remains at bay in James's *What Maisie Knew*. In chapter two – "Henry James and the Development of the Novelistic Aesthetics of Alterity" – Hale reads *What Maisie Knew* through the lens of Morrison, using her work of literary criticism *Playing in the Dark* (1992). It is noteworthy how Hale engages in dialogue two writers from two distant points in the lifespan of the tradition to show what they nonetheless have in common. On the one hand, Hale draws on Morrison to show James's failure in representing a racialized other, and on the other hand, she draws on James himself to show how he struggled to present the novel from the perspective of a character whose subject position is different from his own – a child – and how he managed her representation from a narrative level that made the character both closer and more distant. In this chapter Hale powerfully observes that if the ideological determinants of race and racism, as identified by Morrison, seem to be violations to the integrity of the characters is, in fact, to James's credit for having created a character that is experienced as a living other entitled to such. Indeed, key to the aesthetics of alterity is how the novelist who is "capable of making his characters so real as to seem as if they deserved human rights is the one who possesses not just the godlike power to create, but the godlike power to love social others as others" (91-92). It is thus, others as others, that the aesthetics of alterity opens up the possibility of understanding the social other in their own terms, according to Hale.

The subjectification of novelistic narrative first developed by James is seen in Smith's novel in chapter three "Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*: An Ethical Aesthetics as the Problem of Perspectivalism". Here Hale argues that through her choice of title Smith is directly addressing Elaine Scarry's philosophical treatment of beauty to claim that the novel form is ethically superior in depicting these themes (96). Crucial to this is Smith's use of perspectivalism as to represent "socially diverse characters [...] filled with aesthetic experience," and to convey "their individual attempts to understand that experience" (97). Perspectivalism accords *On Beauty* ethical value, for Smith, by showing how "the ethics of alterity is produced through the experience of self-limit" (113). Before moving on to chapter four "J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*: The Tradition as the Sum of its Parts", Hale considers how Smith's early essays articulate the novelist's "belief in social alterity as an ultimate ethical good" (133). Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* is discussed in the next chapter as to "explore the family of ideas that constitute the novel's formulation of the ethics of alterity and then examine the narrative techniques that make the

N.o 43 – 12/ 2020 | 311-315 – ISSN 2183-2242 | http:/dx.doi.org/10.21747/21832242/litcomp43r1

novel as a genre, from this novel's point of view, not just the book of other people [...] but the book of other states of being" (142). Hale shows how in his novel Coetzee makes use of formal and narrative techniques – particularly, metanarrative – as to present contrasting ethical philosophies represented by different characters. Consequently, the novel stresses how "the disagreement among readers and writers about which properties of the novel realize the ethics of alterity is less important than the agreement that the ethics of alterity defines the value of the novelistic enterprise" (169). Thus, in refusing to provide a clear philosophical grounding for narrative ethics, Hale argues, Coetzee's novel instead describes "a way of understanding how the ethics of alterity collapses into an aesthetic" (171).

Mirroring the discussions on ethics presented in Coetzee's novel chapter five "The New Ethics in the Academy" raises an array of competing new ethical theories. In this chapter Hale finally inquires into the institutional development of the new ethics. In her critique of new ethical theories Hale seeks to "investigate why these recent defenses of the ethical value of literature are made through the particular example of the novel genre – and why this defense so often refers the question of ethics to the novels of Henry James" (173). First, Hale bridges the two seemingly opposing views on the ethics of literature of Martha Nussbaum and Judith Butler. Second, she explores how the new ethics of authors such as Adam Zachary Newton, Andrew Gibson, and J. Hillis Miller expand upon the Jamesian notion of novelistic ethics all to argue from distinct perspectives how the novel as an artform is "particularly qualified to offer the reader an ethical encounter with alterity" (174). The book closes with a coda entitled "Henry James in the Clinician's Office" about James's aesthetics of alterity applied to medical practice. This unexpected – but welcome – focus is prompted by Rita Charon's work into narrative medicine.

Those interested in pathways for selective reading should consult chapters one and two as well as the preface for Hale's debate on the novelistic aesthetics of alterity from James to the present. Chapters three and four offer particularizations of the tradition in two novels from the twenty-first century, and chapter five provides an overview of some of the most important new ethical theories. In her critique of the new ethical theories raised – some of which have already achieved high degrees of notoriety in academic circles – Hale is indeed very incisive. It remains unclear, however, what position does Hale herself take regarding new ethical theories on the ethical power of the novel as an artform – claims she deems unprovable (xvii). Instead, the major takeaway from *The Novel and the New Ethics* is how Hale powerfully identifies a tradition of Anglo-American novelists who believe that novelistic aesthetics necessitates an ethical engagement with the other.

NOTE

[1] Henceforth, *The Novel and the New Ethics* will be referred to solely by page number.