

Beyond empathy: narrative distancing and ethics in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and JM Coetzee's *Disgrace*.

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Beyond Empathy: Narrative Distancing and Ethics in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Beyond Empathy:
Narrative Distancing and Ethics in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*
and J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

Molly Abel Travis (bio)

If we learn to read the text as the text of the other rather than as a representation of identities where narrative is a direct allegory of politics, it is practice for welcoming the interruption of the ethical in our epistemological projects.

— Gayatri Spivak

In a 2006 *New York Times Book Review* survey, respondents chose Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as the best work of American fiction in the last 25 years.¹ Not to be outdone, a panel of British writers immediately followed with a selection of the best British and Commonwealth novel in the last quarter century: J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*.² What these two novels have in common, besides being profound and beautifully written narratives by Nobel laureates, is that they confront historical traumas and foreground the contested relationship between empathy and ethics through narrative distancing. By keeping readers at a distance and preventing too easy an empathy with their protagonists, Morrison's and Coetzee's novels pose searing ethical questions that convey the uncanny haunting of the real that marks the self's inability to arrest the meaning of the other.³

Most conventional arguments for the redemptive power and ethical function of narrative literature point to literature's ability to cultivate humanity **[End Page 231]** through the creation of an empathy that can serve as the foundation for a multicultural ethics. This empathy, so the argument goes, is created through the reader's close identification with the narrator and/or characters in a process that allows us to transcend differences. However, in considering the possibilities of narrative empathy, one finds no guaranteed relationship between literary empathy and a socialized ethical response. As Suzanne Keen concludes in her book *Empathy and the Novel*, "The evidence for altruism as an effect of novel reading is not robust" (167). In fact, I will argue that the most ethical act for literature is not the bridging of gaps through the creation of empathy, but the articulation and keeping alive of intractable ethical

questions about the asymmetrical relationship between self and other. This argument aligns with what Dorothy Hale has identified as the new ethical theory that focuses on "the reader's apprehension through literature of an alterity that exceeds comprehension . . . positioning the reader not as a friend but as a judge," an argument at odds with the assumptions of a multicultural pedagogy that seeks to cultivate empathy, domesticate difference, and overcome otherness (195). It is only through openness to alterity that there can be an ethical relation. Without a relation to that which interrupts our epistemological projects to contain the other, there would be no ethics.

Working from the premise that literature has inhabited the place of the other, Derek Attridge describes the singularity of literature as "a transformative difference . . . that involves the irruption of *otherness* or *alterity* into the cultural field" (*Singularity* 136, emphasis original). This paper examines the "transformative difference" in the reading of Morrison's *Beloved* and Coetzee's *Disgrace*—two novels marked by an alterity that pushes readers beyond empathy. The alterity emerges in the narratives at the sites of irresolvable alternatives placed side-by-side, with the aporias posing ethical challenges to readers that extend beyond the reach of the sympathetic imagination. I end by arguing that *Beloved* and *Disgrace* are exactly what students need, not only because of their intrinsic literary merits but also because they function as necessary supplements to the doses of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Cry, the Beloved Country* that students have received over the years. The juxtaposing of Morrison's and Coetzee's novels with their mirror inversions in Lee's and Paton's novels reveals another aspect of transformative difference. **[End Page 232]**

Morrison's *Beloved*

Beloved speaks from the silence of American slave narratives, troubling the teleology of emancipation and the triumph of justice that was a requisite convention of the genre. Although Americans have attempted to bury those dis(re)membered parts of their cultural and racial histories,

they have not succeeded in laying them to rest. The novel explores the conflicts of Sethe...

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