The relationship between literature and ethics goes back a long way, to foundational thinkers such as Plato and Confucius. It was temporarily forgotten, it would seem, during the period of "grand theory" of the 1960s and 1970s, but the return to duodecimo-format micro-theories of ethnic, racial, and sexual identity has brought with it a resurgence of interest in this approach. The beginnings of this shift can be seen in the work of J. Hillis Miller (The Ethics of Reading, Columbia UP, 1987), and of Tobin Siebers (The Ethics of Criticism, Cornell UP, 1988). Miller's ethics of reading posited a situation in which "there is a response to the text which is both necessitated, in the sense that it is a response to an irresistible demand, and free, in the sense that I must take responsibility for my response and for the further effects . . . of my act of reading" (43). Siebers, on the other hand, focused simply on the "means by which literary criticism affects the relation between literature and human life" (2). Miller's book functioned as an apology for deconstruction — its centerpiece is a reading of the role of ethics in Paul de Man's theory of reading — whose questioning of the subject, Siebers notes, "makes the study of ethical attitudes difficult, to say the least" (2). These two authors were at each other's throats, so to speak, Miller arguing that ethics could only be achieved through submission to linguistic indeterminacy, while Siebers reminded us that simply deciding not to decide was hardly the ultimate ethical choice. (See the also the critique of Miller's position by
So how does the field of ethics and literature look a decade later? Surprisingly, deconstruction, the demise of which has been greatly exaggerated, seems to have triumphed.

It makes sense to start with the book by Thomas Keenan, which began as a dissertation directed by Miller (with Andrzej Warminski). Not surprisingly, Keenan's definition of the reader's responsibility comes directly from Miller's: "Reading . . . is what happens when we cannot apply the rules. This means that reading is an experience of responsibility, but that responsibility is not a moment of security or of cognitive certainty" (1). Responsibility begins where certainty leaves off. Typical of deconstruction is the subtitle of the first chapter, "On the Impossibility of Justice," which opens with a Derrida imitation (almost literally, cf. the first pages of Specters of Marx) in which the first few lines of Hamlet are plumbed over the space of three pages, far beyond their ability to sustain such interrogation. The exegesis does allow the opening question of Hamlet, "Who's there?" to function as a leitmotif for the book and especially for this first chapter. Keenan's arguments for the impossibility of justice point to fundamental aporias in concepts such as human rights, which supposedly are innate and natural, but which require a vocalized claiming which itself establishes the humanity of the subject of justice. The gist here is that justice is impossible because subjects are impossible. Chapter Two tries out this same argument (the deconstructive argument par excellence) on the genre of the fable. The fables of the raven who pretends to be an eagle, and of the wolf in sheep's clothing share a thematic similarity in that they concern duplicity and pretending to be the Other in order to be achieve one's own goals. In their negative exemplarity, fables themselves, Keenan points out, are all wolves in sheep's clothing. The pretense of the raven and the wolf applies to all fables, to all reading, and to all subjects, for whom "there are borrowed names, or no names at all" (69).
Keenan next moves to the Marquis de Sade's *Philosophie dans le boudoir* and its relation to freedom. Sade's *aporia* is that freedom and justice involve a recognition that humans are simply natural creatures — hence, all impulses arise in favor of the health of the organism — but that such a teaching can only be imparted through cultural devices such as language and literature (fable). Hence, the impossibility of reading Sade. A similar conclusion is reached with Karl Marx's *Kapital* in the next chapter, which is founded on two questions: how does Marx's own writing fulfill or contradict his injunction for philosophy to change the world? and, how does capitalism get from use-value to exchange value? Keenan does not work very hard on establishing the relationship between these two questions, but the answer, as we might expect, is that Marx is impossible to read, since exchange value — not to mention humanity — is spectral. The chapter on Foucault, perhaps the best and most cogent of the book, probes a paradox in the French historian's thinking, which consistently denied such concepts as agency and legal subjectivity, while its thinker engaged himself in numerous political causes. A conclusion reiterates the opening thesis. Keenan's book is not easy reading, but is the most consistent and unified of the three under review here, and its ability to treat various types of discourse with a single methodology is to be admired. No doubt its tenacious argument that individual responsibility is constructed over an abyss will edify readers, though that argument would have benefited from the consideration of a broader range of legal and ethical thinkers. Some who finish the book will perhaps say, however, as my students tend to do after reading Paul de Man's work, "this is all very brilliant, but just what are we supposed to do with it?"

Rey Chow's volume is the least unified of the three. Her definition of the ethics of reading, also deconstructive in its essence, differs boldly from what we might find in a dictionary: "a reading practice must carry with it a willingness to take risks, a willingness to destroy the submission to widely accepted, predictable, and safe conclusions. This risk-taking, destructive process is what I associate with *ethics*, a term I use in contrast to
mores and its cognates *morality* and *moralism*" (xxii). Note here that "destructive" is synonymous with "deconstructive." This would seem to be a restatement of Julia Kristeva's position in "The Ethics of Linguistics," where she defines contemporary ethics as the shattering of codes to give free play to negativity, but Chow's version receives little elaboration in the pages that follow. The opening two chapters present examples of her own risk-taking. Chapter One, "Theory, Areas Studies, Cultural Studies," parously suggests that "grand" theory and cultural studies need each other, when they spend most of their time accusing one another of abstraction and triviality, respectively. Chow clearly suggests that cultural studies should be a dialectical sublimation of linguistically rich but empirically poor post-structuralist theory and theoryless area studies (which aren't directly addressed in the essay). The next chapter takes on the issue of political correctness as fascism. Chow's ethical purpose here is "to deconstruct our increasingly fascist intellectual environment, in which facile attitudes, pretentious credentials, and irresponsible work habits can be sponsored in the name of 'cultural pluralism'" (28). Chow goes on to tell a fictional story of a less-than-talented student from a developing country who reads little but becomes celebrated and lands a good job due to the liberal academies' current enthusiasm for women of color. This, in Chow's reading, is fascism. I would first respond that I see little difference between this form of academic fraud and the one of pseudo-philosophy more prominent in my formative years. French and British accents were *de rigeuer* back then; if today they have been replaced by African and Indian ones, I'm not sure this can be called an increase in fascism. I also agree with the many historians and cultural critics who warn against diluting our appreciation of historical events such as fascism, the Holocaust, and genocide by applying the terms to various and unrelated scenarios. In this case, it is hard to see any positive result from equating American academic fascination with the invisible new clothes of the latest emperor with the horrors of "true" fascism.
Chapter Three bears the same title as the book as a whole, and turns out to be based on a review of some books by Gayatri Spivak and Slavoj Zizek on the basis of their shared Marxist revisionism. The analysis is intricate and tenacious, as Chow explains (41-3) how Zizek deconstructs idealist notions which structure subjectivities in both capitalist and totalitarian societies. "Naming is the place where both Zizek and Spivak attempt to plot an alternative ethics," the author claims. For Spivak this means the methodology of De Man and Derrida, while for Zizek it is Lacan's ability to demask subjectivity and revel in the nothingness at the core of being. It is not clear how the praxis of this alternative ethics is to be carried out, nor how, if at all, it might structure the book's remaining seven chapters.

From this point on, the topic of ethics recedes into the background, as it becomes increasingly clear that the book is a collection of essays and book reviews lacking a unified argument. Some readers might be interested in Chow's reading of the role of gender in Frantz Fanon's theories of (post)colonial community, others in her analyses of films, and perhaps still others in her studies of contemporary Chinese and Hong Kong cultural politics and writing. Those who seek a more sturdy thread to hold these readings together, or further enlightenment into ethics, will be disappointed. The dashes separating the four terms in the book's title turn out to be disjunctive.

Colin McGinn is a philosopher of mind, who in this book ventures into the territory of art and literature to make his point. In his conclusion he contrasts a moral discourse based on commandments with his own as developed in this book, which operates on parables, that is, on stories. Unlike Keenan, McGinn is untroubled by the fact that "a tremendous amount of moral thinking and feeling is done when reading novels (or watching plays and films, or reading poetry and short stories)" (174-5). Approximately the first half of his book deals with philosophical problems of ethics. He argues there that goodness and evil are actual conditions of people and acts, and that moral relativism is a fallacy induced by the lack of resemblance between statements about ethics and other
kinds of constative statements. He posits that the evil character can defined by a simple inversion of the link between pleasure and displeasure: while most us us take pleasure in others' pleasure, the evil character is pained by others' pleasure and pleased by their pain. Continuing with the topic of character, McGinn introduces the "Aesthetic Theory of Virtue," which argues that moral goodness is perceived as beauty, while evil is perceived as ugliness. Our perception of virtue has not just an aesthetic dimension to it, but in fact is an aesthetic perception at its core.

By this point, McGinn has begun to adduce several examples from the arts. He argues that the rooms painted by Vermeer, for example, act as allegories of the soul: "what we are seeing in these 'interiors' of Vermeer is an aesthetic depiction of the soul morally conceived" (108). He then moves on to examine Vladimir Nabokov's notion of "aesthetic bliss," given at the end of Lolita, which defines art as "curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy" (110). Nabokov's aesthetic theory allies itself with McGinn's moral theory: both link aesthetic perception with moral qualities. Yet those of us in literature might expect here a note of ambiguity to be raised: is Nabokov/McGinn claiming that the undeniable artistic qualities of Lolita automatically transform Humbert's highly unethical behavior into moral goodness? Nabokov has carried out "artistic sleight of hand" (110) in making an ugly soul aesthetically pleasing.

However, the implications of this are not pursued. They instead lay the groundwork for an extended discussion of Oscar Wilde's Picture of Dorian Gray. The fact that Dorian's portrait changes while his own physiognomy does not provides a negative example to prove McGinn's case. We expect the moral depravity which Dorian exhibits to appear in his own face. Dorian has become a painting, McGinn observes. He has aestheticized his life to the point that it has lost all its moral bearings. Hence, when Dorian goes up to kill the painting at the end of the story, he kills himself. Mary Shelley's Frankenstein is taken as an opposing case: from the unsavoriness of the "dead matter" which comprises his body, to his abandonment by his creator and his subsequent
inclination to violence, the monster represents the ugliness of soul each of us bears within in some (hopefully lesser) degree. The extended discussions of the two novels are lucid; literary scholars will miss any reference to previous scholarship, or to the fact that the book's central position on literature as a vehicle for moral instruction and thought was prevalent in Western pedagogy from the Greeks through the nineteenth century. Indeed, the book as a whole is thinly footnoted and has a three-page bibliography.

These three volumes — one written from a philosophical orientation, one from a cultural studies orientation, and one dancing between these two fields — all have interesting things to say about the relationship of ethics to literature, but none of them provides a definitive statement on the topic. That leaves plenty of room for further study and speculation.

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