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Peter J. Rabinowitz

Hamilton College, prabinow@hamilton.edu

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PETER J. RABINOWITZ

On Teaching *The Story of O*.  
Lateral Ethics and the Conditions of Reading

Actually, I've already raised some ethical issues by giving this essay a provocative but misleading title. »Pauline Réage's«<sup>1</sup> pornographic classic *The Story of O*, written in 1954, is infamous as the story of a young fashion photographer who is brought by her lover to a chateau; while there, she learns, through a series of increasingly brutal encounters, to become (and enjoy being) a completely submissive object for male pleasure. But as for »teaching *The Story of O*«: I have never taught it, I probably never *would* teach it, and in fact I've never even read it through in its entirety (I started it and put it down mid-way, although not without skimming the rest and reading the ending).<sup>2</sup> Up until now, I never thought about *why* I'd made that choice – it seemed, perhaps, so self-evident that it didn't warrant serious exploration. But as I considered *JLT's* generous invitation to contribute to this discussion, I thought it might be interesting to give that decision (or, more generally, some of the ethical tangles behind that decision) a more serious examination. *Why*, in fact, *don't* I teach *The Story of O*? Although I wasn't fully conscious of them, in fact I had good reasons for my decision – reasons that move off the usual axis of »literary studies and ethics« debates onto what I'll be calling »lateral ethics«. It's those reasons I'd like to discuss here.

Let me open with a few primary starting points. First, I use the word »decision« advisedly. There are lots of books (say, *The Golden House* by Charles Dudley Warner) that I've never taught, but that I never explicitly *decided* not to teach. The option simply never came up, in most cases because I never knew the books existed. (For the record, I hadn't heard of *The Golden House* until I was halfway through composing the previous sentence and decided to look for an example that suited my purpose.)<sup>3</sup> In the case of *The Story of O*, however, we're dealing with a conscious

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<sup>1</sup> »Pauline Réage« was a pseudonym of Dominique Aury, although the actual authorship of the book remained in question for many years after its publication in 1954.

<sup>2</sup> Even when, years later, my son wrote his Bachelor's Thesis on the novel (working – not coincidentally, given the subject of the paper – with Wayne Booth and Lauren Berlant), I read his thesis without returning to the novel.

<sup>3</sup> I lighted on this book because I remembered that Warner had been a Hamilton College graduate – and I was curious to see what he had written, other than *The Gilded Age*, a book he co-authored with Mark Twain.

choice, the result of an actual decision-making process. *The Story of O*, in other words, is something I've *considered and rejected*.

Second, my decision is neither pragmatic (in the everyday sense), nor historical, nor aesthetic. It has nothing to do with syllabus logistics (for instance, the number of books I can fit into a semester), with availability, or with cost. It is not based on my sense of its contribution to the history of the novel or of twentieth-century thought more generally. And it has nothing to do with my sense of the literary quality of the text, however that might be defined (in that sense, it's not an »evaluation« of the text, even though it's surely a judgment).

Third, my decision is not based on anxiety about bringing X-rated subject matter into the classroom. I've taught other material that is as sexually explicit as *The Story of O* – and conversations in my classes often take turns that would make many of my colleagues blush. Nearing the end of our three-hour discussion of the conclusion of *The Captive* in my Proust seminar last spring, for instance, one of my best students, Megan Bolger, cried out, in reference to Albertine's embarrassing verbal slip, »What, we're going to leave without talking about anal intercourse?«<sup>4</sup> There was laughter from the class, but it was a laughter of agreement: it *was* something they expected and wanted to discuss.<sup>5</sup> Whatever is governing my decision about *Story of O*, it's not prudishness.

Fourth, I'm convinced that my decision is not simply an inexplicable eccentric choice, a quirk resulting from personal taste. Granted, *The Story of O* itself is probably not on many lists of »books considered and rejected«; but I believe that my general manner of reasoning (if not the specific details) is implicitly shared by – or would be useful for – many colleagues who wrestle with decisions about teaching other similarly provocative novels, like *Lolita* or *Gone with the Wind*.

Most important in terms of this essay, while that general line of reasoning is ethical at its base (no surprise, given the forum in which it appears), it does not, as I've said, fit comfortably into the most familiar literature-and-ethics debates.<sup>6</sup> It's not that my observations are especially radical, or even new – they're not. But they often get put to the side when literary theorists talk about ethics. In particular, while I am offering a consequentialist argument, it does not focus on the potentially corrupt-

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Megan for her permission to quote her here.

<sup>5</sup> Albertine starts to utter the phrase »me faire casser le pot« (French slang for anal intercourse), but stops midway; it takes the narrator a while to reconstruct her utterance. He interprets this, curiously, as a sign of her lesbianism – but figuring out what she meant and why he interprets it as he does is important for understanding their relationship, and it's something my students believed to be worth talking about.

<sup>6</sup> On the surface, perhaps, it would seem to overlap with discussions of censorship – for while deciding not to teach a particular book is not censorship in the traditional sense, such decisions *might* cast some doubt on the scope of Marshall Gregory's generally unexceptional claim that »No ethical critic supposes that censorship will even or ever work, much less that it will make people virtuous« (1998, 214). As we will see, though, I am more interested in the conditions of reading than in the act of reading itself.

ing effects that reading *The Story of O* can have on the reader – at least, not in the way that such consequences are usually conceived.

The most fundamental question in literature and ethics is probably whether we should separate out the ethical when we make aesthetic judgments, a separation vigorously defended by Richard Posner (1997, 1998). As a rhetorical narrative theorist – as someone whose inspiration lies in such works as Kenneth Burke's »Psychology and Form« and Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and as someone who has collaborated for decades with James Phelan – I share, not surprisingly, Marshall Gregory's position that we *cannot* separate the ethical from the aesthetic, no matter how much ethical criticism is maligned (Gregory 1998). That's especially true if we recognize, as Gregory does, that political criticisms – feminist, post-colonial, and so forth – »are not only linked to ethical views, but express views that are fundamentally ethical to their core« (ibid., 200). Even apart from what Posner dismisses as »moral content« (1997, 1), our experience of reading (and the rest of my argument here will center on reading narrative fiction in particular, although it can be generalized beyond that) is so bound up with ethical choices that the notion of ethics-free aesthetics – expressed, for instance, in Posner's claim that »The proper criteria for evaluating literature are aesthetic *rather than* ethical« (Posner 1997, 2, emphasis added) – seems a contradiction. Even Proppian analysis, often held up as a model of pure, detached description, requires us to distinguish between heroes and villains. But for the purposes of my argument here, I want to bracket the ethics/aesthetics issue. *Even if* we could separate the aesthetic from the ethical, I'd make the same choice, because my decision about *The Story of O* is guided by a different set of concerns.

My argument is grounded in two interlocking premises. First, *ethics, for the most part, involves acts and relationships among people (or, very rarely, between a person and an object) in particular situations*. Any discussion of ethics – and that includes any discussion of narrative ethics – requires specifying who those people are and what situation they find themselves in.

Second, *reading is a social activity*. Of course, my work has always stressed the social component of interpretation – the authorial audience is a social, not an individual, entity; and the conventions of reading that allow us to interpret texts are social in nature (see, for instance, *Before Reading*). But reading is social in another way as well: that is, even beyond the act of interpretation, reading has a *lateral* dimension that involves groups of people in particular situations, groups with which we have ethical relations that are only secondarily connected to the ethics of the author-text-reader relationship.

Let me address this in a little more detail. Despite Wayne Booth's arguments for coeduction (which includes discussions with others) and despite Tolstoy's arguments about the way that high art hardens class distinctions, narrative theorists (and I include myself here) often conveniently reduce the range of reading by equating it with »interpreting« and treating it as a solitary activity in which »*the* reader« engages

with a text created by an absent author. Seymour Chatman's communication diagram (1978, 151) stands as a familiar paradigm. Other critics, of course, have offered elaborations or subtilizations of Chatman's basic scheme (see, for instance, Shaw 2005). More often than not, though, we still end up with variations on a basic axis: a reader is connected by a text (which may be conceptualized as including – besides characters – implied readers, authorial audience, narratees, narrative audience, narrator, implied author, etc.) to an author.

Such schemas have proven invaluable, offering us excellent ways to conceptualize a great deal of what is going on when we read. But their value comes, in part, from their simplification: that is, treating reading as a solitary act allows us to focus more clearly on the act of interpretation by ignoring other interfering factors. In particular, this model encourages us, to the extent that we consider the ethics of a text, to center on the author's ethical positions, the ethics of the characters and situations represented, and (most important) the effects of all this on the readers. Author-reader relationships, in other words, are emphasized. Even Booth, for all his concern for reading communities, is apt to slip into speaking of author and reader as if they were the two »parties in every narrative exchange« (1988, 42). Certainly, this scheme would provide ample grounds for exploring the ethical nature of my misleading title.

As soon as we venture beyond the act of interpretation, however, we find ourselves moving away from this clear line. That is, reading also involves a kind of lateral ethics as we engage with other people as well, engagements that do not line up on the same axis as the reader and the author. Let me mention just two complications that result.

First, although you might never notice it in most critical and theoretical texts (at least those not directly and more narrowly related to pedagogy or the study of reading groups), people often read novels at least in part because they want to talk about them: a key part of reading is sharing what you've read and *creating or joining the kind of community in which such sharing can take place*.<sup>7</sup> Thus, more often than not, reading puts you in relationships with other readers or potential readers. These relationships are not merely incidental to the act of reading in the way, say, that your relationship to the other people standing in line at the Department of Motor Vehicles is incidental to the act of renewing your driver's license. Creation of those reading relationships is, rather, one of the fundamental purposes of reading.

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<sup>7</sup> That motivation for reading may be even stronger with film these days than it is with novels. At the closing ceremony of the 2010 Maine International Film Festival, for instance, Festival Director Shannon Haines pointed to »bringing a community together to enjoy film« as a fundamental purpose of the event – and I suspect that for most participants, the creation of community is as important as the films themselves. That is, I doubt they'd attend with the same enthusiasm if they got to watch precisely the same films in empty theaters. But it's also one of the motivations behind book groups, and often influences course selection as well: students may well take a particular class because they want to be part of a particular discussion with particular people.

And they inevitably bring ethical entanglements that are different in kind from the issues that are traditionally front-and-center in narrative-and-ethics discussions. Take, for instance, the broadly shared rule requiring you to give fair warning of spoilers, especially when you're talking about films. How often does it come up in discussion of Art and Ethics? It's clearly an ethical rule: but it has nothing to do with the three basic strands (the autonomy arguments, the triviality arguments, and the consequentialist arguments) that Noël Carroll (2000) sees at the center of current debates about art and ethical criticism.

Second, many of us read books at least partly in order to make public pronouncements about them. As soon as you start writing, lecturing, and publishing about narrative, you potentially take on the role of »critic«, someone who stands apart from other readers because he/she wields (or claims to wield) a certain authority. Are all people who write about literature critics? Perhaps not. We can certainly debate whether people who simply add comments to blogs are laying claim to authority – my guess is that it depends on the person. But just about everyone who writes »professionally« – whether writing movie reviews for the *Waterville Morning Sentinel* or articles for *JLT* – does so with a certain presumption of authority. And critical authority (or claims to it) brings into play yet another kind of ethical relation, one which also has little to do with what most of us narrative theorists talk about when we talk about »narrative and ethics«.

As soon as you start *teaching* literature, both of these complications are brought into play – with, of course, additional complications brought about by their interaction.

First, in a classroom, the group talking about the text often takes on a special character. That is, in many classrooms (and I'd like to believe that my classrooms are among them), whatever the »knowledge« conveyed (which can include general principles of interpretation), part of the purpose of reading together is to create a certain kind of community with particular virtues (which might include, for instance, virtues as broad as inquisitiveness and as narrow as respect for Proust's sentence structure) and particular commitments (which might include, for instance, agreement not to share the comments of others in the class outside the classroom). Of course, any talk about books creates a community or communities, which may have some of the same qualities: when you chat about the latest installment of *Mad Men* at the lunch table, you and your friends may also be inquisitive and trusting. But classrooms are more intentional in this regard: that is, I suspect that most teachers think more carefully about the community that will be created in their classrooms than about how their friends will respond to television gossip. And literature classes often succeed or fail because of the nature of the community they create.

Second, the nature of the critic/teacher changes substantially as well, in two distinct ways. Critics, like authors more generally, write for authorial audiences, whether that be the readership of the greater Waterville area or the presumed readers of *JLT*. When you are teaching, in contrast, you're in touch with an actual au-

dience. Whatever your beliefs about our knowledge of the ways *a narrative* will change the behavior of actual readers, it's hard to argue that the aesthetic anti-consequentialist argument (the belief that we can't judge art on its effects, since those effects are always unknowable) has its parallel with regard to teaching.<sup>8</sup> If it did, parents and students would have a substantial grievance. Furthermore, whereas critics, for the most part, advise and comment, teachers have, in addition, a certain limited power *to require*. A movie critic's most enthusiastic endorsement («You must see this film!») doesn't carry the weight of a teacher's («You must finish *The Story of O* before class on Wednesday!«).

When we put all this together, it's clear that teaching particular books involves us and our students in ethical situations that narrative theorists (and, as I've said, I include myself here) often circumvent, situations that shouldn't be ignored if we take literature, ethics, or teaching seriously. I don't have specific conclusions about specific choices – that is, I don't have a neat schema to tell people what books to include on their syllabi. But this expansion of our thinking about ethics and literature does have the potential change the terms of our discussions of literature and ethics.

So how does this reframing work out in practice? Let's return to *The Story of O*. Working along the familiar narratological axis, there are plenty of valuable and important interpretive questions. Here are just a few representative examples of the sort that might well come up in an undergraduate discussion of the text. What, for instance, is the implied author's perception of sexuality and agency, of the relationship of pain and pleasure?<sup>9</sup> To what degree is the novel ironic – and what difference does that make on how we experience it or how we *should* experience it? What are the presuppositions of the authorial audience or the ethical resonances of experiencing, to use James Phelan's term (1996, 90), the «progression» of the novel? How does its complex publication history – which includes a variety of theories about the novel's authorship, prior to the final clarification in the 1990s – play into issues of female subjectivity and agency? What's the difference between reading the novel now and reading the novel in the 1950s? Do different students read the novel differently depending on age, sex, gender, or whatever?

These are all interesting, but they're familiar sorts of questions among people who talk about literature and ethics. Once we move beyond the act of interpretation to an account that deals with the lateral relationship introduced by taking the conditions of reading into account, a different set of questions emerges. These questions – when considered at all by literary critics – seem part of a different discussion,

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Carroll's (2000) discussion, 355–57.

<sup>9</sup> Of course, whenever we explore what Posner calls – with some disdain – the novel's «moral content» (1997, 1), we run the risk of reducing it to some slogan masquerading as its «message». That's hardly a necessary consequence, however, and there's more interesting material here than Posner suggests.

matters of pedagogy rather a central part of the theoretical literature and ethics debate.<sup>10</sup> Here are just two of them:

First, what's the ethics of *requiring* someone to read the text? Someone like Posner might want to claim that this is not really a matter of »ethics and literary studies«, but a matter of ethics and pedagogy. That, however, would be a copout, since at least some of the ethical issues arise from the »literary« qualities of the text in question. That is, you can't possibly talk about the ethical differences between assigning *The Story of O* and assigning *Pride and Prejudice* without talking about the differences between those texts as texts – but the nature of those differences take on a different light in an atmosphere of compulsion, especially when dealing (as I do) with 18-to-22-year-olds. In any case, assigning a novel signals to my students that, at the very least, I consider it to be worthwhile. Thus, even if I taught *The Story of O* in the context of a discussion of theory and pornography where I severely criticized it, my decision to place it on the syllabus would implicitly affirm my belief that there was something useful gained from the experience of reading it. If a student felt debased or battered or seriously destabilized by the text, I would be implicated in those feelings – and at the very least, I would have an ethical obligation to justify the negative experience. Now in fact I teach many books that unsettle, even batter my students, in one way or another: Anthony Burgess's *Clockwork Orange*, Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*, Nawal El Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile*. I encourage my students to confront issues of suicide directly, whether it be through discussing the failed suicide of Marcel's grandmother in *In Search of Lost Time* or talking about Jean Morris's desire for death in Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*. I do so in the belief, though, that by the end of class discussion, my students will agree that the reading experience was worth it. But I may well be wrong here; and if challenged by a student who feels assaulted by having to read the rape scenes in *Clockwork Orange*, I won't be able to justify my choice *simply* by arguing, say, that the authorial audience of *Clockwork Orange* needs to have those experiences in order to appreciate the moral argument of the text. Somehow, my response will have to go beyond the relationship between the reader, text, and author and include my student's lateral relationship to me (and the institution I represent).

Second, what's the ethical effect of requiring my students to read the novel *in this particular group*? What are the potential costs, for instance, of deliberately creating a situation where my female students have to wonder whether the men sitting next to them have gotten some kind of sexual *frisson* from the novel's potentially attractive descriptions of female masochism? What are the potential costs of deliberately creating a situation where my male students have at least to consider looking at their female classmates through the prism of that text – or a situation where they have to wonder what the female students are wondering about their (the males') reactions

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Patnoe's excellent article on *Lolita*, which touches on some of these issues, but does not use the word »ethics« at all.



to the book?<sup>11</sup> Many factors may be relevant here. Does it matter whether the classroom is co-ed or single sex? Whether the book is taught by a male or a female teacher? And so on. Significantly, what does *not* matter very much is the implied author's »ethical position« or even the ethical experience of the text's progression (see Carroll's discussion of the difference between »knowledge that« and »knowledge of«, 2000, 362). It doesn't matter very much whether Réage is endorsing female submission or undermining it or joking about it or offering a more complicated ironic view. Nor is the novel's persuasiveness relevant. A student's lateral relationship to the other students in the class has been altered regardless of how they, individually or as a group, take up the challenge.

Of course, such wondering about what your fellow students are thinking is possible in any class – or at any lunch table. But once it's generated by a required class reading, it takes on an increased immediacy and an increased gravity, and has a different impact on the nature of the community.

Given my pedagogical aims, which include trying to create an environment where students can be honest and open as they discuss serious and controversial issues, I think that – regardless of the ethical tangles of the reader-text-author relationships – including this book on my syllabus would create lateral ethical effects that would be counter-productive. But the purpose of this essay is not really to defend my decision to reject *The Story of O* for class nor to defend my decisions with respect to *Lolita* and *Gone with the Wind* (both of which I've taught – although never near the beginning of a semester, before the class community had begun to develop a certain measure of trust). In fact, I suspect that my observations here might help someone argue *against* my decisions about *Lolita* and *Gone with the Wind*. In the former case, for instance, I always give students the opportunity to opt out of that part of the class. No one has ever taken me up on it, but is that surprising? Wouldn't taking advantage of that option injure your relationship to the rest of the class? I've never taught *Gone with the Wind* to a class with African-American students – is it possible that I'm somehow creating divisions between my students and their out-of-class friends?

These are all legitimate questions – but we can only begin to answer them effectively once we reframe the more general terms of our discussions of narrative ethics.

Peter J. Rabinowitz  
Comparative Literature Department  
Hamilton College

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<sup>11</sup> Alice Walker's short story »Porn« deals explicitly with the ways in which even consensually shared pornography can distort a relationship.

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