

The tone of ethical criticism, once famously dour and definitive, has become a little wry, even a little risky: the spirit of epigram comes to mind. Since epigram for all its pleasures has never seemed exactly good, especially where ethics is concerned, one begins to wonder if being bad has not somehow become better. The new work on contemporary literature and ethics does describe (and sometimes recommend) ethical paradigms for the analysis of literature and culture, but it presents these paradigms as historical developments and compromises rather than as necessary or wholly affirmative characteristics. In its own manner and in the manners it associates with other contemporary ethical texts, the recent scholarship suggests that ethics need not assume a single or a stodgy demeanor, that ethical writing can wear different literary and rhetorical garments—that even ethics participates in style. Asserting the language of ethics as an idiom of culture, the new scholarship imitates, if not always epigram’s wit, at least much of its wisdom.

Crucial to epigram’s wisdom is the perception that sincerity need not function, perhaps should not function, as the representational logic of an ethical imagination. Theories of representation that em-
phasize sincerity, sometimes called authenticity, tend to imply that language should simply reproduce the conditions of life. For epigram, however, sincerity is a performance, whose assertion of absolute truth and uncontestable intention is parodied by the mock certainty of epigrammatic wit. Epigram seems naughty, not only by association with the heterodox persons who produced its finest examples, but also for its refusal to accept—that is, ignore—the social orthodoxies of language. This refusal is a central premise of two new books on ethics and literary criticism: Andrew Gibson’s Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas and Bruce Robbins’s Feeling Global: Internationalism in Distress. Gibson and Robbins, though they differ in their subjects and strategies, are similar in their effort to detach ethical action from pious confidence and political consistency. They veer away from definitive moral attitudes; they are reluctant to identify a single community of readers or system of values that their work would serve to affirm. Instead, these critics embrace perspectives that Robbins variously calls “imperfect” (3), “uncongenial” (77), and “compromised” (123), and which he associates with “moral messiness” (4) and “impurity” (156). For Gibson, a properly ethical text will advocate a modest impropriety, characterized by “evasion” (50), “abeyance” (85), and “reticence” (86). This is a new vocabulary for ethics, and it reflects the critical revision and self-conscious deviation of the new scholarship.

In Feeling Global, a collection of essays and reviews on contemporary cosmopolitanism, international human rights, and contemporary literature, Robbins seeks to adjust both the terms and the tone of global discourse. In each essay, Robbins dilates out from a local situation—Susan Sontag’s visits to Sarajevo, Mary Louise Pratt’s influential book Imperial Eyes, the genre of “au pair narratives” by Jamaica Kincaid and Bharati Mukherjee, a debate about patriotism and academia that begins with an editorial in The New York Times—to address a range of theoretical subjects. With this intellectual movement from local to global, Robbins practices an internationalism that is at once particular and comparative; his essays move deftly between specific, sometimes national contexts and the alternative, often international contexts that disrupt or refocus narrowly viewed conditions. For example, Robbins frequently reminds his
readers that individual words, even those words that are implicated in colonialis
tist history and vulgar triumphalism, do not have a consistent ethical condition: "If, like cosmopolitanism, terms such as progress and modernity lend themselves to metropolitan self-
flattery, it is more such self-flattery to believe that this usage always and everywhere defines their political meaning. Those who ur-
gently need to 'change their lives' do not speak lightly of progress, even if they rightly distrust the universalized, inevitabilist gradu-
alsm that has been its frequent ideological form" (111–12). Robbins later returns to a defense of "progress," acknowledging that "[a]ny historical instance of progress will obligatorily be compromised in any number of ways" and arguing all the same that "this does not mean that the word progress is so contaminated as to be unsayable" (123). Robbins is committed to what he calls "strategic acquies-
cing," which refers to the imperfect virtue of the academic's "institutional privilege" and also to the tempered rhetoric of the activist's social pragmatism (119).

The shift from absolute position-taking to profane concession is a motif for Robbins, who begins his book with a sharp, intelligent critique of Susan Sontag's "bullying" (his word) internationalism (12). With his analysis of Sontag's writing, Robbins introduces tone as a principal concern of his book and as a striking example of how "feeling" relates to the rhetoric of global thought. Robbins begins his chapter with a discussion of Sontag's essay "A Lament for Bos-
ния: 'There' and 'Here,'" which she published in The Nation in 1995 on her return from Sarajevo (where she had gone to stage a produc-
tion of Waiting for Godot). Sontag's "Lament" facilitates a smart opening salvo for Robbins because he shows that Sontag's ethical tone is inseparable from her definition of ethical action. Sontag ad-
dresses her essay to progressive intellectuals who have not yet wit-
nessed and acted against the atrocities of Serbian ethnic violence. She implies, by invoking "the era of shopping" in which her read-
ners are sure to live (13), that economic privilege and political secu-
rity undermine one's appreciation for the danger in which others live. Robbins objects to the idea that only the most absolute sacri-
fices can count as ethical action; moreover, he argues that extreme sacrifices are made possible, are trained, by the "everyday" sacri-
fices of ordinary life (23). This is a two-pronged approach, for Rob-
bins is opposing Sontag’s tendency to ascribe privileged indifference to others while she fails to acknowledge the institutional and economic privileges that make her actions possible, and he is also opposing Sontag’s overvaluation of rare acts and undervaluation of more common, less dramatic actions accessible to a greater number of people. Robbins observes that Sontag’s model of international action, in its inaccessibility, promotes a model of ethics that is “exotic, rare, uncomfortable.” As Robbins puts it, substituting Sontag’s aesthetic discrimination for his own, “Sontag’s contempt for the stay-at-home is the contempt of the coterie taskmaster for the mass of the tasteless or insensitive, those who are incapable of the latest, deepest, most strenuous self-alienation” (15). Against Sontag’s “contempt,” Robbins offers a less refined, less choosy model of conscience, in which one can shop and also oppose tyranny, in which “transnational connection . . . [is] rooted in routine duties and pleasures as well as in once-in-a-lifetime renunciations.” Robbins calls this “an internationalist ethics of the everyday” (23).

While Robbins is suspicious and downright critical of Sontag’s tendency to “preach” (12), later in his book he wonders whether a global ethics, even one that embraces hedonism against “revolutionary asceticism,” can do without the zeal that political mobilization often requires (58). At the end of “Some Versions of U.S. Internationalism,” a chapter whose title already conveys “some” modesty of argument, Robbins punts: “But it remains to be seen how any internationalism that does not put an ethical and even a quasi-religious fervor into an assault on ‘overdevelopment’ can ever conceive of winning broad U.S. support for that radical redistribution of global resources that has already been postponed for far too long” (59). Robbins never directly argues for “fervor” and is for the most part averse to the forms of fervor he locates elsewhere, but one is left with a feeling of uncertainty, perhaps one of the many feelings his book seeks to deliver.

The title of Robbins’s book recalls that bumper-sticker imperative, “Think Globally, Act Locally,” though this is not an allusion that Robbins ever mentions directly. Replacing thinking with “feeling,” Robbins wants not simply to prioritize the latter term but to emphasize the many and strong feelings that now influence global thought, as well as local action. Robbins is interested in the political usefulness of feelings and also in the acknowledgment that feel-
ings—as patriotism, as outrage—already structure the ethical positions that we regularly inhabit. *Feeling Global* is most valuable in the connections it makes between aesthetic and political affects: the ways that political claims invoke underexamined aesthetic sensibilities, and the ways that aesthetic objects—such as contemporary novels and public theater—complicate political claims. Along the way, Robbins offers some brief, very fine readings of recent fiction, such as Jamaica Kincaid’s *Lucy* and Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*, and engages with many of the key critical paradigms that continue to shape the reception of new, international literature.

*Feeling Global* exemplifies what Andrew Gibson, a bit dismissively, calls “political criticism,” and I suspect that Robbins would not mind the association. *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel* is a monograph about the conception of ethics in poststructuralist theory and postmodern fiction, and Gibson opens his account with a firm distinction between “ethico-political work,” to which his own criticism is committed, and “political criticism,” whose “urgent, political temporality” he finds intellectually limiting (4). This distinction, one of the least compelling aspects of an otherwise careful and intelligent book, is founded on Gibson’s equation between the category of political criticism and the work of Terry Eagleton, whose specific brand of Marxist criticism looms somewhat larger in Britain than it does in the United States. For Gibson, ethical and ethico-political criticism acknowledges, where political criticism does not, the “insufficiency and complicity” of social action and literary representation (4). Gibson associates politics with presence, with immediacy and transparency, whereas Robbins and other critics from Virginia Woolf to Theodor Adorno have sought to refine this definition rather than distrust the category altogether.

One tends to feel that Gibson has jettisoned the political for the ethical in good part because he feels some nostalgia for the midcentury tradition of F. R. Leavis (invoked in his subtitle, *From Leavis to Levinas*). If only an American could write *Feeling Global*, only an Englishman could write Gibson’s book, which, though it eschews the universalist “morality” that Leavis made his watchword, nevertheless claims sympathy with “the distinctively English tradition that [Leavis] represents” (1). Where Robbins is self-conscious and interestingly critical about the traditions of identification and nationalism in which his Americanness participates, Gibson seems
less aware of this issue, even as he imagines a critical continuum from the very English Leavis to the more cosmopolitan, Jewish, antinationalist tradition that includes Emmanuel Levinas and other European writers. In contrast, later in his study, Gibson argues eloquently that “a postmodern ethics will not emerge on the basis of a concept of a ‘shared world’” (85), a strong assertion that seems so much opposed to the Leavisite raison d’être that it is difficult to see why Gibson would claim any continuity at all.

Gibson’s sense that ethics coincides with the avant-garde novel in its “refus[al] to give priority to the backward look at the already given” (18) is not so far from the critique of political authenticity and coherence that Robbins articulates in his own work. There are clear differences between the two books, notably the uncertainty in Robbins that an internationalist ethics can do without some certainty, some “fervor,” and the certainty in Gibson that uncertainty is the condition of ethical thought. Robbins and Gibson both argue that it is the job of the intellectual to introduce ambivalence and profanity where there is moral certainty and social piety. However, Robbins would suggest that action can still take place within imperfect certainty—indeed, that it must—while Gibson is more concerned with the critical activity that takes place while social action is forestalled, in the space where certainty is withdrawn. As Gibson puts it, “I doubt whether a politics can function other than in terms of a kind of conviction or certitude which it is the responsibility of ethics to hold in abeyance” (85).

Neither Leavis nor Levinas leaves much room for the droll, the flirtatious, or the absurd, and indeed it is true that Gibson’s tone bends, at least initially, to the austere. However, the austerity and the resolute Englishness of Gibson’s book are ruptured by the discussion of “sensibility” and “receptivity” in the last two chapters. Here, Gibson develops what he calls “an ethics of affect” (162). Gibson’s discussion of “sensibility” in contemporary fiction, particularly in the fiction of Jean Rhys, echoes the turn to “feelings” in Robbins: sensibility is valued for its contrast to pure cognition, associated in Rhys with the world of men, and for its insistence that “rational economies” are everywhere disrupted by affective investments (167).

Gibson is sharpest in his readings of international fiction in En-
lish by Timothy Mo, Salman Rushdie, and Kazuo Ishiguro, among others. Significantly, his treatment of these writers serves to challenge the distinctive Englishness with which his study begins. In his subtle analysis of Mo’s *Sour Sweet*, Gibson observes that the novel resists the Western reader’s ability to “complete” the text by oscillating between an English and a Chinese social world. “The point,” Gibson writes, “is precisely the oddity and the incompatibility, from one cultural perspective, of value-systems that are apparently congruent enough from another” (198). For Gibson, *Sour Sweet* is engaged in an ethical disruption of the reader’s presumption of cultural “expertise” (192). From *Sour Sweet*, Gibson turns to Ishiguro’s *A Pale View of Hills*, to which he similarly attributes a “split-space” of reception that leaves the reader uncertain of the culture to which the text, the reader, and the characters belong (199). That Gibson takes as his final “ethical” text Salman Rushdie’s *The Salamic Verses* should indicate just how far ethical criticism, not to mention Gibson, has come from the English austerity of F. R. Leavis. In fact, Gibson ends not with the style but with the logic of epigram—with the resistance to any temporality that disguises historicity as naturalness, that substitutes the necessity of universal values for the construction of particular truths (203).

Where Gibson closes with the ethics of blasphemy, Robbins offers as his punctuation the inspiring image of treason, otherwise known as internationalism in a time of war among nations. The last chapter of *Feeling Global* ends on a contemporary novel—*The English Patient*—whose clever title (the hero is mistaken for an English national, but in fact he is Hungarian and has collaborated with the Germans) emphasizes the complexity of Englishness, as a language, an affiliation, a nationality, a literary tradition. At the end of the novel, as Robbins is pleased to observe, the Sikh sapper, Kip, a soldier in the British army, identifies with the Japanese citizens killed by the atomic bombs of his so-called allies, and the “English patient,” the Hungarian Almásy, resonates as the heroic protagonist for whom passionate love is more crucial than the abstract love of country. Ethical blasphemy, ethical treason. Being bad has, indeed, become better.

*University of Wisconsin–Madison*