Ethics, aesthetics and the representation of truth in trauma fiction
Michael Eskin’s influential article “On Literature and Ethics”\(^1\) is introduced by Plato’s phrase from The Republic: “They cite poets as witnesses.” The quotation points to the inextricable relationship between aesthetics and ethics. In Todorov’s view, the relationship between these two discourses has undergone a complex historical evolution that he summarises in three subsequent theories. The first or classical theory “considers art in the service of moral principles, and argues that aesthetic values should be subjected to ethical values”. The second was inaugurated by Romanticism. Reversing the classics’ standpoint, the Romantics considered that “poetry should have the privilege over morality, and art the privilege over life”.\(^2\) According to Todorov, the exaltation of the subject over the community characteristic of Romanticism lies at the heart of the early nineteenth-century transvaluation from ethics to aesthetics – a stance that has never completely disappeared since then. In the light of this, Todorov laments the current dominance of spectacular aesthetics over ethics in turn-of-the-millennium democratic societies\(^3\) while, at the same time, he points out an increasing autonomy of both ethics and aesthetics as the main characteristic of the third stage in the evolution of aesthetic

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2 Valentina Adami, Trauma Studies and Literature: Martin Amis’s Time’s Arrow as Trauma Fiction, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008, 50.
It is evident that beautiful art works can hide despicable moral messages and positions, and that ethically commendable ones can be poorly crafted.

However, the current debate is much more complex, as shown by critics like Michael Eskin, Robert Eaglestone or J. Hillis Miller, who have undertaken a thorough revision of the relationship between the two disciplines or discourses. Deconstructionists consider that acts such as writing and reading, rather than (or apart from) content, have ethical implications worth noting, even though, in their view, literary texts cannot render testimony to the “world outside”, since “the passage from world to text is far from straightforward”. This divergence between lived experience and text problematises the function of the reader and/or critic, justifies Hillis Miller’s concept of “undecidability” or “unreadability”, and determines Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory as described in *Unclaimed Experience*. By contrast, as Eaglestone explains, neo-humanist thinkers, “championed by Wayne Booth (1988), Martha Nussbaum (1990) and more recently … Adriana Caverero … argue that literary texts are an effective and acute form of moral reasoning and as such can be used to heighten our ethical awareness”. These critics still rely on a classic mimeticism that considers the literary text as analogous to reality and capable of interfering with it. In these circumstances, “the narrative content (including, often, the form as content) adds to our lives, reflects our lives, and by our thinking through, or living through, these texts, we are forcefully reminded of our ethical responsibilities”. However, as poststructuralists cogently argue, this neo-humanist outlook is rather problematic, for, how could literature reach reality in unmediated form? And, if art solves real ethical issues, where does the autonomy of the aesthetic discourse lie?

Much has been said on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s famous contention in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) that “Ethics and

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4 Adami, *Trauma Studies and Literature*, 50.


7 Eaglestone, “One and the Same?”, 602.

8 Ibid., 603.