

Performatism, *Dexter*, and the Ethics of Perpetration

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The slow but steady decline of postmodernism in the last decade has been accompanied by a marked shift in ethical thinking, in particular in works of narrative fiction and film. This aesthetically mediated turn away from postmodern ethics is not easily reduced to a specific philosophical source or line of reasoning. Rather, it seems to have arisen spontaneously as an attempt to avoid or counter the problems arising from postmodernism's relentless confrontation of weak, diffuse subjects with vast, impersonal, and constantly shifting fields of discourse. In the following remarks I would like to outline the main features of this ethical turn in literature using six characteristic works of what I call performatist narrative: (1) the movies *American Beauty*, *Inglourious Basterds*, *Amelie*, and *Dogville*; the novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*; and, in particular, the TV series *Dexter*. The prime criteria for this admittedly very limited selection is that the works mentioned have almost nothing in common in terms of theme or genre. What they do share, however, is a certain attitude towards ethics, aesthetics, and subjectivity that is no longer postmodern.

The core elements of the postmodern approach to ethics are by now well known and not difficult to enumerate. If we try to summarize the innovations introduced by Levinas, Derrida, Rorty, Bauman, and other seminal thinkers of the last 30 years or so, we could, without generating too much controversy, speak of the following typical strategies: emphasizing contingency; debunking foundationalism; placing ethics before ontology; orienting ethics towards an Other irreducible to concept or totalization; conceiving the ethical subject as facing an open, endless field of exteriority; privileging the particular over the universal; equating ethics with an endless regress of critical reflection rather with a positive set of rules or norms; and, perhaps most importantly, making discourse the main medium of ethical interaction. These strategies have rough equivalents in postmodern literature, which tends to expose weak or split subjects to ethical problems within the endless regress of intertextual references, (meta-)textual levels, and authorial self-irony that are widely regarded as typical of postmodern writing. (2)

The aesthetic reaction to this discursively defined approach to ethics has given rise to strategies which, although uncoordinated and spontaneous, share certain basic features diverging sharply from the explicit premises of contemporary philosophical ethics as well as from the implicit premises of postmodern literature. Five characteristics stand out in

particular:

1. emphasis on interiority and the separation of the subject;
2. the insistence that aesthetic experience exists in conjunction with ethical experience as an originary or primary mode;
3. the occlusion of discourse and the stressing of intuition, mimesis, and visuality;
4. the stylization of transcendence as a personal relation with a higher theistic or authorial power rather than as a confrontation with impersonal infinity;
5. emphasis on agency and performance as a way of actively transcending the restrictions and burdens weighing upon individual subjects.

This last feature has led me to call this ethics (as well as the aesthetic devices closely allied with it) *performatist*. Also, it has one major structural feature that results directly from its specific way of re-empowering agency and the subject. Performatist ethics is, necessarily, an *ethics of perpetration*, an ethics concerned with the way that discrete, separated subjects act upon others in order to overcome their separation while maintaining their selfness and developing further as ethical beings.

Before I begin, some clarifying words are in order regarding separation, a term that is also central to Levinas's thinking. As Leora Batnicky has rightly observed, Levinas's notion of a separated, closed, and atheistic subject is at odds with the relational, open subject of postmodernism.⁽³⁾ Levinas's separated subject is not determined, as it might first seem, by a direct confrontation with the Other,⁽⁴⁾ but is first set off by a "natural" atheism (defined as a desire to be "outside of God" and "at home with oneself"⁽⁵⁾) and by a self-indulgent, self-confirming pleasure in sensual things, or what Levinas calls egoism or psychism.⁽⁶⁾ Separation is necessary to avoid the subject being assimilated entirely to exteriority: "such a conception would in the end destroy exteriority, revealing itself to be the moment of a panoramic play."⁽⁷⁾ For my purposes it is not necessary to determine whether or to what extent Levinas's exposition of separated subjectivity resists the deconstructive criticism pursued by Derrida in his well-known essay "Metaphysics and Violence."⁽⁸⁾ What is important is that Levinas formally insists on a kind of transcendental subject whose initial, natural state of separation as an atheistic, sensual being practically forces him or her to enter into an ethical relation with the Other later on. This relation is in turn mediated by an infinitely unfolding field of discourse revealing traces of transcendence and not reducible to

concept, image, or theme.

Separation has another feature that is relevant for my topic. Although this is never stated explicitly, Levinas's concept of separated subjectivity also provides a kind of inner dignity for *victims*:

Separation designates the possibility of an *existent* being set up and having its own destiny to itself, that is, being born and dying without the place of this birth and this death in the time of universal history being the measure of its reality. Interiority is the very possibility of a birth and death that do not derive their meaning from history.(9)

Separated interiority provides a kind of safe haven for subjects victimized in some way by historical processes and/or the historiography that dispassionately records those processes, and it allows for the memory, plurality, secrecy etc., that prevent the subject from being assimilated into History.(10) Levinas's separated subject also has rough parallels to the kind of radically reduced subjectivity prevailing in literature of the 1940s, '50s, and early '60s which focuses on (anti-)heroes trying to preserve their own authentic selfness in the face of a hostile, false, or indifferent society (Meursault in Camus's *The Stranger*, Holden Caulfield in Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, Chief Bromden in Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Franz Lenz in Böll's "Christmas Every Day," Frederic Clegg in Fowles' *The Collector*, etc.). It is also certainly no accident that these encapsulated figures are all either close to madness or marked by extreme alienation from society. Levinas's phenomenology, by contrast, provides a way out of this late modernist cul-de-sac by offering a route back to ethical engagement with others—a route following the paradoxical, unpredictable traces revealed in the endless exteriority of discourse. This insight was eventually adopted by many other writers and thinkers and has since then come to dominate ethical thinking in the postmodern era.

The separated subjects of performatism that I wish to describe are historically and phenomenologically very different from those outlined by Levinas. Whereas the Levinasian subject is a reaction to History, the performatist subject is a reaction to *posthistory*, to what has become the wildly successful realization of Levinas's proposal for engaging in an unending, particularized, face-to-face encounter with discursively mediated exteriority. In the course of this confrontation, and following Derrida's well-known deconstruction of separated subjectivity in "Violence and Metaphysics," the many postmodern followers of Levinas have long ago abandoned the enclosed, separated subject in favor of a relational, open one that makes the subject an effect of discourse rather than a natural or transcendental position prior to it.(11) By treating the subject as the effect of discourse, postmodernist thinkers like Derrida, Foucault, Rorty, or Butler eliminated the problem of defining transcendental separation. However, in doing so they effectively reduced subjects to a kind of patchwork quilt of overlapping influences so weak that they can barely pull themselves together to resist the outside forces encroaching upon them (for to do so in a

coherent way would mean restituting those very grand narratives that postmodernist thinkers are bent on eliminating in the first place). Although there have been formal philosophical attempts to formulate more active and positive concepts of postmetaphysical subjectivity,(12) the most radical experiments by far have taken place in the narratives of contemporary literature and film. There, we now consistently find subjects constructed in such a way that they are radically separated from discourse (which is now viewed as a threat and a burden rather than as an opportunity) and that take separation as a jumping-off point for acting in willful, purposeful ways literally inconceivable in postmodernism.

In performatism, the subject reverts to a state of separation, but one that exists under entirely different conditions than those proposed by Levinas. This having been said, it must be noted that the performatist subject still shares certain structural similarities with that of Levinas. In particular, it is unable to function socially in very marked ways and also often evinces the qualities of sensualism, egoism, and atheism noted by Levinas. As examples we might take Lester Burnham's hedonistic withdrawal from social and personal responsibility in *American Beauty*,(13) Amelie's sensualism and inability to connect with an ideal mate in the eponymous movie, and Christopher's autistic personality and programmatic atheism in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*.(14) In *Dogville*, Grace is a kind of *homo sacer* who, having been reduced to pure physical availability, is neither a member of civil society nor a bona fide outlaw. Shoshanna in *Inglourious Basterds* has few notable personal characteristics, but she is separated by virtue of her Jewishness—the socio-cultural model of separation par excellence—and is the custodian of a separated aesthetic space, a movie theater. All in all, these subjects tend to be traumatized in some way by their separation. Rather than reveling in it they are from the beginning categorically motivated to overcome it—but not in the discursive way proposed by Levinas.

Whereas the Levinasian subject ultimately breaks out of its separation through discourse (through irreducible confrontation with the face, the Other etc.), the performatist subject is separated even from *that*: it is in some way impeded from participating in discourse in the open-ended, uncontrollable way envisaged by Levinas. The subject is thus doubly separated: first in the sense that it is cut off in some way from social interaction, secondly in the sense that it is not even able to engage in discourse. The doubly separated subject can only express itself through discrete *performances* that allow it to act upon others—performances that Levinas considers to be crude, one-sided intrusions into the interior life of others.(15)

The thus encapsulated subject can now influence others via active, whole, performative interventions and—if all goes well—experience transcendence as presence, plenitude, and finality rather than as absence, deferral, and regress. The mode of “all goes well” is by definition authorial or theist. It requires that some higher (authorial) agency “cooperate” in causing the performance to bring lovers together (*Amelie*), have characters experience plenitude (Ricky and Lester in *American Beauty*), achieve finality (Christopher in *The Curious Incident*), or revenge themselves totally on their tormentors (Grace in *Dogville* and

Shoshanna in *Inglourious Basterds*). This “lock” or “fit” between individual performances and the structure of the work as a whole is what I have elsewhere called double framing. It prevents the performances from dispersing in the endless ironic regress of discourse and creates an artificial but secure inner space that resists being drawn out into the endless exteriority of discourse.

The “glue” holding this lock or fit together is *performativity*, which may be defined formally as the result of two orders (a higher and lower one, an inner and outer one, an authorial and a personal one etc.) coming together in a felicitous, congruent way (its motto might be said to correspond the title of one of Woody Allen’s recent movies: “whatever works”). The success or failure of these performances is in any case not directly dependent on discourse but on a higher (authorial) order that seems to be operating beyond all contingency to intervene fortuitously in the work at hand. The obvious catch is that the motives of any force operating beyond contingency cannot be known totally. The stylization of a higher, authorially mediated power intervening in a work will always be accompanied by a certain unease as to the “actual” motives of that power, whose existence (like God’s) can never be proven definitively. Be that as it may, performatist works suggest the structural possibility of such a higher power, rather than working to undermine it from the very start.

In performatism, the occlusion of discourse and the separation of the subject create a free space in which visuality and mimesis necessarily fill out the void left by the lack of discourse. This free space—simply by virtue of its performative resistance to the corrupting influence of context—provides a room in which aesthetic judgments and positive ethical positions can emerge through intuition. This can be seen in one way or another in all the works mentioned. In *American Beauty* it is represented by the “beautiful,” magically dancing plastic bag (whose valence is later confirmed on a higher level when Lester dies); in *Amelie* the heroine’s ethically motivated performances have a decidedly aesthetic dimension (she gets her totally separated painter friend to adopt a new style; her lover makes torn-up photos whole); Christopher’s base criteria for viewing the world ethically (red = good, yellow = bad) are also aesthetic; and in *Inglourious Basterds* Shoshanna maintains a movie theater whose closure has a totalizing ethical dimension (it ends World War II); *Dogville* locates the action in what is indubitably an artificial (theatrical) space that we are encouraged to believe is a valid representation of the real world. This visually or intuitively determined free space comes structurally very close to the classic notion of beauty as defined by Kant: it operates without concept, it is pleasing (at the very least to the separated individual), it is binding (also for the separated individual), and, at least initially, it is without purpose (separation being itself nothing more than a tautology, a formal, self-serving differentiation from the other). This makes possible a specifically postmetaphysical understanding of beauty. *Anything*—even something demonstrably ugly—can now be beautiful provided that it is encased in the tautologically tied-up double frame (the paradigmatic example of this is *American Beauty*, in which Lester, from an authoritative, god-like position on the outside frame of the movie, looks back on his banal life and, without

irony, proclaims it “beautiful”).

As we have seen, performatist ethics works by engaging a separated subject with someone else directly in a destructive or a unifying way. This also means that the separated aesthetic mode peculiar to the subject necessarily “rubs off” in some way on the other with whom he or she is dealing ethically (to use Girard’s or Tolstoy’s terminology, it is *contagious*(16)). And, as soon as the double frame marking the performatist work as a whole seals the bond between the separated subject and the other, this half-aesthetic, half-ethical gesture is transferred to the work as a whole. Although there is no universal law or rule governing the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in performatism, in structural terms they go hand in hand. Ethical engagement necessarily involves visually mediated aesthetic projections or gestures, since these are the root forms of non-discursive communication or identification. At the same time, these aesthetic gestures necessarily have ethical consequences as soon as they move through form to touch someone else—that is to say *per formam*.

Double separation and double framing also lead to a new notion of history. Rather than appearing as the oppressive, totalizing vantage point of dispassionate survivors tallying the dead, history now appears as the result of active, totalizing (but not conflict-free) performances carried out by individual agents or subjects. These performances are indeed totalities, but they are *particular* totalities that cannot be subsumed to concept or synthesized on a higher level (except, of course, on an epochal one, where they can be shown to share the same qualities of closure, performativity, aestheticity, etc.). Because these performances are irreducible in their otherness, they necessarily collide—often violently—with the performances or acts of others in a way demanding ethical resolution. The difference between performatism and postmodernism is that this ethical resolution takes place not through the fractured, aporetic traces of discourse(17) but through closed, whole actions proceeding out of bio-social categories or frames. These categories, which are often connected with trauma, impinge upon subjects in ways encouraging them to escape them, that is, to act and to transcend their existing state of being. We must not forget that the conditions of these categories are particular rather than universal; they depend on the given bio-social context rather than on transcendental assumptions about time and space. And, the specific movement out of separation into discursively unregulated contact with others means that performatist ethics focuses on the *perpetrator* (the active, willful, centered subject) rather than on the victim.

Just how does this ethics of perpetration work? At first, performatist ethics seems to following the postmodern pattern outlined by Bauman, Rorty, and others: it is constructed, contingent, and non-foundational in the sense that it does not propose universal, positive codes or systems of morality for acting. However, unlike the ethical thought of postmodernism it proceeds from a doubly separated subject who has practically no other way to express itself than through willful actions that encroach on others. Whereas

Levinas's "face" is a "primordial expression"(18) that enjoins the subject "you shall not commit murder,"(19) the separated performatist subject, who is by nature immune or indifferent to discourse, has no such means of entering into ethical engagement with others in the way outlined by Levinas. Instead one finds a separated subject defined by a particular bio-social category that restricts and impinges on him or her in such an onerous way that he or she is forced to move out of it or transcend it. Such subjects act out a particular imperative to transcend their own categories or frames through totalizing performances that necessarily encroach upon others. These performances (to take the two most extreme cases) can either destroy others entirely or lead to an experience of near-complete unity or reciprocity with them. In any case they result in visible, present, total events rather than in fragmented, discursively mediated confrontations with an infinitely receding other. To achieve an ethical result, however, the specific relations between these two poles must be confirmed and closed on a higher, authorial level suggesting the presence or action of some form of theist agency—a totalizing position that is anathema to Levinas, Derrida, and postmodern thinking in general.(20)

Performatist literary ethics may thus be thought of as having a horizontal dimension (a gamut of options ranging from destruction of the other to unification with the other) and a vertical one (authorial closure or framing). Taken together, they can be used to reconstruct the broad array of ethical patterns marking contemporary literature and film. Hence in *American Beauty* Lester overcomes his retreat into teenager-like hedonism by paradoxically *not* seducing Angela Hayes and establishing a sense of reciprocity with her. At the same time, Lester's rejection of Colonel Fitt's homosexual advances (formally also an act of chasteness) leads to Lester's murder. Both consequences are, however, reconciled when Lester becomes a disembodied, all-seeing deity and a self-confirming authorial narrator looking back on a full, "beautiful" life. In *Amelie* the timid heroine is able to play God and help (or punish) others, but not to help herself; it is only after her friends imitate her ethical intrusions into the interior life of others and intervene in *her* life that she finds happiness with an ideal mate. Here the collective acts as the higher agent confirming the actions of the heroine as does an authorial narrator speaking from off camera. In *Curious Incident* the autistic hero Christopher is, Christ-like, successfully able to raise his mother (figuratively) from the dead and impose his own notion of truth on those around him; as the authorial first-person narrator of the book he is a self-confirming figure whose achievements are confirmed, rather than debunked, by the book as a whole. In *Dogville*, Grace teams up with her gangster father (who arrives from outside as a kind of *deus cum machina*) to wipe out her self-righteous, hypocritical tormentors; her actions are implicitly sanctioned (and certainly not contradicted) by the authorial narrator performing the voiceover. The most egregious example of authorial manipulation is *Inglourious Basterds*, where Jewish hillbillies (bio-socially separated subjects mimetically imitating their tormentors) revenge themselves totally on the Germans in what is manifestly a historical and sociological fiction. Tarantino's patently false rewriting of history serves to underscore the categorical priority of the authorial/theist perspective over questions of socio-historical plausibility.

Performatism in this sense has no ethical “message” or universally applicable imperative. Like Levinasian ethics, it is not reducible to theme or concept. In modal terms, however, all five narratives are comparable, for they all involve active subjects or perpetrators caught in separated bio-social categories that they seek to transcend (traumatically induced timidity in *Amelie*; total victimhood in *Dogville*; Asperger’s Syndrome in *The Curious Incident*; willed reversion to adolescence and closet homosexuality in *American Beauty*, and being Jewish in the extremely limited sense defined by Tarantino in *Inglourious Basterds*). These categories or frames cause the protagonists to impose themselves directly and often violently upon others *qua* performance rather than engaging with those others in an endless regress of discursive irony, which after some forty-odd years of postmodern elaboration is now being experienced as an ethical—and aesthetic—dead end.

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In the following remarks, I wish to treat in detail a case that marks what is perhaps the most extreme possible example of a restrictive, separated bio-social frame and ethical attempts to transcend it. This exemplary case is the popular American TV show *Dexter*.

Dexter is a highly successful television drama that has been running on the cable channel Showtime since 2006 (as of this writing it is in its fifth season).⁽²¹⁾ The show’s principle conceit is that a sociopathic serial killer (someone categorically bad) can nonetheless do good by following a code that enjoins him to kill other murderers. The show’s hero, Dexter Morgan, is an adopted child whose policeman father, Harry, discovers early on that his son is a sadistic sociopath with no empathy or inner feelings. To keep Dexter from killing indiscriminately, the father provides him with a moral codex stipulating that he kill only murderers who have escaped justice (“The Code of Harry”). This, in turn, is made possible because after his father’s death Dexter works in the Miami police force analyzing blood spatter patterns as a forensic expert in Bloodstain Pattern Analysis, and has access to information and techniques allowing the doubt-free identification of murderers; his own standards are more exacting than those of the law. The main conflicts in the show have less to do with Dexter’s way of meting out justice (which, being related from Dexter’s point of view, is not subject to much doubt or ethical scrutiny) than with his attempts to adjust his empty, separated personality to the non-sociopaths with whom he must coexist in order to survive. Considerable dark humor is derived from this, particularly as the story is told from Dexter’s perspective (he narrates from off-camera).

Viewed from a phenomenological perspective, *Dexter* may be taken as the archetype of a separated subject who is not a victim but a *perpetrator*, and it is his ethics of perpetration that I would like to reconstruct in the following pages as a possible model for a more general understanding of how ethics works after postmodernism. *Dexter* would mark the most extreme pole of an ethics based not on a totalized, universal concept of Good or on paradoxical discursive strategies for dealing with the Other, but on a way of acting

proceeding out of a categorically defined situation that must be regarded a priori as universally undesirable (having to kill others to maintain one's own separated selfhood). Seen this way, *Dexter* would be a case study in how good can even be done proceeding from even the worst of all possible a priori premises (something that is typical of the metaphysical optimism of performatism).⁽²²⁾ In the following remarks I would like to take up the five criteria outlined earlier on—separation, primacy of visuality and intuition over discourse, coextensivity of aesthetics and ethics, theism, and performance—and apply them briefly to *Dexter*.

Separation

One of the major problems involved in Levinas's notion of separation is his insistence on its natural, primary quality prior to contact with otherness (the position criticized by Derrida in "Metaphysics and Violence"). The deconstructive critique of this position is to question how separation can be somehow entirely prior to the discursive otherness that is needed to define it in the first place. Performatism avoids this sort of problem by constructing subjectivity as the effect of a monist, bio-social scene or performance *prior* to discourse.^(22a) In the case of *Dexter*, this scene is extraordinarily gruesome and traumatic. As a small child, *Dexter* witnessed the murder-by-chain-saw of his mother and spent several days sitting in pools of her blood in a metal shipping container. According to the show's not very subtle logic, this traumatic experience caused him to become emotionally void and, eventually, a serial killer condemned to reenact his trauma by killing others (and then meticulously cleaning up afterwards). The motivation for *Dexter*'s condition is however also at least partially biological or anthropological: it appears to be based on a kind of ironclad mimetic imperative that makes people imitate and ritualize the traumatic events that beset them. (Any doubts we may have about the broader validity of this imperative are dispelled in Season 2, where we meet *Dexter*'s older brother, who was also at the murder scene and who has also become a serial killer; similarly, District Attorney Prado in Season 3 becomes a killer as a reaction to having an abusive father, and the Trinity killer in Season 4 is reacting mimetically to the violent accidental deaths of family members.)

Dexter's separation in turn gives him an odd perspective on normal human interaction. Unable to engage in normal, discourse-based social behavior, he must studiously learn to do the opposite of what his own emotionless interior state requires (his father helps him in this in numerous episodes) and to feign emotions in somber situations like funerals (1.02) or marriage proposals (3.04). Comic relief is provided by his attempts to relate to the emotions of his long-suffering, naive girlfriend Rita, to his highly emotional sister Debra, and to his domineering prospective mother-in-law.⁽²³⁾ In the course of the series *Dexter* does experience some growing emotional attachment to Rita and her children, however he is never entirely able to transcend his separation, which would involve telling her the truth. Although ostensibly lacking any sentimental or empathetic core, *Dexter* indulges in a positively Dostoevskian idealization of children as a measure for acting ethically; his first

victim is a child-murderer (1.01) and he repeatedly emphasizes that he could never kill children himself.

In relation to adults, however, Dexter embodies the opposite of the ethical scene envisioned by Levinas. “Man as Other” comes to Dexter “from the outside” and is “separated,”(24) but he comes as a being to be killed rather than as a face who “arrests and paralyzes my violence by his call . . . which comes from on high.”(25) Dexter is in fact not only oblivious to the face of the other, but he defiles it ritually by cutting the faces of his victims with a scalpel to collect blood samples documenting his crimes. By virtue of his murderous, mimetically induced drive Dexter is, for all practical purposes, *absolutely* separate. As such, he eludes both Levinas’s definition of subjectivity (which practically insures that the separated subject will engage the other discursively) as well as Derrida’s critique of Levinas, which aims at redefining Levinas’s separated subject as an effect of discourse rather than as something prior to it. The only thing that keeps Dexter from killing indiscriminately is in fact the Code of Harry, which is presented to him from on high, as it were, and stipulates that Dexter kill only murderers and feign an interior emotional life in order not to get caught. Dexter’s ethical Code, which at first seems very clear cut, becomes more complicated when Dexter discovers that his adoptive father was involved indirectly in his mother’s murder and lied to him consistently about the details of his adoption. In short, Dexter realizes that the Code of Harry is a construct embedded in a larger, uncontrollable context, but he continues using it anyway *because it works*. What is important here is the dependence of the separated subject upon some kind of behavioral codex provided from outside and above him; the point is not whether the codex is “true” (which it is not and cannot be), but whether it can be continually projected back onto different contexts in an ethically productive way.

Dexter does exhibit certain typical traits of separation outlined by Levinas: he is an avowed atheist and he indulges in various kinds of sensualism (most notably depicted in the opening credits where he is seen killing a mosquito, crushing fresh oranges, grinding coffee, shaving, and frying a piece of meat). This sensuality, rather than satisfying what Levinas would call need, is closely connected with our visually motivated aesthetic identification with Dexter (a topic I will turn to further below). And, because Dexter’s separation is truly complete, it conditions all other aspects of his existence. Thus both his own discourse and his memory are entirely separated too. They are accessible to us because he narrates and comments on his own actions, but this interior discourse does not play anything but an incidental role in the series’ plot development (in Season 2 Dexter comes close to confessing but ultimately doesn’t). Like many other performatist heroes, Dexter is what I call a first-person authorial narrator.(26) While strictly speaking a first-person narrator (by definition interacting with other characters in the story), he nonetheless has, because of his murderous bent, a privileged, quasi-authorial status vis-à-vis those characters, rather like a superhero (something touched upon in 2.05, “The Dark Avenger”). The notable thing about Dexter—as with other first-person authorial narrators like Lester Burnham or

Christopher—is that they are empowered rather than undermined by the works they narrate: the work as a whole raises their bio-social peculiarities to a higher power rather than ironically exposing them as narrative misprisions or entangling them in the endless twists and turns of discourse.

The Occlusion of Discourse

Dexter's separated nature cannot be expressed in discourse with people in his fictional world, for that would be tantamount to confessing to murder. Indeed, the only persons he can talk to openly about his "work" are his victims and other killers (most notably his brother Brian and his psychopathic girlfriend Lila; later in Season 3 he is also befriended by District Attorney Miguel Prado, who seeks to use Dexter's murderous drive to mete out justice outside the courts). In Season 2, Episode 10, he does confess his crimes to his nemesis Sergeant Doakes, a non-murderer whom he decides to frame rather than kill; by a stroke of luck (interpreted ironically by the atheist Dexter as an act of God), Doakes is shortly thereafter killed by Lila. The only non-murderer who knows his secret is his father, who has a special quasi-theological status (I will return to this shortly).[\(27\)](#)

In contrast to Dexter's performative ethics, pluralistic discourse in the postmodern sense is treated as a sham or illusion that is contingent upon the separated self rather than the other way around. Thus in Season 2, Episode 7, Dexter patches together a "manifesto" out of miscellaneous material gleaned from the Internet in order to confuse the police, who pounce on the parts rather than the whole. (The strategy works quite well until the FBI agent in charge of the investigation realizes it is a holistic strategy designed to confuse the police.)

In general, Dexter's separated ego functions entirely apart from discourse, which he is however able to use to mimic emotionality (most notably when he uses the words of a lying murderess to propose in a heartfelt way to Rita). Dexter can only express himself in a true way through *performances*. These usually involve ritual murder but also occasionally desist from it; in place of murder he sometimes frames or manipulates people. One could say that Dexter's performances are measured ethically in terms of categorically defined acts rather than in terms of strategies repositioning a split, diffuse subject within the endless regress of discourse. In turn, these framed situations are subject to what Erving Goffman calls keying (a cued, not always predictable transition from one kind of frame to another) and fabrication (deceitful manipulation from without), and breaking frame (disruptions of the frame from within).[\(28\)](#) Frames, in other words, can always shift according to circumstance, are open to manipulation, and can be transgressed. Nonetheless, what is decisive for Dexter is the given character of his own primary frame and not the possibility of its infinite critique through discursive interrogation. And, needless to say, we have complete access to that frame through a privileged, completely transparent authorial discourse that gives us total, "magical" access to Dexter's otherwise opaque interiority (something that is not possible in a Levinasian world)[\(29\)](#).

Primacy of Intuition, Visuality, and Mimesis

Levinas harbors a basic and typically postmodern skepticism of visuality and visual evidence that is rooted in the valorization of discourse central to postmodernism. For Levinas, exteriority “goes further than vision.”(30) The “truth of being” is not its “image” or “idea” but is “the being situated in a subjective field which *deforms* vision”(31) in the face-to-face confrontation with the other. Performatism, by contrast, is sub-discursive. For this reason visuality and mimesis are structurally indispensable to it in the sense that they enable action and communication prior to or apart from discourse. It is no accident here that Dexter is a specialist in visual evidence (blood spatter patterns); these reliably mark the one-sided, separated performances (murder) that in turn allow him to constitute his self (it is also no accident that his reconstructions of blood spatter patterns at crime scenes have a distinctly artistic character). When he does “argue” ethically, he also does this visually: before killing his helplessly bound victims, he confronts them with photographs of their own victims. Finally, as already noted, the causal underpinnings of Dexter’s performatist world are primarily visual and mimetic: Dexter learned both to be a sociopathic killer and to disguise this state by way of imitation. The flaw in Dexter’s world—the reason for murder—does not, in any case, occur through “a subjective field which deforms vision” but through an unspecified originary murder or act of transgression that sets in motion an endless chain of imitations.

The Coextensivity of Ethics and Aesthetics

None of the leading theoreticians of postmodern ethics accords much of a role to aesthetics or beauty in the Kantian sense.(32) The main reason for this is, once more, the privileged position of discourse, which is by definition an expression of power relations or a medium of misdirected desire rather than a source of pleasure in its own right. In the anti-aesthetic world of postmodernism, ethical engagement works precisely by interfering with any feelings of self-satisfied pleasure ensuring separation—a separation that is necessarily disturbed and deconstructed by contact with the Other in the boundless exteriority of discourse.(33)

This coextensivity of ethics and aesthetics exists in all the examples I have mentioned, but nowhere is it more pronounced than in *Dexter*. It is most evident in the opening credits, where we are practically forced to identify visually with the sensual aspects of Dexter’s morning routine: swatting a blood-filled mosquito, squeezing a blood-red orange, putting on a shroud-like undershirt, slicing meat etc. These sensually loaded visual cues are at the same time thematic: they relate to Dexter’s habit of killing only evildoers, of draining them of blood, of shrouding them in plastic foil, of stabbing and slicing them up, etc. Dexter’s state of separation—although unacceptable in terms of discourse—is in this way made visually attractive through cues provided by the series’ author. This identification doesn’t make Dexter “good,” but it reduces Dexter’s thematic actions to a sensuality that is intrinsic

to all separated selves (which we, by implication, are too); it is the mark of a basic anthropological commonality prior to the evil logic that determines Dexter's persona. At the same time, it establishes separated space as not just a safe haven or a solipsistic sensual playground (as in Levinas), but as a specifically aesthetic, visually attractive realm. When Dexter says in Season 3, Episode 6 that his "loneliness is an art form," he is expressing what is perhaps the major unstated premise of the series: that (his) separated space is an aesthetic space, albeit a problematical one. This aesthetic space is coextensive with ethics in the sense that it makes possible a visual identification that nonetheless must be confirmed by moving through form—through a performance that necessarily has an ethical—and aesthetic—impact on someone else.(34)

Transcendence and (A)Theism

One of things Derrida points out about Levinas in "Violence and Metaphysics" is that in spite of all precautions Levinas succumbs to what Derrida calls the "equivocal complicity of theology and metaphysics."(35) God turns out to be not a superior, entirely separate authority (in a certain sense the mirror image of the separated individual), but is rather a cipher for the discursive play or traces making the Levinas's theology possible in the first place: "only the play of the world permits us to *think the essence* of God."(36) Levinas's theist argument, as Derrida points out, can be "readily converted into atheism,"(37) since God can easily be shown to be an effect of the trace rather than its origin. Although in later works (like *Specters of Marx*) Derrida accords both religion and the messianic something like an originary, indispensable valence, his basic position remains inimical to the theist notion of God that assumes a resemblance between man and God. In Derrida's words, if there is a resemblance we must think it "before, or without, the assistance of the Same,"(38) which is to say as an unrepresentable, constantly receding *différance*, trace, or play of irreconcilably interdependent opposites.

The works I have called performatist are not particularly religious in the conventional sense of the word. However, they do tend to revert to a theist notion of man as a mirror image of God. Here the reversal of cause and effect noted by Derrida in regard to Levinas applies equally well to the performatist God: God is as much a projection of man as man is a projection of God. The difference is that this irresolvable play of opposites now takes place in terms of performance, representational similarity, and visibility rather than in terms of discourse and non-representable difference, and it plays out in closed interior spaces rather than in an endless field of exteriority. The visibility, intuitivity, and performativity of the man-God relation make it once more possible to experience or imagine this relationship as an aesthetic, rather than as a metaphysical, unity, and it favors the intuition of belief over the certainty provided by knowledge.

Dexter, in particular, casts the father-son relationship as distinctly theist in the sense described above. Dexter's policeman stepfather provides his murderous adoptive son with

an ethical Code that stipulates he kill only other murderers, thus allowing him to remain separate but alive. As the son however discovers after his father's death, his father had an affair with his natural mother, who was an informant for the father; she in turn was bloodily murdered by cocaine dealers, thus setting off Dexter's trauma. The father, in other words, is not an ideal origin, but is implicated in the context determining Dexter's murderous activity. Also, as Dexter discovers, Harry committed suicide after seeing Dexter dismembering one of his first victims; the father was unable to live with his own monstrous, but ethically guided creation. In spite of having exposed his father as a liar, Dexter nonetheless continues to adhere to the Code of Harry, simply because it works ethically (the main performatist criterion); his one attempt to depart from his separation and befriend another sociopathic killer ends in murder. The only "friend" or confidant that Dexter really has is his dead father, who continually reappears in dream-like sequences and acts as a kind of conscience.

A final structural irony (which is once more typical of performatism in general) concerns Dexter's own atheism. Although avowedly not believing in God, he at times is dependent on some kind of luck to help him out of tight jams. His survival indeed seems to be contingent upon something that is above his or our own ken. In fact, if we try to think God in the terms set forth by the series, He would have to be a positive mirror image of Dexter—an entirely separated, unknowable personality who conveys Himself to us through performance rather than through discourse and who could, through some ineffable means, relieve Dexter from his seemingly insoluble categorical dilemma. In a certain sense, Dexter, as the worst possible candidate for achieving redemption, acquires a privileged metaphysical status by virtue of his categorical evilness: if *he* can achieve salvation, then *anyone* can. God, for His part, could be defined as the rationally inconceivable conditions of salvation that would allow Dexter to transcend his own condition (this is mimesis of a higher, ineffable order). The show doesn't explicitly try to "prove" that there is a God, but its entire narrative arc (devoted to prolonging Dexter's search for redemption) supports the aesthetic intuition that a positive resolution might be possible.

Summary: Agency, Performance, and Transcendence

Dexter and the other examples used above suggest that a fundamental change in ethical thinking is now taking place in the narrative arts. The basic structure of this change may be located most directly in the attempt of doubly separated subjects to transcend the confines of their separation by acting on others in totalizing (violent or reconciliatory) ways. Double separation leads almost unavoidably to the creation of a free interior space that exhibits aesthetic qualities reminiscent of Kant's definition of beauty; the willful movement out of that space leads almost unavoidably to the totalizing projection of a higher (theist) authority that might guide that movement successfully. The positional mode of postmodern ethics, where the peripheral victim is privileged over the centered perpetrator, is replaced by a categorical ethics in which bio-socially constructed subjects or agents are once more allowed to engage in particular acts of perpetration that better their position in some way.

This shift in emphasis is *epochal*. It is caused not by some odd concatenation of discursive fields or the latest stage of late capitalism, but by a more-or-less conscious counter-reaction to the ethical strategies of postmodernism, which became explicit after the so-called “ethical turn” of the 1990’s and are now evidently losing their grip on our narrative imagination.

There are many reasons for this epochal counter-reaction, but two general ones seem to be most urgent at the present time. The first is a desire to resist the infinite regress of critical discourse and its increasingly predictable ironies; the second, which follows logically out of the first, is to reestablish the subject as an agent without returning to the 1950s-style model of insanely self-sufficient authenticity. For the return of agency makes *everything* possible, even though the conditions under which that agency returns are restricted and onerous. As examples of these strategies I have chosen heavily stylized works that magnify salient aspects of the new ethics in the extreme. The tendency towards allowing separated subjects to totalize violence is most explicit in *Inglourious Basterds*, *Dogville*, and *Dexter*; the tendency towards totalizing reconciliation and unity can be seen graphically in *Amelie*, *Curious Incident*, and *American Beauty*. Of course, these works all confront us with particular ethical quandaries familiar from traditional discussions on ethics. Should we, like *Dexter*, have ethical reservations about committing euthanasia (yes, we should); is it right, like *Amelie*, to make up something to make someone happy (yes, it is); should we, like Christopher’s father, lie to someone knowing that he won’t care about it that much anyway (no, we shouldn’t). The real point, though, of these works is not their ability to sensitize us to individual moral problems but to force us to identify with a total ethical gesture—a gesture that simultaneously marks a liberating aesthetic break with the by now entirely predictable anti-totalizing posture of postmodernism.

In passing it is also worth noting that none of these works strips away the symbolic order of language to reveal unsettling, fleeting glimpses of the real—the strategy touted most notably by Slavoj Žižek and Hal Foster⁽³⁹⁾ and often erroneously thought to mark the overcoming of postmodernism by way of Lacan. None of these works touches in any significant way upon the malevolent, constantly receding Lacanian real. *Inglourious Basterds* doesn’t reveal anything more real about the Holocaust than *American Beauty* does about death and materiality (just think of that animated, happily dancing plastic bag); *Dogville*’s belated attempt to link its metaphysically loaded subject matter with the grinding poverty of the Great Depression is tenuous at best (would Grace have been treated better if the townspeople had had Social Security?), and neither *Amelie* nor *Dexter* are traumatological studies in any serious sense of the word. Christopher, though psychologically somewhat plausible, is afflicted by a rigidly separated neuropsychological condition that is hardly accessible to Lacanian theorizing.

Instead, all these works surprise us by imposing illusions upon us that thematically reverse and formally oppose the unspoken premises of postmodern ethics and/or aesthetics. In *Inglourious Basterds* Jews become perpetrators and find their own final solution to the Final

Solution; they achieve closure in the quite literal sense of the word. Would the possibility of achieving total mimetic revenge at the end of WW II have changed history? There is obviously no way to answer this question, but the fact that it is at all posed in a feature-length film in the year 2009 stands suggests a deep-seated, massive impatience with the victimary narrative that has dominated treatments of the Holocaust over the last 30-odd years. In *Dogville* Lars von Trier grapples with a similar, though more abstractly posed question of what happens when an absolute victim is endowed with absolute power over her tormentors. The implicit suggestion seems to be that when man (or, even more pointedly, a victimized woman named Grace) plays God, there is no possibility of total mercy (the only real source of such mercy presumably being God Himself—von Trier had converted to Catholicism shortly before making the movie).⁽⁴⁰⁾ *Dexter* follows the same totalizing pattern of mimetic revenge but serializes it in such a way that it would eventually lead to the elimination of evil (the logical end result of a murderer systematically murdering all other mimetically motivated murderers). *Dexter* is in this sense the ethical and metaphysical antidote to Baudrillard's fatal strategies in which evil multiplies uncontrollably through untrammelled boundary transgression.⁽⁴¹⁾ Caught up in a bio-social category that makes him evil, *Dexter* is nonetheless able to do good in a categorical sense by trying to eliminate the category that defines him.

The significance of *Dexter* as a bellwether of the new performatist ethics and aesthetics is hard to overestimate, for it embodies the most extreme example we have to date of an absolutely separated persona and its problematical, but positively marked agency. *Dexter* and works similar to it are not some clever variation on postmodern notions of subjectivity, aesthetics, and ethics, but are their diametrical opposites. They are also slowly but surely displacing an ethics and aesthetics founded in discourse, open-ended exteriority, and victimization with ones forthrightly promoting interiority, closure, and totalizing acts of perpetration.

Notes

1. For an in-depth discussion of performatism see Raoul Eshelman, *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* (Aurora: Davies Group Publishers 2008). [\(back\)](#)
2. The problem of how ethical problems unfold in postmodern literature can be touched on here only in passing. For recent studies see, for example, Barbara Schwerdtfeger, *Ethics in Postmodern Fiction. Donald Barthelme and William Gass*. (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter 2005); Zuzanna Ladyga, *Rethinking Postmodern Subjectivity. Emmanuel Levinas and the Ethics of Referentiality in the Work of Donald Barthelme* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang 2009), and Catherine Walker Bergström, *Intuition of an Infinite Obligation. Narrative Ethics and Postmodern Gnostics in the Fiction of E.L. Doctorow* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang 2010). [\(back\)](#)

3. See her "Encountering the Modern Subject in Levinas," *Yale French Studies* 104 (2004), 6-21 as well as Robert Bernasconi "The Silent Anarchic World of the Evil Genius," in G. Montea, J. Sallis, and J. Taminiaux, eds., *The Collegium Phaenomenologicum: The First Ten Years* (Dordrecht: Kluwer 1988), 257-72. ([back](#))
4. An interpretation advanced, among others, by Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Malden: Blackwell 1993), 84-85. ([back](#))
5. *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority* (Duchesne University Press, Pittsburg 1969), 58. ([back](#))
6. *Totality and Infinity*, 59. ([back](#))
7. *Totality and Infinity*, 290. ([back](#))
8. In Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 79-153. For a defense of Levinas vis-à-vis Derrida's critique see Bernasconi 1988. ([back](#))
9. *Totality and Infinity*, 55. ([back](#))
10. Levinas's subject undoubtedly marks a crucial development in the victimary rhetoric described by Eric Gans, who suggests that postmodernist politics is based on the model of the asymmetrical, non-reciprocal relationship between the Jewish victim and the Nazi perpetrator; see, for example, the exposition in his "Originary Thinking and Victimary Politics," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment* 380, 17 Oct. 2009. < anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw380.htm > ([back](#))
11. Whether Levinas himself retreated from this conception is a matter of debate. Although he does not use the term separation anymore in *Otherwise than Being* (1974), Batnitsky (2004, 20) maintains that Levinas's arguments still tacitly depend on it in the sense that he defines "sensibility as a kind of intentionality beyond instinct and beneath reason," (20) as is also the case in *Totality and Infinity*. ([back](#))
12. A notable example is Alain Badiou's *Ethics. An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2001), which, proceeding from Lacan's concept of desire and the real, stresses unified truth, goodness, agency, and consistency rather than victimization and the absolutizing of evil. ([back](#))
13. For an in-depth discussion within the context of performatism see Raoul Eshelman, *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* (Aurora: Davies Group Publishers, 2008), 1-38. ([back](#))

14. For a detailed analysis see my "Transcendence and the Aesthetics of Disability: The Case of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*," *Anthropoetics* 15, 1 (2009) <anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1501/1501eshelman.htm> ([back](#))

15. Levinas's notion of discourse is explicitly *not* performative: "Action does not express. It has meaning, but leads us to the agent in his absence. To approach someone from works is to enter into his interiority as though by burglary; the other is surprised in his intimacy . . . but does not express himself" *Totality and Infinity*, 66-67. ([back](#))

16. See, for example, Girard's *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1987), p. 19. In treatises like "What is Art" (1897) and "Why Do Men Stupefy Themselves" (1890) Tolstoy stresses the notion of ethical (mimetic) contagion as existing in close conjunction with aesthetics, which he views skeptically because of its corrupting potential. ([back](#))

17. Cf. typical statements of Levinas such as "language institutes a relation irreducible to the subject-object relation: the *revelation* of the other" (*Totality and Infinity*, 73); "[the] commerce [of interlocutors] is not a representation of the one by the other, nor a participation in universality, on the common plane of language. Their commerce . . . is ethical" (73); or "The exteriority of discourse cannot be converted into interiority" (295). ([back](#))

18. *Totality and Infinity*, 199. ([back](#))

19. *Totality and Infinity*, 199. ([back](#))

20. The double frame of performatist ethics requires the twofold understanding of transcendence as developed by Heidegger's definition in his *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1992). According to Heidegger, transcendence may be thought of in two ways: as movement from inside to outside (the absolutely exceeding) or as the experience of a force that seems to be beyond contingency (the unconditioned). For an illuminating discussion of why these two concepts should be thought in conjunction with one another, see Marina Ludwigs, "Three Gaps of Representation, Three Meanings of Transcendence," *Anthropoetics* 15, 2 (2010). <anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1502/1502ludwigs.htm> ([back](#))

21. This article covers the first four seasons. ([back](#))

22. *Dexter's* ethical fix is not an anomaly in American television, which in the last few years has focused on more or less positively conceived perpetrators like Nancy Botwin in *Weeds*, Walter White in *Breaking Bad*, or Omar in *The Wire*. ([back](#))

22a. This bio-social founding of human behavior is unacceptable to Levinas, whose approach

is rigorously phenomenological; see his gloss “The I of Enjoyment is neither Biological nor Social” (*Totality and Infinity*, 120). ([back](#))

23. Dexter nicely fulfills the criteria of awkwardness suggested by Kyle Karthaus to explain singularly odd characters in contemporary comedy. See his “Popular Culture after Postmodernism: *Borat*, *Family Guy*, *The Office*, and the Awkwardness of Being Earnest” in *Anthropoetics* 15, 2 (2010). < anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1502/1502karthaus.htm > ([back](#))

24. *Totality and Infinity*, 291. ([back](#))

25. *Totality and Infinity*, 291. ([back](#))

26. See Eshelman, *Performatism*, 19-21. ([back](#))

27. A partial exception is the psychopathic district attorney Miguel Prado, who erroneously thinks he “understands” Dexter and befriends him. Dexter, for his part, reacts to Prado’s attempts to buddy up with him by musing that “no matter how close people are, they remain infinitely distant” (3.06). Needless to say, the “friendship” ends in the usual way. Dexter murders Prado after the latter shows no interest in adhering to Harry’s Code and kills a personal enemy who in Dexter’s terms is demonstrably not evil. ([back](#))

28. These concepts are developed at length in his *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern University Press 1986). ([back](#))

29. See *Totality and Infinity*, 202: “Expression does not consist in giving us the Other’s interiority.” ([back](#))

30. *Totality and Infinity*, 290. ([back](#))

31. *Totality and Infinity*, 291. ([back](#))

32. An exception of sorts is Bauman, who in his *Postmodern Ethics* devotes a short section to “Aesthetic Space” (168-174). ([back](#))

33. For more on Levinas’s post-Kantian approach to aesthetics see Henry McDonald, “Aesthetics As First Ethics: Levinas and the Alterity of Literary Discourse,” *Diacritics* 4 (2010), 15-41. ([back](#))

34. It might be pointed out in passing that the aesthetically determined bio-social categories of performatism differ from the originary bio-political state that Giorgio Agamben calls *homo sacer*, as outlined in his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1998). In this borderline state a subject (the *homo sacer*) is reduced to “bare life” that is both outside human and divine law and at the same time functions as the exception to those laws that makes them possible in the first place.

Agamben's *homo sacer* marks a completely unfree space determined by the epistemological logic of pure power relations, and it assumes an originary distinction between the sacred and the political only. Performatism, by contrast, assumes that an unfree space is paradoxically also always a free (aesthetic) one by virtue of its separation. Agamben's *homo sacer* leads literally to a dead end; the aesthetic space and simple subjectivity of performatism always permit renewal and resistance from within. [\(back\)](#)

35. "Violence and Metaphysics," 109. [\(back\)](#)

36. "Violence and Metaphysics," 107. [\(back\)](#)

37. "Violence and Metaphysics," 108. [\(back\)](#)

38. "Violence and Metaphysics," 109. [\(back\)](#)

39. See Foster's *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT University Press 1996) and Žižek's *Looking Awry. An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT University Press 1997). [\(back\)](#)

40. Von Trier's later comic film about someone playing God, *The Boss of it All* (2006), demolishes the notion of aesthetics-as-ethics in much the same way. The actor playing "the boss of it all" in the movie seems to be moving towards an ethically correct decision to save the company he is ostensibly running, but in the end opts for an ethically dubious decision based solely on a shared aesthetic affinity with an unscrupulous investor. [\(back\)](#)

41. See, for example, Baudrillard, *Selected Writings* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1988), esp. Chapter 8 "Fatal Strategies," 185-206. [\(back\)](#)