

On the Significance and Originality of Nie Zhenzhao's Ethical Literary Criticism

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Abstract This contribution discusses Nie's concept of ethical literary criticism. Nie's interpretation differs substantially from the body of work that is usually captured under the umbrella notion of ethical criticism in the West. The originality of Nie's approach lies in the fact that he seeks to rigorously differentiate moral and ethical criticism, the former being guided by the need to pass judgement from the commentator's/reader's current perspective, while the latter sets out to understand the specific evolution of literature as a tool of facing and resolving dilemmas around good and evil, duty and pleasure, loyalty and freedom, etc. This is what makes Nie's iteration of ethical literary criticism so interesting for intellectual historians; the distinction between cotemporary significance and historically evolving meaning also brings his understanding of literature and culture into productive proximity with hermeneutics. The article also offers a brief parallel with Marxist ideas of cultural evolution, particularly those of Engels and Porshnev.

Keywords ethical literary criticism; cultural evolution; hermenetutics; Nie; Engels; Porshnev

Author **Galin Tihanov** is the George Steiner Professor of Comparative Literature at Queen Mary University of London. He is the author of five books, most recently *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond* (Stanford UP, 2019) which won the 2020 AATSEEL Prize for "Best Book in Literary Studies." His co-edited volume *A History of Russian Literary Theory and Criticism: The Soviet Age and Beyond* (2011) won the 2012 Efim Etkind Prize. His work in intellectual history and on cosmopolitanism, world literature, and exile has been widely translated.

Anglophone readers will soon have access to one of the most interesting conceptualisations of literature to emerge from China in the early years of the

twenty-first century. The author of this book¹, Nie Zhenzhao, is undoubtedly a preeminent literary scholar who has gained international prominence and has been instrumental, through his publications, editorial work, and numerous doctoral students, in initiating a new version of ethical literary criticism, powerful in China and increasingly visible abroad.

It would not be amiss to place Nie's ideas in the context of his own remarkable intellectual formation. Nie began his career as a historian of English literature, writing his dissertation and his first book on Thomas Hardy, followed by extensive work on English prose and poetry of the late 18th and the 19th-20th centuries. Nie's scholarly interests and expertise proved wider still: as readers of this book would notice, his range is formidable: from Sophocles to Wordsworth to Tolstoy, and from Hemingway to Chinese literature from the 16th century to the May 4th Movement. This would have sufficed as a visiting card for any comparatist of international distinction. Yet Nie's work has gone far beyond this: it is not just the breadth of his scholarship that makes him an excellent ambassador of Chinese literary studies; rather, it is his capacity for conceptual thinking and his ability to work out new approaches and coin new terminology. The present book is testimony to this power of generating a different perspective on literature that positions Chinese literary scholarship vis-à-vis Western and Russian work in the field.

Nie has called his own approach "ethical literary criticism," and with due modesty and tact he tells his readers that this approach is in dialogue with the rich tradition of ethical literary criticism in the West (Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum are two of the more recognisable names he draws attention to). But his own approach, even as it is referred to by the same name, differs substantially from the body of work that is usually captured under the umbrella notion of ethical criticism in the West. The originality of Nie's approach lies in the fact that he seeks to rigorously differentiate moral and ethical criticism, the former being guided by the need to pass judgement from the commentator's/reader's current perspective, while the latter sets out to understand the specific evolution of literature as a tool of facing and resolving dilemmas around good and evil, duty and pleasure, loyalty and freedom, etc. This is what makes Nie's iteration of ethical literary criticism so interesting for the intellectual historian; the distinction between cotemporary significance and historically evolving meaning also brings his understanding of literature and culture into productive proximity with hermeneutics (certainly with Hirsch's version of it).

The scenario Nie elaborates is projected onto a large-scale historical canvas.

1 See Nie Zhenzhao, *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, Peking University, 2014.

He is, of course, well aware of Darwin's impact on Victorian literature, notably on George Eliot and Thomas Hardy; he nonetheless finds that while Darwin's teaching of evolution (natural selection) helps to explain the origin of men and women as biological entities, it fails to explain their origin as distinctly human beings, and least of all their origin as creative human beings who produce narratives in song, poetry, and prose. Nor can the latter quality be understood with reference to the habitual Marxian (Engels's, in this case) version that seeks the roots of human creativity in labour. This would remind Nie's readers of other inspiring projects of philosophical anthropology, not least the work of Arnold Gehlen or Boris Porshnev. The latter's idea that the proper history of humans is much shorter than their existence as biological species is a seminal reminder of the underlying asymmetries Nie's own project recognises as it examines the long course of human evolution. Noteworthy is also the fact that Porshnev, too, believed Engels's theory of the origin of language and art in labour to be deficient. For Porshnev, language and art originate in the need to articulate and enact suggestion and countersuggestion as nuclear forms of power-fraught human interaction; for Nie, the real story of humans begins not with the natural but with the second, "ethical" selection which facilitates the transition from animality to humanity by forcing us to move from the realm of "ethical chaos," as he terms it, into the realm of what he calls "ethical enlightenment." Nie considers the famous episode in the Bible in order to evoke the originary scene in which Adam and Eve leave the state of "ethical ignorance," as he would put it, and step over into the field of continuous ethical dilemmas. His reading of a number of novels and plays throughout the book, often in polemic with Freud's classic version of psychoanalysis, is a reading not for the plot but for the traces of such formative challenges in the narrative; to readers in the West this quest for ethical maturity may often resemble the matrix of a Bildungsroman, even where the genre itself is arguably rather different (as is the case, for example, with the classical Chinese novel, *Journey to the West*, which Nie also writes about).

There is little doubt that Nie's large-scale (and deep-time) thinking about literature would appeal to an audience familiar with an intellectual tradition that includes thinkers such as Bakhtin, Freidenberg, Marr, and Lotman who, in their own ways, strove to integrate the study of literature with the study of culture and grasp the mechanisms of its evolution. Nie is no doubt familiar with evolutionary accounts of literature that are grounded in cognitive science; equally, his attention will have been drawn by recent work, notably Joseph Carroll's, that elucidates the relationship between evolutionary biology and literary theory (students of world literature would recall here the importance of evolutionary biology for Franco

Moretti). Yet Nie follows a path of his own: to him, it is the ethical dimension that is key to a *longue durée* approach to literature; the aesthetic, as he succinctly puts it, is only an extension of the ethical—not in cognitive terms, but in terms of the late arrival of aesthetic autonomy in the economy of literary production.

Nie's bold attempt to produce an evolutionary account of literature that is at the same time sensitive to questions of poetics—while giving primacy to larger ethical concerns —, is thought-provoking and refreshing, even when it doesn't necessarily invite agreement; it offers marvellous evidence of the current stir and ambition of Chinese literary studies and promises the Anglophone reader—and this means a vast audience across the world that has access to work in English—a fascinating intellectual journey that will enrich and nuance the way we think of the evolution and ethical significance of literature.

Works Cited

Nie Zhenzhao. *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*. Beijing: Peking UP, 2014.