

Striving for a New Critical Approach: Rereading *English Literature in the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism*

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Abstract Nie Zhenzhao and his colleagues are exemplarily successful in turning out their *English Literature in the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism*, an insightful book that merits our attention. It aims to search for a new critical approach to literature, say, ethical literary criticism. Nie does an admirable job of identifying a largely neglected area in literary studies that purport to reveal and unearth the ethical heart of British writers' vision in China. His methodology is forthright and clear as he strives for an ethical approach to English literature.

Key words Nie Zhenzhao; literary studies; ethical criticism

Literary theories have existed as long as literature has. "Literary theory" isn't only something we learn, but something we are now aware of. We already have acquainted with a theory, or several theories, about literature, but we may not bother to think about them or articulate them. Covering a variety of approaches to texts, literary theory points to sets of ideas that have greatly influenced the way literature is read. It originates from "all kinds of disciplines, including linguistics, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, history, economics, gender studies, ethnic studies, and political science," but has little to do directly with what is perceived as literature (Klages 4).

Recently, Chinese literary scholars have encountered such a perplexity trying very hard to examine factors that shape how literature is written and how we observe it. In this sense, Nie Zhenzhao and his colleagues are exemplarily successful in turning out their *English Literature in the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism*, an insightful book that merits our attention. It is a collection of essays, aiming, in the words of the editor, "to search for a new critical approach to literature, say, ethical literary criticism" (Nie, et al 4). Nie does an admirable job of identifying a largely neglected area in literary studies that purport to reveal and unearth the ethical heart of British writers' vision in China. His methodology is forthright and clear as he strives for an ethical approach to English literature.

The essays are consistently insightful, offering an estimation of each author's value and some attempt to place them in relation to an ethical perspective. Some of the chapters clearly stand out. Chapter One, for example, exhibits smart scholarship

on the moral tradition of British humanist fiction in which Geoffrey Chaucer and Thomas More are explored in depth. The discussion of the latter is an engagingly written analysis of More's ethical concerns in his *Utopia*. Thomas More, Li An argues, cultivated ideal societies and perfect cities in the fiction. In his opinion, more knew how to merge Christian doctrines and classical ideas of great minds such as Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, implanting in earthly life a humanist politics. He was optimistic about man and his utopian world is filled with harmony and hierarchy (qtd. in Nie et al 87). Chapter Two focuses on the ethical turn that features British humanist playwrighting. Here, Yan Xuejun offers a case study of Shakespeare looking into his plays with reference to family, love, marriage and law. Yan, instead of confining his analysis to Shakespeare's tragedies, delves into his comedies and histories, maintaining that ethical dimensions pervade Shakespeare's writing. Yan explains that the notion of order dominates Shakespeare's social views and ethical thought apart from his comedian demarcation of good and evil (qtd. in Nie, et al 129). In a similar fashion, Lin Yupeng examines carefully the far deeply embodied ethical vision that permeates Shakespeare's poetry. What strikes the reader is Lin's close analysis of Shakespeare's secular dimension of humanist ethics. According to Lin, Shakespeare revitalizes ancient and traditional literary motifs, displaying in his verse a strong sense of ethical concerns as a humanist (qtd. in Nie, et al 155). Chapters Four and Five are persuasively argued and beautifully written. The two chapters are a model for how poetry is approached from an ethical perspective. The two discussions of both Metaphysical poets and poems of the Enlightenment are illuminating, limning a range of theoretical tools to keep us think more deeply about how 17th and 18th century British poetry implicates ethical themes. John Donne, for instance, called for a secular life affirming humanity. In his cultivation of morality lies his ambiguous understanding of both piety and rebellion (Nie, et al 187).

Similar undertaking also features the fifth chapter in which John Dryden was observed from the lens of pragmatism emphasizing his complex "vision of happiness" and "antagonism against reason" (Nie, et al 211 - 15). Continual discussions of poetry lead to a further look into the British Romantic period which gave rise to a boom of fine poets such as William Blake, William Wordsworth, P. B. Shelly, Byron and John Keats. This undertaking of Chapter Eight marks a critic's unique efforts to search for a moral poetics in Shelly and his contemporaries. It highly valorizes what constitutes Shelley's morality and cultivation of virtue on which man heavily relies in order to reach for salvation (Nie, et al 407 - 09). What follows is an interpretation of moral criticism in 19th century British poetry centering on the poets' human concerns for social reform and justice. Here Zhang Hongmin and his fellow critics approach the Victorian agencies and highlight the poets' democratic ideals of affiliation based on sympathy, sociability, justice and benevolence. The passages on Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning are superbly well written, offering respectively various insightful remarks on the two Victorian poets. The other chapters are informative in many ways. In his final substantial chapter, Liu Lihui fittingly turns to playwrighting again, outlining the constant pursuit of ethical thought in 20th century British drama. W. B. Yeats, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter are fairly well perceived, displaying

their ideas of judgment embedded in profound historical sense. A case in point is Yeats who added into his plays not only mysticism but also an obvious dimension of grand heroism. Yeats' plays, Li maintains, harbor his ethical and moral ideals (qtd. in Nie, et al 676). Besides their highly merited scholarship, they render enjoyment of reading. As a collection of essays, *English Literature in the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism* is full of insight, producing an impressive array of ethical criticism. Many chapters in the book demonstrate how Nie and his colleagues attend to and employ the approach.

Therefore, Nie and his colleagues are obviously aware of the difficulties implicit in such an academic journey. It is not easy job to theorize ethical criticism and its methodological appropriateness, but Nie has achieved what he has proposed to do. Each chapter, though well framed by historical and social forces, is based around an author's ethical vision. Whatever its meticulous search for both ethical and moral concerns, the book invites further investigations of critical intellectual thinking. Like most other books, *English Literature in the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism* also contains some fault in its large exclusiveness. There should have been more authors to be covered. Also, no one book could answer all of the important and complex questions raised so far, but Nie has produced a suggestive text that offers many avenues for further probes into ethical criticism of British literature. Only this can I suffice to say that *English Literature in the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism* is an excellent and groundbreaking book that will help to launch more coherent and extensive discussions of British literature from an ethical perspective. Nie has written a fine first book, offering an audacious entry into the contemporary literary critical maelstrom. Its critical wealth is enormous, extending to future studies in a similar vein.

Works Cited

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- Nie Zhenzhao, et al. *English Literature in the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism*. Wuhan: Central China Normal UP, 2007.

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