

Ethical Literary Criticism: International Perspectives

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Abstract This article is an introduction to the thematic cluster “Ethical Literary Criticism: International Perspectives.” It begins with a brief overview of recent works on ethical literary criticism in the West and those produced in the East, suggesting a necessity for a dialogue between Western perspective and Oriental perspective. The bulk part of the article is devoted to explicating the major arguments of all the contributions. In doing so, it reveals that Western ethical literary criticism, assimilated either by philosophy or by narratology, has hardly developed into an independent school of critical theory, while Chinese ethical literary criticism, with its distinctive terminologies and critical frameworks, has emerged as an exciting new critical theory.

Key words ethical literary criticism; philosophy; narratology; stylistics; sociology

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The second decade of the twenty-first century witnessed a new upsurge of ethical criticism in Western academia, which is saliently evidenced in such works as Steve Brie, and William T. Rossiter’s *Literature and Ethics: From the Green Knight to the Dark Knight* (2010), Toker Leona’s *Towards the Ethics of Form in Fiction:*

Narratives of Cultural Remission (2010), David Parker's *Ethics, Theory and the Novel* (2011), Jakob Lothe, and Jeremy Hawthorn's *Narrative Ethics* (2013), Nora Berning's *Towards a Critical Ethical Narratology: Analyzing Value Construction in Literary Non-Fiction across Media* (2013), Adam Zachary Newton's *To Make the Hands Impure: Art, Ethical Adventure, the Difficult, and the Holy* (2014), and Liesbeth Korthals Altes's *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation: The Negotiation of Values in Fiction* (2014), to name a few. Equally noteworthy is the popularity of ethical approach to literature in the East, which is largely in debt to the rise of ethical literary criticism proposed by Nie Zhenzhao. Ethical literary criticism, according to Nie, designates "a critical theory that reads, analyzes and interprets literature from the perspective of ethics so as to identify its ethical nature and moral teaching function" (Nie13). Unlike Western ethical criticism, which has been assimilated either by philosophy or by narratology, ethical literary criticism has fully fledged into an independent school of critical theory in China.

When talking about the nine lives of theory, Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge observe that " 'Theory' was never a single, self-identical object and, in fact, one of its signature reflexes was the resistance to such 'totalizing' groupings, which were usually seen to commit the epistemological violence of reducing the rich heterogeneity of a complex field to a single homogeneous concept" (Elliott and Attridge 2). Along somewhat similar line, one can postulate that ethical criticism has never been a single and unified grand theory. At issue is what we are supposed to deal with, in particular, the plethora of ethical criticism developed against different critical traditions. About the correlations between ethical criticism and other critical approaches, Marshall Gregory suggests that "What the humanities in general need is an ethical criticism that is intellectually defensible, not to replace or displace other critical approaches but to complement them"(Gregory 194). I'd like to further extend Gregory's argument by claiming that different strands of ethical criticism are not to replace each other but rather to form a type of complementary relation. To this end, in "The Rise of a Critical Theory" (2014), I place much emphasis upon the dialogue between ethical criticism in the West and ethical literary criticism in China, and I firmly believe that "the more our exchanges involve a sharing of ideas about the two traditions and innovations, the more we can learn from each other and the more productive the relationship is likely to be" (Shang 35).

My expectations have been largely fulfilled by the 4th International Symposium on Ethical Literary Criticism held in Shanghai Jiao Tong University from December 19th to December 21st, 2015. As an organizer of this conference, I was delighted to

see it attended by nearly 300 scholars from more than 10 countries and regions, including the United States, England, Germany, Russia, Norway, Hungary, Estonia, South Korea, Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China. Among these attendants are not only the graduate students and young scholars eager to join the academic community but also quite a few eminent, experienced, and internationally recognized scholars. To name a few, Marjorie Perloff, Charles Bernstein, Ansgar Nünning, Vera Nünning, Péter Hajdu, William Baker, Geoff Hall, Jüri Talvet, Brian Reed, Knut Brynhildsvoll, Simon C. Estok, Igor Olegovich Shaytanov, Youngmin Kim, Yuanmai Wu, Zhenzhao Nie, and Di Wu. There were all together 17 plenary speeches and 14 panel sessions, embracing a diverse array of broad topics, such as theoretical explorations of ethical literary criticism, ethical literary criticism and interdisciplinary studies, and ethical literary critical perspective on national literature, in addition to a wide range of issues thoroughly explored and heatedly discussed.

The current thematic cluster is one of the most fruitful results of this conference, featuring international perspectives on and multiple approaches to ethical literary criticism. It begins with Charles Ross's interview with Nie Zhenzhao, the Chinese founder of ethical literary criticism. In this wide-range interview, Nie elaborates the definition of ethical literary criticism, the origin and function of literature, and the ethics/morality distinction. In particular, he says much about the differences between ethical literary criticism and aesthetic criticism. In Nie's opinion, ethical literary criticism sees literature as a moral means for undertaking ethical selection; while aesthetic criticism regards literature as a sensual means for aesthetic appreciation. Equally illuminating is Nie's elaboration of natural selection and ethical selection, which are considered as the two pillars of his critical enterprise. Arguably, ethical selection is the second selection after natural selection in the history of human civilization. Completing natural selection, human beings must undergo ethical selection so as to transform "animal man" into "ethical man."

Nie's oriental perspective on ethical literary criticism is met with Western perspectives starting with Ansgar Nünning's paper, which forcefully argues that narrative theory and ethical literary criticism should be seen not as strange bedfellows but as natural allies, despite the regrettable fact that classical narratology largely ignored questions concerning context, history, interpretation, norms and values, while ethical criticism has not been much concerned with formal issues or narrative techniques. In his article, Ansgar, apart from offering an overview of the different trajectories of narratology and ethical literary criticism,

and the recent attempts at reconciling and synthesising narratological and ethical approaches, lays out the premises and concepts of narratology and ethical literary criticism to do each others' service. In doing so, Ansgar concludes that "the more narratological ethical literary criticism becomes, and the more interested in ethics and the dissemination of values narratology becomes, the better for both."

Ansgar's attempt to combine the insights from narratology and ethical literary criticism is further consolidated by Vera Nünning's efforts. In her contribution, Vera dwells on the cognitive and ethical potential of fictional narratives. As a part of her larger project in *Reading Fictions, Changing Minds* (2014), Vera's essay aims to synthesize psychological research and the theory of narrative. Taking the findings from recent psychological study on the persuasive power of fictional stories to change readers' beliefs and to improve readers' cognitive abilities, Vera focuses on the potential of fiction to enhance readers' abilities of social cognition, and reveals how ethical issues are intricately involved in the cognitive processing of fictional narratives. Thought-provoking are the future directions outlined by Vera, such as the cognitive potential of popular fiction, the hierarchies of values embedded in fictional stories, and possible links between the values disseminated in a story and the genre it belongs to, all of which deserve an in-depth exploration and set up a scholarly agenda for the rest of us.

Equally interdisciplinary is Geoff Hall's contribution, which tries to bring together the strengths of stylistics and ethical literary criticism. As an established scholar of stylistics, Hall is fully aware of the fact that both stylistics and ethics are essentially about choices: stylistics is the study of linguistic choices, while ethics is the study of moral choices. That said, stylistics and ethical criticism can be brought into a fruitful dialogue if one starts from the idea of *choice*, which, in Hall's view, is "a notion basic to both stylistics and to ethics." The words used in a text and the words that readers express preferences and perspectives often have an ethical import. Specifically, Hall takes Henry James' fictions as an object of analysis, demonstrating how a stylistic awareness can help critics to pin down the ethical implications of literary texts.

Like the Nünning and Hall, Knut Brynhildsvoll also intends to reconsider ethical literary criticism from an interdisciplinary perspective. However, there are substantial differences in their explorations: in the contributions by the Nünning, the counterpart of ethical literary criticism is narratology; in Hall's contribution, the counterpart is stylistics; while Brynhildsvoll attempts to shed a new light on ethical literary criticism from the science of sociology. In particular, Brynhildsvoll intends to examine the changing ethical evaluations with reference to Norbert Elias and

Peter Dürr. In doing so, he argues that as far as ethical criticism aims at obtaining a change in the reader's mind, it depends on the inherent capacity of the text to transcend his/her expectation horizon and create an awareness of the need for a spiritual renewal.

While the above scholars' contributions are marked by their synchronic feature, Kenneth Womack and William Baker's draws a brief review of Anglo-American ethical criticism diachronically. Observing that "ethical criticism's fusion with continental philosophy has produced a more theoretically rigorous form of literary critique that continues to elevate its status as a viable interpretive mechanism," Womack and Baker bluntly claim that "ethical criticism offers a valuable lens for examining the manner in which literary characters experience moments of moral clarity and interpersonal change." To illuminate this argument, they take Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End* as an object of analysis. With reference to Levinas's ethical philosophy and its critical matrix of alterity, they try to reveal Ford's ethical imperatives in *Parade's End*, which aims at altering readers' perspectives of war and atrocity via his well-honed Impressionistic techniques.

As a Vice-president of International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism (IAELC), Jüri Talvet embraces Nie's ethical literary criticism and speaks highly of the newly founded IAELC, the mission of which, in Talvet's opinion, is "to initiate a new trend of international literary scholarship that would form a certain counterweight to Western literary studies, which at least since the last quarter of the 20th century have indeed oscillated between two extremes: on the one hand, linguistic-formalistic research (including narratology, cognitivistics, language philosophy applied to literature, etc.); on the other hand, sociological approaches (discourses on power relations, postcolonial scholarship, gender studies, etc.)." Talvet agrees with Nie in claiming that "there was very little hope that big or small 'peripheries,' if they continued to follow the main fashionable trends proceeding from Western 'centers,' could ever contribute to universal literary scholarship or world literature studies by their own, original points of view, reflecting realities beyond 'centric' Western literary currents and criticism and their faithful imitations in the 'periphery.'" In his contribution, Talvet reflects upon the possible origin of Western ethical literary criticism in Dante Alighieri's philosophical treatise *Convivio*, assuming that the formation of a theory/philosophy of ethical literary theory ran in parallel with ethical practice in the first great European literary masterpieces of the budding new era — Dante's own monumental *Comedia* and the following creation of the early Italian Renaissance writers.

Similarly, Zheng Jie also applies Nie's ethical literary criticism to her

analysis of Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*. Focusing on the cultural and historical background of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, Zheng specifically interrogates the ethical environment of Timon's tragedy. In order to reconsider the tragedy through reference to Shakespeare's reflection on ethics in the play, she explores the conflicts between feudal ethics and the ethics of contract in the transition from feudal economy to modern capitalism. Zheng's close reading of the text suggests that the secular, asocial, and unethical image of Timon reflects the collective ethical anxiety hang over the heads of the Elizabethans and Jacobean.

Then it follows Wang Songlin's exploration of Thomas Carlyle's ambivalent attitudes towards social change. Reading *Teufelsdröckh in Sartor Resartus* and Carlyle's other writings, Wang reconstructs and evaluates Carlyle's appeals for social order as well as the Gospel of work as a remedy for moral degradation of his time. Throughout his contribution, Wang stresses that in the heart of Carlyle's change and ambivalence dwells the agony of a prophet of modernist consciousness who was acutely wary of the potential chaos, contradiction and even the absurdity far beyond his era.

This thematic cluster ends with Younghoon Kim's reading of D. H. Lawrence's *The Virgin and the Gipsy* along the line of ethical philosophy. He begins with Nietzsche's critique of morality before moving to Deleuze's idea of ethics. For most part, Kim examines the relationship between Yvette and the gipsy by resorting to Lévinas and Derrida. In doing so, he attempts to disclose Lawrence's commitment to ethics and morality.

Finally, I want to extend my heart-felt thanks to all the contributors of this thematic cluster, without whose enthusiasm and cooperation, this project would never be possible. Their professional ethics adds a new layer to the wide spectrum of ethical literary criticism.

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