

Should Literary Criticism be Ethical?

Hitoshi Oshima

Department of Japanese Literature and Comparative Literature, Fukuoka University
Kon-ya-machi 1675-2-1003, Karatsu, 8470053, Japan
Email: pacharsky07@yahoo.co.jp

Abstract If the term “ethical” means the attitude open to every being in the world without exclusion, a literary work is “ethical” so long as it expresses that attitude and so is a literary criticism that appreciates and evaluates it. Mikhail Bakhtin’s polyphonic theory offers a basis to such literary criticism and Anton Chekhov’s plays are good realizations of “ethical” literature.

Key Words ethical; polyphony in tune; polyphony out of tune

In the name of freedom of expression, some literary critics try to defend works in which we cannot find any ethical concern on the author’s part. They insist that everything should be admitted in a literary world, if not in reality. In my opinion, such a position is not acceptable. Literary criticism should be ethical because literature is not for an individual but for a society.

What is ethical in literature? I would say an ethical writer is the one who cares for the ethical dimension in Life, the one who expresses it in one way or another. An ethical critic should be the one who takes care to find such value which makes a literary work ethical, the one who appreciates it in a way that allows readers to share it. I would like to quote here Albert Camus’ words pronounced in Stockholm when he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1957. Those words, from the *Discours du 10 décembre 1957*, represent my position regarding the question of the ethical in literature.

In my eyes, art is not a solitary enjoyment. It is a way to touch as many people as possible by giving them a privileged image of sufferings and joys common to them. This obliges any artist not to be alone but to submit to the most humble and universal truth. ... An artist forms himself or herself through the ceaseless going-to and coming-back-from others, between beauty indispensable to him and the community impossible to run away from. That is why he neglects nothing. He obliges himself to understand instead of making judgments.¹ (240)

“Not to neglect anything in the world,” that is Camus’ key phrase for us. Just in the same way that an ethical writer should examine whether or not he or she neglects anything in the world, an ethical critic should examine whether or not the writer neglects anything in the world. For not neglecting anything is the most eloquent sign of his or her love and sincerity for the world.

Some would say stressing the social dimension too much will lead to oppressing the individual. I would say that is not the case as the above quote from Camus shows. A writer, an artist, is half individual, half social, going and coming back between the individual and the social. Only through respect for the social can we come to respect the individual.

Needless to say, I do not mean that a critic should evaluate works that represent the socially admitted moral values. Even works representing the bad or the ugly can be evaluated as ethical so long as they represent it in such a manner that encourages love, kindness, generosity, tolerance, etc. Violence or destructiveness might be a necessary element of a work when it is not represented to encourage the evil. A literary critic should be especially careful about the problem of whether the author has any intention to do harm to society or not.

Anti-ethical or non-ethical literary critics may argue that the notion of good or evil is too relative to be introduced as a criterion for literary criticism. They would say a good in today’s society could be an evil yesterday or tomorrow and vice versa. Indeed, almost anyone appreciates today Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* or Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* as masterpieces of modern Western literature whereas those works were condemned as vicious by the French authorities during their own time in the 19th century. Nevertheless, I insist that literary criticism should be ethical because being ethical does not necessarily mean making any moral judgment on a work.

All we need to do, as critics, is to find ethical values in a work and appreciate them. What the French critics of the time of Flaubert or Baudelaire should have done was to find and defend in *Les Fleurs du Mal* or *Madame Bovary* the respective writer’s sincere protest against the hypocritical morals in the society of their time. They should have appreciated the authors’ desperate search for genuine love and nobility of spirit. Of course, the task was not easy to achieve, nor is it today.

“Not to neglect anything in the world,” that premise of Camus which I mentioned above, is the basis for an ethical literature. In this sense, Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-81) was such an ethical writer and Mikhail Bakhtin who discovered it was an ethical critic. Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics* (1929) is an exemplary realization of ethical literary criticism. As he developed a theory to evaluate the writer’s ethical dimension fully, we can consider him as an ethical critic.

The well-known theory of polyphony Bakhtin developed in *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* is really ethical. The theory of polyphony tends to be interpreted as an aesthetic one because it explains a narrative structure that can be found in many of Dostoevsky's works, but we cannot overlook the ethical dimension implied in it. Let me quote one of the paragraphs concerning it.

The real polyphony is composed of distinctive and independent voices, each voice invested with his or her own values and never destined to merge with others. Such polyphony is what distinguishes Dostoevsky's works from others'. What happens to his works is not the development of different personalities or destinies in a unified objective world which is nothing but a reflection of his unified consciousness. What happens instead is the involvement of different and distinctive plural consciousnesses into an event or another, without losing their respective integrity and independence.² (Bakhtin, 15-16)

As the quotation shows, Bakhtin's intention does not lie in establishing an ethics but rather in showing the particularity of the narrative structure of Dostoevsky's novels. Yet his structural analysis of Dostoevsky's literary text necessarily leads us to the ethical value of the Russian writer. Bakhtin says that Dostoevsky gave a different voice to each one of the characters in his novel, each one talking free of the author's intention. This implies that the Russian writer felt and expressed infinite respect and love for each of them.

This reminds us of Camus' remarks on the ethical in literature that an artist should not neglect anything in the world. Dostoevsky viewed by Bakhtin just realized the ethics that Camus pronounced. The Russian writer not only respected each one of his characters as individuals but loved them and let them be free, even from their creator.

When I think of Dostoevsky and his polyphony that Bakhtin pointed out, I cannot help but thinking of Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), not as a short story teller but as a playwright. Usually, those two Russians do not appear on our comparative table, but in my opinion, Chekhov was a hidden successor of Dostoevsky, precisely in polyphony. I do not mean by this that the playwright of *The Seagull* or *Three Sisters* consciously or intentionally tried to follow the author of *Crime and Punishment*. But looking back at them from today, I see a line of continuity between them.

It is true that more than once, Bakhtin said polyphony was not possible in a drama. The reason he gave for this is that a drama by essence had to be a unified work controlled by a unique consciousness of the author. Characters of a drama could have their own voices, he said, but their voices had to be integrated to a whole system of

the play; otherwise, it could not be a drama.³ I agree with him to a certain degree. So far as a common drama is concerned, even a successful drama rich in characters can make symphony but not polyphony in Bakhtin's sense of the term. Nevertheless, I dare say that the Russian critic did not see the possibility of a drama that could realize real polyphony. Such is the case, I believe, with Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*.

It is curious that Bakhtin did not mention anywhere in his critical works the name of Chekhov as a playwright although he was a compatriot contemporary to him. He may have referred to Chekhov as a short story writer but not as a playwright. As Chekhov's plays were continuously on the scene during Bakhtin's lifetime, I cannot help wondering if he ever went to Moscow Art Theatre.

In my personal view, Chekhov's play is an extension of Dostoevsky's polyphony as I said above, even though the literary connection between the two writers has not been proved so positive as in the Tolstoy-Chekhov relation. Tolstoy and Chekhov knew each other personally; the latter admired the former as a novelist and the former appreciated some of the latter's works. Concerning the possible relation between Dostoevsky and Chekhov, we hardly know anything, which easily leads us to suppose that there was no literary relation between them.

Even if I am almost sure that Chekhov had no conscious intention to follow Dostoevsky's literature, I find a similitude and continuity between their literary works all the same. Contrary to Bakhtin's general assertion on dramas, I would say that Chekhov opened a new type of drama that could go beyond the playwright's unified consciousness. I insist that Chekhov realized a polyphonic drama, therefore an ethical one, which Bakhtin did not see.

To show the undiscovered linkage between Dostoevsky's novels and Chekhov's drama, and how polyphony worked in Chekhovian dramas, I would like to refer to one of his masterpieces: *The Cherry Orchard* (1904). As many know, *The Cherry Orchard* is a drama through which the author tried to show a historical change in Russian society after the *Emancipation Reform* of 1861. He skillfully depicted the decadent upper class, who were unable to rid themselves of their nostalgic vision of the past, as well as the lower class, who lost their traditional values without knowing what to do. The author did not forget describing a new type of people who began to realize the importance of labor for the making of a new society. Chekhov represented a whole society under a drastic change by way of vivid descriptions of a dozen of characters that appear on the scene.

The center of the drama is, however, not history but human beings in plural. History in the play is surely not a mere background. Yet it is onto the strength and weakness, the loneliness and warmth of each character, that the author casts special

light. As is usual with him, Chekhov introduces “dramatic” events quite prudently. The only event introduced in the drama is the auction of Lady Ranevskaya’s estate, namely her beautiful cherry orchard and magnificent mansion. The auction is important because it decides the destiny of the lady, her family, her servants and friends. All the people surrounding her cannot but be affected by it. The auction is the very symbol of a definite social change.

The utmost importance is given by the author to each one of the characters: what he or she thinks, what kind of vision of life each one has, how he or she lives. Although some are given more chances to speak than others, all of them have their own distinctive voices. As is in Dostoevsky’s novels, each one is a narrator of his or her own story. The whole play is sort of an ensemble of different autobiographical narratives.

Let us have a look at the scene in which Lady Ranevskaya, called Lubov, together with her daughter Anya have just come back home after five years’ stay in Paris. She is moved to find her mansion and the cherry orchard again. Rediscovering the nursery in the mansion where her children used to sleep, she was deeply touched:

Oh, my dear nursery, oh, our beautiful room. . . I used to sleep here when I was a baby. [Weeps] And here I am like a little girl again. [Kisses her adopted daughter VARYA, then her brother Gaev] And Varya is just as she used to be, just like a nun. And I knew Dunyasha, our young maid. [Kisses her.]⁴

Instead of responding to her sister, Gaev, however, talks about the poor functioning of the Russian railway, while Charlotta, the governess of Lady Ranevskaya’s children, completely ignores Ranevskaya and Gaev, and suddenly begins to talk to Pischin (a friend of the lady who has come to welcome her): “My dog eats nuts too.” Later in this scene, when Dunyasha the maid confesses her secret of her lover’s proposal to Anya, the daughter who has just come back from Paris, Anya was indifferent and shows no interest in Dunyasha’s remarks. She is completely immersed in her own world and keeps talking about her bored journey and her relief of coming back home.

Two points can be revealed from the scene. First, each one of the characters has a narrative of his or her own, which makes perfect polyphony in the Bakhtinian sense. Secondly, in spite of the similarity in the narrative structure of Chekhov’s plays and Dostoevsky’s novels, Chekhov differs from Dostoevsky in that his polyphony is, let us say, *out of tune* while the latter’s is *in tune*. As a matter of fact, in the above scene, each character has hardly any dialogue with others but a monologue that no one else seems to have interest in sharing. Lady Ranevskaya, for example, is full of nostalgia on coming home after five years’ absence, but her brother Gaev, who waited

for her for hours at the railway station, is thinking of the low quality of the Russian Railway service. As for Charlotta, the governess, she does not care about anything but her dog. Even if the sensible Pischin shows a critical attitude to her, she does not care at all. The worse is the maid Dunyasha's total lack in due consideration toward others. She boasts how popular she is among men, even though Anya, the daughter of her mistress, is exhausted after the long travel. Chekhov presents here a cruel reality that each human being is alone without a real connection to others, without mutual understanding. From this, we can easily come to the conclusion that he was a real pessimist.

As far as *The Cherry Orchard* is concerned, Chekhov continues showing his pessimistic vision from the beginning to the end. The whole drama sounds pessimistic and the last scene is truly pathetic. Fiers, the eighty-seven year old footman who has lived for the family of Lady Ranevskaya all his life, is left alone, everyone else moving to another place, believing without any evidence that he had been sent to hospital. Left completely alone, the old man, so much attached to the place, cannot and does not want to move. The following is his last words that make the very end of the play:

They've gone away. [Sits on a sofa] They've forgotten about me. ... Never mind, I'll sit here. ... And Leonid Andreyevitch (Gaev) will have gone in a light overcoat instead of putting on his fur coat. ... [Sighs anxiously] I didn't see. ... Oh, these young people! [Mumbles something that cannot be understood] Life's gone on as if I'd never lived. [Lying down] I'll lie down. ... You've no strength left in you, nothing left at all ... Oh, you ... bungler! (Act 4)

Hearing the old footman's sad words, who would not say that the author was a pessimist? And yet, pessimism is not really an adequate term for the Chekhovian play. Let us pay attention to the author's own definition of the work. He said it was a *tragicomedy*, in which we can find both tragic and comical elements. We should esteem that both hope and despair are present. The Chekhovian vision of the world is complex, nuanced and gray. In other words, Chekhov treated human beings and human life just in the way as Camus wished a writer to do. Instead of judging, the Russian playwright included and accepted everything about human beings. His way of creating literature was ethical in the sense that I defined above, quoting Camus' words. If life is *out of tune*, if life is discordant, if it is discontinuous, we have to accept it and even love it. That is what we learn from Chekhov.

When comparing Chekhov's drama with Dostoevsky's works, we can find the difference in polyphony mentioned earlier between them. I would like show the

difference in polyphony by citing a passage from one of Dostoevsky's masterpieces *Crime and Punishment* (1866). The passage describes the first encounter of the hero Raskolnikov, a student who decided to commit homicide, with Marmeladov, a drunkard. Later the hero will know that the drunkard was the father of Sonia, a young prostitute who would love him, but neither we nor he know it for the moment.

There are chance meetings with strangers that interest us from the first moment, before a word is spoken. Such was the impression made on Raskolnikov by the person sitting a little distance from him, who looked like a retired clerk. The young man often recalled this impression afterwards, and even ascribed it to presentiment..... At last he looked straight at Raskolnikov, and said loudly and resolutely:

“May I venture, honoured sir, to engage you in polite conversation? Forasmuch as, though your exterior would not command respect, my experience admonishes me that you are a man of education and not accustomed to drinking. I have always respected education when in conjunction with genuine sentiments, and I am besides a titular counsellor in rank. Marmeladov — such is my name; titular counsellor. I make bold to inquire — have you been in the service?”

“No, I am studying,” answered the young man, somewhat surprised at the grandiloquent style of the speaker and also at being so directly addressed. In spite of the momentary desire he had just been feeling for company of any sort, on being actually spoken to he felt immediately his habitual irritable and uneasy aversion for any stranger who approached or attempted to approach him.

“A student then, or formerly a student,” cried the clerk.

“Just what I thought! I'm a man of experience, immense experience, sir,” and he tapped his forehead with his fingers in self-approval.

“You've been a student or have attended some learned institution!... But allow me....” He got up, staggered, took up his jug and glass, and sat down beside the young man, facing him a little sideways. He was drunk, but spoke fluently and boldly, only occasionally losing the thread of his sentences and drawling his words. He pounced upon Raskolnikov as greedily as though he too had not spoken to a soul for a month. (Part I, Chapter 2)⁵

What I would like to show in this quotation is Dostoevsky's typical way of setting up a scene. The key expressions in it are “chance meetings” and “presentiment.” The author prepares a special meeting between the two characters who present their encounter to be a fatal one. This of course does not merely indicate the author's literary skill. It rather shows his psychological insight into the fate to which all

humans are subject. In this sense, we can say that Dostoevsky the novelist was more “dramatic” than Chekov the dramatist.

Actually, Dostoevsky still lived in the dramatic age while Chekov lived in the post-dramatic one. Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky were all dramatic writers who believed in a Shakespearian way of viewing life. Chekhov, much younger than they, had a more modern and scientific vision of life which he probably obtained from his medical practices. His spirit was anti-dramatic and thus his dramas are paradoxical in this sense. His polyphony, different from that of Dostoevsky, is out of tune as I said. He as a playwright not only accepts the variety of human voices but embraces the discontinuity and non-communicability of our everyday life.

To conclude, I would like to repeat that not neglecting but appreciating every aspect of life and everything in the world instead of pronouncing judgment on it is the attitude I consider ethical. When an ethical writer expresses such an attitude fully and skillfully in his or her works, it is the responsibility of an ethical literary critic to point it out and to appreciate it in such a way that many can share it. Let us remember Albert Camus’ speech in Stockholm. Let us remember Mikhail Bakhtin’s polyphony theory of Dostoevsky’s works. And let us remember Chekhov’s plays in which all the characters have their own stories to narrate even if each one is infinitely isolated from others. Should literary criticism be ethical? Yes, of course, it should be so.

Notes

1. The translation of the original French text into English is mine.
2. The quotation is my translation from the Japanese version of the work.
3. See Bakhtin 36-37.
4. All the quotations from *The Cherry Orchard* are in English translation made by Julius West.
5. The quotation is from the English translation made by Constance Garnett in 1914.

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