

Ethical Literary Criticism and Ethical Narratology: An Interview with Prof. Wolfgang G. Müller

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Abstract Wolfgang G. Müller (Email: womu@gmx.de) is retired Professor of English Literature at the Friedrich-Schiller University of Jena. He received his academic education at the universities of Mainz, Manchester, and Leicester. He taught as professor at the universities of Mainz, Leicester and Jena. Book-length publications include *Rilke's "Neue Gedichte"* (1971), *The Lyric Self* (1979), *The Political Speech in Shakespeare* (1979), *Theory of Style* (1981), *English and Scottish Balladry* (1983), *Dialogue und Conversational Culture in the Renaissance* (2004), *Edition of Shakespeare's Hamlet* (2005), *Don Quixote's Intermedial Afterlives* (2010) and *Genre in Shakespeare* (2015). He published articles on rhetoric in Renaissance literature, the tradition of Don Quixote in English literature, narratology, intertextuality, iconicity, the letter as a genre, ethics in literature and detective fiction. At present he runs a research group on the flaneur in English and American literature. On behalf of *Forum for World Literature Studies*, Dr. Zhang Tian, when attending the 6th Conference of Ethical Literary Criticism, Comparative Literature and World Literature (Oct., 2016, Tartu, Estonia), interviewed Professor Wolfgang G. Müller on the issues concerning ethical literary criticism and ethical narratology.

Key words ethical literary criticism; ethical narratology; ethics

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Zhang Tian (hereafter Zhang): Dear Professor Müller, thank you so much for accepting our invitation to have this interview. It was so great to see you in Tartu in the 6th Conference of Ethical Literary Criticism, Comparative Literature and World Literature. I even remembered the place of our first meeting in Estonia. It was at the Tallinn bus station when a group of us, scholars from China, were expecting the coach. And eventually we saw you. It was such a pre-destined meeting for us all. As far as I know, you have been a very regular and active participant in the conferences of the International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism initiated by Prof. Nie Zhenzhao. I have attended your insightful and fascinating keynote speeches in South Korea and this time in Estonia. In your keynote speech in the 6th Conference of Ethical Literary Criticism, Comparative Literature and World Literature, you gave a speech on “Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: The Tragic Hero as an Ethical Problem Case.” At the very beginning, you mentioned the neglect of making a distinction between morality and ethics because the value constructions to be achieved in literature are difficult to be specifically named and presented in literary works. What is your opinion on this distinction between morality and ethics? What is the significance of this distinction in the construction of ethical literary criticism?

Wolfgang G. Müller (hereafter Müller): There is a distinction to be made between moral philosophy, which is concerned with naming and defining moral values and principles, and ethical philosophy, which is on a higher level of intellectual pursuit in that it investigates the problematic nature of values and ethical judgments. Literature has a greater affinity with ethics than with morality, because it does not simply convey moral values in terms of didactic messages, but sensitizes the reader to the problematic nature of life and its ethical concerns and values by way of fictional constructions, which show us, in Aristotle’s terms, a world not as it is — not a mere copy of reality — but reality as it could be. Literature thus mediates a sense of similarity and can create a basis for empathy and stimulate the intellect.

Zhang: When we talk about Shakespeare, character flaw is an unavoidable topic. You also mentioned that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is an extremely sensitive character. Do you think character flaw matters much in the character’s value construction?

Müller: The characters in fictional works, especially the protagonists, usually are not one-dimensional and they tend to be involved in situations in which whatever they do may be wrong. From life we know that decision-making may involve us in unsolvable dilemmas. So the presentation of a character in a difficult situation may alert us to the ethical tensions and contradictions inherent in performing actions. Character-flaw as an error of judgment, Aristotle's *hamartia*, is essential to Greek tragedy. Oedipus' killing of his father and his marrying his mother are unintentional, but his hubris in trying to defy the prophecy of the oracle is a flaw, causing his downfall. Shakespeare's Hamlet is a more difficult case. He regards his indecisiveness, his incapacity to commit premeditated murder — demanded of him as part of a revenge action which he considers necessary — as a personal flaw and blames himself for not acting decisively. But it is the very fact that he does not kill his enemy, when the best opportunity is offering itself to him in the prayer-scene, which establishes him as an ethical character. This raises the whole issue of ethics and action. Goethe said in an aphorism that only the meditating man can afford a pure conscience, while an acting man is conscienceless. Thus literature stimulates us to think about basic ethical issues, without explicitly teaching us morality.

Zhang: Quite thought-provokingly, you discussed the comic dimension of *Hamlet*. You proposed the question of whether the comic episodes and scenes have an ethical impact. You provided the tentative answer that Hamlet's use of world-play and irony and his playing the role of the fool are means of asserting freedom in an oppressive and corrupt social world.

Müller: Your finely phrased question contains the answer. Humour and wit always call in doubt established values and beliefs and thus may be an assertion of freedom of thought. That is why dictators and tyrants hate wit and satire. We must be aware that *Hamlet* is, whatever else the play may be, a tragedy of resistance with the protagonist spied upon and persecuted by murderous intriguers. Since open resistance would cause his destruction under the political conditions at the Danish court, he resorts to playing the role of the fool, which he comes to enjoy and perform in a masterly manner. In view of the corrupt society at the Danish court, Hamlet's ridicule of its representatives (Claudius, Polonius, Osric) is an assertion of his freedom and simultaneously an emphasis on ethical values, which deviate from those of the rotten court. Moreover the comic dimension makes the tragedy more theatrical. We know from Shakespeare's whole dramatic works and especially from the comedies that he loves word-play and wit. One of his wittiest characters is Sir John Falstaff in *Henry IV*, whose wit also has a subversive dimension. It is a sign

of Shakespeare's greatness as a dramatist that Hamlet as his most complex tragic character is also one of his most intelligent and wittiest figures, matched only by Rosalind in *As You Like It*.

Zhang: What do you think makes the ethical substance of a tragedy and how does it achieve ethical cognition in a way which differs from ethical cognition in philosophical works?

Müller: We can distinguish between two kinds of cognition, philosophical and literary cognition. Philosophical cognition is the result logical operations (definition and syllogism). Literary cognition is the result of the fictional representation of human actions and issues. This difference of the two fields of cognitive activity is particularly striking in the realm of ethics. Whatever the central issues in Shakespeare's tragedies may be, for instance revenge in *Hamlet* or jealousy in *Othello* or murder in *Macbeth*, the ethical aspect never is absent. *Hamlet* presents the problems of a protagonist who is not capable of planning and perpetrating murder, although he is aware that his enemy has deserved death. Nie speaks of the killing taboo in this context. *Othello* shows on the stage how a perfidious villain may manipulate a basically honest man into killing the person he loves most in the world. And *Macbeth* represents the process of the moral destruction of a man who gives way to the temptation of murdering for ambition. Since all these works present images of moral and immoral action in physically conceived situations on the stage, they have a greater effect on the mind and soul of readers and spectators than any philosophical arguments dealing with revenge, love, friendship and moral, political and legal problems.

Zhang: In your article "An Ethical Narratology" which appeared in *Ethics in Culture: the Dissemination of Values through Literature and Other Media* (2008), you discussed several strategies of mediating moral values and alerting readers to moral issues and problems through narration. Can you elaborate on that? And what is the difference between your approach and that of James Phelan?

Müller: This article explores the ethical potential of narrative technique for the representation of moral issues and problems, concentrating on basic forms of narration. Authorial fiction with its omniscient narrator, for instance Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, seems to have an explicit way of dealing with moral problems which is, however, frequently qualified by the use of irony and a restriction of the narrator's reliability. Even though the authorial narrator presents himself/herself as the dispenser of ethical values, ethical-critical work remains to be done

by the attentive reader with regard to the representation of plot and character and a qualified judgment of virtuous and vicious conduct and their many transitional forms. As distinct from authorial fiction, point-of-view narration usually goes without explicit moral comment. It privileges the perspective of individual characters, referring to them in the third person, i.e. without making them narrators. Point-of-view fiction brings the reader close to the consciousness of fictional characters, which may cover the whole range from good-hearted to criminal and sinful figures. By way of empathy the reader gets access to the processes occurring in the minds of the characters and thus he/she may experience ethical crises or ethical errors in a more immediate form. There are even examples like Patricia Highsmith's crime novels in which the consistent use of free indirect style — the stylistic hallmark of point-of-view fiction — makes the reader share the thought processes of pathological murderers in what are ethically and aesthetically most extraordinary reading experiences. Point-of-view fiction is to be distinguished from I-narration, which latter confronts the reader with a fictional character who narrates experiences made or witnessed from the subjective position of the storyteller. An example of the high ethical potential of I-narration is the case of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, whose protagonist accuses himself for committing a sin, when he actually does a highly good deed in helping the black boy Jim on his way to freedom. For the reader it is an intellectually and ethically exciting experience to have a different image of a character in morally challenging situations than the character himself. Complex individual stances and attitudes can be represented by the voice of an I-narrator in an unfiltered way. The wealth of forms of self-presentation and of interaction between the narrating and reading self have given first-person narration its high position within the sphere of ethical narration. An outstanding critic investigating first-person narration is undoubtedly James Phelan, whose rhetorical approach I admire and try to extend to other forms of narration. It must be stated, however, that Chinese narratologists like Nie Zhenzhao and Shang Biwu have lately caught up with international developments.

Zhang: Prof. Müller, most of your publications are focused on literature of the Renaissance period. Do you think ethical narratology and ethical preferences have different reflections in literary works in different periods?

Müller: I can only give some hints. A novel like Ian McEwan's *The Children's Act*, which deals with the conflict between the professional and the human aspect of a lawyer's case, has an ethical basis which differs strongly from that of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, in which questions of decency, moderation and honesty are at stake.

The rise of ethical criticism has occurred most significantly in view of narrative fiction. In this context it is definitely necessary to include the historical aspect. There are, for instance, normative periods like the Age of Reason which believe in a set of values to be shared by all reasonable members of a community. In so far Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* is the product of the Enlightenment. One tendency of the nineteenth century was to place ethical dilemmas in the consciousness of the individual, for which purpose new methods of narrative introspection were used. Ethical preferences are not only historically conditioned; they are also dependent on genre. In this context it would be an intriguing question to ask if lyric poetry is open to ethical criticism. (See, for instance, Hank Lazer in *Forum for World Literature Studies* 8, 2016) One could for instance ask if the ethical component is stronger in the romantic poet William Wordsworth or in his contemporary John Keats.

Zhang: You gave a very exact and wonderful case study in your article "From Homer's *Odyssey* to Joyce's *Ulysses*: Theory and Practice of an Ethical Narratology" in *Arcadia* 50 (2015). Your notion of ethical narratology seems to be more integrated. Aesthetics, as you mentioned, together with ethics can be interdependent in narrative art. What draws your attention to this?

Müller: My point is, for instance, that there are aspects of human relationships and of life which can be represented in the novel, as a consequence of specific narrative devices, aspects that are inaccessible to other forms of discourse, for instance philosophy. It is the aesthetical nature of literature and specifically the novel which unlocks new realms of experience. In so far the ethical dimension is in the novel inseparably related to the aesthetical dimension. To put it extremely, aesthetics gives birth to ethics in the novel. To repeat it once more, since it is so important, it is literature and the novel in particular which makes possible ethical cognition in ways which are closed to the intellectual sciences. This seems to have been noticed by philosophers like Peter Bieri, Michael Hampe and Gottfried Gabriel at the beginning of our century, who covetously glance at the cognitive-ethical potential contained in literature and increasingly draw on literary and especially narrative examples within their philosophical argument. In the sphere of the novel the newly discovered sisterhood of ethics and aesthetics has produced most significant results, at which philosophers can only marvel. As a contemporary author who increasingly merges philosophy and literature with emphasis on ethical issues J. M. Coetzee can be referred to, for instance in his novel *Elizabeth Costello* (1999).

Zhang: Ethical dilemma has been a key term in Prof. Nie's construction of ethical

literary criticism. Do you think ethical dilemma is another way to describe what you mentioned above “the ethical substance of a tragedy ? ”

Müller: Yes, I share Professor Nie’s emphasis on ethical dilemma as a key term in ethical criticism. Literature may confront us with irreconcilable oppositions, in which whatever the protagonist does may be wrong, in which there may be collisions of laws and duties and volitions. The problem of decision-making with all its implications is one of the central ethical issues in literature. In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* the protagonist has to cope with the problem of revenge, which he regards as an imperative duty, but which he is on account of his individual disposition incapable of performing. Thus he preserves his moral integrity in a desperate situation. On a less tragic level the protagonist of Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot, faces the problem of saving her family’s hopeless financial situation by marrying the apparently impeccable heir to the estate, whom she yet does not trust. Here it is her moral intuition which causes her to make the right decision. In both cases it is the respective authors’ superior art that gives moral profile to the issue in question. At this point is necessary once more to emphasize that literature can only be ethically relevant, if it offers compositional equivalents which express ethical substance in complex forms. There is an interdependence of form and meaning on the ethical level, too. A formally modest or aesthetically reductive work can never possess ethical depth.

Zhang: Ethical literary criticism has been achieving noticeable attention from home and abroad. What’s your opinion on ethical literary criticism?

Müller: I believe that ethical literary criticism is one of the most important departures in recent critical work and that its relevance is universal. Ethical criticism does not simply try to sift out meanings and messages from literary works. If we could detach ethical messages from literary works, the works would be dispensable. It is of central importance to realize that the ethical substance is part and parcel of the work’s whole as an aesthetical construct. The aesthetical and spiritual complexity and iridescence of the work of art is a prerequisite for its ethical significance.

Zhang: Prof. Müller, thank you once again for this interview.

Müller: Thank you for asking such good questions.

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