

# A Diachronic and Synchronic Study of American Ethical Criticism: A Review of *American Ethical Criticism: A Survey*

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**Abstract** *American Ethical Criticism: A Survey* by Prof. Yang Gexin is a pioneering monograph that studies the rise, development and demise of American ethical criticism diachronically and synchronically. It argues that the American ethical criticism since the 1980s has inspired and enriched the contemporary ethical literary criticism, which ultimately transcends the limitations of the former as an established literary approach. Besides evaluating the merits and demerits of American ethical criticism, the book illustrates how it is critically integrated into the contemporary ethical literary criticism. Based on the study, the book also outlines the current problems and future direction of ethical literary criticism. This paper firmly believes that the monograph will open up a new territory for literary studies in China and beyond.

**Key words** Yang Gexin; *American Ethical Criticism: A Survey*; Ethical Literary Criticism

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Since the 1980s, the passionate promotion and debate of ethical approach to literature by Wayne Booth, Martha Nussbaum and other American critics rejuvenates the once silenced ethical criticism. Despite its initial vitality, the American ethical criticism declined by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to its inherent flaws, though it continued to influence literary studies. At the beginning

of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, absorbing the strength of American ethical literary criticism but transcending its limitations, ethical literary criticism in China developed its own theoretical framework and critical discourse, gradually establishing itself as a leading literary approach in China and beyond. But the intense yet ephemeral academic journey of American ethical criticism had never been sufficiently studied.

Yang's recent book is the first academic monograph that systematically studies the origin, development and changes of American ethical criticism (Nie 3). The book makes a diachronic and synchronic study of American ethical criticism. Diachronically, the book traces the classical and European origin, the historical development, the gradual demise and the historical influence of American ethical criticism. Synchronically, it focuses on the scholarly exchange and debate of American ethical criticism since the 1980s, evaluating its merits and demerits. Based on the study, the book also highlights current problems and future direction of ethical literary criticism, which plays an increasingly important role in contemporary literary studies.

This review first recapitulates major arguments of the book, presenting how it scrutinizes the historical evolution and synchronic debate of American ethical criticism and how it explores the contemporary ethical literary criticism's correction of American ethical criticism. Based on the analysis of the merits of the book, this review then illuminates its significance in ethical literary criticism in particular and literary studies in general.

### **The Diachronic Evolution and Synchronic Debate of American Ethical Criticism**

Although Chinese scholars have been studying American ethical criticism since the 1980s, Professor Yang's book is the only monograph that clarifies its etymological ambiguity and quests into its historical origin and academic tradition, examining the evolution of ethical criticism (Ji 173). Besides diachronic examination, the book presents the extensive dialogue and heated debate of American ethical criticism, exploring its essence.

With numerous materials but lucid prose style, Yang briefly outlines the evolution of the ethical critical terms and traces origin of American ethical criticism from Classical Antiquity to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the introduction and the first chapter of the book. As a transdisciplinary study of literature and ethics, ethical criticism arises out of the ancient but enduring debate between literature and ethics since Classical Antiquity and is nourished by the tradition of European moral criticism. Pre-platonic philosophers and poets had always acknowledged the vital

role literature played in shaping ethical awareness until Plato famously excluded poets from his Republic. But Plato's view was challenged and redressed by his student Aristotle, whose "non-reductive humanism" reaffirmed literature as a vital source of ethical knowledge. Yang considers the ancient debate as "a historical prerequisite for the development of ethical literary criticism" (16). Besides, he shows convincingly how Plato, Aristotle, Horace and others contributed to the ancient ethical criticism with their respective practice and theory.

The first chapter continues to review, with great clarity, the European development of ethical criticism and explores the forces that bring the approach to its demise. The Hellenistic Era and the Middle Ages upheld the ethical stance established by Aristotle, Medieval secular and Christian literature obviously featuring ethical education. Renaissance humanism paved the way for the development of moral criticism with critics like Philip Sidney. The realist literature of the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on ethical values to set role models for the public, propelled the development of moral criticism. Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson and Samuel Johnson are mentioned as its practitioners. The development of critical realist literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought to the fore various moral problems in society and further advanced the development of ethical criticism. Charles Dickens, Balzac, Turgenev and Tolstoy's works demonstrate ethical inclination. At the same time, since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, a series of notable works that studied literary ethical criticism were published. Yang observes that these critical works put forward the concept of "ethical literary criticism", and expanded the territory of literary research, bringing religious, political, theological and culture perspectives to the study of ethics in literature, though it failed to establish an accepted theoretical framework. Although ethical criticism continued to play its role in the study of literature, it gradually lost the momentum in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yang summarizes three factors that brought its downturn: the rise of Aestheticism that denied the moral dimension and function of literature, the linguistic turn and the turn of the reader's response that further eliminated the moral dimension of literature and the innate flaws of ethical criticism.

Having showed the rich historical heritage of American ethical criticism, the second and third chapters conduct a synchronic study of American ethical criticism since the 1980s. In 1983, *New Literary History* published a special issue on "Literature and/as Moral Philosophy," sparking a new wave of critical enthusiasm in ethical criticism. Yang maintains that the return of the ethical criticism in America is a response to the linguistic turn in literature studies that focuses solely on linguistic forms. It is also stimulated by the ethical debate within deconstructionism,

the increasing popularity of narratology and some leading philosophers' ethical probes into literature. Yang analyzes the critical theory and practice of major critics of new humanist and deconstructionist ethical criticism respectively. Wayne C. Booth and Martha C. Nussbaum inherit Aristotelian humanism and the subsequent new humanism in approaching literature. Booth's ethical theory, especially his "conduction," illustrated in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* is studied in details. Yang observes that Booth's ethical criticism advances from ethical monism to pluralism and relocates the essence of ethical criticism. Absorbing Aristotelian ethics, Stoicism and the 18<sup>th</sup> century Sentimentalism, Martha C. Nussbaum advocates plural and noncommensurable values, stressing the importance of perception and emotions in ethical criticism. Likewise, the contribution of two most prominent deconstructionist ethical critics is carefully examined. Assimilating Kant's Ethics and Paul De Man's language theory, Miller argues that the act of reading entails ethical judgment, conclusion and prescription. Adam Zachary Newton's narrative ethics integrates the theory of Bakhtin, Levinas, Cavell, Robert Langbaum, and Wayne Booth, formulating narrative, representational and hermeneutic levels of theoretical frame. He argues that narrative is ethics and the meaning of literature depends on author's intention and interest, the formal text created for readers of a historical era and the response of readers at a given time.

The intense debate of American ethical criticism is closely studied in chapter three. This chapter begins with a review of the traditional debate between Autonomists and Anti-autonomists, cognitivists and their opponents, consequentialists and anti-consequentialists. Prof. Yang puts forward three principles for critics in defense of ethical criticism: the principle of ethical submission, the principle of diversity and the principle of relativity (121-22). The heated ethical debate between the radicals is closely analyzed. In 1997 and 1998, Richard Posner published two essays against ethical criticism in *Philosophy and Literature*. Martha C. Nussbaum immediately responded with her essay "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism" in the same journal, pointing out Posner's faults in attacking ethical criticism. Nussbaum summarizes four points of Posner's attack: "empathetic torturer argument," "the bad literati argument," "the evil literature argument" and "aesthetic-autonomy argument" (133). Prof. Yang then illustrates how Nussbaum responded to each of Posner's accusation. In the following section of this chapter, Prof. Yang explains Wayne Booth's defense for ethical criticism in the wake of Posner's attack. Booth also published an essay in *Philosophy and Literature*, titled "Why Banning Ethical Criticism Is a Serious Mistake" in defense of ethical approach to literature. Yang recapitulates the two major issues of their

debate: whether is it appropriate to evaluate literature on the basis of ethics? whether is reading helpful to create better citizens under democracy? Yang wraps up this chapter with a summary of the essence of the debate: “The discrepancy of this debate lies in politics as well as in literature. Broadly speaking, it includes the discussion of political policies, human nature and social structure. It is the political commitment that frames and at the same time circumscribes the ethical debate” (149). The real disagreement of the two sides lies not in the definition of ethics and aesthetics, as acknowledged by Posner and Booth respectively, but in the opposition of their political views. But the flaws exhibited in the traditional and radical debate of the American ethical criticism, Yang points out, never impedes the development of ethical criticism. On the contrary, the intense debate and the unresolved conflicts attract more critical attention, especially Chinese scholars striving for a new ethical approach to literature.

### **The Response of Chinese Scholarship to American Ethical Criticism**

Yang’s book manifests a strong sense of contemporaneity and Chinese subjectivity. Its meticulous study of American ethical criticism serves not for the nostalgic interest in a particular period of critical history but for the present literary studies in China and the world. Having sorted out the strength and flaws of American ethical criticism, the book continues to explore its influence by examining how Chinese contemporary literary criticism responds to it.

Chapter four, the last chapter of the book, reviews the Chinese assimilation and correction of American ethical criticism in their construction of ethical literary criticism. The American ethical criticism was introduced to China since the 1980s when Chinese scholars analyzed the works of major American ethical critics. At the same time, professor Nie Zhenzhao and his team has embarked on constructing ethical literary approach to literature, combining western and Chinese critical traditions. The national conference “Anglo-American Literature Studies in China: Looking Back and Looking Forward” held by Jiangxi Normal University in 2004 propels the development of ethical criticism in China, where Prof. Nie Zhenzhao made a key-note speech “Ethical Approach to Literary Studies: A New Perspective” that promoted the ethical criticism in literary studies in China and outlined the major framework of this new approach to literature. In subsequent essays, Prof. Nie further expanded and demonstrated the approach, which gained increasing critical attention. The conference “Ethical Approach to Literary Studies: A New Perspective” held by Central China Normal University in 2005 Marks the rise of ethical literary criticism in China, when more than 120 scholars convened in Wuhan discussing the values,

significance, methodology and practice of literary ethical criticism.

Prof Yang points out that the contemporary ethical literary criticism in China transcends the limitations of American ethical criticism and displays four distinct features of its own: 1) It sublimates literary ethical theories into ethical literary methodology; 2) It proposes that literature arises out of ethical needs, regarding the function of education as the primary function of literature; 3) It distinguishes ethical criticism from moral criticism from different perspectives; 4) It establishes its own critical discourse, such as ethical situation, ethical order, ethical confusion, ethical dilemma, ethical taboo, ethical complex, etc., making it easily approachable to literature studies. With some leading scholars of ethical literary criticism like Prof. Nie Zhenzhao, an important journal of scholarly exchange (*Foreign Literature Studies*), and increasing number of practitioners and academic publications, ethical literary criticism moves steadily to its perfection. Prof. Yang compares Prof. Nie's definition of ethical literary criticism with Marshall Gregory's definition and points out convincingly that Nie's version is more comprehensive, since it greatly expands the territory claimed by Booth and Gregory, as it emphasizes objective evaluation of authors and their works from ethical perspective, explaining the ethical nature of literature, exploring the moral reasons of various phenomena of life described in literature and evaluating them accordingly. Yang also shows, with numerous case studies, that the application of ethical literary criticism to literary texts produces new conclusions. An ethical approach to *Hamlet* finds that prince Hamlet's hesitation to take revenge is caused by two unresolved ethical complexes: regicide and patricide. His famous soliloquy could be therefore understood as "To be (ethical), or not to be (ethical)" (172).

Yang further demonstrates his strong sense of critical responsibility in pointing out the current problems and the direction of ethical literary criticism in the conclusion of the book. Although ethical literary criticism has established its basic critical frame, but three issues must be further clarified: 1) the essential difference between ethical criticism and moral criticism; 2) The limited capacity of ethical literary criticism and the unlimited potential of textual interpretation; 3) the definition and application of basic terms of ethical literary criticism. At the meantime, Yang highlights that ethical literary critics are to endeavor in the following three directions: 1) guided by the principle of practicality, ethical literary criticism is expected to produce more exemplar critical works for different texts; 2) Based on the principle of plurality, ethical literary criticism must attempt to assimilate the merits of other critical approaches so as to fortify its own strength; 3) Ethical literary criticism must be equipped with transdisciplinary and transcultural

perspectives. At the end of the book, Yang expresses his confidence that ethical literary criticism will play a greater role in literary studies in the future.

### **The Critical and Practical Significance of *American Ethical Criticism: A Survey***

With rich historical documentation, insightful analysis and strong practicality, Yang's book plays an important role in the perfection of ethical literary criticism and the academic exchange between Western and Chinese literary studies.

To Begin with, it traces and analyzes the Western heritage of ethical literary criticism since the Classical Antiquity to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which had never been sufficiently studied. For more than a decade, Professor Nie Zhenzhao and his team from Central China Normal University has been striving for a new ethical approach to literature, to "avoid ethical absences and solve the problems of separating theory from practice in ongoing literary studies in China" (qtd. in Yang Jincai 36). Yang's book is the 10<sup>th</sup> academic monograph of the "Construction of Ethical Literary Criticism Series" published by Central China Normal University Press. While most monographs provide case studies of writers and their works from ethical literary perspective, Yang's book examines the Western and Chinese tradition, methodology and practice of ethical criticism, seeking to fortify the theoretical foundation of ethical literary criticism.

Moreover, the book demonstrates the distinctive feature of ethical literary criticism and helps to clarify some misunderstandings of ethical literary criticism. It distinguishes the contemporary ethical literary criticism from previous versions including American ethical criticism, proving that the former firmly establishes its own theoretical framework and critical discourse while the latter fails. As Prof. Nie points out in the preface of the book, the publication of this monograph helps us to understand the flaws in the methodology of American ethical literary criticism and the importance of fundamental theory and methodology for ethical literary criticism (6). In addition, analyzing the long odyssey of ethical literary criticism, Yang also clarifies some ambivalent critical terms like "moral" and "ethics" that had always been haunting ethical approaches to literature. Undoubtedly, it will help to foster a better understanding of ethical literary criticism.

Furthermore, the book reveals current and potential problems in contemporary literary criticism based on the study of the demerits of American ethical criticism and makes valuable suggestions accordingly. At the meantime, it also points out the direction of future development of ethical literary criticism. All these facilitate a better development of ethical literary criticism.

Last but not least, Yang's book is a confident move to promote scholarly

exchange between China and the West in the field of literary studies, as one reviewer points out: “With a strong sense of scholarly cultural awareness, Yang examines the evolution of American ethical criticism and the Chinese reconstruction of ethical literary criticism based on academic recognition and dialogue” (Ji 175).

From what has been discussed above, there is no doubt that Yang has produced an insightful and suggestive text that invites future probes into ethical literary criticism. The book certainly anticipates a better future of contemporary ethical literary criticism and a new wave of scholarly exchange between China and the west in literary studies.

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