

Ethical Literary Criticism and Comparative Literature: An Interview with Professor Dorothy M. Figueira

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Abstract Dorothy M. Figueira (Email:figueira@uga.edu) is Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Georgia. She has published extensively in the field of comparative literature, whose books include *Translating the Orient* (1991), *The Exotic: A Decadent Quest* (1994), and *Otherwise Occupied: Theories and Pedagogies of Alterity* (2008) and *The Hermeneutics of Suspicion: Cross Cultural Encounters with India* (2015). She has served as the Editor of *The Comparatist* (2008–11) and is currently editor of *Recherche litteraire/Literary Research*. Prof. Figueira is an Honorary President of the International Comparative Literature Association, and has served in the past on the boards of the American Comparative Literature Association and the Southern Comparative Literature Association. She has held fellowships from the American Institute for Indian Studies, Fulbright Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. She has been a Visiting Professor at the University Lille (France), Jadavpur University (Kolkata), and the Indira Gandhi National Open University (New Delhi).

Key words Ethical Literary Criticism; Comparative Literature; critical theory

Interviewer **Li Jing**, Ph.D. in English language and literature, is Associate Professor at Zhongnan University of Economics and Law (Wuhan 430073, China). She specializes in contemporary British and American drama, ethical literary criticism and feminist literary criticism. Jing is the in visiting scholar in Department of Drama at University of Michigan (Ann Arbor). She is recipient of awards and scholarships from The Ministry of Education of Humanities and Social Science project, the Chinese Scholarship Council, Hubei Provincial Ministry of Education and Zhongnan University of Economics and Law.

Li Jing (hereafter Li): Professor Figueira, thank you very much for accepting this interview about Ethical Literary Criticism and Comparative Literature. Could you introduce the main arguments of your keynote speech at 6th International Conference of the IAELC “Ethical Literary Criticism, Comparative Literature and World Literature”?

Dorothy M. Figueira (hereafter Figueira): “The Ethics of Reading the Other” began with a discussion of why religion and literature (including the study of ethics in literature) never became as popular as other interdisciplinary configurations that one historically found in Comparative Literature (such as literature and philosophy, literature and the law, literature and cinema, etc.). I attribute this disinterest in the study of religion and literature to certain trends in literary studies in the US, particularly New Criticism and the manner in which a Protestant worldview consistently influenced literary studies in America. I next questioned how and why ethical judgments which one would think inform literary study, particularly with its current interest in alterity, are not more central to our theoretical concerns. Since ethics involves both the Self and the Other, I then give an historical overview of the employment of the Other in literary theory (from the Greek classics, through Romantic hermeneutics, phenomenology, existentialism and colonial discourse analysis). Finally, I offer a blueprint for how we might ethically conceptualize our readings of the Other. I base my proposal on the historiographical work of Michel de Certeau, Paul Ricoeur’s work on narrative, and Emmanuel Levinas’s reworking of a Heideggerian concept of Being. I propose a middle path approach between the critical consciousness approach that views encounters as acts of intellectual and cultural mastery and hermeneutical consciousness that seeks to engage the Other. This middle path, championed by Ricoeur, permits us to recognize that we are confronted by ideological distortions, yet posits the possibility of recovering a text’s lost message while maintaining the necessary suspicion aimed at demystifying it.

Li: As the title of your speech indicates, “The Ethics of Reading the Other,” what do you mean by the “Other”?

Figueira: The Other is not some new-fangled post-colonial concept. It has existed in Western consciousness since Plato and in India since the Rig Veda. It plays a key role in the history of philosophy and is of particular interest for literary studies in the work of Schleiermacher and Dilthey. More recently, the Other is historicized in the master-slave dialectic of Hegel, fetishized by Marx, relativized by Husserl, and viewed by analogy and reduced by existentialists such as Heidegger and Sartre. In the wake of the Holocaust, philosophers such as Levinas felt a reassessment of

the Other was warranted as was a revaluation of the transcendent subject. So there is a significant discourse on the Other before Identity Studies and postcolonial criticism. I do not view the Other as does Fanon (as a phobic object), Freud (as a fetish), Lacan (in terms of subject formation) or as Bhabha (almost the same, but different). I also feel that postmodern approaches focus on psychologizing modern fantasies of alienation and they can be situated in a pathologization of the classical era as the origin of a climate culminating in nineteenth-century imperialism. Many poststructuralist constructions of the Other tend to view it only as a translation of European familiarity with the Self. The Other, for me, is more akin to the object one seeks in the hermeneutical encounter — where one goes to seek one's own in the alien. It is a site of excursion where the spirit moves to the strange and unfamiliar, finds a home there or recognizes what was previously perceived as alien as one's genuine home. The Other is something one seeks in order to know oneself better. The Self is suffused with the Other. We should recognize and seek a reconciliation of our own understanding and that of strangers through a fusion of horizons.

Li: And then warmly congratulations on the publication of the Indian version of your book *Aryans, Jews, Brahmins: Theorizing Authority through Myths of Identity*, which is a timely reissue of an American edition (SUNY Press, 2002). In Section Two, “Who Speaks for the Subaltern?” is a tangential answer to Gayatri Spivak’s question, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” which in the field of South Asian historiography is a primary concern for Subaltern Studies intellectuals in the postcolonial framework. Put the risk of over-generalization, would you please give a very brief introduction to your counter arguments or responses to Spivak’s subaltern studies?

Figueira: I do not actually offer counter arguments to Spivak. My position is quite clear, “subalterns” have always spoken, just not so much in the English and French language where the critic has been looking for them. Their voices are even available, not just in English and French publications or metaphorical archives, but in actual archives. When I was doing research in India, there was plenty of unpublished archival testimony of figures such as suttees, the paradigmatic subaltern females that Spivak evokes. So it is a political posture and instance of posturing to say that such figures have no voice and then presume to speak for such disenfranchised individuals. The whole gimmick regarding the voicelessness of the “subaltern” was, I felt, a cynical ploy so that critics could usurp a voice and make of it what they wished. If “subalterns” cannot speak, it necessitates the critic using the language and strategies of Western theory to “speak for” them. It is a question of self-designated spokespersons illegitimately usurping the native voice. I have a problem with this

critical and political stance. Historians and sociologists are well aware that such “voices” exist. But most theory is grounded in an understanding of the world that English professors possess and such knowledge is really quite limited. It is only the hegemony of English Departments in many universities that allows its professors to think that they have the capacity to make authoritative pronouncements regarding concepts in other fields in the humanities and social sciences (history, anthropology, sociology, etc.), when their knowledge of these fields is partial and fragmentary (and often translated).

Li: As David Damrosch cogently observes “world literature is the quintessential literature of modern times...can usefully continue to mean a subset of the plenum of literature” (4). Do you think in the era of digital media, film studies can be classified as part of the world literature to study? Or what’s your opinions about world film/cinema studies?

Figueira: Of course, digital media and film studies can be classified as World Literature and world film/cinema should be a part of World Literature. But do not forget that World Literature, in its American configuration, is the study of the world’s cultural production as it is translated into English. So, I do not know how much depth we can hope to find in a study of dubbed films.

Li: In 1993 Susan Bassnett declared that “Today, comparative literature is in one sense is dead” (47), she saw it destined to be subsumed within translations studies. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in *Death of Discipline* surveys the fields of comparative literature, culture studies and ethnic studies, and criticizes their insularity and cultural conservatism. She advocates disciplinary collaboration to establish institutional bridges to respond more appropriately. Do you think Ethical Literary Criticism is such an effort of building institutional bridge?

Figueira: It is very easy for someone who does something else (like Translation Studies, in the case of Bassnett) to talk about the death of Comparative Literature. So much theorizing these days is careerist self-posturing. “X” is dead; “Y” (what I happen to do) is better and can take its place. In the case of Spivak (and others), there is a tendency to claim that something is the case when it is not. Comparative Literature as I know it is not so monolithically Western-centric and it certainly does not lack cross-disciplinary perspective. Once a “problem” has been discovered – real or not – the critic, once again, stands at the ready to position herself to step in and rectify it and, in the process, make a place for herself. I am really quite mystified by what people (Spivak and Bassnett) who are basically English scholars trained and

based in the West, presume to say about the global practice of Comparative Literature. In China and in India, comparatists seem to be mapping out their own course.

As for Ethical Literary Criticism (hereafter, ELC), I see it as a school based in China, proudly originating in China and exporting itself quite aggressively abroad as an indigenous Chinese counter to Western theory. In theory, the ELC general thesis is that there is a deficit in ethical engagement in Western theory. From this conference and the foundational articles on ELC, I see it more as a Chinese version of the new Western trend in World Literatures. ELC is institutionalized and exported by the IAELC and it tied to academic journals, *The Forum for World Literature Studies* (published out of Purdue University in India) and *Foreign Literary Studies* (published in China). I understood that the IAELC was founded in 2012 by Professor Nie Zhanzhao expressly as a counterweight to Western literary studies and its focus on linguistic and formalistic research (such as narratology) and sociological approaches (such as the discourse on power relations, postcolonialism, gender studies, feminism) which were thought to impede the contributions of non-Western original points of view. ELC's thesis, not an unreasonable one, is that there is a deficit of ethical engagement in Western theory. Its principle theorist claims that the main function of literature is moral judgment and that such morality is not the purview of the critic. It is imposed from some other source. If humans do not obey a certain type of ethical order, they receive due punishment. According to Nie, the teaching of the literature of the world (and even here, as with American WL, the canon is almost exclusively English and American literature) should contextualize the taboos formed by human rationality as opposed to emotions (primary of which is free will) which are seen as primitive.¹ In short ELC imposes a rigid and strict function on our reading of literature. It demands our submission to some trans-individual ethical power.

The Chinese vision of WL is actively propagated abroad through journals (particularly the one even published in the American Midwest), international conferences, and cooperative relationships.² While theoretical schools in the West

1 See Nie Zhenzhao, "Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism: Its Fundamentals and Terms," *Foreign Literary Studies* 32.1 (2010):12-22. For a Western interpretation of ELC, see Juri Talvet, "What is Ethical Literary Criticism: Some Reflections on the Lady Called Filosofia in Dante Alighieri" (*Interlitteraria* 19.1 (2014):7-21.

2 The ELC met this year in Tartu (Estonia) and plans to meet at the University of London next year. The Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association is scheduled to go to Shenzhen in 2019. The Chinese hosts proposed the theme of WL. It will be interesting to see how CL is done there.

are playing identity games, the Chinese have come in and are making a concerted effort to insert their vision (through ELC) into global literary studies.

Li: Ethical Literary criticism in the humanist tradition seemed to “disappear” from the Anglo-American academia of literary study in the 1960s and 1970s, and until toward the end of 1980s did it reemerge. The so-called “ethical turn” in the field of literary studies was brought about by the profound intellectual development in humanities and social sciences. Against such cultural and philosophical background, Ethical Literary Criticism has gained a series of new perspectives and methods. Tracing its trajectory of development, it may be detected by two schools, which is the Neo-Aristotelian and the Deconstructive. Each of the two camps has its own understanding of such crucial concepts as text, other and reader, and proposes unique approaches to literary works accordingly. The first camp inherits Aristotelian ethics and poetics, valuing moral and ethical education through reading literature, while the second camp does ethical criticism by drawing from poststructuralist theories, emphasizing readers’ reading experience as well as the ambiguity of textual meaning. What do you think about the two schools?

Figueira: I cannot really speak of the Ethical Literary Criticism of Anglo-American literature scholars because I am not an Anglo-American literature scholar. Nor can I see what you term Neo-Aristotelian or Deconstructive schools of criticism as articulations for ethical criticism. I come from a background in theology and the history of religions. So, perhaps, I have a different understanding of the notion of “ethics.” As in my paper, when I think of ethics and literary criticism, I think of thinkers like Ricoeur, Levinas, Certeau and their formulations of the text, the Other, and the reader. You ask me what I think of an Aristotelian vision of literature. My training in Classics and my schooling at the University of Chicago have conditioned me to see things in Aristotelian terms. My early career in the heyday of Deconstruction (not the late Derrida of the ethical turn) made me leery of its marginalization of a hermeneutical consciousness approach in favor of the critical consciousness method or its hermeneutics of suspicion. I came to the study of literature late and try to avoid dogmatic tendencies that one finds in theories as they succeed each other.

Li: Since the 1980s, Western cultural theoretical study has entered into a relative period which is labeled “After Theory” by Terry Eagleton. In his view, the phrase “After Theory” does not mean that theory is now over, and that we can return to an age of pre-theoretical innocence. In your opinion, does the “ethical turn”

corresponds to what Terry Eagleton's claim of "After Theory"?

Figueira: If there is anything more disturbing than institutional theory, it is what passes for After-Theory. Once again, I do not see this as an ethical turn. There is no need for a turn. Ethics has always been present in theory, just devalued, denied or occluded. But even in these instances, it was always there. The ELC group seems to have latched onto this notion of an ethical turn to set itself apart and justify what it purports to do.

Li: Against such cultural background of "After theory" and "ethical turn," do you think ethical literary criticism realizes the pre-theoretical innocence Terry Eagleton has called for?

With the passage of time, Ethical Literary Criticism catches increasing attention from the world, which are evidenced in several journal special issues, such as "Ethical Literary Criticism: East and West" in *arcadia: International Journal of Literary Studies* 50.1 (2015), "Fictions and Ethics in Twenty-First Century Fiction" in *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 17.5 (2015), and "Ethical Literary Criticism" in *Universitas- Monthly Review of Philosophy and Culture* 42. 4 (2015), as well as a long commentary from *TLS: Times Literary Supplements* on July 31st, 2015. What's your opinion about the oriental voice of Ethical Literary Criticism?

Figueira: Eagleton is totally readable and enjoyable. But one has to see his notion of After Theory or a call for a pre-theoretical innocence in light of Marxist historicism. If you cannot follow this perspective, then such concepts are not very useful. ELC claims that moral enlightenment is the main function of literature, but according to my understanding of it, it does not believe that critics have the right to make moral judgments themselves. The question then becomes: if critics should not pursue ethical judgments, who and what are the authorities that establish the ethical order that we should seek in literature? ELC not only discounts the aesthetic component of literature, but it calls for a historicist approach without any recognition that historicism has its flaws and has been seriously challenged. According to the papers I heard at the IAELC conference in Estonia, the ELC seeks to contextualize taboos formed by what its proponents call human rationality, as opposed to emotions (such as free will) which it deems primitive. In short, ELC negates the value of aesthetics and emotion and does not address the ambiguity of the ethical dilemmas that literature might pose. Rather it seeks to impose upon our reading of literature a rigid and strict function. Yet, who and what establish these ethical rules? The answer to this question is not directly addressed, but it is nevertheless quite clear.

ELC claims that Western literature presents humans governed by desire (seen a

negative) and not reason (viewed as a positive). It deems the expression of free will as “animal” as opposed to what it champions as a more “human” will dictated by reason. The ethics that ELC promotes amounts to the suppression of what it deems “animal” desire. In essence, ELC demands our submission to some trans-individual ethical power. What might that be? What is the source of the rules? Who imposes them? The State, perhaps? We are only left to surmise.

I do not think this quest for reason and the “textualization” of taboos is really the purpose of literature. It is certainly not why I read and teach literature. I am not enamored with Western theory’s focus on linguistic-formalistic research or its fixation on sociological discourse’s endless meditation on hegemonic violence. I actually believe there is a middle path between hermeneutics and the critique of ideology and that this middle path is certainly not the harsh imposition of some different new (and significantly non-Western) restrictive ideology.

Li: Prof. Figueira, thank you once again for this interview.

Figueira: Thank you for asking such good questions.

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