

The Rise of a Critical Theory: Reading *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*

Shang Biwu

School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Jiao Tong University

800 Dongchuan Road, Shanghai 200240, China

Email:biwushang@sjtu.edu.cn

Abstract As an original critical theory formulated by a Chinese scholar, ethical literary criticism has received a large amount of attention from the academics. This paper, with reference to Nie Zhenzhao's new monograph *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, reviews the background and significance of ethical literary criticism before illuminating its major arguments and core issues such as the origin of literature, the existential forms of text (brain text, material text, and digital text), ethical selection, and Sphinx factor. Apart from surveying the critical receptions of ethical literary criticism in China, it also offers three tentative suggestions for the future development of this new critical theory, namely, the construction of its critical principles, the examination of the interconnections between ethics and narrative forms, and the necessity of placing dialogues between ethical criticism in the West and ethical literary criticism in China.

Key words Nie Zhenzhao; ethical literary criticism; ethical turn

Terry Eagleton, in his notorious *After Theory*, observes that “The golden age of cultural theory is long past” (Eagleton 1). The evidence lies in the fact that, in Eagleton's opinion, the “pioneering works of Jacques Lacan, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault are several decades behind us,” and gone are “the path-breaking early writings of Raymond Williams, Luce Irigaray, Pierre Bourdieu, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, Jürgen Habermas, Fredric Jameson and Edward Said” (1). With these observations in his mind, Eagleton concludes that “[t]hose to whom the title of this book suggests that ‘theory’ is now over, and that we can all relievedly return to an age of pre-theoretical innocence, are in for a disappointment” (1). Partially right is Eagleton's hypothesis. It is true that those Western critics who are doing theory purely for the sake of theory instead of trying to uncover the deep meaning of literary text, are doomed to be disappointed, owing to the waning tide of critical theories. Equally disappointed are those non-Western

scholars, including Chinese critics, who are enthusiastic for introducing and importing Western critical theories to their native countries, since the source of their academic capital is no longer sufficient. Yet, turning our eyes to China, we find a different but exciting picture that counterpoints to the fate of literary theory in the West, which, to a large extent, is due to the rise of ethical literary criticism founded by Nie Zhenzhao.

In a year that followed Eagleton's lament for the bygone golden age of literary theory, there was "Conference on Anglo-American Literature Studies in China: Retrospect and Prospect" held in Nanchang. In his key-note speech addressed to the conference, Nie proposed ethical literary criticism as a new methodology, criticizing the unnatural gulfs between critical theory and literary criticism on the one hand, and elaborating the frameworks, objectives of this critical approach as well as the ethical tradition of literature on the other hand. Nie's address raised a profound interest of all scholars attending the conference, and led to a heated discussion thereafter. More significantly, it marked an emergence of ethical literary criticism, which is defined as "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" (Nie, *Introduction* 13). The previous decade witnessed an explosion of interest in exploring literature from an ethical perspective in China. Noteworthy is Nie's continuous efforts in constructing and building up this critical theory, which culminates in his 2014 monograph *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*.

I agree with Yang Jincai when he argues that "It is not easy job to theorize ethical criticism and its methodological appropriateness, but Nie has achieved what he has proposed to do" (Yang 151), which is evidenced in Nie's more than ten papers on ethical literary criticism and his ground-breaking *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*. This paper, with its major reference to Nie's new book, attempts (1) to elaborate on the ethical turn and its Chinese counterpart; (2) to illuminate the theoretical framework and the core concepts of ethical literary criticism; (3) to survey its receptions and applications; and (4) to outline a few directions for its future development.

Ethical Turn and Its Chinese Counterpart

In Western academics, *ethical turn* is a rather popular term, which is often used interchangeably with *turn to ethics*. However, in Robert Eaglestone's opinion, "this term is misleading, since the study of literature has always had a strong involvement with ethics since its inception and vigorous arguments have taken place as to how that involvement should be understood" (Eaglestone 581-82). According to Eaglestone, there are "two wings" that "make up a sense of the ethical turn, the recent renewed interest in the relationship between literature and the question of

how we should live” (586). The first wing lies in the disappearance or overtaking of ethics by new critical approaches developed in the 1970s and ‘80s, such as feminism, post-colonialism, Marxism, and deconstruction; while the second wing comes from a necessary deepening and concern for ethics in a more “theorized” strand of criticism, which is accounted by three sub-factors: “a sense that the Marxist project *per se* had failed”; “the need for a response to the criticisms made of deconstruction and other theoretical paradigms”; and “the quite normal development to critics’ own interests” (584). Unlike Eagleton, Liesbeth Korthals Altes examines *ethical turn* in a rather narrow sense. That is, *ethical turn* in narrative theory, which refers to several overlapping developments such as a pointed interest in narrativity and narrative literature from the side of moral philosophy, an increased reflection on the relation between ethics and the novel, and the corresponding growth focusing on ethical issues in narrative fiction (Altes 142).

Despite the different observations made by Eagleton and Altes, agreeable is the fact that since the 1980s, a considerable number of scholars have taken their interest in unpacking ethical elements in literature or investigating literature from the perspective of ethics. As David Parker points out, there has been “a profusion of work, especially in the US, that looks very much like the beginning of a significant resurgence of ethical criticism” (Parker 14). The boom of western ethical criticism can be found in the proliferation of works contributed by such renowned scholars as Martha Nussbaum, Tobin Siebers, Wayne C. Booth, Charles Altieri, J. Hillis Miller, James Phelan, Adam Zachary Newton, and many others.

Interestingly and surprisingly, contemporary Western ethical criticisms have been most recently further promoted, strengthened and enriched by their Chinese counterpart, though its *ethical turn* has occurred two decades later and ascended against a different background. With reference to ethical literary criticism, there are four major factors accounting for the *ethical turn* in China. First and foremost, it came as a response to *theory aphasia* in contemporary Chinese literary studies. As is known, since the opening up to the outside world after the Cultural Revolution, China has imported a huge number of Western critical theories such as comparative literature, psychoanalysis, Russian Formalism, structuralism, narratology, reception theory, post-colonialism, feminism, new historicism, cultural criticism, eco-criticism, to name a few. Admittedly, the imported Western critical theories contribute to the overall progression and flourishing of literary studies in China. However, compared with the large-scale importing and applying Western critical theories, there is a serious shortage of Chinese scholars’ engagement with literary criticism, that is, not even a single Chinese critical theory proposed and applied. Second, there is an inadequacy of ethical engagement in those imported critical theories, which are either concerned

with the structures and forms of literature (e.g., New Criticism, Russian Formalism, Structuralism, etc.), or concerned with politics, power and ideology in literature (e.g., feminism, post-colonialism, Marxism, etc.). Third, scholars tend to move away from literature in the name of theory. Consequently, they are too much engrossed in the so-called *theoretical complex*, *thematic complex*, and *terminology complex*. Fourth, the origin of literature has been misread or misinterpreted. For a long time, literature has been conceived of deriving from labor or mimesis. That said, moral teaching or enlightenment of literature has been largely neglected or devalued (Nie, *Introduction* 3-5; Huang 117-118). The above-mentioned factors suggest that the belated *ethical turn* occurring in China in the new millennium aims at solving the practical problems existing in contemporary Chinese literary studies, which conveys much sense why Nie's ethical Literary criticism has been warmly received and heatedly discussed by Chinese scholars.

Against the background elaborated above, Nie proposes ethical literary criticism, which embraces the following five aspects: (1) in terms of writers and their writings, it needs to investigate moral values of the writers and their historical background, and the connections of the writers' own moral values and those ethical values projected in those writings; (2) in terms of the works produced by the writers, it needs to investigate the relations between moral phenomena existing in works and in reality, the moral inclinations of the works, and social and moral values of the works; (3) in terms of the relations between readers and works, it needs to examine the effects of the works' moral values upon readers and the society, and readers' evaluations of the moral thoughts of the writers and the works; (4) it also needs to evaluate the moral inclinations of the writers and their works from an ethical perspective, the influence of the moral inclinations of the writers and their works upon their contemporary writers and literature as well as those of the later period, (5) it not only aims at uncovering the moral features of the writers and their works but also aims at exploring various issues concerning the relations between literature and society, literature and writer, and literature and writer from an ethical perspective (Nie, "Ethical Approach" 19-20). In order to develop ethical literary criticism into a fully-fledged discipline, Nie has put forth a set of core concepts and basic theoretical frameworks and demonstrates their working mechanisms, which are to be discussed in the next section of this paper.

A Conceptual Map of Ethical Literary Criticism: Major Arguments and Core Concepts

When reflecting upon the practices of Western ethical criticism, Todd F. David and Kenneth Womack admit that "What has changed over the course of the twentieth

century in our discussion of ethics and literature is *the simplistic, uncomplicated prescription of external ethical forces* regarding so many different literatures and cultures” (David and Womack x, emphasis mine). David and Womack are astute commentators, and it is usually unwise to argue against them. With no doubt, these external forces help to quicken the development of Western ethical criticism. However, they also failed to consider ethical criticism as an independent discipline or school of critical theory. For instance, in the case of Emmanuel Lévinas, Maurice Blanchot, and Martha Nussbaum, ethical criticism has been more or less assimilated by philosophy; in the case of Wayne C. Booth, James Phelan, and Adam Zachary Newton, ethical criticism has been assimilated by narratology. Unlike its Western counterpart, ethical literary criticism has been developed into an independent or individual school of critical theory in China, which is saliently marked by its distinctive theoretical framework and core concepts. For the sake of clarity, I shall focus on four major arguments of ethical literary criticism, namely, the ethical origin of literature, the materialist nature of literary text, ethical selection, and Sphinx factor.

About the origin of literature, there have emerged a number of hypotheses, such as Mimetic Theory, Catharsis Theory, and Labor Theory. So far, the most influential theory on the origin of literature has been Labor Theory, which argues that literature, or arts in a broad sense, has originated from human labor. Frederick Engels claims that the development of labor “necessarily helped to bring the members of society closer together by increasing cases of mutual support and joint activity, and by making clear the advantage of this joint activity to each individual. In short, men in the making arrived at the point where *they had something to say to each other*” (Engels 454-455, italics original). Unlike Engels, Nie forcefully argues that “labor is just one of the conditions for human beings to produce arts” (Nie, “Ethical Literary” 14). In his opinion, “literature is produced out of the need of humans to express their views on morality or the desire to share their ethical experience” (14). Nie’s reasoning goes as follows: when early human beings identified the need for collaboration and cooperation in their working, they learned to deal with their relations with others, which gradually brought them to recognition of order. Consequently, their recognition of collaboration, cooperation, and order marks the initial form of ethical relations. In turn, human beings created scripts and written characters out of their desire to express those ethical relations and ethical values, so that they could document the incidents of their collaboration coupled with their own understandings. “In doing so, they turned abstract life stories into written texts made of letters and words, which in turn served as references or guides for them as well as for their descendants to pursue a worthy life. The texts generated in this manner can be considered as the earliest form of literature” (14).

Closely related to Nie's argument about the ethical origin of literature is his elaboration upon textual forms of literature. According to Nie, words and texts are two fundamental conditions for studying literature. Specifically, words are the carriers of meanings; while texts are the forms taken by literature (Nie, *Introduction* 16). In accordance with the existence and consequential forms (or to be better phrased as *media*) of words, texts fall into three broad categories: brain text, material text, and digital text. Before the creation of words, literature mainly takes on the form of brain text, which is defined as "memory stored in the human brain. As a peculiar biological form, brain text contains human beings' perceptions and cognitions of the world" (270). In the history of literature, there have existed many kinds of literary genres that resort to the brain text. Typical examples are mythologies, folk tales, and legendary stories. Those genres of literature taken on the form of the brain text have been passed down from one generation to the next through oral storytelling, though they cannot be inherited biologically. Consider oral literature as an example. In contrast to the popular view that negates the existence of textual forms of oral literature, Nie sees it in a different way. He postulates that "Literature cannot exist without texts, and oral literature is no exception. Unlike written literature, oral literature is communicated not through the visible form of material text but through the invisible form of the brain text" (271). Nie goes further to argue that "Fundamentally, all literary works result from the writers' retrieving, assembling, processing, rewriting, storing and representing of the brain text. To put it another way, without the brain text, there wouldn't be writings produced by writers, and thus there wouldn't exist material text and digital text" (271). Unlike the brain text, the material text usually takes those lifeless materials as its carriers such as paper, rock, pottery, metal, etc. Nie considers the creation of the material text as a revolutionary event in the field of communications and literature, which in turn helps the brain text to be liberated from its abstractness and to take on the concrete material form. Thus, it wins "the independence of literature" (278). Compared with the brain text and the material text, digital text or electronic text can be easily identified as those textual forms "stored as documents or files in hard drives, disks, or other electronic devices" (278). In my opinion, though the digital text is derived from the brain text and the material text, it does not mean that the digital text can replace the other two textual forms. That is to say, all three textual forms are expected to be in coexistence instead of replacing one with another, and they enjoy complementary relations instead of exclusive ones.

Equally significant is Nie's contribution to the understanding of human nature, which is aptly illuminated through the concept *ethical selection*. I agree with Nie when he sees the fact that "In the history of human civilization, the biggest problem for mankind to solve is to make a choice between the identities of animals and the

identities of human beings” (32). It is true that why and how human beings have come into existence are always central to scholars’ interest. As is known, Charles Darwin developed his evolutionary theory to account for the physical forms of human beings, who have evolved from apes through a long process of biological selection. Later on, Friedrich Engels, relying on Darwin’s theory, goes a step further to argue that it is labor that differentiates human beings from animals. However, in Nie’s view, labor is merely one of the conditions that enable human beings to evolve and to develop from apes. In other words, both Darwin and Engels succeed in accounting for where human beings have come from but fail to draw a fundamental distinction between man and animals (31-34). “Biological selection,” Nie argues, “is the first step taken by human beings, which helps them to be who they are in a biological sense. What truly differentiates human beings from animals is the second step — ethical selection” (267). It is ethical selection that helps to endow human being with reason and ethical consciousness, which eventually turn them into an ethical being. To illustrate the differences between biological selection and ethical selection, Nie deliberately uses the story of Adam and Eve, who are physically different from other living creatures in the Garden of Eden. However, so far as knowledge is concerned, they remain basically the same as other animals, being naked with no sense of shame, taking fruit from trees when hungry, and drinking water from streams when thirsty. The act of eating the fruits from the Tree of Knowledge is rather significant in the sense that Adam and Eve have thus acquired knowledge and ability to tell good from evil, which accounts for their consequential actions of feeling ashamed of their nakedness and looking for leaves to cover their secret places. With reference to this biblical tale, Nie argues that “Eating the forbidden fruit and the consequential ability acquired to tell good from evil helps Adam and Eve to complete their ethical selection and become human beings not only in a biological sense, but also in an ethical sense. In other words, the ability to tell good and evil sets up a criterion for distinguishing human beings from animals. The notion of good and evil emerges along with ethical consciousness and is used to evaluate human beings only. In this sense, good and evil constitute the basis of ethics” (35-36).

In connection with ethical selection, Nie coined another helpful concept *Sphinx factor*, which is derived from his new reading of the Sphinx Riddle in Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex*. From the perspective of ethical literary criticism, the Sphinx Riddle can be seen not as “an expression of issue concerning humanity’s doomed failure to fight against fate, but as an exploration of the mystery why humans are such beings.” (36). In Nie’s opinion, the feature of the Sphinx’s combination of a human head and an animal body implies that “the most important feature of a human image lies in its head, which stands for reason of human beings emerged in the evolutionary process,

and that human beings evolve from animals and thus still contain some features belonging to animals” (38). With this point in his mind, Nie names this feature the “Sphinx factor”, which is composed of two parts: the human factor and the animal factor. Specifically, the human factor equals “ethical consciousness embodied by the human head, which results from human being’s biological selection in their evolution from savagery to civilization”; while the animal factor refers to “human beings’ animal instinct, which is mainly controlled by their primitive desires” (38-39). Viewed in this light, the Sphinx Riddle can be interpreted as an ethical proposition for human beings to meditate after their going through biological selection — being human or being animal, which in turn requests them to complete their evolutionary process by undertaking the ethical selection. In terms of the Sphinx factor, Nie argues that “the various combinations and alternations of the human factor and the animal factor generate a variety of ethical events and ethical conflicts in literature, thus conveying different moral implications” (38). There are an uncountable number of literary works demonstrating the interplay between the human factor and the animal factor. Typical examples are *Oedipus Rex*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Cloven Viscount*, and *The Journey to the West*.

David and Womack observe that at present, “the ethical consideration of a given work of literature ranges from the close reading of the text itself — particularly in terms of the dilemmas and conundrums presented in the lives of the characters that we encounter there — to the ethical questions that the story raises in the readers own life beyond the margins of the text” (David and Womack x, emphasis mine). Apparently, David and Womack place much stress upon the moral implications of literature for readers. To some extent, ethical literary criticism shares the similar position. As Nie says, “In specific literary works, central to ethics are those about the recognized and accepted ethical relations between human beings, between human beings and society, and between human beings and nature, as well as about the ethical norms and orders established upon those relations” (Nie, *Introduction* 13). “The mission of literature,” Nie claims, “is to write about changes of those ethical relations and their consequences, so as to offer enlightening power for the progression of human civilization” (13). In order to uncover the ethical nature of literature and the moral implications of given literary works, Nie also proposes some other insightful concepts, including ethical taboo, ethical environment, ethical identity, ethical confusion, rational will, irrational will, natural will, free will, etc., which are amply illuminated in his *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* and other relevant publications.

Ethical Literary Criticism in China: Receptions and Applications

There are countless books and over 1,700 essays concerning ethical literary criticism

published in Chinese journals in the years between January 2005 and August 2014 (as indexed in CNKI). More surprisingly, Nie's ground-breaking essay "Ethical Approach to Literary Studies: A New Perspective" (2004) has been cited over 200 times (as indexed in CNKI). The above mentioned hard facts reveal Chinese scholars' enthusiasm for embracing ethical literary criticism, as well as the warm receptions and wide applications of this new critical theory in China. A brief survey shows that all those publications related to ethical literary criticism fall mainly into two encompassing categories: (1) those concerned with theoretical explorations of ethical literary criticism; and (2) those concerned with the applications of ethical literary criticism to specific literary works.

For those scholars working in the first category, we can identify such names as Liu Jianjun, Zhang Jie, Lu Yaodong, Li Dinqing, Long Yun, and many others. For instance, Zhang Jie and Liu Zengmei examine the methodological basis of literary ethical criticism from a perspective of pluralism, claiming that moral standards based on the value judgment are pluralistic, that ethical literary criticism ought to be open and dialogical accordingly, and it is not to preach morally at readers, but rather to pose questions, to be thought-provoking, and to hold dialogues with readers (Zhang and Liu 137-143). Similarly, in their co-authored paper "Current Situation and Future Trend of Ethical Literary Criticism," Xiu Shuxin and Liu Jianjun identify three major problems existing in ethical literary criticism: undifferentiated use of the terms of ethics and morality; confusion over ethical literary criticism and moral criticism; and a lack of classification of related terms. With these three problems in their minds, Xiu and Liu suggest redefining ethics, combining ethical literary criticism with other critical approaches, and proposing the key terms of ethical literary criticism and moral criticism (Xiu and Liu 165-170).

For those scholars working in the second category, we can name quite a few scholars such as Liu Maosheng, Yang Gexin, Liu Hongwei, Wang Songlin, Tian Junwu, Shang Biwu, and others. For instance, employing a set of toolkits like ethical identity, Sphinx factor, and ethical context from ethical literary criticism, Liu Hongwei reads Harold Pinter's *Betrayal* in a new light. She argues that the "extramarital love" between Jerry and Emma demonstrates that Man is an existence of Sphinx factor, fully embodying the ethical conflicts among rational will, free will and irrational will. Their extramarital relationship results from the uncontrolled free will as well as the irrational will controlling their sense of moral obligation. Jerry's choice of going back home shows the return of his ethical consciousness, and the power of the rational will (Liu 26-33). With reference to ethical literary criticism, Shang Biwu re-reads the "daughter-selling" event of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and decodes a set of ethical complexes in the novel, such as ethical choice, ethical identity and ethical consciousness, and thus

arrives at a new interpretation of this fictional work (Shang, “Ethical Choice” 14-23).

It also needs to be noted that, there have been several symposiums held in China to explore ethical literary criticism as a new methodology for literary studies. Namely, there was “China’s National Symposium on Ethical Literary Criticism” (Wuhan, Oct. 2005) attended by over 100 scholars, who were eager to express their interest and enthusiasm for this burgeoning critical paradigm, and “The International Symposium on Ethical Literary Criticism” (Yichang, Dec. 2012) attended by over 150 scholars and a variety of issues concerning ethics and literature were discussed. A particularly fruitful result of Yichang conference is the establishment of International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism, the mission of which is to provide a forum and resource for scholars and advanced students all over the world an opportunity to share their findings in the study of literature and ethics. There was “The Third International Symposium on Ethical Literary Criticism” (Ningbo, Oct. 2013) attended by nearly 200 scholars coming from home and abroad, which was saliently marked by internationalization, and much wider range of issues and perspectives that have been tackled with. And, there is “The Fourth International Symposium on Ethical Literary Criticism” (Shanghai, Dec. 2014), which is to be attended by over 200 scholars from different regions and countries.

It is not only the scholars and the journals that have shown their unprecedented enthusiasm for embracing ethical literary criticism. As a new critical approach proposed and constructed by a Chinese scholar, ethical literary criticism has also caught the eyes of China’s National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Sciences, which first funded Nie’s *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* and later selected it into the National Achievements Library of Philosophy and Social Sciences. With his new project “Ethical Literary Criticism: Theory Construction and Critical Practice” recently funded by China’s National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Sciences, we have strong reasons to expect Nie and his team to bring us more surprises.

Forward Thinking: Future Developments of Ethical Literary Criticism

Zhang Jiang keenly observes that “Contemporary Western critical theories are deeply rooted in the Western culture, which makes them different from Chinese culture in such aspects as language, ethics and aesthetics. Consequently, their applications in China are limited” (Zhang 4). About the future developments of Chinese critical theories, Zhang suggests “returning to Chinese writings and avoiding too much reliance upon Western critical theories; returning to Chinese context and inheriting the traditional Chinese literary theories; and maintaining the balance between external studies and internal studies” (4). Insightful are Zhang’s suggestions, which are

also applicable to ethical literary criticism. To expand and enrich Zhang's thought-provoking suggestions, I would like to add three points to that list.

First, a set of critical principles of ethical literary criticism need to be proposed. Despite its applicable frameworks and terminologies, ethical literary criticism needs also to offer critics a set of rules or principles to follow when they attempt to pursue an objective criticism of a given literary work. For instance, in my opinion, there might be a three-step procedure of reading literature across ethical literary criticism, that is, reconstruction, description and evaluation. The first step is to reconstruct the ethical environment, ethical identities of characters, ethical order governing a given fictional world, etc. The second step is to describe changes of characters' ethical identities, the breaking of ethical order, and their respective consequences, etc. The third step is to evaluate moral inclinations projected by the works and to reveal their moral implications for the contemporary society.

Second, the interconnections between ethics and narrative forms are to be examined. It is true that "literature is an ethical expression of a human society in a given historical period, and the nature of literature is about ethics" (Nie, *Introduction* 13). However, literary works vary in effectiveness of conveying their ethical experience and moral enlightenment to readers. Presumably, all writers resort to narratives as a means for their ethical aims. In that case, it is necessary to investigate the writers' employment of narrative strategies and their consequential effects upon the expression of ethical values.

Third, a dialogue needs to be placed between ethical criticism in the West and ethical literary criticism in China. Chinese scholars are very familiar with ethical criticism practiced by the Westerners; while the Western academics know very little about the tradition of Chinese moral criticism and the newly established ethical literary criticism. I think, 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.

It has to be admitted that some of these suggestions have already been taken. Consider the dialogues between ethical criticism in the West and ethical literary criticism in China as a quick example. In addition to organizing annual convention of International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism, Nie has guest-edited several special issues on ethical literary criticism in some international journals, which are either under preparation or forthcoming. To name a few, "Ethical Literary Criticism: East and West" in *Arcadia: International Journal of Literary Studies*, "Ethical Literary Criticism" in *Universitas-Monthly Review of Philosophy and Culture*, and "Fiction and Ethics in the 21st Century" in *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*.

When reflecting upon "theory now and again", Jonathan Culler stresses that "In

literary studies, theory was first deployed for thinking about the nature of the critical enterprise and for *producing new readings of literary works*" (Culler 230, emphasis mine). In Culler's opinion, the most essential quality of a good critical theory is to produce new readings of literary works. In that case, I think Culler should be happy if he reads what Nie has stated about the aims and purpose of working towards ethical literary criticism: "The overall goal of ethical literary criticism is to shed new light on a given literary text by performing a close reading from an ethical perspective... The significance and value of ethical literary criticism is not to repeat the existing conclusions or arguments but to arrive at new interpretations, cognitions, and new findings, surpassing thereby the existing scholarship, and ultimately moving critical scholarship forward" (Nie, "Ethical Literary" 22). Thus, I would like to end this essay by reiterating what I have argued somewhere previously: formulating and practicing ethical literary criticism, Nie "exemplifies the best resource for the study of literature by facilitating new ways of engaging with literature and fostering new understandings of literary history. In this sense, it resonates not only with Chinese scholars, but ought to resonate with scholars in the West" (Shang, "Ethical Criticism" 6).

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