

The Clash of Amalgamations: Tomo Virk's Approach to the Ethical Turn in Literary Criticism

Matic Kocijančič

Abstract: The author discusses the monograph *Etični obrat v literarni vedi* (*The Ethical Turn in Literary Studies*), in which Tomo Virk presents and evaluates the main currents of ethical criticism from the 1980s to the present. The first part of the paper outlines Virk's confrontation with the humanist tradition of the ethical turn and sets out the basic polemical concepts of his study. The second part of the paper analyses more closely one of these concepts, the so-called amalgamation, and its use in Virk's critique of equations made in literary theory between rhetoric, aesthetics, politics and ethics. The conclusion identifies Virk's original theoretical contribution to ethical criticism.

Key words: Tomo Virk; ethical turn; ethical criticism; amalgamation; neo-Aristotelianism.

Author: Matic Kocijančič, is Researcher at Department of Comparative Literature and Literary Theory, University of Ljubljana, Askerceva 2, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia. His research interests include ancient Greek drama, philosophy of tragedy, and post-war theatre (Email: matic.kocijancic@ff.uni-lj.si).

标题：融合中的冲突：托莫·维尔克论文学批评中的伦理转向

内容摘要：托莫·维尔克在其的学术专著《文学研究中的伦理转向》中讨论了二十世纪八十年代以来伦理批评的主要流派。本文作者首先梳理了维尔克对伦理转向中人文主义的研究，并提出了他研究中引起争议的观点；其次作者集中讨论了融合这一概念以及维尔克如何运用这一概念在修辞学、美学、政治学和伦理学之间构建自己的文学批评模式；最后本文作者总结了维尔克对伦理批评的理论贡献。

关键词：托莫·维尔克；伦理转向；伦理批评；融合；新人文主义

作者简介：马蒂克·柯西贾希奇，卢布尔雅那大学比较文学与文学理论系研究学者。研究领域主要为古希腊戏剧、悲剧哲学和战后戏剧。

Tomo Virk, one of the leading Slovene literary theorists and historians, has recently published the book *Etični obrat v literarni vedi* (*The Ethical Turn in Literary Studies*).¹ The book is divided into four parts. In the first two parts, Virk gives an overview of the phenomenon mentioned in the title, the intensive interrogation of the relationship between literature and ethics that pervaded American literary studies — and was soon to have a global impact — in the 1980s and 1990s. In the field of literary criticism, this evident growth of ethical studies became known as the “ethical turn”, while the broader term “ethical criticism” was applied to its prominent representatives, theses and methods. The third part of the book is devoted to Nie Zhenzhao, “undoubtedly the leading non-Western representative of the ethical turn” (10), in whose work Virk finds not only “a new, minutely elaborated, systematic approach to literature” but also one of the most successful editorial, organizational and institutional supports for ethical literary studies (25). The fourth and final part of the book, which forms a thematic arc together with the introduction, sets out Virk’s original identification of productive starting points for contemporary ethical criticism, along with its main aporias and promises.

Outline of the “Humanist Tradition” in Ethical Criticism

In his historical outline, Virk takes into account the close connection between the fields of philosophical ethics and ethical criticism; as he highlights throughout, it was precisely in the key decades of the ethical turn that the mutual influences between the two fields clearly went both ways. The two predominant ethical orientations in contemporary literary studies — which Virk calls “the humanist tradition” and the “ethics of otherness” — have been shaped by philosophical impulses. In the context of the first we find an attempted literary-critical application and development of Aristotelian ethics. Virk discusses the two leading representatives of this orientation, Martha Nussbaum and Wayne Booth, under the joint (sub)heading of “neo-Aristotelianism”. In the context of the second we find literary studies confronting the ethical challenge of Emmanuel Levinas and the “primacy of the other/Other” (158). One of the first works in the canon of the ethical turn as outlined by Virk, Nussbaum’s *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, which Virk calls “one of the central and most influential works of ethical criticism” (35), already in its subtitle directs the reader’s attention to the question of the relationship between philosophy and literature — and the connections between their characteristic discursive strategies. Here the American

1 The author acknowledges the financial support from the Slovenian Research Agency (research core funding No. P6-0239).

philosopher and literary critic, who throughout the work unveils the diverse ethical nuances of the connections between *emotion* and *belief*, programmatically sums up her philosophical apology for literature as ethical reflection *par excellence*: “One good way to get really clear philosophically about what acceptance of a belief in the commensurability of values would really mean in a human life is to turn to the literary imagination, asking for stories of people who really live this belief, stories that would show us with a concreteness and reach that are frequently absent in abstract philosophical reflections on the topic, just what the world would look like to such people” (124).

This dimension of her project largely coincides with one of Virk’s defining intuitions, according to which “literature itself — and not just the abstract theoretical and logical discourse of philosophy and theory — is perhaps the most important form of moral philosophy or ethics, that is, the most appropriate *thematization* of ethics, the ethical, ethical questions and dilemmas”; he defines this intuition as “the logical consequence” of one of the “most productive insights of ethical criticism”, namely, that the “ethical situation is singular” and that “in this singularity lies the analogy between ethics and literature” (331). Though Virk perceives “much that is unclear, inconsistent, based on a preconceived thesis, and otherwise flawed” in Nussbaum’s work, he still considers the “‘sound core’ of her theory” to contain “one of the most complete and systematic forms of ethical criticism” (76). He acknowledges her as “one of the founders of the ethical turn in literary studies” (35) and as an important link between the ethical turns in philosophy and in literary studies (36).

Virk gives Booth, too, a decisive place among the instigators of ethical criticism. According to Virk, Booth’s work *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* — along with *Love’s Knowledge* and Hillis Miller’s *The Ethics of Reading* — “triggered the avalanche we call the ethical turn” (78), and is at the same time “also more specifically a work of literary studies than the works of Nussbaum and Hillis Miller, which take a more philosophical tone” (88). He is nonetheless far more critical toward Booth than toward Nussbaum; while appreciating Booth’s project for its strenuous and quantitatively impressive “cataloging of dilemmas [of ethical criticism]” (100), Virk remains unconvinced by most of his theoretical propositions, be it the broadening of the notion of *literature* to certain traditionally non-literary genres and art forms, the erasure of the difference between the ethical and the aesthetic, or Booth’s insistently pragmatic discourse, which in Virk’s view too often ends up in “inconsistency, laxity and superficiality” (89) precisely for its forced pragmatism.

Beside his analysis of the neo-Aristotelian findings of Nussbaum and Booth — and of their critics, among whom he discusses Charles Altieri, Hanna Meretoja and Richard Posner more closely — Virk also includes in his presentation of the humanist current of the ethical turn an outline of so-called narrative ethical criticism, to which he adds — with considerable reservations over terminology (154) — a sub-chapter on “ethical narratology”. In this two-part section, he lays out and evaluates the intersections between the ethical and literary-theoretical projects of Alasdair MacIntyre, Hanna Meretoja, James Phelan, Wolfgang G. Müller and Ansgar Nünning. Their central theses extend and deepen the neo-Aristotelian reflection on the superiority — or at least the indispensable role — of literature in the thematizing of ethical dilemmas, but do so by concentrating on the ethical status of *narrative* as such, which leads many representatives of this movement to a unique conceptual turn in which they no longer understand literature merely as the primary medium for ethical reflection, but also raise the question of the narrative structure of life itself, of the irreducible *narrativity* of the real ethical situation. This section, too, is characterized by its close entanglement with related — preceding and contemporary — philosophical projects; already in his initial delineation of the problem, Virk draws on theses and quotes from Bernard Williams and Paul Ricoeur, but he pays the most attention to Alasdair MacIntyre — who is primarily a philosopher and theologian — and to Hanna Meretoja, who is a comparatist, not a philosopher, but whose “narrative ethical criticism is richly lined with philosophy” (110).

In his polemical juxtaposition of these two writers — who concur at least in their basic view of narrativity as a fundamental ethical question — Virk stresses the problem of the homogeneity of life-as-narrative. To MacIntyre, “life [is] a uniform search for identity and meaning and a completed, coherent whole, a narrative” (112), but Meretoja takes the opposing view on two levels: first, narrativity does not determine life itself, but only its transmission; second, any attempt to transmit the narrative of life is inevitably many-layered, non-linear, often even fragmented; “life does not form one coherent narrative, but is instead a process of constant narrative reinterpretation” (Meretoja 2018, 44). This incoherence, which prevents interpretive stagnation in how we relate to our own lives, also stems from the inevitable plurality of narrative voices through which our lives are articulated, be it as “internal dialogue, dialogue with others, intersubjective relations or social and cultural narratives” (Virk 112).

MacIntyre’s project itself is in principle favourably received in Virk’s book; among other things, Virk writes that MacIntyre has “given a fairly detailed

philosophical and anthropological argument for the unbreakable tie between ethics and narrativity” and that his “findings are a good example of the thinking that forms [...] the innermost core of every narrative ethical criticism”, namely “the thinking that has connected the outcomes of the two turns in the humanities of the last third of the 20th century: the narrative and the ethical” (109). Nevertheless, Virk is won over by Meretoja’s misgivings; in her refined critique of MacIntyre, Nussbaum and Booth, he recognizes a welcome “grounding” and hermeneutic “specification” of ethical criticism (113); he also takes a positive view of her wider hermeneutic starting point, such as her stress on the ethical potential of narrative “to cultivate and expand our sense of the possible” (Meretoja 2018, 35), which he even declares to be “Meretoja’s most innovative contribution” (Virk 114). He sees her approach to narrative ethics as “the most appropriate and elaborate model of narrative criticism to date”, although Virk immediately adds to this praise the explanation that “this kind of criticism is not the only possible approach to literature at the intersection of narrativity and ethics” (121).

“Unjustified Amalgamation” as the Basic Problem of Ethical Criticism

While the encounter with the “ethics of otherness”¹ in Virk’s book takes about as much space as the already outlined discussion of the “humanist tradition”, it is particularly in connection with the latter that Virk develops the basic polemical concepts of his study, which he later tests out on all the other movements of ethical criticism under discussion. One of these basic concepts, and the one I will focus on in the present part of my paper, is *amalgamation*. This is an expression that

1 Virk divides the section on “the ethics of otherness” into two parts. In the first he discusses Emmanuel Levinas, who “with his ethics actually remains the foremost philosophical reference of ethical criticism” (181), “more frequent than e.g. Aristotle or Derrida” (158). In the second he discusses deconstructionist ethical criticism, focusing on Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller and Gayatri Spivak. Deconstruction, Virk finds, “plays a somewhat unusual role in the ethical turn in literary studies. Most of the central protagonists and chroniclers of this development stress that one of the main motive forces for the turn was precisely the glut of deconstruction and the opposition to it in literary studies. On the other hand, chroniclers (sometimes the same) also include the deconstructionist version among the central currents of ethical criticism” (182). Even though Virk is enthusiastic about many of the stylistic features and the “analytical perspicacity” (295) of the leading deconstructionists, their confrontations with ethical questions largely leave him cold: “Deconstruction [...] fails at positively grasping the ethical. This even applies to its celebrated notion of the *relation* and *responsibility/responsiveness to the Other*, which gets its specific ethical coloring only in a field outside the (inter)textuality characteristic of deconstruction, that is, in the field of *intersubjectivity* (which despite occasional over-complicated theorizing is front and center e.g. for Spivak). Such an ethic of otherness was probably most influentially developed by Levinas, not by deconstruction” (295—296).

Virk applies critically — often along with pejoratives like “unjustified”, “hasty” and so on — to those attempts at solving ethical-literary quandaries that rashly equate the ethical dimensions of literatures with other, traditionally connected, but nevertheless independent areas of life, thought and art. Virk, who appreciates ambivalence and paradoxes — even, and especially, in the ethical domain — as a basic constituent part of literature, thinks this attitude risks impoverishing the discourse of literary theory for no convincing reason. He particularly points to three forms of amalgamation in ethical criticism:

1. *Amalgamation of ethics and rhetoric* (92, 123). Virk harshly criticizes those parts of Booth’s work that fall into “amalgamation of the ethical and rhetorical understanding of *ethos*” (92) or “amalgamation of the philosophical-ethical concept of *êthos* with the rhetorical” (157), as he puts it later, seeing in this problem one of the most noticeable weaknesses of the wider neo-Aristotelian coalition in the ethical turn. He describes “the watering down of ethics with rhetoric” as “one of the poorer, but not one of the rarer options within ethical criticism” (323).¹ He finds the basic reason for this “option” in a problematic reading of Aristotle — in “the derivation of the ethical from the *êthos* that is employed e.g. by Booth, Müller in L. Korthals Altes (and vaguely suggested also by de Man)” (322—323) — in which the rhetorical *êthos* (one of the three modes of persuasion in the Aristotelian art of rhetoric beside *logos* and *pathos*) is equated with the underpinnings of ethics as such.

2. *Amalgamation of ethics and aesthetics* (92, 316). In contrast with the “equation of the ethical with the aesthetic” (157), Virk defends “the position that regardless of the fact that every literary work is made up of aesthetic, ethical and epistemological dimensions which are mutually connected in various ways and therefore form a kind of whole, these dimensions must nevertheless also be distinguished from each other without privileging one at the expense of the others. If we act differently [...], we actually slip out of ethical criticism and find ourselves deep in moralist, ideological criticism [...], a phenomenon that is not at all a thing of the past, but highly topical today

1 In connection with this phenomenon, Virk fleetingly notes the related linguistic amalgamations in deconstruction, “where ethics is sometimes understood as a linguistic phenomenon or equated with understanding or even with the ontological structure of (language-moderated) reality in general.” Against such a theoretical horizon, ethics, “takes on the role of a rather freely floating signifier which can be stuck onto any signified whatsoever if we only formulate it with enough skill” (323).

and, in the guise of the ethical turn, no less self-confident than before” (316). The danger of moralism is of course also connected with the aforementioned terminological quandaries of distinguishing between ethics and morality,¹ which often end up conflating them completely (315) and thus inevitably also descend into moralism. Particularly with regard to the “humanist tradition” in the ethical turn, Virk points out the “dangerous closeness between ethical and moralist criticism” (157).

3. *Amalgamation of ethics and politics*. Here Virk — more clearly than with his other critical observations — finds many fellow-thinkers who see the trend of equating the ethical with the political as a burning problem (327-328); among others, these include David Parker, Hillis Miller, Adam Zachary Newton, C. A. J. Coady, Seumas Miller and Nie Zhenzhao. Here, he cites Nie’s critique of “political” approaches to literary criticism, with particular regard to “Feminism, Ecocriticism, New Historicism, and Postcolonialism”, which he accuses of “a deficit of ethical engagement” (Nie 2015, 84). Virk defines the relationship between ethics and politics as hierarchical — “politics is based on ethics and derives from it” — and at the same time conflictual — “ethics and politics are not at all the same thing; in some regards they are even opposed to each other” (329). He points to Sophocles’ *Antigone* as the emblematic literary account of this dynamics (ibid.).

The phenomenon of so-called politically correct criticism — characterised by merciless score-settling with the great literary works of the past in the name of modern moral stances, calls for the radical transformation of literary canons in accordance with the collective values prevailing at the moment, etc. — actually rests on a kind of synthesis of all three types of amalgamations: in this “ethics”, the “ethical” is only a suitable or unsuitable rhetorical strategy which expresses correct or incorrect moral principles, the highest potential aim of which is to participate in the political project of bringing about social justice. Ethics becomes another name for politics, with moralism as the main weapon of its struggle. Virk perceives a considerable dose of hypocrisy in the fashionable forms of critical political correctness, particularly in their progressivism-based aggression against traditional moral codes: “The characteristic psychological deformation of many of the newer approaches that are considered ‘progressive’ and sometimes tied to

1 Virk devotes a significant part of the book’s introduction and conclusion to terminological problems in the distinction between ethics and morality, both in literary studies and in philosophy (see 12-17, 313-330).

the issue of so-called ‘political correctness’ is that they are highly critical towards traditional moralist forms of ethical criticism, but fail to recognize themselves in this type, even though they are themselves highly moralist in orientation and assess literary works mainly from the point of view of moral values (their own, of course), giving less weight, if any, to the aesthetic” (31). Despite this “lesser weight” given to the aesthetic — or perhaps because of it — the amalgam of politically based moralism, under the flag of theoretical ethics, ultimately subordinates to itself all other dimensions of the literary art, including the aesthetic ones. Virk sees this subordination as one of the key aporias of contemporary ethical literary studies — the unreflective, casual passage back and forth between proudly contemporary and supposedly time-proof value systems: “It is right that, from today’s point of view, the reprehensible ethical acts and standards of the past, too, should come in for their share of our criticism; after all, this is one (perhaps even the main) way in which ethical/moral awareness is raised. But this should not be allowed to influence our aesthetic evaluation of past literary works. Those classical literary works that are based on ethical standards unacceptable today are in principle just as ethically ‘reprehensible’ as those based on contemporary ones; we only have yet to realize this perspective [...]. But both the historically older ethical standards and those of the present day always exist only within the frame of what is possible at a given time. The literary works based on them — to put it in simple and somewhat clumsy terms — are but the reflection of their time. And — to simplify once more — their aesthetic value depends only on how they reflect their time, not on what were the standard values of that time. For the sensitive (or simply: the sufficiently professional) literary historian or interpreter, then, the ‘moral failings’ of a work — which are failings only from the present point of view and not from that of the limited possibilities of that time — should not also be taken as aesthetic ones” (100).

Towards an Authentic Ethical Criticism

What, then, is Virk’s alternative? How should the “literary historian or interpreter” in his view act when faced with the ethical challenges of high literature? What positive principles of ethical criticism can be found in Virk’s opposition to amalgamation and in the other central themes of his book? At this point, we return to the question of the ethical singularity of the literary situation, which to Virk is the central topos of any convincing ethical criticism. He does not value this singularity for its help with demonstration and systematization, but quite the opposite, for its obstinate independent witness to the decisive and often unbridgeable paradoxes, ambivalence and contradictions of the human experience. As a place of systemic

predicament. As the exception that renders the rule problematic.

The ethical in literature, in his view, is most fully authentic precisely when it precludes placing things into a preexisting scheme; only then is it authentically ethical, only then is it authentically literary. The method of ethical criticism that is traced here, then, is oriented toward the preservation and communication of these unique ethical dimensions of literature, toward a thorough analysis of their depth and range, and not least also toward their defense against all attempts at simplifying instrumentalizations, be they complex theoretical amalgamations or one-dimensional activist appropriations. The kind of criticism that Virk advocates “takes place as a precise, careful reading of literary texts and, where ethics is concerned, learning from these texts, and not folding them up into preexisting templates of ethical theory” (332). It poses the question whether the most profound ethical dilemmas that are expressed in literature are enigmas that call on us to solve them — and whether they can be solved — or whether they convey the fundamental constants of human experience, its inalienable essence, full of internal struggles, contradictions and ambivalence.

Virk’s critical starting point — which is strongly inclined toward the second answer — therefore differs from the approaches he criticizes most sharply, and not only in terms of the spectrum of scientific and methodological preferences; at the heart of his polemic we can see a clash of two world-view paradigms. The world view that Virk’s critical project implicitly opposes is based on the optimistic illusion that all human problems can be solved through a refined system of collective rules and values, through the bureaucratization of life; in the context of criticism based on such an outlook, literature (and usually most other artistic enterprises as well) is degraded to a pedagogical medium that introduces the reader to the principles of a wider value system (a little more artfully and entertainingly than rule-books and textbooks do). This is an outlook that is anti-literary in its very nature. Seen from such a world-view, the literary situation is valuable only as a demonstration aid that in the final analysis remains clearly embedded in a department of the wider moral bureaucracy. This means that its singularity is valuable only when it is illusionary; when it is only a masked non-singularity, susceptible to unmasking. Real observation of the ethical uniqueness of the literary situation, as Virk convincingly shows, lies beyond the horizon of such criticism.

In the final paragraphs of his book, Virk raises a discursive question as well: What theoretical language, what theoretical form best suits the principles of authentic ethical criticism? To Virk, one of the fundamental problems of contemporary ethical-critical discourse is how it is trapped in the “primacy of the

theoretical”, in the illusion of a pure, immaculate theoretical discourse, which would present general truths about the essence of literature beyond the literary; he perceives this often unreflective, but always fateful assumption even in literary theorists who in his opinion do understand the meaning of the Romantic thematization of literature’s “insights into reality”, said to be different from or even “higher” than those of philosophy (he highlights Hölderlin and Novalis as the key Romantic references for this question), but fail to embed them discursively in their own critical practice (331). Their schematic language in itself dictates schematic contents. What discourse, then, can successfully resist such a “primacy of the theoretical”?

The concluding surprise of Virk’s book lies in his answer to this question, his first positive use of the notion of amalgamation: “The appropriate thematization of ethics [...] draws close to the Derridean (or even the earlier Heideggerian) approach, which intentionally amalgamates philosophical discourse with literary discourse” (331). Even though he sees numerous problems with the deconstructionist approach to literature — first and foremost the “immanent methodical nature of the approach” that “overlays its template on reality” so that “for all the attention it devotes to the singular, it nevertheless always uncovers the same structure in the background” (332)¹ — he still sees its inventive, expressive language as one of the most powerful weapons in the struggle against the rigid and blind schematism that marks the sidetracks of modern literary theory discourse.

The book’s conclusion thus once more confirms Virk’s love for intriguing contradictions: In the creative discursive amalgamation of literary theory, he spots the antidote to its most controversial conceptual amalgamations.

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1 Against this templating he counterposes another concluding positive example, Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, where “the reading of literary works is not guided by a preexisting theoretical template, but the findings derive from the more or less immanent analysis of literary works. [...] From such readings, the possibility of theory does not always follow — it only comes later and is subordinated to the findings of the ‘analysis’” (ibid.)

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