

伦理批评新动向：评《美国伦理批评研究》

A New Direction of Ethical Criticism: A Review of *American Ethical Criticism: A Survey*

苏坤 (Su Kun)

内容摘要：即使从其肇始于 20 世纪 80 年代的伦理转向算起，美国的伦理批评也已走过了近四十年的历程，然而在中国却未见一本专著介绍并分析美国的伦理批评，直至 2016 年杨革新教授出版《美国伦理批评研究》一书，才进一步丰富了该领域的研究。该书不仅清晰地描述了美国伦理批评的历史，而且还精辟地分析了美国伦理批评的对话与论战的形态和性质，以及美国伦理批评在中国语境化中的重构与完善。对于在其幽暗迷宫中探索伦理批评的中国读者来说，《美国伦理批评研究》就像一个光芒四射的火炬，为他们照亮了未来研究的道路。

关键词：伦理批评；伦理转向；文学伦理学批评；《美国伦理批评研究》

作者简介：苏坤，文学博士，上海交通大学外国语学院讲师，主要从事叙事学、英美文学研究。

Abstract: American ethical criticism has enjoyed a long history of about forty years since the ethical turn in the 1980s, but there was no Chinese monograph addressing the topic. This situation had not changed until Professor Yang Gexin published his *American Ethical Criticism: A Survey* in 2016, filling in the gap. The *Survey* not only presents a lucid narrative of the evolution of American ethical criticism but also provides incisive analyses of the forms and nature of the dialogues and debates among the critics in American ethical criticism, and of the reconstruction and improvement of American ethical criticism in the Chinese context. The *Survey* is really the first torch shining brightly for the Chinese readers who are in the dark labyrinth of their investigations of ethical criticism.

Key Words: ethical criticism; ethical turn; ethical literary criticism; *American Ethical Criticism: A Survey*

Author: Su Kun, Ph.D., is Lecturer at School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Jiao Tong University (Shanghai 200240, China). Her research areas include narratology, and British and American literature (Email: azuresusu@163.com).

There was no monograph in China tracing the evolution of American ethical

criticism before 2016 when Professor Yang Gexin published his *American Ethical Criticism: A Survey*. The first study in this regard both locally and internationally¹, the *Survey* was applauded warmly when it appeared in the academic circle, and received rapt attention from all sides, which testifies the widespread influence of ethical literary criticism and the hankering for clarifications in this field.

The *Survey* has four chapters, plus the “Introduction” and “Conclusion.” In the “Introduction,” with his profound theoretical attainment and intensive research work, Yang starts off with “ethical criticism” as a term of literary criticism by charting the changes of the terms of “ethical criticism,” and diachronically analyzing the relationship between literature and ethics. Yang also talks about the origins of American ethical criticism, of which he traces back to ancient Greece, particularly in regard to the relationship between literature and ethics. Yang’s historical textual study aided by etymological inquiry nails down the cultural, literary and philosophical origins of ethical criticism, ascertains or even justifies the bond between literature and ethics, and validates the theoretical premise of ethical criticism based on the origins and nature of literature. From Yang’s point of view, American ethical criticism originates from the age-old feud between literature and ethics, which, in its turn, can be recovered in ancient Greece as can be witnessed through the different doctrines of Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle’s practical ethics, in stark contrast to Plato’s ethical concepts and practices, laid the theoretical foundation of ethical criticism and paved the way for the development of ethical criticism. From Plato, Aristotle, and even down to Horace, literature and ethics have been endowed with different meanings, functions, and purposes. Though the connections between the two are treated differently, one common point is that ethic judgment is indispensable to the literary value of the literary work. Moral approach predominated in ancient literary theory. It is true that moral approach can’t be taken as ethical criticism, but the two share much affinity. Since ancient Greece and Rome, both orthodox religious literature and secular cavalier literature had depended heavily on moral education for literary works. Yang reasons that the prevalence of moral criticism in fit time triggered the robust growth of ethical criticism since the middle of the nineteenth century. At that time, the concept of “ethical criticism” was loosely and widely applied. But a salient feature of it is that it concerns itself no longer with the singular relationship between literature and morality, and that it shows clear signs of influence from other disciplines such as ethics, philosophy, theology, politics, and so on.

1 See Nie Zhengzhao, “Preface” to *American Ethical Criticism: A Survey* (Wuhan: Central China Normal UP, 2016) 7.

After the diachronic treatment of the metamorphosis of ethical criticism, Yang launches out into ethical criticism in the twentieth century in the first chapter. Despite the long tradition of moral approach to literary criticism and the real emergence of ethical criticism in the nineteenth century, ethical criticism, entering the twentieth century, met with onslaughts from various camps. For one, with the rise-to-the-fore of aestheticism claiming “art for art’s sake” which directs the reader’s attention to form instead of content, ethical criticism which is based on extra-textual moral principles was on wane and lost its luster. For another, the two consecutive turns in western literary study accelerated the exit of ethical criticism into the background. The first turn came when the focus was redirected away from the author toward literary text (e.g., formalism and New Criticism); the second was an adjustment from literary text to reader reception (e.g., reception theory [or reception aesthetics] and reader-response criticism). Either way, the eclipse of ethical criticism testifies the defiance against traditional literary study moulded since the time of Plato and Aristotle upon the template of moral consideration, and reflects radical changes in literary concepts and cognitive methods. The relegation of ethical criticism arrests the apprehension of many philosophers and literary critics in that they fear that moral standards in ethical criticism might take precedence over literary values in the judgment of literary works, and that literary criticism might metamorphose into a type of censorship.¹

The waning situation of ethical criticism, beginning in the late nineteenth century, had not changed until the 1980s. At the beginning of Chapter 2, Yang points out that it is in the 1980s that the “ethical turn” took place (32). In fact, Yang put forth this view three year earlier in his article “Ethical Turn in Literary Studies and the Revival of American Ethical Criticism.” He takes *New Literary History*’s pioneering special issue “Literature and/as Moral Philosophy” (1983) and J. Hillis Miller’s *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* as evidence of the reviving of ethical criticism.²

1 Yang Gexin, *American Ethical Criticism: A Survey* (Wuhan: Central China Normal University, 2016) 29. Citations from this edition hereafter will be just marked with page numbers.

2 However, one needs to notice that Herbert Grabes thinks that “critical anthologies like *The Moral Turn of Postmodernism* (1996) [ed. Gerhard Hoffmann, Alfred Hornung] or *The Ethics in Literature* (1999) [ed. Andrew Hadfield, Dominic Rainsford, Tim Woods] as well as Andrew Gibson’s *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas* (1999) document that in the later nineteen-nineties the so-called “ethical turn” had definitely taken place” (Grabes 39). Yet, this notice doesn’t mean that Yang is false; on the contrary he may be sounder as the 1980s really witnessed much writing on ethical criticism, and, in addition, Yang’s list of evidence includes those works published in the 1990s (see Yang *Survey* 38).

In Yang's account, the ethical turn is, in a way, a counterblow towards formalism and New Criticism since the "linguistic turn" and influenced by feminist criticism, postcolonial theory, multiculturalism, gay criticism, etc. Even philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty swerved to literary study, while Jacques Derrida and Paul Foucault in their reappraisal of the ethics of deconstruction helped turning the tide. And to complement the picture, the narrative turn came upon the stage. Martha Nussbaum, with her *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, and Wayne Booth, with his *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, called academia's attention to narrative ethics, and fuelled narrative ethic study. In Yang's reflection, the ethical turn is a historical necessity given the on-flow of different currents of modern thought and the consequential crosscurrents among them. The ethical turn, as was witnessed in 1980s, is more than a revival, a recovery, or a recall of the nineteenth century traditional literary study; it is simply a recapitulation, a replacement, and a re-contextualization, of ethical criticism in literature. Among the most salient and compelling features of this turn, Yang lays emphasis on the restoration of author's subject status, on reader's responsibility, and on the revelation of mores or ethical purpose through formal structures of the text and due weight given to social politics. He argues that the laudable points about this turn are interpersonal, social responsibility and self-correction absent in the earlier period of ethical criticism.

In the rest of Chapter 2, Yang devotes much space to the revival of the ethical criticism. First, he introduces three key figures of the old humanism tradition – F. R. Leavis, Lionel Trilling, and Northrop Frye — to point out their influence and status in the development of ethical criticism, lay bare the problems of the old humanism tradition, and prepare for the rise of neo-humanism ethical criticism (41-42). Then he lists Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum as two key figures of neo-humanism ethical criticism. Other contributors to the revival of ethical criticism include J. Hillis Miller, a deconstructionist, and Adam Zachary Newton, "a narratologist to be more exact" (98). Much influenced by Aristotle, Booth seems never to tear himself away from ethics in his writing. His neologism "conduction," revolutionary concept of "implied author," and acknowledgement of pluralism in ethical creation make up much of contemporary ethical criticism. Nussbaum is also much influenced by Aristotle. But she is more a philosopher than a rhetorician, basing her concepts of ethical criticism on moral philosophy (65). Although she marries literature to philosophy, and criticizes such sort ethical criticism that separates literature from philosophy, Nussbaum thinks that literature is never superior to philosophy (71), and maintains that "the values that are constitutive of

a good human life are plural and incommensurable” (71). “For Nussbaum, with the help of literature, one might be better able to be engaged in life and practice more ethically” (Yang “The Revival” 21).

While Booth and Nussbaum are the representatives of neo-humanism ethical criticism, J. Hillis Miller and Adam Zachary Newton are the representatives of deconstructionism ethical criticism. Miller’s ethics of reading, which is based on Kantian ethics, is deeply concerned with the “ethical moment” in the act of reading. He thinks that this “ethical moment” is “necessary,” and that it is “neither cognitive, nor political, nor social, nor interpersonal, but properly and independently ethical” (88). However, Miller’s ethical criticism goes beyond Kant’s for he thinks that the key elements of ethical criticism are “language theory, narrative theory, and a theory of personification” (89).

Newton, as mentioned above, is more a narratologist than a deconstructionist. In his *Narrative Ethics*, Newton makes the distinction between “between moral propositionality or the realm of the ‘Said’ and ethical performance, the domain of ‘Saying’” (99). He argues narrative is ethics by pointing out that “Narrators, listeners, and witnesses assume the responsibilities of ethical relation.... Fiction does not demarcate art from life” (100). The focus of his ethical criticism is on how and why we respond to different ethical voices. “My proposal of a narrative ethics implies simply narrative as ethics,” he says, “the ethical consequences of narrating a story and fictionalizing person, and the reciprocal claims binding teller, listener, witness, and reader in that process” (100). On the basis of Booth’s and Louise Rosenblatt’s theories, he develops a transactive theory of reading where texts shape reader and reader shapes text. “Each text, finally, analogizes aesthetic looking and human relation, showing the close relation between aesthetic perception and an ethics of Saying and Said” (101).

If Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 are a lucid narrative of the evolution of, and different schools or types of, American ethical criticism, then Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 constitute an analysis of them. In Chapter 2 Yang argues that the different types of American ethical criticism form a dialogue and debates among themselves in the form of autonomism vs anti-autonomism, cognitivism vs anti-cognitivism, consequentialism vs anti-consequentialism. Yang lists some of the participants in the dialogue or debates: Richard Posner as radical against ethical criticism, and Nussbaum and Booth as defenders. Yang finally points out the nature of the debates, arguing that the participants’ differences are not literary but political (148, 150, 153), and that as both sides stick fast to their political views, each will not give up to the other. However, the debates will not hinder the development of

American ethical criticism; on the contrary, they will draw more attention to ethical criticism from critics both American and foreign, which is evidenced by much more publications in the 21st century.

To be more exact, Chapter 4 is a chapter on the Chinese-contextualized American ethical criticism. As the title indicates, American ethical criticism is reconstructed and improved in the Chinese context.

Before the 1980s when there was an ethical turn in the United States, critics in China paid little attention to American ethical criticism (154), and few had published articles on ethical criticism, let alone monograph. However, entering the new century, there came a boom of ethical criticism in China. The boom is believed to be triggered off by Nie Zhenzhao (158), “the founder of ethical literary criticism in Eastern academy” (Yang “The Revival” 25), when he delivered his influential keynote address entitled “Ethical Approach to Literary Studies: A New Perspective” at the academic conference held in Jiangxi Normal University in 2004, with the influential concept of “ethical literary criticism.” The speech was published in the same year in *Foreign Literature Studies*. According to Shang Biwu, Nie’s “ethical literary criticism” is “different both from traditional Chinese moral criticism and from its Western counterparts” (qtd. in Yang “The Revival” 25). Since then Nie has published a series of articles illustrating his “ethical literary criticism,” which are crystallized into his monograph *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* published in 2014. In Yang’s reading, Nie distinguishes three pairs of relationships: first, the relationship between ethical criticism and ethics; second, the relationship between ethical criticism and moral criticism; and third, the relationship between ethical criticism and aesthetics (163). In a sense, this monograph of his is one piece of evidence of the contextualization of American ethical criticism in China which sets in motion the search, sorting, founding and systematization of a series of theoretical frameworks, concepts and terms. In Yang’s view, the contextualization of ethical criticism in China is a reconstruction and improvement of American ethical criticism whether in terms of theory or method (172).

In the “Conclusion,” Yang, reviewing the existing ethical criticism, suggests that we need to make further distinction between the nature of “ethics” in ethical criticism and the nature of “ethics” and “morals” in ethics, develop a proper relationship between the limitedness of ethical criticism and the non-limitedness of textual interpretation, and improve the definition and use of basic terms of ethical criticism. (173-77). At the same time, bearing the Chinese context in mind, and seeing that any theory or method of criticism must work through ups and downs, Yang proposes that ethical criticism should first keep criticism practice-oriented

and further construct paradigms for interpreting different texts in ethical literary criticism, second, strive for a multiple criticism by combining other types of criticism, and third, adopt an interdisciplinary perspective (178-80).

The Chinese boom of ethical criticism was triggered off more than a decade ago. To fuel it means to redouble efforts. As one of such attempts, Yang's *American Ethical Criticism* is the first torch shining brightly for the Chinese readers who are in the dark labyrinth of their investigations of ethical criticism.

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