

Self-referential Aspects of Ethical Literary Criticism

Knut Brynhildsvoll

Abstract: In the discussions about the role of ethics in literary texts one has frequently focused on the content of the texts and the attitudes of the involved figures. In my paper I intend to turn my attention to the self-referential components of literary representation and consider their role as constitutive factors in establishing a “good” work of art. Hereby I take my point of departure in the contradiction “good”/”bad”, which are terms adopted from moral philosophy and used as criteria in the evaluation process. It is my intention to show that when ethical categories like “good” or “bad” are applied to artistic writing they turn into aesthetical designations which function according to changing taste systems. Furthermore my paper discusses the role of self-referential judgements in the establishing and maintenance of canonical formation. With reference to Immanuel Kant’s and David Hume’s conceptions I finally conclude with statements, due to which the evaluation of art works is reductive if one limits the judgement to the self-referential aspects and neglects that works of art are interacting with a variety of other functions such as contextual, designative and cognitive.

Key words: self-referential; good; bad; moral philosophy; code switching; canonical formation

Author: Knut Brynhildsvoll is Professor of Nordic literature at the University of Cologne (Köln 50923, Germany), guest professor at the Universities in Hamburg, Bochum, Marburg, Giessen and Zürich, 2000-2007 director of the Centre for Ibsen Studies, University of Oslo. He has published more than 200 articles in national and international research journals on topics from romantic literature to postmodernity including literary theory and comparative literature, and numerous scholarly books in Norwegian and German. Email: knut.brynhildsvoll@ibsen.uio.no

标题: 文学伦理学批评视阈中的自我指涉

内容摘要: 伦理在文学文本中的角色通常限定在文本的内容和相关人物角色的态度。本文旨在分析文学作品中的自我指涉，探究其作为基本要素在一个“好”的艺术作品中扮演何种角色。据此，笔者从道德哲学评价的术语“善/恶”出发，阐释当诸如“善”或“恶”的伦理分类运用于艺术创作时，常常转向

美学意义且根据不断变化的审美体系而发生作用。本文还将进一步探讨自我指涉对建立和巩固经典作品的权威性产生的作用。笔者运用康德和大卫·休谟的哲学思想，说明如果文学研究仅限于自我指涉，忽略艺术作品与其他诸如语境、指称和认知等方面的关联，艺术作品的价值会被严重低估。

关键词：自我指涉；善；恶；道德哲学；语码转换；经典形成

作者简介：克努特·布莱恩希沃兹威尔，科隆大学北欧文学系教授，汉堡大学、波鸿大学、马尔堡大学、吉森大学和苏黎世大学等高校客座教授，2000-2007年奥斯陆大学易卜生研究中心主任，已在国内外国际学术期刊发表论文逾200篇，研究领域包括浪漫主义、后现代文学、文艺理论和比较文学，用挪威语和德语写作出版多部学术著作。

This paper connects to ideas I developed previously and pays attention to questions regarding the self-referential aspects of ethical literary criticism. Every time when one emphasizes the specific poetical function of language one focus at the same time on its self-referential usage. The concept of auto-referential inquiry has now a day won through as important research subject in great many scientific disciplines, not least inspired by Niklas Luhmann's system theory. In the metafictional prose of postmodern writers one finds numerous examples of self-referential presentations. In the following I intend to elaborate some of the ethical implications which follow from the inner-textual perspective on literary texts. It strikes me that there frequently is a tendency to argue in a far too distant relation to the core questions of ethics. It is worth-while to keep in mind that ethics is dealing with moral concerns, with matters concerning good or bad, right or wrong. In order to distinguish between the antagonisms one need moral criteria, which may differ from one culture to another. There are however moral standards that are regarded to be common for everybody, independent of political, ideological and religious convictions, principles implemented in conventions and orders like "The Declaration of Human Rights" or "The Ten Commandments." As far as values are related to taste there are however no obliging standards equally valid for every human being. The citizens of ancient Rome used to say: *De gustibus non disputandum est*, which means that it is useless to quarrel about matters of taste. Like language taste is closely related to the origin of the human existence. Your language is your mother tongue, and your taste is developed under influence of maternal and paternal instructions, which in combination with cultural stimulations help constructing a standard system which enables value judgments. It is thus evident that taste is far from being an objective quality, especially not when related

to a work of art. You can spontaneously agree on that a meal is good, that the weather is good, that somebody's behavior is good, but it is far more complex to decide if a poem is good. When ethical categories like good or bad are applied to artistic writing they turn into aesthetical values, which function according to changing taste systems. Every time when a reader evaluates a written text he turns the ethical terms good or bad into aesthetical ones. That means when an evaluating act turns self-referential and directs its statements towards the text itself, we have to do with a code switching, informing about the aesthetical status of the text. It is good as far as it is elaborated according to the taste system prevailing at a certain time, in a certain place under certain circumstances, it is bad if not. Throughout the centuries the quality measures have changed; what once was regarded good, may later be considered insufficient. Value judgments are, unless they are totally subjective or provoking, mostly derived from general rules and norms regarding artistic expression or later, as aesthetics was separated from the philosophical discourse and established itself as a separate research discipline, from the various concepts of aesthetical systems, which serve as advisory sources for critics.

The self-referential aesthetical standards comprise all interconnected poetic components and functions of the artwork, not only the rhetoric and stylistic composition, but also structural features like coherence, openness, confinement, harmony, completeness, complexity, polyvalence, intertextuality, etc. When the evaluation act is based on some of the mentioned internal properties the designations "good" or "bad" are dependent on the successful adaptation of poetical standards. It seems quite obvious that the poetical realization requires of the author that he is familiar with the peculiar principles of poetry. He cannot write blank verses without being familiar with the iambic pentameter and he cannot write a sonnet without knowing the metrical form of a sonnet. And vice versa: the critic cannot evaluate in a proper way a literary text unless he is well acquainted with the artificial ways of expression characteristic of the poetical genres. In order to avoid misunderstandings I want to underline that I in the following don't intend to value the autonomous character of literary texts, but their capacity to successfully realize or help realize the applied aesthetical guidelines according to the qualities "good" or "bad." From the point of view of ethical literary criticism the self-referential aspects of literary artworks are the more effective the more they support the impact on the reader and his ability to increase his power of judgment concerning social and individual *mores*.

As far as aesthetics is defined as the study of the beautiful it deals with the properties which provide it with these features. When a work of art satisfies

the specific demands of beauty the critics usually calls it a “good” work hereby recirculating a quality classification originally rooted in ethical research. The designation “good” as opposite to “bad” to day serves as an aesthetical quality marker and as such it functions better than the characterization “beautiful” because the depiction of ugliness may prove to be “good” as well, but never “beautiful.” Barbara Herrnstein Smith in her influential book *Contingencies of Value. Alternative Perspectives for Critical theory* asks what teachers and academic critics mean by recommending a work as “good literature” before having clarified the reasons for their evaluation.

At least two developments have challenged the stability of aesthetical systems and questioned their usefulness. Since the beginning of modernity writers rebelled against the tyranny of aesthetical regulations and established new ways of expression void of general validity, the result of which was a huge increase of new aesthetical programs, mostly with an anti-artistic and provoking affront. The parole was: the more expansive the less obliging. Until in postmodernity authors won acceptance for their ideas that everything goes. Art recirculates the formal and thematic repertoire of previous periods and epochs, hereby making art to a playground for experiments with the writing traditions of the past. The main mentality behind this renunciation of innovative creativity is expressed in the following sentence: Everything is said, consequently it remains saying it in another way. This mode of resignation suggests that literature has arrived at its final stage, where the permanent reuse of the literary heritage suffocates every attempt at artistic renewal. This turning on the spot gradually evoked dissatisfaction among readers and authors. The Norwegian author Jan Kjørstad brought it to the point with the following statement: It is not sufficient to copy postmodernism, it is necessary to rewrite it with regard to the rapidly increasing standards of knowledge and rethinking it at the background of the contemporary political and ecological crises. It is likely to believe that the upcoming questioning of postmodern preferences marks a turning point, where the documentation of formal skill gives way to a reinforced focusing on what in a seldom before noticed way threatens the survival of human beings. This may be considered the date of birth of an ethical literary criticism, where the adjectives good and bad primarily again refer to the content of literary works and regain a quality linked to the moral standards of the involved literary figures and their activities and conflicts. The moving of the focus from the form to the content of a literary work consequently implies that complete different aspects of literary expression are subject to quality evaluation. Faced with a complex literary plot it may be challenging to differ between good and bad,

even on the level of direct confrontation between contradictory figures like Othello and Iago, Faust and Mephistopheles. From the point of view of ethical criticism it seems to be completely clear that Iago and Mephistopheles represent the principle of evil. Still they have a positive function in the presentation of goodness; without their presence in the plot it would have been impossible to elaborate the horizon of what goodness is not. Nie Zhenzhao has coined the designation the Sphinx factor in order to illuminate that human beings are trapped in an existential dilemma and exposed to the contradictory powers of human and bestial attitudes. In his interpretation the lower capacities of bestiality form the horizon against which the higher values of human attitudes and ethical behavior appear. That means: the function of the evil is to make the good and the valuable visible. On the other hand it remains a paradox that the presentation of the evil from the viewpoint of ethical literary criticism may be evaluated as good or successful as far as it deals with the phenomena in an excellent way.

Obviously there is also another reason why attention has been drawn away from the postmodern rewritings of the aesthetic canon and directed towards questions concerning the reader's response to the literary text. The modern reception theory moves the focus from the text to the reader, who is the one that on the background of his literary competence through the reading act completes the comprehension of the text and as such proceeds to a co-creator of it. As far as it is up to the reader to fill in the lacunae or the space left open by the author it depends to a certain extent on him to attribute to the work the values good or bad. The author delivers the single textual elements, the reader and the critic arrange them with regard to what they consider the ethical intention of the elaborated text materials. In so doing it is by far enough to trust one's feelings. When the quality judgment has no roots in reliable theoretical frames the evaluation threatens to be accidental. In order to counteract miss-readings and to ensure scientific credibility it is necessary to use as a basis adequate evaluation standards, both in the field of forms and contents. A literary work of art can be evaluated not only in relation to aesthetical features like beauty, compatibility, ambiguity, but also in relation to measures linked up to subject matters like freedom of opinion, exchange of information, increase of knowledge etc. as well. The validity of this kind of criteria changes throughout the centuries and depends on normative principles derived from philosophical, sociological and theological frame theories. Supporters of ethical literary criticism, be it authors, be it scientists, are all more or less indebted to the theoretical sources of moral reflection.

It is however a fact that modern reception theory has reevaluated the standards

of literary excellence. A literary work of art is not necessarily good because it obeys the prevailing aesthetic rules and corresponds to them, but on the contrary because it breaks the rules and transcends what is estimated to be the valid norm. Inspired by Thomas Kuhn's theory of the paradigmatic shift the adherents of modern reception theory introduced the concept of the expectation horizon, which marks the borderline between traditional and innovative literature. This implies that that all kind of avant-garde writing offends against the accepted paradigms and insists on establishing the good of tomorrow beyond the good of today. According to this concept the ethical oppositions good/bad, right/wrong are permanently subject to replacements and adjustments. The inevitable consequence of this process is the loss of the text as an autonomous object. The research interest is exclusively directed towards the text's impact on the reader. The text constitutes itself in the reader's mind as a network of appeal impulses and completes itself through the interaction with the reader. Due to this understanding the text is not any more a limited material object, but an aesthetic artefact that evokes more or less controlled responses and paves the way for subjective impressions instead of elaborated knowledge. Thus the reader actualizes the inherent potentialities of textual meaning according to his educational presuppositions, his reading experiences and his feelings. In articles from the late 1940s the American critics W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley vehemently refused the concept because it abandoned the proper object of literary analysis, the reified text.

Anyhow, the efforts of modern reception research have doubted the concept of a static, correct and eternal validity and meaning of literary texts. The result has shaken the very foundations of canonical thinking. How is it possible to put together a list of representative artistic writing when the works in question are deprived of substantial consistency and solely exist as a source of individual taste display? An intact canonical system requires at least an agreement on the ontological status of a literary work and on the main principles of structural coherence. The history of canon formation shows indeed the need for quality guidelines and curriculum recommendations. What good is, however, and of lasting importance is liable to be judged in the retro-perspective. Consequently most canonical lists consist of texts from the past, which have proved their durability throughout generations. According to Harold Bloom "canonical prophecy needs to be tested about two generations after a writer dies" (522). Because artistic excellence is subject to taste fluctuations and change of conventions there is a current urge for canonical revisions. Due to Harold Bloom the crucial propulsion by secular canon formation is the "aesthetic choice" (22). According to my understanding the "aesthetical

choice” is an ethical one as far as it uses aesthetical measures in order to decide what is canonical and consequently good. He admits however that he himself has a pre-scientific reason for ascribing to literary works the attribute of canonicity. “The only pragmatic test for the canonical” is, he claims, “only what I have read and think worthy of rereading” (518).

In the last year’s discussions one has argued for a democratization of the literary canon formation: equal number of males and females, equal number of young and old, equal number of literary genres, equal cultural and national representation. This egalitarian principle threatens to transform the canonical system into a statistical one, hereby losing the elitist character of the canonical out of sight, then according to Harold Bloom “literary criticism always was and always will be an elitist phenomenon” (17). In so far he concurs in David Hume’s opinion that by judging good and bad works men have very different views and not everybody is equally fit to judge art. According to Hume a man who has no opportunity of comparing the different kinds of beauty is indeed totally unqualified to pronounce an opinion. Addressing beauty Hume refers to the poetic and rhetoric components that cooperate in creating the artistic effects of art language. Hereby he understands the surplus of aesthetic qualities that separate the language of art from daily life language. Nobody has underlined this artistic difference in a more precise way than has Jan Mukarovsky, one of the most influential members of the Prague circle. Due to him the language of everyday communication serves practical purposes; therefore it is rule-bound and automatized. The poetical language is by comparison characterized by a deviated use of the standard language and a systematic violation of its norms. Accordingly the poetical language is good because of its de-automatized utilization of the daily conversation language. However, in the context of aesthetic expression the signification good has lost its immediate moral value, but it regularly regains an ethical dimension “when literary works are conceived of as the means of transmitting specific values” that means when the aesthetic construction appears as a semantic arena in the service of decoding ethical values (Bloom 22).

I have so far underlined the auto-referential elements of text-constitution as essential for the canonical formation. This position has however been contested and its theoretical basis, the idea of aesthetical values, vehemently attacked. There are obvious reasons for doubting the objectivity of aesthetic value judgment. Baumgarten in his introduction to aesthetics (1750) emphasized the sensory rather than the rational nature of such judgments, likewise Kant, who considered aesthetic judgment as non-conceptual and entirely based on pleasure or displeasure. One

of the reasons why aesthetic values are lacking constancy and endurance has to do with the nature of the aesthetic object and the changeability of the evaluating subject. Taking the constitutive elements of a literary work of art into consideration, its “structure,” “features,” “qualities” and of course its “meanings”—one may recognize that these properties are not fixed given, or inherent in the work itself, but are at every point the variable products of particular *subjects*’ interactions with it.

It belongs however to the paradox structure of the Kantian taste judgment that it, although subjective, still demands general validity. This intermingling of subjective and objective reasoning may seem to be a challenge to the common sense, but Kant bridges the contradiction by introducing the term “*Gemeinsinn*,” meaning “our common capacity for shared cognition.” Accordingly “*Gemeinsinn*” involves a claim of universality, which ensures that taste questions are not only a matter of personal preferences.

Kant’s concept of the aesthetic value has been disputed, not least because of its disinterestedness, which dissociates the aesthetic from moral values hence paying less attention to the aspects of good and bad. However, in recent years one can observe an extended understanding of the category of the aesthetic. Hereby it is striking that the aesthetic value of a work of art is not restricted to its formal features, but increasingly are conceived of as interacting with a variety of other aspects, namely contextual, cognitive and moral elements. One may explain the connection between the self-referential and moral connections within the artwork in the following way. A work of art is “good” when it is in accordance with the valid norms of the beautiful. In so far I agree with Bery Gaut, who asserts that “art can teach us about ethical values through linking cognition to imagination” (252). The “good” is essentially a judgment that something is ethical, the judgment that something conforms with the moral law. It would however be a mistake to think that the interplay between the “good” on the level of formal skill and on the level of content is drawing in the same direction. The contrary may prove to be the case when the content of a work of art in a perfect way is glorifying the ugly and the bad. The clash between the structural and the moral usage of the opposition good/bad shows that the interactive display between the two functional levels don’t necessarily work according to the theoretical concepts. Radical autonomists reject the moral contamination of aesthetic values because of their intrinsic contradictions. They maintain that “moral assessment presupposes that the object assessed has mental qualities and capacities. Yet works of art do not possess minds; so they cannot be subject to ethical assessment” (Gaut 69). This extreme view may be valid in case of abstract and experimental texts, but all kinds of representational art

forms transcend their formal expression and are subject to ethical criticism, simply why words, isolated or in artistic contexts, are semantic units with denotative and connotative designations. It may however prove difficult to apply ethical measures to text types which like non sense poetry and l'art pour l'art fiction underline the intrinsic value of art and refuse to serve any didactic, moral, or utilitarian purpose. Only as far as one adapt the self-referential model of evaluation discussed in this paper one is able to judge whether the text is good or bad with regard to its ambitions.

Before concluding I want to make some additional remarks to the self-referential aspects of literary works and to their connection with the semantic levels of expression. It is striking that Wayne Booth ascribes to aesthetic qualities ethical ones as well because they possess the capacity "to write stylishly, beautifully or elegantly and possessing an acute aesthetic sensibility" (42). Booth underlines that "a critic will be doing ethical criticism just as much when praising a story or poem for raising our aesthetic sensibilities or increasing our sensitivity as when attacking decadence, sexism, or racism"(49). The self-referential act of evaluating literary texts is nevertheless reductive because it ignores that they are situated in a communicative situation and are conceived of as the means of transmitting specific meaning and values. Thus artworks composed in verbal signs differ from those made in color or marble because they are not only components in an artistic design, but primarily carrier of a diversity of supplementary symbolic, allegoric, cognitive, contextual and moral functions. I agree with Berys Gaut when he emphasize that "Ethicism is the doctrine that a work of art is aesthetically meritorious in so far as it has an aesthetically relevant ethical merit" (138).

Not surprisingly one finds "ethical merits" in many literary genres. In my concluding comments I want to focus on the criminal novel, in which the spirit of ethical care is jeopardized through the dissemination and infiltration of criminal minds and networks. There are many reasons why the criminal novel attracts so much attention in the Western societies. Sociologists consider the phenomenon as a compensation for the boredom and lack of tension in everyday life. In an ethical context it is worth-while noticing that the detective, the main figure of the criminal novel, is a person who fights the evil in order to restore the ethical balance in society and through his intervention helps protect decent people from falling victims to the powers of badness. His professional job is to remove the bad and shape the presupposition for the recovery of social peace. The criminal novel is mostly characterized by the dominance of what has been called "forward tension" (Vowärtsspannung); it favors straight actions, complementary characters

and a strict separation between good and bad figures. It is based on the idea of a final solution through which the bad is defeated, very much like in the fairy tale, where the underdog finally escapes his oppressors through violating or killing them. The concept of the criminal novel has in so far a structural similarity with that of restoration ecology because it aims at fighting the pollution of the social surroundings through appropriate steps. The concept of the criminal novel focus on content and attitudes and as such it is a counter-concept to the strategies of the self-referential approach to literary texts. It is likely to draw the conclusion that the aesthetic value of a criminal novel is independent of its formal features and that the critical evaluation mostly don't pay attention to the self-referential aspects of the texts. Very seldom I have found authors of criminal novels that are aware of the interrelation between form and content and reflect the formal patterns of the genre. Among the few renewals of the genre I want to mention Jan Kjærstad's novel *Verge*, in which the author deconstructs the traditional patterns of the criminal genre and turn the narrative into a book on how to be a greater and better human being, without abandoning the forward tension of the average criminal novel. This may serve as a good example how one can change and extend the genre from inside, from the very sources of the self-referential components of the literary text.

【Works Cited】

- Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994.
- Booth, Wayne. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1992.
- Gaut, Berry. *Art, Emotion and Ethics*. Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 2007.
- Smith, Barbara Herrnstein. *Contingencies of Value. Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991.
- Wimsatt, W. K, and M. C Beardsley. "The Intentional Fallacy." *The Sewanee Review* 54.3 (1946): 468-88.

责任编辑：蒋文颖