

Complexities and Limits of Ethical Literary Criticism

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Abstract: Although the so-called ethical turn in literary studies happened in the eighties and nineties of the twentieth century in North America, the topic “Literature and Ethics” in its various forms and denominations has been present since the beginnings of the reflection on literature. This treatise summarizes the most prominent research directions of this topic and attempts to point out their strengths and weaknesses. As the most burning deficiency, it identifies the so-called cacophony of ethical approaches to literature (mostly in Western literary criticism, but also globally; Nie Zhenzhao’s well elaborated proposal of ethical literary criticism seems to be a bright exception in this respect), characterized by the lack of theoretical and methodological self-reflection. In order to overcome this deficiency, it proposes to scrutinize some basic concepts and relations of ethical literary criticism, such as the range of terms “ethics” and “literature”, the relation between ethics and morality and between ethics and politics, the problem of aesthetic autonomy in relation to the ethical evaluation, the problematic issue of aesthetic re-evaluation on the ground of ethical evaluation, etc. In the conclusion, the treatise stresses the general importance of ethical research in literary studies and points out (the ethical) obligations of researchers engaging in Ethical Literary Criticism.

Key words: Ethical Literary Criticism; literature and ethics; ethics and morality; literature and politics; aesthetic autonomy and ethics

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内容摘要: 尽管文学研究中的伦理学转向发生于北美 20 世纪 80、90 年代，然而以“文学与伦理”为主题的探讨早在文学研究之初就以多种方式在各色学派中存在。本文旨在汇总与该论题有关的重要研究，试图指出这些研究中的优势与劣势。就其最显著的缺陷而言，文学伦理学批评对文学之伦理分析

的强调因缺乏理论与方法论的自我思考而显得有些刺耳（这一现象多在西方文学伦理学批评领域发生，在全球范围内也时有发生。聂珍钊教授详尽阐释的文学伦理学的提议却是个例外，读后令人感到眼前一亮。）为了克服这一缺陷，本文将从某些基本概念如“伦理”与“文学”、伦理与道德之间的关系、伦理与政治之间的关系、审美自律与伦理评价、道德评判基础上的审美评判等问题入手阐释相关概念以及文学伦理学批评中的诸多关系。总而言之，本文在强调文学伦理学批评在文学研究中的重要性的同时，指出文学伦理学批评研究者自身的伦理责任不容忽视。

关键词：文学伦理学批评；文学与伦理；伦理与道德；文学与政治；审美自律与伦理

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Associating literature and ethics (or literature and morality) has a long and respectable history. Plato and Aristotle, for instance, both believed that literature had a moral impact on its audience. Aristotle's theory of empathy and catharsis in *Poetics* prefigured many of the contemporary debates about the ethical value and importance of literature, as well as did his theory of *phronesis*, a practical wisdom necessary to conduct a good life, as developed in his ethical writings that deeply influenced the Neo-Aristotelian current of contemporary ethical criticism. If other classic, medieval and early modernist authors might not have been such an inspiration for contemporary research in this respect, this doesn't mean that they didn't reflect the connection between literature and ethics. On the contrary, the *literature and ethics* topic was widely discussed in the middle ages as well as later, even in such monumental works as, for instance, the four-volume *Versuche aus der Literatur und Moral*, written by Christian August Clodius in 1767. To name some other, more prominent examples: Shelley, "Shaftesbury, and the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment [...] anticipate[d] aspects of the contemporary philosophies of Jürgen Habermas (1990) and Martha C. Nussbaum" (Locatelli 49), concerning ethics, and understood the relationship between literature and ethics in quite modern terms, not at all in an old-fashioned moralist manner. So did some German Romanticists. The list is actually quite extensive. Yet towards the end of the 19th century and in the first decades of the 20th century, the ethical approach to literature became suspect of *moralism* and got replaced with other approaches, such as aestheticist and formalist.

This changed dramatically in the last decades of the twentieth century, when

the so-called *ethical turn* occurred, initially in North America. To be sure, the metaphor itself, evoking the “Copernican Turn” and all the subsequent “turns” (linguistic, theoretical, political etc.), seems to be a bit excessive. Since the Romanticism, the implicit and explicit theoretical discussion and criticism about values, ethics and morality in literature continued—not only in Anglo-American criticism that seems to dominate contemporary debates on ethics and literature, but also in others.^① Yet it is only in the eighties and the nineties that literary criticism and theory, but also philosophy, *programatically* turned their attention to the various aspects of the topic *literature and ethics*. The most prominent philosophers and literary scholars in this respect were Wayne Booth, Martha Nussbaum, Alasdair Macintyre, Richard Rorty, J. Hillis-Miller, Stanley Cavell, Adam Zachary Newton, Lawrence Buell, James Phelan and others. A little bit later (in 2004) and basically not influenced by the Western “Ethical Turn”, a well elaborated approach to the *literature and ethics* topic emerged in China, with Nie Zhenzhao and his “Ethical Literary Criticism”. In the last decades, ethical literary criticism evolved in a variety of sub-categories, perhaps the most prominent among them being *narrative ethics*, *rhetorical literary ethics*, *ethics of reading* and *ethics of alterity*, but also *ethics of writing*, *ethics of fiction*, *ethics of criticism*, *ethics of interpretation*, *ethics of world literature*, *ethics of imagination*, *ethics of hypertext* etc. The list of potential further candidates seems to be inexhaustible and the field widely open to such an extent that it gives the impression of rather chaotic enterprise. It is no surprise that some scholars got worried about this state of affairs. In my view, Dagmar Krause rightly observed that

ethics denotes very different things to different people, and the task of clarification is made even more difficult by the fact that only very few people who partake in the debate deign to define ethics and morality, although most people freely use both terms. Moreover, it is only rarely made clear on what level exactly the presumed ethical influence of literature is supposed to take place and what counts as ethical influence in the first place. The entire debate, for example, between Nussbaum, Booth and Posner suffers from this misunderstanding. (Krause 36)

A similar point was made by Lawrence Buell:

In any event, since no specific model for inquiry into ethics is shared by more than a fraction of the scholars working in the various domains of

literary theory and criticism, it is more than ordinarily perplexing when, as often happens, avowed practitioners of “ethical” criticism neglect to relate their brand of ethics to its alternatives or to antecedent traditions of moral thematics, the ideology of genre, the deconstructive ethics of reading, the politics of canonicity, and so forth. / To date, nobody seems to have worried much about a problem of cacophony, however. (Buell 11)

In order to regulate this “cacophony” at least to some extent, attempts have been made to explain the driving forces behind the “ethical turn” and in addition to propose a kind of its genealogy, typology or classification. Concerning the reasons for its rise, most often the opposition to deconstruction and “textualism” or “the law of periodical turn” in this case away from the text to the context are mentioned. Some attention has also been paid to the assumption that the turn to ethics in literary studies and humanities in general is due to the humanities’ need to socially legitimize themselves (see for instance Nussbaum in *Love’s Knowledge, Poetic Justice, and Not for a Profit*). As for the genealogy-typology-classification attempts, the majority of them stress three strains of contemporary ethical criticism: Neo-Aristotelian (Nussbaum, for instance), deconstructionist (de Man, Hillis Miller, Derrida), and the one inspired by Levinas (or Blanchot) (Attridge and a legion of others). To my knowledge, the fullest account so far can be found in Buell’s 1999 article “In Pursuit of Ethics”. There he identifies the following six “genealogical strands”: 1) traditional criticism dwelling “on the moral thematics and underlying value commitments of literary texts and their implied authors” [Parker, Booth] (Buell 7); 2) the use of literature for philosophical-ethical purposes [Nussbaum, Rorty] (8); 3) deconstruction with “two specific [...] ethical currents” (9), the *ethics of reading* [B. Johnson, Hillis-Miller] and the *ethics of alterity*, emerging from Derrida’s dialogue with Levinas; 4) “the intensified attention [...] given subjectness and agency” under the influence of “the later work of Michel Foucault” (9); 5) another late-Foucauldian strand, criticising “out-and-out cognitive scepticism”^② (10), and 6) “increased self-consciousness about professional ethics” (10). In addition, Buell proposes “[f]ive [...] distinctive contours” of ethical criticism (12): 1) the “recuperation of authorial agency in the production of texts”; 2) the “readerly responsibility”, deriving from “a conception of literature as the reader’s other” (12); 3) “[t]he approach to literary texts as arenas of ethical reflection by reason of their formal or generic contours” (13); 4) the distinction between ethics and morality (14), and 5) “the relation or distinction between the personal and the socio-political” (14). A little bit different—and in my view a much more systematic—set

of possibilities to approach ethics in literature from the standpoint of literary studies proposes Nie Zhenzhao with the “following five aspects: (1) in terms of writers and their writings, it attempts 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 tries 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 intends 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)” (Shang 29). In contrast to Buell, who offers a classification concerning the entire “cacophonous” corpus of contemporary ethical criticism, Zhenzhao’s well considered proposal concerns only his own approach, one of the few integral ethical approaches to literature so far.

In spite of their disturbing “cacophony”, ethical approaches to literature seem to share some common ground. For instance, if we are engaged in ethical literary criticism, we supposedly presume that literature—apart from other values, such as aesthetic or cognitive—also has an ethical value. Literary scholars are indeed not quite unanimous in what this value consists; there seems to be a large agreement, however, about what makes literature so suitable for ethical research. In the first place, the distinguished feature of a great deal of artistic literature is its *singularity* which is typical also of the ethical situation and decision-making. Here we are dealing with a kind of a structural analogy between the both domains. No less important seem to be some other features, detected not only by philosophical or literary-critical investigations, but supported also by, for instance, psychology and cognitive sciences. In this respect, the great value of literature for ethical research, but also for ethical education, consists in its ability to evoke emotions, to stimulate empathy, and to develop our imagination, which are all cognitive modes characteristic also of moral or ethical judgment that is by no means propositional or only reflective, as some other types of judgements are.

These views about literature are more or less commonly shared. The

differences arise, however, in the evaluation of what literature does—or can do, or even should do—with this ability from the point of view of ethics. Some critics believe that literature offers moral examples to follow (or to refuse), and that it is particularly effective in doing so just because of the features described above. Others maintain that literature stages *particular, singular* moral situations, characters and their decisions, and in this way strengthens our moral capacities, while we read it, since it is a kind of exercise in moral imagining and reasoning. From this perspective, when we read *Antigone, Hamlet, Crime and Punishment* or any novel of Henry James or George Eliot, we ourselves, *pace* Borges, temporarily become Antigone, Hamlet, Raskolnikov, or the protagonists of James' and Eliot's novels, and in this manner get experiences we probably wouldn't get otherwise. Others, again, stress that literature fosters our ability for empathy and knowledge and recognition of alterity, which is a pre-condition of ethics (at least in Levinasian sense).

These three positions of ethical criticism which are all very much alive and present in contemporary literary studies and in my view can be seen as its three prevailing typological strands: the *moral, ethical and meta-ethical* are so heterogeneous that they don't allow consensus about literature-ethic relationship and even generate very different answers to some basic questions of ethical criticism, such as: Does literature teach morality or not? Does it offer instructions to conduct a good or moral live? Does it make its readers better persons? Or, to move to more complex issues: Can a literary work be immoral at all? Do moral flaws of a work of art diminish its aesthetic value (and *vice versa*)? Or even: can a morally defective work of literature be called artwork at all? And finally: What about the canonized classical literary masterpieces (Shakespeare, Twain) that from the point of view of at least some of contemporary readers have serious moral flaws? Disparity of potential and actual answers to these and other related questions seems to imply some kind of ethical relativism and, consequentially, even nihilism. To be sure, ethical relativism—which is not the same as pluralism!—is a legitimate stand in ethical theory. Yet I believe that it is not a very promising and helpful theoretical background for doing ethical literary criticism. In order to avoid the implication of relativism, I propose a critical reflection of some crucial terms and concepts on which the ethical criticism is based. In my view, this might bring some clarification to the disturbing accidental “cacophony” of the literary ethical criticism and turn it into a pluralist, albeit not sufficiently self-reflected field of inquiry.

I want to begin with a general claim that is not quite devoid of certain paradoxicality: when discussing *literature and ethics*, we should avoid as much

as possible generalizations and strong statements. Their validity can be easily impugned by counter-examples. For instance, many ethical critics, such as for instance Hillis Miller, agree that literature doesn't offer explicit (or even implicit) moral instructions or "moral guidance" (Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism" 11). Such a view rests on a certain notion of literature associated with familiar concepts such as *aesthetic autonomy*, *open work*, *fictionality*, *quasi-reality*, *endless semiosis*, *polyvalence convention*, *writerly text*, *polyphonic novel*, *semantic aporia*, *slippage of the signified under the signifier* etc. A legion of close readings of literary texts, particularly from the part of New Critics and Deconstructionists, but also practitioners of some other approaches to literature, seem to confirm the basically non-instructive, non-didactic nature of literature. However, even if such a view is pertinent to the most of modern literature, it certainly doesn't cover all of it, let alone the pre-modern literature which admittedly functioned under very different conditions and criteria than the modern one. To claim that at least one of the functions of Sophocles' tragedies, Dante's *Divina Commedia*, medieval *exempla* etc. was not to morally instruct and educate their readers is to be blind for the facts. Yet this doesn't hold true only of the pre-modern literature, but also of Voltaire's *Candide*, *littérature engagée* and the works of great Russian novelists of the 19th century which, for instance, were perceived by their audiences as a moral guidance. There can be no doubt that many other modern literary works can also edify their readers.

However, the opposite general claim, namely that literature *gives* us moral instruction, is obviously equally too exclusive. Quite often such a claim, tied to the referential reading of literature, which is to say, to a strong concept of mimesis, remains implicit, hidden under the cover of ideological or political criticism. To the western scholars, such a claim is probably too remindful of old-fashioned moralism to be brought to explicit statements or principles. Nevertheless it is there. Eastern scholars are less scrupulous and more sincere in this respect. For Nie Zhenzhao, the initiator and the driving force behind the Chinese—one could even say Eastern—variety of the Ethical Turn, "[t]he basic function of literature is instruction and education to teach man to be a moral being" (Kim 398). Again, even if Nie offers fine examples in support of his thesis, which certainly holds true in the context of his own well elaborated proposal, many arguments and examples (such as, for instance, some novels of George Perec and other members of the Oulipo group, experimental poetry, visual and concrete poetry, the non-referential literature in general, etc.) of the proponents of the first general claim undermine it.

The lesson taken from both extremes is quite simple; no *general* claim about

the “moral instruction”—or “moral guidance”—of literature issue is quite adequate. Literature *can* morally instruct its readers, but it *can* also not do it. The answer to the question, whether it has a morally-didactic function or not, depends on several circumstances, regarding the recipient’s horizon of expectation, his literary culture, his reading skills and education, the historical moment, the type of literary text (“readerly” or “writerly”, self-reflective or engaged, “poetic” or “mimetic” etc.) and many others.

Insistence on such general claims can be seen as one reason for the irreconcilable “cacophony” of the ethically/morally motivated approaches to literature. Another reason seems to be the arbitrary range of the concept of literature itself. Booth, for instance, uses the term in a very broad sense, synonymous with *narrative*. Similarly Eskin claims that “use literature in a broad sense, including film, etc.” (557). A case of different use can be found in Locatelli: “I have qualified literature as ‘artistic’ to indicate that I am not using the term ‘literature’ in the general sense of any kind of written texts, but rather in the restricted sense of texts either possessing or aiming at some artistic quality or effect” (Locatelli 47). Nussbaum’s reading of literature as a part of moral philosophy has even narrower focus: it pertains only to a certain type of modern novels.

It goes without saying that these different sets result in very different views of what “literature” in the *literature and ethics* syntagm *means* and of what literature *does* in terms of ethics. For instance, many scholars are inclined to believe that *artistic* literature’s “meanings” and “messages” are too complex to allow a straightforward paraphrase, while the so called “trivial literature” is not so resistant to it. If we use the term literature in this sense (as artistic), all varieties of ethical criticism, ascribing to literature explicit morally instructive function, are excluded. Many critics also believe that realist literature is more referential than high-modernist literature of, let us say, Joyce and Virginia Woolf, and for this reason more suitable for the moral-learning-from-literature approach as carried out by Nussbaum, for instance. Many other critics, however, particularly those influenced by Levinas’, Blanchot’s or Derrida’s views, quite contrarily assign higher ethical potential to the *open works* of high modernism. All these examples demonstrate that the way we understand literature or define its range, essentially influences our views on its ethical range and mode.

The complementary issue is the variety of uses of the term *ethics* in ethical literary criticism. Martha Nussbaum, for instance, draws from the Aristotelian conception of ethics (yet partly also, I believe—even if she would probably deny it—from utilitarianism) which essentially designs her approach to a very limited

scope. For her, the basic ethical question is how to conduct a good life, and she finds this “instructions” better exemplified in literature (in a certain type of modern novels) than in philosophy. On the other hand, the broadest—and therefore the most confusing—understanding of ethics can be found in Booth who understands ethics etymologically from the Greek *ethos*, meaning a “character”, a “collection of habitual characteristics”, “whatever in a person or a society could be counted on to persist from situation to situation. I express my ethos, my character, by my habits of choice in every domain of my life, and a society expresses its ethos by what it chooses to be”. In this way, ethics includes “the entire range of effects on the ‘character’ or ‘person’ or ‘self’” (Booth 8). Richard Posner rightly observed that “Booth defines ‘ethical’ so broadly that it largely overlaps what I consider ‘aesthetic’” (Posner, “Against Ethical Criticism: Part Two” 359). Posner’s observation is fully confirmed by many passages in Booth’s *The Company We Keep*, for instance this one:

Expanding our terms in this way exposes the falseness of any sharp divorce of aesthetic and ethical questions. If “virtue” covers every kind of genuine strength or power, and if a person’s ethos is the total range of his or her virtues, then ethical criticism will be any effort to show how the virtues of narratives relate to the virtues of selves and societies, or how the ethos of any story affects or is affected by ethos—the collection of virtues—of any given reader. Obviously this means 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. (Booth 11)

From the point of view of ethical literary criticism, this seems to be a rather questionable standpoint, blurring what is distinctively *ethical* in works of literature (but also in general) and consequentially implying that the moral defects of literary works are to the same extent also aesthetic flaws, and also the other way around. I’ll briefly discuss this problem a little bit later. For now, I want to add that the most elaborated, widely applied use (but also misuse) of the term *ethics* in contemporary literary ethical criticism derives from Levinas (sometimes accompanied by Blanchot or Bakhtin) and is integrated and upgraded (with Derrida’s, Badiou’s, Bauman’s and other readings) in several forms of the so-called *ethics of alterity*. This kind of ethical criticism, when performed correctly, addresses mostly the issues of the reader’s *responsibility* and of *literariness* as a *model-alterity*, in the

latter case being an approach that passes into a kind of *meta-ethical* criticism. It needs to be noted, however, that Levinas' ethics is particularly vulnerable to misunderstandings and false simplifications, if not studied carefully enough. In such cases, Levinasian *alterity* is not understood in connection to *saying* (le dire), but to *said* (le dit), which can make such an approach quite often in the postcolonial context suspicious.

Another important issue that needs to be subject to my scrutiny is the relationship between ethics/morality and aesthetics, already briefly touched upon above. To make it as short as possible: in spite of the famous Oscar Wilde's claim that "there is no such thing as moral or an immoral book", very few people would seriously deny that at least some works of literature—if not all—have certain moral or ethical dimension. The crucial question in this respect, however, is, what kind of relationship is there between the aesthetic and ethical value. To repeat some of the questions already posed before: *Does literature teach morality or not? Can a literary work be immoral? Do moral flaws of a work of art diminish its aesthetic value (and vice versa)? Can a morally defective piece of literature be called artwork at all?* The aesthetic autonomists defend the conviction that art is separate from ethics and that ethical values in no way affect the aesthetical value. Quite often they have good reasons to believe this (for example, the defence of literature's artistic freedom from legal prosecution). Yet many critics practicing ethical criticism disagree with this position. Their arguments are too numerous and much too heterogeneous to be listed here; let me instead concentrate on a specific and very important issue in this respect: the aesthetical re-evaluation of canonized masterpieces on the ground of their ethical re-evaluation. Booth deals extensively with this issue in *The Company We Keep*, referring to some examples of his own re-evaluating experience in cases of *Huckleberry Finn*, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and some others.

Booth is aware of the complexity of the problem he deals with. He admits, for instance, that even as a professor, he wasn't aware for a long time of certain ethical flaws in Twain's or Rabelais' novels. Yet once he was confronted with their ethical defects, this also influenced his aesthetic evaluation of these works. Some scholars criticised Booth for such an attitude, accusing him of tendentious and shallow, ideologically pre-determined reading, and also reminded him that he wrongly evaluated these works from his own historical ethical and moral horizons, not respecting the historical and cultural circumstances or moral standards and conditions, under which these works had been written. Nie Zhenzhao would label Booth's re-readings *moral* and not *ethical criticism*. However, Booth seems to be

aware of these possible objections and has a well prepared answer. For him, to read literature does not only mean to let himself being totally immersed in the textual world, but at the same time also to keep some distance, to remain the person he is in his actual social and historical world.^③ Consequently, Booth denies the possibility of total acknowledgment of the otherness.

This is quite a delicate issue, still acute and in my view one of the most important conceptual problems of ethical criticism, re-emerging in new variations. To remain with the Booth's example, I see three different possibilities within the ethical criticism to take position in this debate. I have already briefly presented Booth's arguments. In extreme cases they can be graduated up to the complete denial of artistic value of such canonized works that are morally flawed from the perspective of actual moral and ethical standards. Some of the politically engaged contemporary literary criticism takes this course. Booth's opponents, on the other hand, stress the autonomy of literature or rely on *close reading* of works in question, claiming that recipient's personality should not be included in the reception process, demonstrating Booth's too diligent over-interpretation and misreading, and also his supposed ignorance of historical circumstances or at least incapability to evaluate the work according to the ethical or moral standards of its own historical and cultural moment. In my view, none of these options is satisfactory, since it is not far reaching enough. For a balanced response to this demanding challenge we need a third perspective, perhaps the one offered without allusions to the particular case Booth deals with by Hanna Meretoja who states:

Reading narrative fiction about a particular historical world can contribute to the reader's sense of history as a sense of the possible in two interconnected ways. Firstly, it provides the reader with a sense of the space of experience in which it was possible to experience certain things and difficult or impossible to experience other things—a space of experience that encouraged certain modes of action and thought and discouraged others. Cultivating a sense of that kind of space of experience can make actions comprehensible to us that might otherwise remain incomprehensible. Secondly, a sense of what kind of space of experience a past historical world was can provide the reader with a new perspective on his or her current historical world, allowing him or her to see its limits and blind spots and to perceive other possibilities of experience, thought, and action. (Meretoja 44)

To put it shortly and straightforwardly, with regard to Booth: Booth doesn't occupy

an absolute moral position from where he could deliver absolute judgements. Similarly as he would—perhaps due to the political correctness—probably avoid to judge moral standards of some *other, subaltern* contemporary culture by the standards of his own culture, he ought to avoid criticising historically *other* cultures' standards from the standpoint of his own historical standards. From the point of view of a not-yet-attained moral/ethical level, his views could be no less unethical than the ones he is criticizing. To the same extent that Rabelais' possibilities of experience were limited by his historical horizon, Booth's possibilities of experience are limited by his own historical horizon that is by no means the *absolute one*. Therefore, the most undiscussable ethical lesson Booth can take from his example is the experience of provisionality of his (and everyone else's) moral standards. Such an experience can contribute to our self-understanding and help us to “conduct a better life” in both Booth's and Nussbaum's senses of the word. Such an experience also prevents us from the incorrect aesthetic re-evaluation on the ground of our own moral standards.

With the last case we come close to another couple of terms that cry for clarification of the relationship among them: *ethics* and *politics*. Here, too, we are faced with the two opposed opinions: for some ethical critics, there is no substantial difference between ethics and politics—or at least, for them, they are “inextricably linked”.

I do not deny a certain relationship between ethics and politics. It would be unwise to do so. There is, for instance, a basic connection between them in a sense that—in a manner remindful of the Aristototele's *homo politicus*—everything has something to do with politics, and also that they sometimes actually address same issues. However, I claim that not all varieties of this relationship are fruitful for the ethical criticism. Some of them may even inhibit it. Let me pose for the clarity's sake two such possible relationships: 1) a view that politics is based on ethics and derives from it, and 2) the opposite view, that ethics is based on politics (which can be seen as a sort of macchiavelism). I believe that the second view doesn't allow for an ethical criticism proper, because from this perspective, ethics is always a political construct, and if we want to go to the core of character's actions and decisions (or of “author's intentions”), we land in the political criticism, and not ethical.

So in my view, from the perspective of ethical literary criticism, it is only consistent and fruitful to clearly distinguish ethics from politics. They are not at all the same; in some respect they are even opposed to each other (*Antigone* would be a good example). While politics is always about power, the ethics *proper*

never is, even if power relations may raise also ethical questions. Nevertheless, the distinction remains. For instance, in practice, the politics is an attempt *to gain power over others*; this is also characteristic of political discourse. Not so in ethics. Ethics is not about gaining power over the others, but about *respecting others*. This is also how ethical discourse—in literary criticism or elsewhere—essentially differs from the political criticism. In my opinion, the ethical criticism should not serve as a cover for a political or any other criticism; I agree therefore with Eugene Goodheart that “the ethical critic must resist the language of power” (qtd. in Henriksen 490) as characteristic of political criticism.

For practical reasons, I am only now turning to a terminology issue that ought to accompany—and, actually, even introduce—every piece of ethical criticism, literary or non-literary: the relationship and distinction between *ethics* and *morality*. Philosophers and literary critics often use them interchangeably (for instance Devereaux 2004,⁴ Eskin 2004, Nussbaum 1990), even if sometimes they are aware of their different meanings. Some others make a clear distinction here. Nie Zhenzhao, for instance, understands ethics as “a general term encompassing both moral terms and immoral terms, while morality is a specific term excluding immoral terms” (qtd. in Ross 8), and explicitly distinguishes between moral and ethical criticism:

Unlike moral criticism, ethical literary criticism does not simply evaluate a given literary work as good or bad on the basis of today’s moral principles. Instead, it emphasizes “historicism,” that is, the examination of the ethical values in a given work with reference to a particular historical context or a period of time in which the text under discussion is written [...] Though some traditional ethical critics have attempted to unpack ethical elements in literature, they have usually analyzed literature from their personal ethical values and moral principles or, at best, the moral principles of their contemporaries [...] Theoretically, their point of departure should have been to analyze literature from an ethical perspective, or to put it differently, the ethical value of the literary text should have been the target of their research, and their moral principles should have merely served as toolkits in that process. However, in practice, the analysis of literary texts ceases to be their target of investigation and their personal moral principles take priority. By contrast, ethical literary criticism represents a particularly strong call for objectivity and historicism. Grounding itself in specific historical contexts or ethical environments, ethical literary criticism sees the contemporary value of

literature as the rediscovery of its historical value. (10)

To be sure, clear distinction between the ethical and moral is not a matter of literary studies; it is rather a challenge for philosophy which is burdened with historical heritage of the interchangeability of both concepts. Yet for the sake of clarity, necessary to confront the disturbing cacophony, mentioned above, at least the awareness of the difference between the two domains would be useful. “The moral of the story” means something else than “The ethics of the story”.

Here my listing of topics indispensable for the methodological self-reflexion is at the end. What remains is to propose a kind of conclusion. To use a moral vocabulary again: what lesson can one take from the issues briefly touched upon in my presentation?

In the first place, I would say that ethical criticism—in my view the most important branch of literary criticism—consists in an innumerable variety of approaches. This variety can be seen as an *anything-goes-cacophony* or as a *healthy plurality*. The distinction between both lies in self-reflection. If ethical literary criticism is rightly seen by some as a cacophony, then it needs more self-reflection in order to become a plurality. Zhenzhao’s proposal, for instance, is one of a very few such systematic, integral and methodologically self-reflected approaches, in this respect a good example also for western scholars to follow, when doing ethical literary criticism.

The variety of ethical approaches to literature, that perform extremely important work also in terms of social welfare, is in principle limitless. Nevertheless, there are, at least in my opinion, some limits for ethical criticism that need to be respected. Critics engaged in the ethical criticism ought to respect the principles of the *ethics of criticism*. They should not, for instance, use ethical criticism as a cover for some other sort of criticism. They should behave responsibly towards the literary works, which means that they should respect their singularity and not misuse them for their own purposes, as in the case of, for instance, ideologically burdened criticisms of various colours. The ethical dimension and potential of literature is so precious that ethical literary criticism should not blur it with an irresponsible treatment. The word “ethical” in the term “Ethical literary criticism” should therefore signify both: the specific research topic as well as the way how the research proceeds. In my opinion, these two responsibilities mark the only eventual limits to the ethical criticism I can think of.

【Notes】

① To name only a couple of cases preceding the Turn in North America: in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, published in 1957, Northrop Frye even devoted an entire chapter to what he called “Ethical criticism”. (It is true, however, that with this title he didn’t really discuss what we nowadays understand under this term.) Another such case is John Gardner’s controversial *On Moral Fiction* (1978). More examples can be found in French, German, Russian (pre-Soviet and Soviet) and probably many other literary criticisms.

② For the sake of clarity I am adding a bit longer description: this strand derives from Foucault’s “incipient critique of his earlier evaluation of ‘the idea of truth as nothing more than a ruse in the service of an epistemic will-to-power,’ as a mere discursive artifact” (Norris 124, 126). This strain of recent theory concerns itself with exposing the intellectual reductionisms and moral hazards of the ‘out-and-out cognitive skepticism’ that supposedly characterized poststructuralism (Norris 3), while avoiding old-fashioned models of mimetic realism” (Buell 10).

③ Booth approaches a hermeneutical issue here. The similar point has been done, for instance, by the Gadamer-influenced Aesthetic of reception with its claim that a proper understanding always includes the entire variety of historical horizons of expectation, including, of course, the reader’s one. Yet such a starting point can also lead to different conclusions regarding the aesthetic value than the one proposed by Booth.

④ Devereaux’s use is not problematic only due to the non-distinction, but also due to the very broad conception of the term ethics/morality: “A note on terminology: in the context of this paper, I am using ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ interchangeably. I am also using these terms in a very broad sense, including more than might ordinarily be counted under the label ‘moral.’ For my purposes, the label ‘the moral’ includes the political, the ideological, the religious, and so on. Lastly, I am not committed to the claim that the terms ‘moral’ and ‘immoral’ are the fundamental terms of moral evaluation. Here I use these terms as stand-ins for all kinds of moral language (ordinary talk of justice, happiness, virtue and vice, terms such as ‘duty,’ ‘obligation,’ and ‘right’ in ethical theory)” (Devereaux 10).

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