

Ethical Selection and Literary Work as Ethical Event: Redefining Ethical Criticism

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Abstract: Ethical criticism, since 1980s, has undergone a resurgence and revival in both literary and philosophical realms. Scholars and critics try to redefine what the revived ethical criticism is: Wayne Booth terms his model “coduction,” to “re-locate” ethical criticism; Martha C. Nussbaum demonstrates the interpretive power of ethical criticism; J. Hillis Miller claims that there is a “necessary ethical moment” in the act of reading that is neither cognitive, nor political, nor social, nor interpersonal, but properly and independently ethical; Marshall M. Gregory and Peter J. Rabinowitz, use “power of invitation” and “lateral ethics” to criticize the postmodern thesis that ethical criticism is impossible and focusing on redefining and reframing ethical criticism, thus pursuing a new methodology. Nie Zhenzhao, the founder of ethical literary criticism in Eastern academy, focusing on the key term “ethical selection,” delineates a conceptual map of Chinese ethical criticism and establishes his discourses of criticism and systematic theory.

Key words: ethical criticism; ethical selection; Literary work as ethical event; *Oedipus Tyrannos*; “Upon Julia’s Clothes”

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标题: 伦理选择与作为伦理事件的文学作品：重新定义伦理批评

内容摘要: 自 20 世纪 80 年代以来，伦理批评在文学和哲学领域经历了重生与复兴的过程。学者和批评家都努力去重新定义复兴的伦理批评。韦恩·布斯用“共导”模式来重新界定伦理批评；玛莎·努斯鲍曼论证了伦理批评在哲学领域的阐释力；希利斯·米勒指出任何一种阅读中必定存在某种既不是认知的、政治的，也不是社会的、人际的，而是独立的伦理时刻；马歇尔·格雷戈里和彼得·拉宾诺维奇分别提出了“召唤力”和“侧面伦理”来重新构建伦理批评的框架，试图寻求一种新的方法论；中国学者聂珍钊作为文学伦理学批评的首倡者，以“伦理选择”为核心术语构建了中国伦理批评的理论框架和批评话语体系。

关键词：伦理批评；伦理选择；作为伦理事件的文学作品；《俄狄浦斯王》；“茉莉亚的衣裳”

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Over three decades ago, *New Literary History*'s pioneering special issue "Literature and/as Moral Philosophy" (1983) stimulated a strong interest in the question of "ethics and literature" and simultaneously witnessed the advent and subsequent waning of such intellectual movements as new criticism and deconstructionism. Ethical criticism, since then, has undergone a resurgence and revival in both literary and philosophical realms. The revival of ethical criticism in literary studies, as James Phelan once related, is a "general reaction against the formalism of ... deconstruction" and the growing influence of such thinkers as Emmanuel Levinas as well as broader institutional developments, such as the "continuing power of feminist criticism and theory and the rising influence of African American, [post-colonial,]multicultural, and queer criticism and theory" (Phelan 107). More than a mere rejection the "putative formalism" of poststructuralism, the ethical critical renaissance has entailed a renewed embrace of literature as a way of knowing, "as [a] site... of the culture's deepest moral questioning" (Parker 7).

Redefining Ethical Criticism: West vs East

Scholars and critics try to redefine what the revived ethical criticism is. Wayne Booth, fundamental to the revival of ethical criticism in his "Preface" to *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988), articulates one of his "aims" for the book is to "relocate" ethical criticism, turning it from flat judgment, for or against supposedly stable works to fluid conversation about the qualities of the company we keep — and the company that we ourselves provide (x). Booth terms this model "coduction," and it remains one of his most important contributions to this larger, ongoing ethical critical conversation. Martha C. Nussbaum applies her Boothian conception of ethical criticism to the work of Henry James, Marcel Proust, and dramatist Samuel Beckett in her work *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1990) and demonstrates the interpretive power of ethical criticism.

As a key figure of deconstructionism ethical criticism, J. Hillis Miller, based on Kantian ethics, sets out to establish the philosophical, theoretical base of his deconstructionism ethical criticism. In *The Ethics of Reading* (1989) he concerns the process that occurs between the text and the reader, showing that there is a "necessary ethical moment" in the act of reading that is "neither cognitive, nor political,

nor social, nor interpersonal, but properly and independently ethical” (1). Pushing the ethics of reading a further step, Adam Zachary Newton in his *Narrative Ethics* (1995) differentiates “between moral propositionality or the realm of the ‘Said’ and ethical performance, the domain of ‘Saying’” (5). For Newton, narrative is ethics. As he puts clear, “[M]y proposal of a narrative ethics implies simply narrative as ethics: the ethical consequences of narrating a story and fictionalizing person, and the reciprocal claims binding teller, listener, witness, and reader in that process” (10-1). Here he proposes a transactive theory of reading where texts shape reader, and reader shapes text.

The beginning of the second decade of the new century ushers in some generalizations and reflections with contributions by such scholars as Marshall M. Gregory and Peter J. Rabinowitz, criticizing the postmodern thesis that ethical criticism is impossible and focusing on redefining and reframing ethical criticism, thus pursuing a new methodology. For Gregory, the “old ethical criticism” lies, at the heart three confusions that have plagued it from the beginning, i.e. “methodological,” “intellectual,” and “combined ethical and rhetorical” (288). The way out, as Gregory suggests, is to introduce a new notion, “power of invitation,” as central to a new ethical criticism, and as a replacement for the notion of “lessons,” a central concept in the old ethical criticism (290). As a complementary, Rabinowitz’s “lateral ethics,” grounded in two interlocking premises first, ethics involving acts and relationships among people in particular situations; second, reading being a social activity claims that “beyond the act of interpretation, reading has a lateral dimension that involves groups of people in particular situations, groups with which we have ethical relations that are only secondarily connected to the ethics of the author-text-reader relationship” (159).

Here I just give details of Gregory’s notion of power of invitation. For Gregory, every work of literary art extends to its readers at least three invitations that call for responses at three different levels. First, the work extends invitations to feeling. Every work invites its readers to respond in specifically emotional ways to the represented content: dread, suspense, indignation, gratification, curiosity, and so on.

Second, the work extends to the reader invitations to belief, invitations, that is, for reader to believe certain facts or notions that the effects of the work depend on. The reader’s assent to these invitations may be more of an operational assent than a deep existential commitment — the pleasure to be gleaned from the work usually depends on the reader’s compliance — but it is not an insignificant ethical gesture on the part of readers that they willingly try on beliefs that may lie outside the scope of their everyday beliefs.

Third, the work extends to the reader invitations to ethical judgment. At a fundamental level, readers interacting with artistic representations have to make judgments about who the good guys and the bad guys are, whose successes are deserved and are therefore gratifying, whose actions, thoughts, and speech demand disapproval, whose inner selves hang uncertain in the moral balance, and so on.¹

Actually, What Gregory and Robinowitz concern, “involve an overextended generalization, one that undermines the position of a new ethical criticism as much as it reinforces it” (Greoben 131). The content of the text, after all, is only a potential “invitation,” from which it is not possible to determine how the text will affect actual readers. Gregory’s new ethical criticism does not deserve the name, because “neither that it is ‘new’ nor that it is a ‘methodology’” (Gregory 283). So, the so called new ethical criticism, though reviving in 1980s and then becoming popularity, “fails to construct its systematic critical theory” thus loses its independence and gives way to other critical theory (Yang, “Ethical Turn in Literary Studies” 24). For instance, in the case of Nussbaum, ethical criticism has been more or less assimilated by philosophy and politics, while in case of Booth, Newton, ethical criticism is more narratological than ethical.

Interestingly and surprisingly, the boom of contemporary western ethical criticism has been most recently further promoted, strengthened and enriched by their Chinese counterpart, though its ethical turn has occurred two decades later and ascended against a different background. In this point, it needs to be noted that Nie Zhenzhao, the founder of ethical literary criticism in Eastern academy, is quite “different both from traditional Chinese moral criticism and from its Western counterparts” (Shang, 2013). In his new monograph *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* (2014), Nie delineates a conceptual map of Chinese ethical criticism and “establishes his discourses of criticism and systematic theory” (Yang, “Ethical Literary Criticism” 338). As Nie notes that “ethical literary criticism is not to give a new name to its western counterpart and the traditional moral criticism, but to establish its own terminology and critical mechanism” (10). As for Nie, ethics in ethical literary criticism refers to the ethical relationship or ethical order between man and man, man and society, or man and nature. Within particular literary texts, ethics also refers to the moral conceptions based upon ethical order, or the relevant norms used to maintain the ethical order. The general aim of literature is to describe the ethical order, the changes of ethical order, and moral problems caused by those changes, so as to offer some experience for human beings to learn from.

1 The detailed explanation can be found in Marshall Gregory, “Redefining Ethical Criticism. The Old vs. the New,” *Journal of Literary Theory* 4.2 (2010): 273-301.

When Nie redefines his ethical literary criticism, he makes a big breakthrough in discussing about natural (biological) selection and ethical selection. Nie points out “the biggest problem for mankind to solve is to make a selection between the identities of animals and the identities of human beings” (32). The theory of natural selection by Darwin and the argument of labor assumption by Friedrich Engels are regarded to be forceful in differentiating human beings from animals, while in Nie’s view “both Darwin and Engels failed to make a fundamental distinction between man and animals though explained where human beings have come from” (34). In Nie’s opinion, natural selection is only the first step to help human being to be who they are in a biological sense. “What truly differentiates human beings from animals is the second step, ethical selection” (35).

To make it more persuasive Nie resorts to the story of Adam and Eve from Bible. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve are human beings purely in biological sense. Despite of their being physically different from such creatures as livestock, insects and wild animals, so far as knowledge is concerned, there are no fundamental differences between them and the rest of other animals. Only after eating the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge has the man acquired knowledge about good and evil, which completes the distinction between man and the rest of other creatures. Viewed from the perspective of ethical literary criticism, Nie claims that “The consequential ability acquired to tell good from evil from eating the forbidden fruit helps Adam and Eve to complete their ethical selection and become human beings not only in biological sense but also in ethical sense” (35). In other words, the ability to tell good and evil sets up a criterion of identifying human beings from animals. The story of Adam and Eve reveals the vital role played by ethical selection in human beings’ liberation from herds of animals as well as in their realization of their difference from animals. “The nature of ethical selection lies in man’s decision to be a human or an animal, and the precondition of this decision is the knowledge about man’s self or about what distinguishes human beings from animals” (36).

Closely related to the argumentation of ethical selection is Nie’s enlightening concept of Sphinx factor. Viewed from the light of ethical selection, the Sphinx Riddle can be interpreted as “an exploration of the mystery of why a man is such a being” (36). When human beings acquired their figures through natural selection, they also found that they still contain many animal features, such as the instinct to survive and to reproduce. The feature of Sphinx’s combination of a human head and an animal body has two implied meanings: Firstly, the most important feature of human beings lies in its head, which stands for ration of human beings emerged in the evolutionary process; Secondly, it indicates that human beings evolve from

animals and thus still contain some features belonging to animals. Nie names this feature “the Sphinx factor, which is composed of two parts — human factor and animal factor” (38). Human factor equals “ethical consciousness embodied by the human head”, which results from human being’s natural selection in their evolution from savage to civilization. Oppositely, animal factor is human being’s “animal instinct, which is mainly controlled by their primitive desires” (39). To a large degree, the Sphinx factor is a key to understanding literature. Nie states that “the various combinations and alternations of human factor and animal factor generate a variety of ethical events and ethical conflicts in literary works, thus conveying different moral implications” (38). In this light, Sphinx Riddle is an ethical proposition for human beings to ponder over after they finished natural selection thus urges human being to go through another step of evolution — ethical selection.

Ethical Selection and Literary Work as Ethical Event: An Exemplum

As the key term of ethical literary criticism, ethical selection is not a static theory but a set of dynamic actions and concrete performance of moral and ethical choices within the everyday world of social relations. All of us are perpetually engaged with such ethical questions as “am I doing the right thing in this situation or that situation,” “am I being treated fairly or unfairly by other people,” am I justified in pretending that I don’t see Person X’s appeal to me for help,” “am I really obliged to forgive the person who hurt my feelings last week,” and on and on. Beyond these ethical questions of daily conduct, all of us also persistently engage with even deeper issues about ethos as we struggle with such questions as “am I an honest person if I cheat on my taxes,” “why do I lash out when I’m angry,” “am I as good a person as I want to be,” and so on. Most of us are forced to process these kinds of ethical conundrums by relying only on our intuitions that were crammed into us in our youth, but we would undoubtedly find it easier to act as reasonable creatures if we could also rely on a vital tradition of ethical criticism that opens up ethical conundrums for productive discussion instead a rigid one that shoves doctrinaire or religious solutions down our throats.

Let’s take Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannos* as an example. In *Oedipus Tyrannos*, Sophocles makes a full use of incest story of Oedipus’ killing his father and marrying his mother to explicate the tragic process of Oedipus’ ethical selection. Though Oedipus had no knowledge that the man he had killed was his father and the woman he had married was his mother, his incestuous actions still brings disaster to the citizens of Thebes.

Owing to his ethical self-consciousness, Oedipus realizes how sinful he is and

eventually blinds himself out of fear. For Oedipus, the symbol of his rationality lies in the emergence of his ethical consciousness, which obliges him to abide by the ethical taboo, which drives him to investigate the ethical crimes and hunt for the criminal that has violated the ethical taboo by killing the father and marrying the mother. He also attempts to punish the criminal as severely as possible. That's why Oedipus is not willing to exempt himself from being punished when he turns out to be the very criminal that he has so much wanted to arrest. Oedipus' misfortune implies that man has stepped from savagery to civilization through ethical selection and has finally become an ethical being.

The ethical conundrums in *Oedipus Tyrannos* are on the surface and it is easy to notice the hero's ethical choices and the process of his ethical selection because the tragedy on itself is an ethical event. Analyzing the ethical content of a poem that on its surface offers no obvious traction for ethical commentary is a much more complex intellectual challenge than most ethical critics have ever understood. When reading this kind of works, we should keep in mind one tradition in the circle of literary criticism that regards the work as having its existence in the readings, or performances, given to it. The work of literature, in this account, is an event, or, from the reader's point of view, an experience. If we see a literary work as an event, we mean that the work takes place in a culture. And as a cultural event it has ethical and political effects, effects which may be minuscule or wide-reaching. A work of art is thus an event in two ways: there is the event whereby the artwork comes into being, and the event of what we may call, reception.¹

One way of articulating the status of the work as event is to introduce a clear distinction between "work" and "text." We are used to talking of the word "text" in literary analysis since Roland Barthes made the distinction several decades ago. But in referring to literary uses of language the word "work" implies that the creative labour is not left behind but sensed in the reading because the words in a literary work have been selected and organized by an author. We may not know who the author is, but the words have the quality of authoredness. So, when someone refers to a "work of literature" the phrase often carries an implication of an event of enjoyment, interpretation, perhaps puzzlement, an event recalled or imagined or heard about.

The term "text," on the other hand, refers to all types of linguistic entity. We

1 Derek Attridge gives details to the term "literary work as ethical event. See Derek Attridge, "The Literary Work as Ethical Event," *Theory Matters: The Place of Theory in Literary and Cultural Studies Today*, eds. Martin Middeke and Christoph Reinfandt, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016): 219-232.

can include in the category of text the literary exemplar conceived as a string of words, outside of any reading of them. If we read Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* in search of information about fishing in the far sea, and for that reason alone, we are reading it as a text. It is true that the marks on the page or sounds in the air are only language for someone who possesses the requisite knowledge that renders them legible. If we read it as literature, on the other hand, enjoying it as an event rather than trying to extract any information from it, we are still reading the text, but we are now experiencing it as a work. The "workness" of the text, in other words, lies in the effects it produces in a reader. As Blanchot argues, a work may become "graspable" in time when this happens,

it expresses or it refutes what is generally said; it consoles, it entertains, it bores [...]. At this juncture what is read is surely no longer the work; rather, these are the thoughts of everyone rethought, our common habits rendered more habitual still, everyday routines continuing to weave the fabric of our days. And this movement is in itself very important, one which it is not fitting to discredit. But neither the work of art nor its reading is present here. (Blanchot 206)

Where exactly is the work to be located then? Is it a psychological event in the mind of a particular reader? Not quite: although when we try to do justice to the power and value of a literary work we have no option but to base our discussion on our own experience of it, we are not just talking about a psychological experience; we are talking about the text as it is experienced in our reading.

Understanding the literary work as an event has clear implications in a consideration of the ethics and politics of literature. What, then, is the ethico-political function of literary works, taking place in literary readings? Putting this in simpler terms, to read a poem or a novel that merits the term "literature" or to watch a successful theatre piece, is to feel oneself taken into a new realm of thought and feeling, perhaps only fleetingly and temporarily, but occasionally with profound and long-lasting effects. Robert Herrick's brief 17th-century poem, "Upon Julia's Clothes," is a work as apparently devoid of ethical references as this one. Yet, it turns out the poem can yield a rich crop of intellectually challenging and aesthetically productive insights that not only reveal but that underwrite the poem's potential ethical effects.

Whenas in silks my Julia goes,
Then, then (me thinks) how sweetly flows

That liquefaction of her clothes.
 Next, when I cast mine eyes, and see
 That brave vibration each way free;
 O how that glittering taketh me! (Herrick 1891, 77)

Unlike *Oedipus Tyrannos* with obvious ethical conundrums for the hero to confront, “Upon Julia’s Clothes” just presents an invitation for the reader to enter the feelings and thoughts of the speaker. When we claim a genuine understanding of another person’s feelings, thoughts, and character we mean we have experienced a process of ethical selection: going out of ourselves, deploying our capacity for vicarious imagining, and entering into a field of reference that was not our own. Assuming another person’s field of reference, however, is an ethical activity because entering this alternative field of reference actually reconfigures our own. No matter how slightly, we will have become someone different from who we were before because we will have enlarged our capacity for making some selections that we would not have constructed in just the way that reading Herrick’s poem invites us to do.

Apparently, Herrick’s theme is a trite one, i.e., a man in love looking at a woman who excites him. But Herrick challenges himself to make a new exploration of this potentially trite theme arresting, primarily by contrasting feelings of longing and love lying in the background with fresh and vivid feelings of longing and love. The trite version of male longing is the stereotype of a man wanting sex, but Herrick’s version of longing and love confounds this stereotypical expectation. In the poem, the speaker is sufficiently self-controlled, relying more on art and thought than on impulse, not to demand any return declaration of love from Julia, or, indeed, not to demand any response from her at all. The speaker reveals a sensibility that is “taken” merely by the sight of Julia’s clothed body; the sound of her movement, and the way the sight of her shimmering gown suggests to him the appearance of silver melting into liquid. He is, at least at the moment, content to enjoy his beloved in an act of intensely introspective observation and contemplation that does not entail direct discourse. By distancing the speaker from Julia physically, the poet keeps sexual longing in the background. In the foreground, the speaker’s longing is a nuanced yearning not for nakedness, sweat, or touch, but for the more removed, non-tactile sensations of visual and auditory experience. As the reader empathetically replicates the speaker’s feelings and point of view, he or she undergoes the ethically significant activity of seeing the world in this poem through another person’s eyes, mind, heart, and feelings.

The poet also distances his speaker from Julia psychologically by selecting

ethically the particular words of the speaker. First, “whenas” and “methinks,” as words drawn from medieval English and thus archaic even in Herrick’s day, create an ethos for the speaker of a man at least as interested in art and language as in physicality. Second, the projection of this ethos is further enhanced by another word “liquefaction,” a word referring to something that is becoming liquid, yet not to something that is already liquid. It was a word as uncommon in Herrick’s day as in ours. By using such recondite but precise language, the poet holds our attention on the nature and quality of the speaker’s special powers of expression and attentiveness. Third, the phrase “brave vibration,” with the semantic association between “brave” and “bravado,” suggests that Julia may be fully aware of the magnetic attractiveness that her flouting, shimmering silks exert on men in general and on the speaker in particular. But regardless of what her own intentions may be, the speaker is undoubtedly much less interested in a slam-bam sexual score than in the complex apprehension of a woman whose sweetness and femininity pleases him by selecting archaic and artistic words to express his passion. So, the cliched images of bare flesh and heavy breathing were melted into those of soft rustlings and liquidity. At the end, the speaker’s complex feelings and emotion progress from sensory and sensual observations at the beginning to a quietly controlled surge of summative emotion primarily produced by “taketh,” a word that viscerally evokes those moments in life when an unexpected realization, idea, or memory suddenly stops our breath and implies that the speaker is helplessly seized by emotions of longing and love more powerful than himself.

Conclusion and Expectation

Then, returning to Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannos* and Herrick’s Poem, if we see them as literary work with ethical event, the ethical selections of Oedipus and the Speaker illustrate us models we persistently register as points of reference in everyday life. We often dismiss the ethical significance of doing so on the ground that not every reader’s ethos shifts vastly from the influence of a single engagement with a single work of literary art. But we should not forget to take into account the cumulative effects thus lodged within us. Even if each change we make is slight, our lives and character are made up of these small changes. We follow models from literary art to empathetically assume different identities partly because it feels invigorating and liberating to enrich and enlarge our own lives in this way, partly because doing so helps us understand how other people feel and think, and partly because we all need to experiment with the possibility of adding new parts or qualities to ourselves from sources outside of us in the larger world.

The ethical critic who can show how this or that work of literary art may exert an ethical influence on its readers does a real service to those of us who want to know not only why works of literary art are interesting, but why they might be important. The goal of ethical criticism is not to make an over-simplified judgment about literature by saying it is good or bad. Instead, it attempts to unpack the ethical values of literature, and the truth about social life depicted in literature from an ethical perspective. It is to be reiterated that the ethical value of literature is historical, stable and objective, regardless of the changes undertaken in today's moral principles.

Consider *Oedipus Tyrannos* as an example again. The central concern of ethical criticism is not to define the ethical principles accepted by Oedipus but to illuminate why the prophesy that he will kill his father and marry his mother lead to his tragedy; it does not aim at making a moral judgment about Oedipus's crime but aims at explicating why his crime for killing his father and marrying his mother is considered as the most horrible one; it does not mean to sum up moral inclinations of Oedipus or Sophocles but to reveal factors attributing to Oedipus's tragedy. The overall goal of ethical criticism is to shed new light on a given literary text by doing close reading from an ethical perspective. To further extend this point, I think literary criticism is not a repetition of existing criticism but is a constant pursuit of new interpretations and new findings. Put it another way, literary criticism is not stable but rather rigorous, dynamic and progressive.

Finally, what're the further measures we could take to perfect ethical criticism? The first thing we should do for the development of ethical criticism is to make a clearer distinction between ethics and morality. The distinction between ethics and morality can be thought of as the difference between principles (ethics) and rules (morality). Ethics is more capacious and flexible than morality because rather than applying a priori rules ethics applies principles to situations and reasons to its judgments on the basis of those principles. Then, we need recuperate authorial agency goes hand in hand with attention to ethics because the interest in literature as a site for the exploration of value generates an interest in who has constructed that site and how that construction can guide the exploration. What's more, ethics is woven into literature on the grounds that the use of certain techniques or structure inevitably has an ethical dimension. Thus, we might talk about the larger ethical assumptions governing the selection to write like this or that. Though the selection would be up to an individual author, but his way of thinking about ethics assumes that there's an ethical stance inherent in his selection.

All of us know that the world could be better. A new ethical criticism goes without saying having a role to play in helping this better world emerge, by helping

all of us analyze productively the relationship between the development of selves and the ethical influence of literary works.

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