

Ethics, Community and Literature: An Introduction

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We are in a time of rapid change, a time that ethical issues are addressed by various disciplines: philosophy, economics, medical science, art and literature, to name only a few. Terence Hawkes rightly points out in his General Preface to the *New Accents* series that a time of rapid and radical change will inevitably affect the nature of those disciplines that both reflect our society and help to change it and he perceptively realizes that such changes are nowhere more apparent than in the central field of literary studies, because the erosion of the assumptions and presumptions that support the literary disciplines in their conventional form has been proved fundamental. What, then, are the assumptions and presumptions that are central to literary studies? A survey of the tradition of world literature exhibits that there has been a clear line of ethical concerns in both literary writing and literary criticism ever since the ancient time. To many, literature serves as a moral library or an illustration of philosophical ideas and actual moral life by supplying “the kind of experience needed to develop a person’s faculty of moral judgment” (DePaul 563). The idea of literature has “civilizing values” and “teaching values” was proposed by many authors, thinkers, educators as well as critics like Mathew Arnold, who in his *Culture and Anarchy* suggests that culture seeks “to make the best that has been thought and known in the world ” and “to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light.” Here, quite conspicuously, Arnold binds cultural value with ethics. Undoubtedly, ever since the rise of literary studies ethics has been the conventional “assumptions and presumptions that support the literary disciplines.”

However, with the passing of time and as the discourse of criticism changes, the traditional ethical assumptions and presumptions have been eroded and replaced by various theories, deconstructive theories in particular in the last two or three decades of the 20th century. Most theories of the latter half of the 20th century are hostile to ethical criticism. For a very long time the ethical commitment of literary criticism has been challenged and marginalized and the old map of criticism were totally changed.

In the circle of criticism and in the university classroom of Department of English Studies scholars have been busy mongering “theories” and “theories.” Such situation remained unchanged until late 1980s and 1990s in particular when a revival of or a renewed interest for the ethical issues in literature emerged.

This rise of ethical criticism soon became widespread and impressive. According to A. Mendelson-Maoz, in the 1980s and the 1990s several journals devoted special issues to the subject of ethics and literature: *New Literary History* 1983 (Diamond, Murray, Nussbaum, Putnam, and Raphael), *Ethics* 1988 (Backer, Booth, Diamond, Nussbaum), *PMLA* (Publications of the Modern Language Association of America) 1991 (Attridge and Buell), *Yale French Studies* 1999 (Nouvet), and *Poetics Today* 2004 (Askin). *Philosophy & Literature* has devoted an issue to a Symposium on Morality and Literature (hosting the debate between Nussbaum and Posner) in 1998, and deals with ethical criticism almost in every volume.¹ Evidently, after many years’ clamor of “theories,” criticism began to assume an “ethical turn.” Then, what is ethical criticism in this so-called age of “after-theory”?

In order to answer this question and draw this map in China, Nie Zhenzhao, vice chairman of China Association of Foreign Literature Studies, vice chairman of International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism, and professor of comparative literature in Central China Normal University, began to establish a set of paradigms for ethical literary criticism at the turn of the century. Nie’s unremitting endeavor in ethical literary criticism has now become influential and his ideas have been hotly discussed and responded in several international symposiums. We can safely say that a renewed interest for ethical criticism (or an “ethical turn” together with an “ecological turn” which is essentially related with the issue of ethics) is now prevalent and that the map of literary criticism assumes a new and clear contour, at least in China. The seven articles under this column are selected from the contributions to the 3rd International Symposium on Ethical Literary Criticism held in Ningbo University (China) last year. These essays, all soundly based on close reading and analysis of literary texts, are designed to discuss the question of ethics and aesthetics, ethics and community, ethics and identity, and ethics and ecology.

Cesar Dominguez, from the University of Santiago de Compostela of Spain, begins this cluster of articles by citing Tobin Siebers’ famous statement: “The heart of ethics is the desire for community.” Then he points out that it is with the world literature paradigm/discipline that the idea of community has become more visible in the form of the “human family,” an ethical topic that works of world literature turn to address after the WWII. Cesar Dominguez also discusses the issue of the “desire for uncommunity” in “hermitic literatures,” i.e., literatures by isolated peoples. He raises the question of whether such “isolated literatures” should be integrated in world

literature as a foil to the “desire for community.”

The sense of community which is indispensable to ethics is also responded in “Should Literary Criticism be Ethical?” by Hitoshi Oshima from Fukuoka University of Japan. To illustrate his opinions about the ethical values of a literary work, Hitoshi Oshima quotes Albert Camus’s Nobel Prize Speech in 1957, which claims that “an artist forms himself or herself through the ceaseless going-to and coming-back-from others, between beauty indispensable to him and the community impossible to run away from. That is why he neglects nothing.” Hitoshi Oshima regards Camus’s “Not to neglect anything in the world” as “the most eloquent sign of his or her love and sincerity for the world” and hence the basis for an ethical literature. He further points out that just in the same way that an ethical writer should examine whether or not he or she neglects anything in the world, an ethical critic should examine whether or not the writer neglects anything in the world. He suggests that an ethical critic should be the one who takes care to find such value as makes a literary work ethical, the one who appreciates it in a way that allows many readers to share it.

Another contributor who deals with the problems of ethics, identity and community is Florence Kuet from University of Malaya of Malaysia. She investigates the relation of family and community in Han Suyin’s works from the perspective of ethical choice and cultural identity, arguing that the central theme of Han Suyin’s life lies in her successful attempts in reconstructing the ethical order of her world. Florence Kuet finds several breakthroughs in Han Suyin’s characterization, firstly, her ability in defusing the curse of her illegitimate existence in the family as well as the community where she was brought up; secondly, her success in challenging the ethical norms of her era, and thirdly the rebirth of her new “dual-identity.” Evidently, for Florence Kuet the sense of community features a sense of family belonging as well as a sense of cultural and ethical identity.

Much as Cesar Dominguez’s considering ethics as the desire for community, Hitoshi Oshima’s defining “Not to neglect anything in the world” as the base of ethical literature, and Florence Kuet’s taking community as a way of ethical choice and cultural identity, Xu Yan from Ningbo University of China studies the issue of existence and community in the novel *The Farming of Bones* by the Haitian American writer, Edwidge Danticat. Xu Yan’s article “To Narrate is to Be ” centers on the character Amabelle Désir’s life-long endeavors to extricate herself from a sense of non-existence by the way of narrating. In another word, the heroine tries to associate herself with some communities through the working of words. The death of Amabelle’s parents cuts her loose from the solid family foundations since birth. Her helpless choice to be a handmaid in the neighbor country alienates her further from her Haitian community. Humble as she is as a handmaid, Amabelle still rebuilds a new

community with her boyfriend and his friends. But the 1937 Massacre exterminates her new community mercilessly and completely. Again the only hope for her is to find a safe nest in words to lay down all the people and their existence, thus finding a grave in words to commemorate them and establishing a narrated community that she still identifies herself with.

As is mentioned above, accompanying the “ethical turn” early in this century there was an “ecological turn” which is closely related with environmental ethics and, in Timothy Morton’s term, “melancholy ethics.” Peter I-min Huang from Tamkang University applies Morton’s “dark ecology” or “melancholy ethics” to discuss the novel *Power* (1998) by Linda Hogan, the renowned Native American writer. He convincingly points out that Derrida’s concept of vulnerability is similar to Morton’s “melancholy ethics” in terms of shared suffering between human and non-humans and the need for compassion. Derrida, who regards compassion as the basis of ethics, strongly stresses the necessity of experiencing compassion to open “the immense question of pathos” and “of suffering, pity and compassion.” According to Huang, this kind of ethics does not attempt a separation of man from the environment, whether human or non-human environment, nor does it distance itself by relating to it only in “aesthetic” terms. Rather, this understanding of ethics is a commitment to recognizing that love is as much about loss and separation as about amalgamation and unity. By proposing a non-human perspective of ethics, Huang contributes a new understanding of the theme of moral judgment and sacrifice in the novel.

The other two contributors, Young Suck Rhee from Hangyang University of Korea and Knut Brinhildsvoll from the Centre for Ibsen Studies at the University of Oslo of Norway, both deal with the moral and aesthetic effects of literature, the former by analyzing W. B. Yeats’ poems, the latter by exemplifying the role of ethics in the works of Emile Zola, Henrik Ibsen, Bertolt Brecht, Robert Louis Stevenson, to name only a few. Young Suck Rhee attempts to rectify a misreading of Yeats by most readers who regard Yeats’ poetry as aesthetically pure. He argues that ethics is closely related with art and poetry and that Yeats was perhaps one of the first poets who considered it wrong to separate ethics from aesthetics. Young Suck Rhee regards Yeats as a combination of “priest of religion” as well as an artist. Knut Brinhildsvoll’s article focuses particularly on different kinds of genres and their artistic expressions, which aim at obtaining a moral effect and a mental change. He begins with Aristotle’s theory of catharsis and moves on all the way from Horace to Hegel, Karl Max, Bertolt Brecht, F.R. Leavis, and quite significantly to Emmanuel Levinas, whose ethical philosophy about Self and Other serves as the a theoretical door-opener in literary disputes about moral questions. The innovation of this article lies in its demonstration of the unity of content and form of literary works, that is, in Knut Brinhildsvoll’s own

words, “ethical questions may be attached to the work’s formal structure as well.” Brinhildsvoll coins the term “the ethics of aesthetics” to justify a call for a new ethical agenda in artistic writing.

Note

1. See Adia Mendelson-Maoz, “Ethics and Literature: Introduction.” *Philosophia* 35(2007):111–116, P113.

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De Paul, R. M. “Argument and perception: The role of literature in moral inquiry.” *The Journal of Philosophy* 85.10 (1988): 552–565.

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