

The Role of Ethics in Literature: An Approach

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Abstract This article deals with questions concerning the relationship between literature and ethics, in particular paying attention to different kinds of genres and artistic expressions, which aim at obtaining a moral effect and a mental change. It takes as its point of departure the ancient theater's notion of catharsis, which connects the impact of the dramatic plot on the audience with mental purification. The article shows that questions of good and bad can be related to both the content and form of literary works. Most common is that moral awareness is revealed on the level of a literary work's content, but ethical questions may be attached to the work's formal structure as well. The work is good as far as it meets the requirements of the contemporary aesthetical standards, it is bad if it does not. (By the way, quite opposite to modern reception theory, which claims that a work of art need transcend the expectation horizon in order to be considered pioneering.) The article underlines that what I call the ethics of aesthetics do not do justice to the serious catastrophes of our time, which calls for a new ethical turn in artistic writing.

Key words catharsis; moral perfection; value vacuum; the novel of education; didactic conceptions; the morality play; the ethics of aesthetics; tendency literature; the ethical turn

Aesthetics is usually considered to be the theoretical framework of art and literature. If you, on the contrary, deny the priority of aesthetics in the field of artistic expression in favor of ethics, you risk facing considerable contradictions. In order to elaborate criteria, due to which one may judge the role of ethics in literary texts, it is recommended to pay attention to the history of literary reception. It is obvious that questions concerning the intention of artistic writing have been discussed long before the introduction of modern reception theory. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle launched the concept of purification or catharsis; hence, the function of the tragedy consists in releasing the spectators from fear and compassion brought about by the dramatic conflicts. The artistic presentation has, in keeping with the catharsis idea, a psycho-

hygienic impact because the purification or “purgation” of the excessive passions triggers the ideal of mental balance. Among the authors who have emphasized the ethical function of the catharsis impact belongs the German Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who in his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* declares that catharsis entails “a transformation of passions into virtuous skills” (Stück 78). He explains: “Men are sometimes too much addicted to pity or fear, sometimes too little; tragedy brings them back to a virtuous and happy mean” (Lucas 23). The idea of catharsis has even survived in Hegel’s philosophy of art. Following Aristotle, he, in his *Aesthetic*, ascribes to art as its main intention the property of purifying the passions in order to achieve moral perfection (75). Due to Hegel, all kinds of art aim at elaborating standards that enable the recipient to separate impure passions from clean ones, and in so doing draw guidelines for ethical behavior. On the reception level, Hegel complies with Horace’s notion expressed in the sentence *fabula docet*, which means it is the function of artistic writing to advise and instruct. When the plot succeeds in achieving this mental effect it paves the way for what Hegel calls “moral improvement” (78), which he looks upon as the first step on the way to “moral perfection,” in which advice and purification collaborate in bringing about “the truly moral good” (78). It is actually noteworthy that an aesthetic principle serves as a stimulus to reach ethical consequences. The nature of art is in my opinion not primarily ethical, but art is always able to produce not only ethical effects, but through its capacity of releasing emotions to show that feelings have a cognitive function.

Of course, it is useless to look upon literature independent of its respective context. Obviously there are certain literary periods during which moral questions are predominant and must be considered the primary concern of literary expression. Nobody has emphasized this opinion more precisely and with more appropriate arguments than Nie Zhenzhao, who through his stimulating articles and publishing activities has inspired numerous colleagues and students to collaborate on the theoretical expansion of ethical criticism. According to his understanding of literature, Nie Zhenzhao underlines that “the practical aim of artistic writing is moral enlightenment” (1, 6) and consequently that “literature is a product of morality in a given period of history” (3). The temporal restriction is important; otherwise, one may risk that there will be” conflicts between ethics of the past and ethics of today” (9). The theoretical viewpoint is historicism; because “all the literature in different periods has its own ethical situation and ethical context,” “any changes of its ethical environment... will lead to misreading and misjudgement” (9).

In a study on ethics and existence in Ibsen’s last play, *When We Dead Awaken*, Tom Eide considers literature and ethics as complementary disciplines, which illuminate the same phenomena from different viewpoints, and thereby contribute

to a more complete recording of them. The aesthetical approach to ethics enables a supplementary insight. Martha Nussbaum in *Love's Knowledge* (1990) emphasizes that moral philosophy needs literature, as there are ethical problems which one can hardly express with a comparable differentiation in the analytical language of philosophy. It is obvious that literature offers a narrative or dramatic strategy, which does not intend to understand ethical issues in the light of rational arguments, but in the light of narratives and stories. Thus it makes sense to speak about the narrative character of ethics. Wayne C. Booth in his book *The Company We Keep* (1988) explains it in the following statement: "The ethics of narrative is inherently a universal subject: in the beginning and from then on, there was a story, and it was largely in story that human beings were created and now continue to recreate themselves" (39). Booth seems to share Martha Nussbaum's opinion that literary texts are more proper for elaborating ethical complexity than are philosophical analysis (288). Nonetheless, both discourses overlap each other in a way which has induced Hillis Miller to maintain that "ethics and narration cannot be kept separated," thus indicating that "there is a peculiar relation between the affirmation of universal moral law and storytelling" (2).

In the following, I want to concentrate on questions related to genre concepts, text reception and ethical evaluation. First of all: are there special kinds of literary texts that are considered favorable for dealing with ethical problems? If a writer's primary concern is to highlight moral questions, he of course can make use of artistic conceptions. In so doing art serves as a midwife for intentions that are considered to be superior to the expressive act itself. This means that art declines to a formal framework, which helps to transmit the ethical message. In so far it makes sense to assert that the ethical message of literary texts achieves a primary function in cases when the literary form submits to the content and itself absorbs as less attention as possible. In the following, I will pay attention to three different genres of literary expression, in which moral awareness, ethical education and didactic instruction require a primary role. By far the most essential category of ethical literary writing is the novel of education or the novel of development, which was a very widespread and popular genre during the Romantic period in European literature, especially in Germany. The term was used for the first time by Wilhelm Dilthey in the Hölderlin-essay in *Erlebnis und Dichtung (Poetry and Experience)*. Hereby he understands the monumental form of the German novel in the Classical and Romantic periods. Some of the most typical features of this genre are to be found in Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre (Wilhelm Meister's years of apprenticeship)*, in which a group of congenial souls join and constitute a community called "the pedagogical province," whose members in a constantly ongoing process of self-transcendence strive for an increase of their humanitarian qualities. Proceeding from one level to the next, they move forwards

on an ascending course in the direction of the ideal and perfect embodiment of the human spirit. The aim of their efforts is to realize the highest form of humanity, which is only accessible through education. Shaftesbury, whose works appeared in German translation in 1738, defines 'Bildung' as "formation of a gentle character" and "innere Bildung" as "inward form." The individual concept of education gradually obtains an ethical dimension through its integration in a social context. The efforts of the pedagogical community are directed towards an enhancement of immanent abilities and at the same time a development of inter-personal and inter-cultural competence that meet the requirements of the highest human ideal.

As far as the author of the novel of education succeeds in depicting the ideal community or at least the outline of it, he has reached his primary intention, which is an ethical one. In this case it may be reasonable to draw the conclusion that within the frames of fiction the proclamation of the idea of humanity and its moral roots overshadows the importance of formal skill and aesthetic articulation. There are, however, also reasons to maintain that ethics and aesthetics participate equally in the representation of the human ideal, and that one should not forget that the education and practice in the field of aesthetical disciplines in the novel of education is part of the ethical process of human growth and perfection. It makes a difference if aesthetics is regarded as the organizing principle of a work of art or as one subject among several, which has to be dealt with during the building of the ideal ethical personality. Whereas the novel of education endeavors to unite aesthetical and ethical components and combine individual and social elements in order to present a complete representation of the single members of the ideal community and their interrelations, other educational genres pay attention to more limited aspects of pedagogical intentions.

One of the most influential writers of modern drama, the German playwright Bertolt Brecht, wrote in the time between the two world wars a great many didactic plays that intended to change the audience's attitude of comprehension from consumption to reflection. The spectator should not identify emotionally with the actors and the plot, but develop a critical view of what happens on the stage. Only from a distant perspective is he enabled to judge the stage actions and draw the intended conclusions regarding the abandonment of social injustice and exploitation of the outside world. Brecht's dramatic concept owes a great debt to Karl Marx, who demanded changing activities from philosophy. "The philosophers have so far interpreted the world," he wrote and added: "now it is time to change it" (12). In one of his most successful plays in the didactic genre, *The Good Person of Szechwan*, Brecht applies Marx' suggestion to a dramatic plot, in which the old Greek Gods Zeus and his son Hermes are descending to the Chinese province in order to test the

question whether it is possible to live on the earth and at the same time to be good. Not surprisingly, the answer is No: under the current capitalistic or former feudal society it is not possible. Brecht's intention is to show that the lack of ethical standards results in a system where you need to be bad if you want to survive. 40 years before Brecht, the Swedish playwright August Strindberg dealt with the same problem in his drama *A Dream Play*. The Goddess Indra visits the earth in order to test how life on earth is, and she returns with the same conclusion: the condition of humanity is a great pity! But unlike Brecht's ideological intention of ethical change, Strindberg affirms the *status quo*, implying that we cannot change anything through artistic writing.

The baroque morality play is another genre, which may contribute to throw light on the role of ethics in literature. Without mentioning this category of plays, Nie Zhenzhao yet approves the moral purpose of this kind of play, while underlining that "the primary purpose of literature is not to provide entertainment but to offer moral examples for human beings to follow..." (6). The morality plays, among them the English *The Summoning of Everyman* from the late 15th century and the Flemish *Elckerlijck*, use allegorical characters in order to dramatize the conflict between good and evil. Hugo von Hoffmannsthal's Austrian version of the morality play called *Jedermann* has been performed annually at the Salzburg festival since 1920. The subtitle of this morality play, *The Play about the Death of the Rich Man*, indicates ethical conflicts emerging from the threat of sudden death. Interesting from a Chinese point of view is Frederic Franck's modernized version drawing on Buddhist influence.

Strindberg's view is certainly a very pessimistic one, leaving out the consideration that there is a possibility of transition from the world as it is to a world as it ought to be. No hope, no change for the better, no future. This standpoint ignores what is said to be the link between moral law and poetry, wonderfully expressed in Goethe's poem *The Divine*: "Noble be the man/helpful and good!" (249) Please notice that through the use of subjunctive the meaning is not that the man is noble, but that he ought to be noble. The moral law within him leads him to act according to the divine intentions. Due to this understanding ethics is a normative discipline, based on metaphysical, religious or *a priori* principles deeply rooted in man. In his book *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience* (1955), Maurice Mandelbaum states that "among most contemporary philosophers it now passes for an obvious truth that ethics is not to be regarded as having a descriptive or explanatory function; it is held that its task, being normative, is to deal with not "what is," but "what ought to be" (13). Nevertheless, in the wide field of literature there are numerous texts that "describe" ethical concerns without linking them to *a priori* systems. Connecting to Goethe's notion of nobility I would like to draw attention to Ibsen's drama *Rosmersholm*, in which the main male figure, Johannes Rosmer, introduces the idea of establishing an

association of what he calls “free noblemen,” whose members are meant to cultivate the lofty idea of a humanism void of institutional traditions. This attempt, even if it fails, shows the strong need for reestablishing a moral identity hereby filling the ethical gap left open after Rosmer as a priest has broken with his Christian faith.

There is a gap between these two different options of literary intentions. There are writers who only want to throw light on existing conditions, without having any ambitions of changing them, and others who are writing in order to leave behind them a better world. In the history of European literature from the 19th century, I just want to give one example. Two of the most distinguished writers of the naturalistic school, Emile Zola and Henrik Ibsen, have been accused of having completely contradictory intentions behind their literary projects. The following differentiation is said to be typical concerning their intentional efforts. Whereas Zola is descending into social and individual shit in order to take a bath, Ibsen is doing the same in order to clean the shit. This distinction may give the impression that both of them were occupied with the misery of the human crisis, but Ibsen hereby was the one who, governed by an ethical impetus, shows ways out of the crisis and in so doing shapes a link to the notion of catharsis in the old Greek tragedy. It is important to notice, however, that Ibsen is establishing this link in an indirect way. The most illuminating example is his play *Ghost*, which is regarded to be the drama that comes closest to a modern tragedy. Oswald, the son of chamberlain Alving and his wife Helene, suffers from a deadly venereal disease brought upon him by his father’s dissolute sexual practice. He himself is completely innocent in his terrible faith; he is simply the victim of a moral decline which he cannot escape. Ibsen’s message seems to be: unless you do not change the moral codes you will not be able to restore a “clean” society based on mutual respect and ethical responsibility.

From a philosophical point of view the problem focused upon in Ibsen’s play is the relation between determination and free will. If somebody like Oswald Alving is deprived of having a free will, how could he ever perform the ethical claim? I have so far discussed ethics on the level of literary content. This is a very common approach. Literary theories have always described the connection between ethical norms and the function of literature, thus making artistic writing a battlefield where the powers of good and bad are fighting against each other. This concept has been questioned because working with oppositions which do not consider the intermediate states of mind, there has been a widespread tendency to blame the followers of ethical criticism for dealing with pre-modern texts. It is truly remarkable that many researchers during postmodernity refrained from participating in discussions about ethics and evaluation for fear of being considered old-fashioned. Now-a-days times have changed and one has recognized that there is a need for an ethical reconsideration. Frank Raymond

Leavis, who asserted that there cannot be great literary art without serious moral purpose, rejected the notion of New Criticism that only the text-immanent analysis represented a scientific method, whereas an interpretation based on trans-textual, moral criteria was taboo. Leavis connected aesthetic and moral questions and saw in the great novel tradition a relevant medium for a moral approach to the central questions of life. He considered the quoted novels as moral fables with a topical significance for the understanding of the present time. The renewed interest for the ethical concern of literature was a response to the loss of moral orientation and the decline of ethical values in the late 20th century. The dissemination of postmodern and post-structural writing had left a value vacuum, which promoted the rise of ethical criticism as a new discipline in literary research. Especially in America, this new field of literary research has gained much attention. J. Hillis Miller has endeavored to find what he, in reference to Immanuel Kant, calls universal ethical values, a generally accepted moral law, but this has, as he admits, proved to be impossible, and so he ends up with a very pessimistic conclusion, due to which the ethics of reading after all shows the unreadable character of all literary texts. Because of the continual suspension of meaning in verbal expression language will never arrive at a final goal. Ethical concepts as well as the act of a final constitution of meaning within the linguistic signification process are subject to constant adjournments which prevent a final statement.

You risk being confronted with the same difficulty if you choose the content of a literary work as value criteria. The ethical status of all kinds of trans-textual subjects implemented on a wide scale, from political to love stories, constantly changes in accordance with the changing cultural and time-space contexts. This fact makes it a problem to draw valid conclusions regarding universal ethical judgments from the contents of literary texts. You may of course object to my assertion and argue that every human being independent of time, space and generation has an innate capacity to distinguish between good and bad, a theme which is often discussed as a point of departure in the so-called theodicy problem: when God is almighty, why does the bad exist? Since the bad came into the world it attacks the good and intensifies a conflict, which ever since has been part of world literature.

It may however prove more profitable to take one's point of departure in Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy of dialoguing, in which he revives a philosophical tradition, due to which the self requires the Other to define itself. This "primary philosophy" is an "ethical philosophy," not about what is, but about what ought to be. The face-to-face encounter with the Other makes the human being a moral subject, which reveals himself in his otherness. Unlike the ontological concepts of Husserl and Heidegger, Levinas receives his impulses from the exterior world

beyond philosophical introspections. It is central to Levinas to respect the otherness of the other and take steps to avoid mixing together the Other and the Same. Levinas' rediscovering of Otherness as a constituent element in a philosophy of ethics may serve as a theoretical door-opener in literary disputes about moral questions, but ethical criticism arrives at its limits in texts dealing with the loss of Otherness, in cases when literary figures suffer from solipsism, autism or madness, and what you face when face-to-face is the absence of the Other as an intact vis-à-vis.

During the Romantic age this conflict between good and bad tended to turn inward and manifest itself in disintegrated figures whose minds are disrupted and in a state of mental disorder. Accordingly the romantic writers have a predilection for all kinds of doubles and revenants. Goethe's *Faust* is confessing that "two souls live in my breast," (41) Edgar Allan Poe's *William Wilson* lodges a double next to himself, whom he cannot escape. Maybe the most dazzling case of psychical dissociation is found in Robert Louis Stevenson's story *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). From a young age, Jekyll has been aware of his disjunct nature and has in vain tried to suppress the negative parts of his character. Later, as a medical doctor, he is fascinated by the idea that he could solve the problem if he succeeds in isolating the two contradictory dispositions by placing them into two different bodies. As a result of his experiments he transforms by the help of chemical substances the bad part of his character into the separate person Mr. Hyde, who commits terrible crimes including murder. As Mr. Hyde gains more and more power over his creator, Dr. Jekyll makes up his mind and decides to destroy both of his identities thus liberating the world from a monster. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde are in reality two designations for good and bad, and the story tells about the oscillation between these two states of mind. It is obvious that Mr. Hyde is the "hidden" part of Dr. Jekyll, his invisible *alter ego*. Dr. Jekyll makes a big mistake when trying to get rid of him. Instead of removing him, it would have been more promising to educate him and make him more Jekyll-like. If you emphasize an ethical reading of the story, it is important to underline that only the assimilation of the two antagonists into a Jekyll-like personality would have met the requirements of ethical criticism. It is by far, according to Hegel, insufficient to argue that "you need to know the evil and the sin in order to act morally" (78).

If we change the perspective from the ethical content of literary texts and turn to the aesthetical values we face a meta-textual level of the literary object. It is a matter of evaluating the elements of literary constructions and their internal relations. First of all, it is a simple truth that literary texts *per se* neither are valuable nor not. They obtain these qualities when one relates them to value standards and asks to what extent they meet these demands. Literary research has developed standards of literary evaluation, which are drawn from aesthetical norms related to formal,

structural, rhetorical, and linguistic aspects of literary expression. In keeping with these evaluation criteria it is understandable that the designation used for literature is in France *belle-lettres*, in Germany *schöne Literatur*. That means if you ask whether a literary text is good or bad, the answer is to be given on the level of aesthetics. It is good as far as it has adjusted the text to the requirements of the changing literary standards; it is bad if it has failed to do so. However, if you restrict literary quality to the successful use of literary techniques, you limit literature to the level of formal skill and make it a matter of *l'art pour l'art*. This reduction will meet the expectations of those who enjoy literature as an excellent performance of *artistique brilliance*. Such a receptive attitude is however contradictory to the ideas of the Enlightenment, due to which the main idea of literature is to achieve change according to the Horatian doctrine *utile dulce*, to combine the useful with the pleasant.

Ethical concepts of literature seem to me to flourish in times when there is a need for enlightenment and writers engage in the correction of social and human errors and wrong ways of progress. Andreas Brenner explains the ethical turn in contemporary philosophy with the threat emerging from a possible collapse of the eco-system which has given rise to numerous forms of “ecological ethics” (37-55). Obviously the increasing interest in ethical criticism in literary research is not least a response to the ethical boom in modern philosophy and in a lot of neighboring disciplines. Many of the topics and problems dealt with in bio-ethics, medical ethics, juridical ethics, social ethics, political ethics, ethics of the multimedia, etc., are subject to discussions and analysis in different kinds of modern literary writing. If such forms of ethical writing will be successful, there must be a close interaction between the ideas of production and reception. If the primary concern of artistic writing is to obtain an ethical impact, the author can reach this intention within different ways of expression. If he intends to warn against the threat of global heat, he may do so in many genres and media. He can write a documentary text, a newspaper comment, a research study, a scientific essay, etc., and he can publish it in print or electronic media, on the internet or on Facebook. However, if he decides to realize his ethical approach in the field of belletristics, he depends upon making use of a literary language, which through its structural features and rhetorical forms differs from the communication language of everyday life. According to the influential conceptions of the Prague circle the most important mark of the literary discourse is its literality. Roman Jakobson asked: “What makes a lingual utterance a work of art?” and his answer was “its literality.” Hence the subject of literary research is not literature itself, but the literary as the artistic procedure through which the literary text comes into being. Manfred Frank, one of the leading experts in the field of literary research in Germany, agrees and underlines the fact that literary studies beyond the limits of interpretation face problems which

tend to be repressed because of a one-sided focus on the content of literary texts. This may explain why literary researchers, when explaining their methods, to a considerable degree prefer text-materials from pre-modern writing or from the wide field of realistic narrative literature. This focus is due to Frank's problematic because it ignores that "modern literature articulates a protest against the categories of narrative coherence and semantic availability" (138).

Through the numerous literary theories which have been launched during the last decades, we know a lot more about the constitution, the function and the internal organization of the literary work of art. By the predominant focus on structural and morphological characteristics there was after the decline of Marxian literary studies a tendency to neglect the trans-textual references of literature, all questions related to the meaning and purpose of belletristic articulations. You may look upon ethical criticism as a reaction to the disobliging patterns of postmodernity and a rediscovery of belletristics as an instrument in the service of mental and ideological change. This turning towards an instrumental conception of literature was furthered through the increase of ecological and humanitarian catastrophes and the spreading of ethnical and religious conflicts. When you start using literature as a way and means to achieve moral improvement and change of aggressive attitudes, you give priority to ethical preferences. When you look upon literature from this point of view, it may make sense to maintain that ethics is prior to aesthetics and that aesthetics is a mid-wife who helps accomplish the idea of ethical criticism.

In order to make this a little bit more concrete, I want to draw attention to a master piece of Norwegian novel art, written by Alexander Kielland and published in the year 1883. The name of his novel is *Poison* and it is a central work of the so called tendency literature in the second part of the 19th century. In his novel, Kielland attacks the traditional Latin schools and their one-sided preference for the Latin Language to the disadvantage of teaching the mother tongue. The intention of the novel is to argue for the abandonment of classical languages and their replacement with modern Norwegian. Kielland's attempt was successful. Through his novel he paved the way for a school reform, which decreased the role of Latin and favored the study of Norwegian history and language in the country's high schools. In Kielland's opinion, the numerical majority of Latin classes poisoned the students' minds and kept them away from the acquisition of more useful knowledge. His novel complies with the expectations of an ethical project because it aims at bringing about a spiritual decontamination, and as such it is part of a nation-building concept.

In all kinds of tendency literature, the ethical change is the primary incentive, in so far it makes sense to consider the successful performance of this intention as the primary concern of the novel. The novelist then has to decide which means of

presentation are most helpful to realize these demands. Not surprisingly, Kielland makes use of satire, as satire is a weapon well-suited to destroy its object in order to create the presuppositions for a new deal and a renewed growth.

Satire is akin to caricature. Both genres can, by means of confrontation between norm and irregularity, serve the idea of ethical change because their internal disproportion makes the gap between idea and reality striking. Both satire and caricature are important categories in what Karl Rosenkranz in his famous book from 1853 called *The aesthetic of ugliness*. The twisted figures of satiric and cartoonist presentations violate the norms of beauty and deviate from the idea of ethical balance. Nevertheless, through their lack of symmetrical appearances they pay attention to the absence of harmony and cause a need for a reinforcement of an ethical counter-current.

In the future discussions about concepts of ethical criticism, I think it would be favorable to include texts from the time of early modernism, as during the short period between 1890 and 1924 western writers developed different kinds of literary expression, which have been called revolutionary. It would have been of utmost interest to explore to what extent ethical criticism is a relevant path-way to the comprehension of the new literary paradigms. In any case it will be a challenging matter. Common for the constitution of new forms of artistic expression is that they respond in a radical way to social, technological, psychological and optical renewals and to the decline of common sense poetry to non-sense and Dada-esque expressions. I am not sure, but I doubt that it will be possible to apply ethical criticism to the imaginations of cubist art and literature, except for the case of an internal evaluation of the formal skill of the presentation. In his well-known book, *The Loss of the Centre*, German art historian Hans Sedlmayr notes that cubist art deals with the consequences of the deconstruction of the central perspective of the artistic object, which was decomposed and shown simultaneously in its multi-perspective appearance. The idea behind this is to grasp the complexity of the artistic subject and get access to all its aspects, which remain hidden in the mono-perspective description. Thus the intention of the cubist concept is to improve the image of the human being through a simultaneous presentation of all dimensions of his figure in a single design. If complete is better than incomplete, does this mean that there is an inherent moment of ethics in the cubist theory of art? Or in all kinds of art? And does this mean that ethical criticism is limited to the judgment of the aesthetical qualities of a literary work of art? If this is right, you could replace the term ethical criticism through the designation the ethics of aesthetics.

However this limitation of the field of ethical criticism does not do justice to the needs of the conflicts, crises and catastrophes of our time, which call for a new

ethical turn in artistic writing. Bertolt Brecht once brought this requirement to the point in his poem *An die Nachgeborenen* (*To Those Who Follow in Our Wake*):

What times are these, in which
A conversation about trees is almost a crime
For in doing so we maintain our silence about so much wrongdoing! (158)

The poem invites the reader to avoid speaking about trees because this may prevent him from fighting the “wrongdoing,” whose executors are the members of the fascist movement in Adolf Hitler’s Germany. Now-a-days, the threat has changed. It is no more “almost a crime to speak about trees,” it is, on the contrary, “almost a crime not to speak about trees,” because the deforestation among other environmental devastations has made the turning of this process a presupposition for the survival of mankind. This is in my opinion the reason why writers rediscover their ethical responsibility and in their works draw attention to the current “wrongdoing” and in so doing legitimize ethical criticism as a field of engaged interference which understands literature as a medium of ethical change. In this way, I agree with Nie Zhenzhao that “within certain historical periods moral enlightenment is the primary function of literature” (1).

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