



COMMENT ON “INTERPRETATION OF THE ETHICAL TURN OF CONTEMPORARY WESTERN LITERARY THEORY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ‘NEW ARISTOTELES’”


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COMMENT ON “INTERPRETATION OF THE ETHICAL TURN OF CONTEMPORARY WESTERN LITERARY THEORY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ‘NEW ARISTOTELES’”

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Since the 1970s, Western literary theory has undergone an “ethical turn.” This turn is characterized by an anti-linguistic tendency, the criticism of structuralism and literary utilitarianism, an inward redirection of literary studies, a revival of humanism and a reaffirmation of the ethical value of literature. On one hand, Emmanuel Levinas emphasized “the responsibility of the other,” with his ideas providing the theoretical foundation for Jacques Derrida’s use of “deconstruction” to overturn “structuralism,” highlighting the reader’s responsibility and forming an “ethics of reading.” On the other hand, Wayne Clayton Booth and Martha Craven Nussbaum explored the relationship between literature and reality and literature and philosophy, insisting that the reader’s relationship with the text is ethical. The present study is based on the theoretical foundation laid by Booth and Nussbaum.

Booth valued the educational significance of literature, consciously taking on the task of reviving ethical criticism. The impact and shaping function of literature on individuals is achieved through readers imitating characters in fictional worlds. Booth’s definition of “fictions” reveals his Aristotelian perspective on literary mimesis as a member of the New Aristotle. He emphasized that literature imitates life rather than replicates it because, in his view, literature constructs life experiences, and reading is to establish a close connection between the reader and the work in terms of experience and intuitive

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perception. Booth revealed the experiential characteristics of ethical criticism, emphasizing the reader’s intuitive perception of literary works. The logic on which we rely in, forming our unique judgments, is neither deduced from obvious premises (even the most complex logic is no exception) nor induced from a series of precisely defined isolated examples. It is always the product of intuition.

Traditional moral criticism and Booth’s ethical criticism both adhere to the Western humanistic tradition: their common ground. However, the experiential nature of Booth’s ethical criticism determines the differences between the two regarding the objects and methods of criticism. Regarding the objects of criticism, Booth’s ethical criticism opposes theoretical deduction and advocates critical analysis of specific literary works. Regarding the methods of criticism, Booth advocates the ethical nature of evaluating human relationships, especially the nature of the relationship between the author and the reader. Booth differentiates between “stories that provide readers with straightforward, absolute moral positions” and “stories that take us beyond inherent moral beliefs for moral exploration”, pointing out that the best ethical thinking often does not dictate “what you should do”, but instead it pursues a perfect “self.” Ethical criticism is the reader’s active engagement in constructing works based on their reading experience, experiencing literary characters’ ethical choices and relationships in complex situations. In other words, Booth opposes the pitfalls of a preconceived moral criticism and, through the diversity of literary values, resists the dichotomization of traditional moral values, attempting to use descriptive methods to showcase the rich value of literary works.

“Coduction” is a common starting point for Booth and Nussbaum. The term emphasizes individuals’ rich experiences and specific values in concrete contexts, representing a constructive activity to restore the richness of literary experiences. Starting from life experiences, Booth recognizes that anyone’s value judgments inevitably rely on their knowledge background, unavoidably making comparisons, leading to the process of coduction.

In the last part of “The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction”, Booth fully practices the “coduction” method, which he sees as a remedy for ethical criticism. For example, Booth engages critically in dialogues with feminist and black criticism to address potential dogmatism and arbitrariness in ethical criticism, thus respecting and realizing the value judgments of literary works to the fullest extent. Through his reading practice, Booth demonstrates the specific coduction process. In his evaluation of a novel by Lawrence, Booth tells us how, after rejecting the ideological criticism of Lawrence, he recognized his own mistakes through coduction. Regardless of the arguments one tries to put forth in defense of Lawrence, feminist critics correctly pointed out that the fact remains that he did indeed ‘fail to treat the other half of humanity justly.’ This ongoing critical reading process reflects literary works’ “plasticity” and reproductive characteristics. “Plasticity is at the core of defending

aesthetic judgment; it is always relative and, therefore, always influenced by our previous experiences. Even the study of Shakespeare or Hume is bound to change over time, with conduction and replacement, as later judgments expand to different cultures and eras.”

In this ethical turn, literary ethical thought is no longer limited to the content of literature, but it extends to the forms and genres of literature. Ethical characteristics or purposes are discovered in specific discourse patterns, genre forms or structures. Authors, with different perspectives, may adopt different textual forms, forming diverse and rich ethical events. At the same time, the act of choosing literary forms itself has ethical implications. Therefore, literature is the most suitable place for ethical reflection. Terry Eagleton explores the ethical content of literature and the ethical expression of literary forms, arguing that moral life is complex and literature presents the humanity’s complex and ever-changing life, which manifests the ambiguity of capabilities of the novel. In this way, the forms and styles in literature become equally important. Booth acknowledges that it is impossible to discern the ethical nature from the surface of specific artworks, as works may lack words or narrative plots related to ethics, such as many music critics claiming that pure music cannot be ethically evaluated. However, readers’ reception involves ethical emotions, and the creator’s moral demeanor leads us to reflect on which category of people forms the basis for these ethical emotions.

Nussbaum points out that there is an organic connection between the form and content of both individuals and texts. In addition to the opportunities for experiencing the content of literature, the expressive forms of literary content, especially narrative forms centered around life, contribute to the exploration and evaluation of ethics. Miller inherits Kant’s assertion that “without storytelling, there is no ethics” and puts forth the view that “without personification, there is no storytelling.” He believes language connects people and ethics, leading to personification and ethical considerations. Language both expresses ethics and generates ethics. When philosophical concepts cannot be expressed in language, narratives appear timely, much like analogies. Influenced by Paul Ricoeur’s language theory, Miller argues that ethics must be attributed to the realm of language rather than the subject’s realm because “metaphor always has an ethical dimension.” In addition to textual language, ethical reflection focuses more on narrative theory. Philosophers attempt to unearth profound ethical implications from the forms, styles, rhetoric and specific discourse expressions of literature, embedding ethics tightly into various parts of literary research, reflecting distinctive features of the ethical turn. This is our comment about Zhang (2024).

REFERENCE

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