



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

Xiaoyue Ding

College of Humanities, Yangzhou University, Yangzhou 225000 – China.

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-7630-8242> |  xyding2024@163.com

Commented Article: ZHANG, Qiaozhu. Interpretation of the ethical turn of contemporary Western literary theory from the perspective of ‘new Aristoteles’. **Trans/Form/Ação:** Unesp journal of philosophy, Marília, v. 47, n. 4, “Eastern thought”, e02400122, 2024. Available at: <https://revistas.marilia.unesp.br/index.php/transformacao/article/view/14883>.

Submission: 25/10/2024 | Decision: 28/10/2024 | Revision: 01/11/2024 | Publication: 25/11/2024

 <https://doi.org/10.1590/0101-3173.2024.v47.n4.e02400334>



This is an article published in open access under a Creative Commons license

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

*Xiaoyue Ding*¹

Commented Article: ZHANG, Qiaozhu. Interpretation of the ethical turn of contemporary Western literary theory from the perspective of ‘new Aristoteles’. **Trans/Form/Ação:** Unesp journal of philosophy, Marília, v. 47, n. 4, “Eastern thought”, e02400122, 2024. Available at: <https://revistas.marilia.unesp.br/index.php/transformacao/article/view/14883>.

According to Zhang (2024), since Plato and Aristotle, it has been a commonly held view that there is no distinct boundary between ethics and aesthetics, albeit their bases differ. Following the loss of the metaphysical worldview in the eighteenth century, philosophers like Shaftesbury introduced changes. With “Shaftesbury’s moral sense theory” and “Shaftesbury’s doctrine of the internal sense,” they posited that moral cognition and the concept of goodness could appeal to people’s emotions. However, by the late eighteenth century, the separatist view that the aesthetic and ethical realms are independent began to gain prevalence. Kant’s notion of disinterestedness in aesthetics inaugurated a new scenario in the trend of aesthetic autonomy, which has since influenced the subsequent state of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics as being mutually independent. Commencing from Wittgenstein’s re-examination of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, and until the 1970s and 1980s, the so-called “end of postmodernism” furnished an opportunity to resurgence ethical criticism. Only at that time did aesthetics and ethics commence to be interconnected once again in the domain of Anglo-American literary criticism and contribute to the occurrence of the “ethical turn” in contemporary literary criticism.

This turn can be perceived as the outcome of intra-disciplinary and interdisciplinary evolution. The ethical turn in literary studies can be considered “a refutation of deconstructive

¹ College of Humanities, Yangzhou University, Yangzhou 225000 – China. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-7630-8242>. E-mail: xyding2024@163.com.

formalism” and is influenced by the debate between Emmanuel Levinas and Paul de Man, along with feminist criticism, postcolonial theory, multicultural theory, and gay criticism. Naturally, as we have already deliberated, the essential connection between literature and ethics is not a novel perspective. It existed in ancient Greece and has also constantly emerged in the critical paradigms of some thinkers. However, this ethical turn is not merely a rebuttal to formalism. More significantly, it redefines literature as a mode of cognition and a locus for profound cultural moral inquiries. Marshal Gregory also concurs with this view. He contends that connecting the potential ethical function of literature with its mimetic capacity can offer readers models to emulate:

Narrative affects people’s spirit and temperament by setting exemplars for people’s behaviors and attitudes, by guiding us on how to extricate ourselves from various life predicaments, and by summarizing our diverse ethical judgments on various behaviors (Gregory, 2004, p. 282).

In this manner, the cognitive approach furnished by literature is unavoidably linked with the narrative structure of human cognition. Consequently, the principal cause for the revival of ethical criticism cannot be analyzed in isolation. However, it should consider the development of the entire intellectual community, encompassing literature and philosophy and disciplines like psychology.

This ethical turn must confront a crucial issue: how to manage the residual impact of postmodernist thought appropriately. Regarding this issue, the ethical turn presents two distinct critical pathways. On the one hand, critics such as Nussbaum, Booth, and Gregory are inclined to probe into ethical issues in literary works profoundly and tend to uphold the core concepts and premises of traditional ethical criticism. For instance, they consider literary works as vehicles of moral education and believe that literature can exhibit excellent and evil uniquely, incomparable to philosophical treatises. They regard writers and critics as moral guides and hold that by following their thoughts, readers themselves will also engage in moral practice, making reading a valuable ethical experience. They also believe that the fictional world constructed in literary works can provide readers with an alternative experience to compensate for the deficiency of experience in real life because real life is often too constrained. In contrast, literary works can broaden our horizons and enable us to reflect on and sense things inaccessible in daily life.

Gregory summarizes the goals of this type of ethical criticism into three main aspects: firstly, aiding readers in understanding the potential influence of literary works and how literature molds their thinking, emotions, and judgment; secondly, assisting readers in grasping the moral standards of the inner and outer worlds portrayed in literature; finally, evaluating the value of literary works and making constructive recommendations. The advantage of this ethical criticism method is that the general public readily accepts it and

is closer to the public’s expectations of the function of literary criticism, helping to restore the influence of literary criticism in the public domain. However, its deficiency resides in that it may overlook the mediating role of language in literary creation and pay inadequate attention to textual features. It sometimes may fall into the traps of moral reductionism and dogmatism.

Scholars such as J. Hillis Miller represent another distinct postmodernist critical path. He believes that deconstructionism does not foster moral relativism but is critical of the methods of traditional ethical criticism. Miller advocates that universities should remain open to questioning deconstructionism better to fulfill the responsibilities and goals of traditional humanistic criticism. Unlike critics who solely focus on the ethical content in literary works, Miller concentrates on the so-called “ethics of reading,” which involves various ethical issues that may arise when readers interact with texts. He believes there is an essentially ethical moment in the reading process independent of cognition, politics, society, and interpersonal relationships. Miller adheres to the tradition of deconstructionism and regards literary works as language creations. Language itself is not a neutral and transparent medium. The refraction of language causes blurriness and differences between the ethical content in the text and the reality it attempts to depict. These blurriness and differences refuse to be assimilated by readers and critics. He views reading as an ethical responsibility. This does not require readers to accept teachings passively. Instead, they must read with patience, caution, and precision and presuppose that the text may challenge their expectations or existing knowledge.

Simultaneously, some critics, like Nussbaum and Booth, have reintroduced the metaphor of the Victorian era, regarding literature as the reader’s teacher or friend to offer ethical guidance or joint guidance. Bueler even believes that the revival of this metaphor is a significant innovation in the current ethical turn. In contrast, Miller employs the postmodernist concept of the other to depict the relationship between works and readers. This relationship resists the ethical expectations of readers and questions and challenges their ethical preconceptions, prompting them to reflect on the historical, personal, cultural, and ideological factors behind these preconceptions. Miller emphasizes not seeking consensus but maintaining differences. For him, ethics should not be construed as a specific set of behavioral norms but as a dialogical process that respects differences. The attainment of consensus is not the most crucial thing because it often implies suppressing dialogue and eliminating differences.

Literary ethical criticism is a dialogue and cooperation between the field of ethics and literary criticism regarding various aspects, such as literature’s nature, function, and value. The purpose of literary ethical criticism is not only to expound the ethical and moral characteristics of literature or the ethical issues that writers encounter in the process of creating literature but also to study literary works from an ethical and moral perspective and

various issues related to literature and society, literature and writers, literature and readers, et cetera. After the baptism of postmodern thought, the emergence of the ethical turn in literary criticism can be regarded as the outcome of the spiral development of literary theory.

REFERENCES

GREGORY, M.W. Ethical Engagements over Time: Reading and Rereading David Copperfield and Wuthering Heights. *Narrative*, v. 12, p. 281-305, 2004.

ZHANG, Q.Z. Interpretation of the ethical turn of contemporary Western literary theory from the perspective of 'new Aristoteles'. *Trans/Form/Ação: Unesp journal of philosophy, Marília*, v. 47, n. 4, "Eastern thought", e02400122, 2024. Available at: <https://revistas.marilia.unesp.br/index.php/transformacao/article/view/14883>.