

Ethical Criticism and Literary Studies: A Book Review Article about Nie's Work

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**Biwu SHANG**

### **Ethical Criticism and Literary Studies: A Book Review Article about Nie's Work**

Scholars in China are familiar with Zhenzhao Nie (聂珍钊) and his theory of ethical literary criticism, yet it remains little known to Western scholars. Thus in this book review article I elaborate on his theory, in particular his 2012 *文学伦理学批评及其它* (Ethical Literary Criticism and Other Issues). When doing his graduate degree at Central China Normal University in the 1980s, Nie developed a profound interest in Thomas Hardy and he devoted almost ten years to working on Hardy's oeuvre. The years' hard work resulted in a number of publications including his 1992 *悲戚而刚毅的艺术家: 托马斯·哈代小说研究* (Thomas Hardy: A Study of His Novels), which has become one of the most influential and best-selling works on Hardy in China. In the book, Nie presented an in-depth exploration of Hardy's novels from the combined perspectives of sociology, culture, ethics, aesthetics, and history and challenged the dominant belief that envisions Hardy as a pessimistic writer: in Nie's opinion, Hardy was more a moralist and idealist rather than a pessimist. The late 1990s saw Nie's turning his interest to English poetry, especially English verse rhyme. As is known, the rhyme of English poetry is as complicated as it is important. In the Chinese context, it is confusing for readers, students, and scholars to follow the rhyme of English poetry and this makes it difficult for them to unveil its beauty or to have a further exploration of such texts. In his *英语诗歌形式导论* (An Introduction to English Verse Rhythm), Nie explicated concepts of in poetry studies such as syllable, accent, stress, line, stanza, foot, meter, rhyme, etc. In addition, Nie presented a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the English sonnet. Although other scholars also publish(ed) books introducing English poetry, the strength of Nie's book lies in that as a Chinese comparatist, he never forgets that his books are written for a Chinese readership and thus he uses comparative literature as a method and starts his elaboration from a Chinese perspective (on comparative literature in Chinese, see also Chen and Sheng <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss6/14>>; Moore <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss6/6>>; Wang, Miaomiao <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss6/17>>; Wang and Liu <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1882>>; Zhou and Tong <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1092>>).

Since the opening up to the outside world after the Cultural Revolution, China has imported a considerable number of Western critical theories such as comparative literature, psychoanalysis, Russian Formalism, structuralism, narratology, reception theory, postcolonialism, feminism, new historicism, cultural criticism, ecocriticism, to name a few. Admittedly, imported Western critical theories contribute to the overall progression and flourishing of literary studies in China. However, they also result in side-effects in this large-scale importing and applying Western theories. As Nie observes, there are basically four problems generated in this process. First, scholars tend to move away from literature in the name of theory (33); second, scholars are too much engrossed in the so-called 理论自恋 (theoretical complex), 命题自恋 (thematic complex), and 术语自恋 (terminology complex) (44); third, there is an inadequacy of ethical engagement in all these theories (3), and fourth, there is a serious shortage of Chinese scholars' engagement with literary criticism — as opposed to literary scholarship — and this he terms 失语症 (*aphasia*) borrowed from 曹顺庆 (Shunqing Cao) (3-4; on Cao's work see, e.g., Wang, Ning <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss6/18>>). It is against this background that Nie calls for a new critical approach to literature, namely ethical literary criticism. At the 2004 *National Conference on Anglo-American Literature* in Nanchang, Nie introduced his concept, in which he elaborated on the relationships between literature and society, the relations between writers and their works, and the relations between readers and works from said ethical perspective. From then on, ethical literary criticism has been his focus of scholarship. Since then, Nie devoted himself to cultivating this new critical approach and that he consolidated and exemplified in several books and collected volumes including the ones I am discussing here and his 2006 *文学伦理学批评: 文学研究方法新探讨* (Ethical Literary Criticism: A New Approach to Literary Studies) and 2007 *英国文学的伦理学批评* (English Literature in the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism) (for a review of the book see Yang <<http://www.harvard-yenching.org/features/english-literature-perspective-ethical-literary-criticism>>).

In *Ethical Literary Criticism and Other Issues* Nie defines the concept and approach as "a critical theory that approaches literary works and their authors from the perspective of ethics" (4; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). Nie not only invites us to see the origin and function of literature from an ethical perspective, but also illuminates the working mechanisms of ethical literary criticism and its terminology in detail including ethical taboo, ethical environment, ethical identity, ethical confusion, the Sphinx factor, the human factor, the animal factor, rational will, irrational will, natural will, free will, etc. Additionally, Nie offers a set of new readings of such classical works as Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* from the perspective of ethical literary criticism so as to demonstrate the interpretive power of this new critical approach.

It needs to be noted that Nie's ethical literary criticism is different both from traditional Chinese moral criticism and from its Western counterparts. Moral criticism examines and evaluates literature from the vantage-point of today's moral principles or the moral principles held by philosophers often affected by subjectivity while ethical literary criticism grounds itself on the certain historical context or ethical environment of literature produced and sees the contemporary value of literature as its historical value rediscovered. As we know, the 1980s witnessed a large-scale "ethical turn" in literary criticism in the West. When elaborating "ethical turn," Liesbeth Korthals Altes observes three major tendencies: 1) pragmatics and rhetorical ethics as done by Martha Nussbaum, Wayne C. Booth, David Parker, and James Phelan; 2) the ethics of alterity as practiced by Emmanuel Lévinas, Jacques Derrida, J. Hillis Miller, Maurice Blanchot, and Jean-François Lyotard; and 3) political approaches to ethics led by Drucilla Cornell, Luce Irigaray, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (142-46). Despite the flourishing and popularity of contemporary Western ethical criticism, what seems to be missing is that the approach has not been developed either as an independent discipline or as an individual school of critical theory. For instance, in the case of Lévinas, Blanchot, and Nussbaum, ethical criticism has been more or less assimilated by philosophy while in case of Booth, Phelan, and Newton ethical criticism has been somehow assimilated in the field of narratology (see Altes; Müller; Newton; Nie; Shang). However, unlike its Western counterpart, Nie's ethical literary criticism has been more or less developing into an independent or individual school of critical theory.

In the history of human civilization, "the biggest problem for mankind to solve is to make a choice between the identities of animals and the identities of human beings" (Nie, *Ethical Literary Criticism and Other Issues* 16). Why and how human beings have come into existence are always central to scholars' interest. According to Nie, there are basically two kinds of selection in human civilization, namely biological selection and ethical selection. The theory of biological selection developed by Darwin succeeds in accounting for the physical evolution of humans. Based on Darwin's theory, Friedrich Engels claimed that it is labor that differentiates human beings from animals while in Nie's view labor is merely one of the conditions which enable human beings to evolve. Nie argues that "both Darwin and Engels succeed in accounting for where human beings have come from but fail to make a fundamental distinction between man and animals" (18). In Nie's opinion, biological selection is the first step taken by human beings which helps them to be who they are in a biological sense. What truly differentiates human beings from animals is the second step: ethical selection, which eventually turns them into beings endowed with reason.

Nie's uses the story of Adam and Eve to suggest the difference between biological selection and ethical selection: in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve are human beings purely in a physical sense. Despite of their being physically different from such creatures as insects and animals, so far as knowledge is concerned, there are no fundamental differences between them and the rest of other animals. Naked as wild animals, Adam and Eve ate fruit from trees when hungry and drank water from streams when thirsty, thus no different from other creatures. Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge simply because once they ate fruit, they would be able to tell good from evil. Failing to resist such a temptation for knowledge, Eve and Adam ate the fruit and thus acquired the knowledge which made them ashamed of their nakedness and looked for leaves to cover themselves. To put it another way, only after eating the forbidden fruit has humanity acquired knowledge about good and evil, which completes the distinction between them and the rest of other creatures and enables human beings to be liberated from animals. Nie argues that "Eating the forbidden fruit and the consequential ability acquired to tell good from evil helps Adam and Eve to

complete their ethical selection and become human beings not only in biological sense, but also in ethical sense. In other words, the ability to tell good and evil sets up a criterion for distinguish human beings from animals. The notion of good and evil emerges along with ethical consciousness and is used to evaluate human beings only. In this sense, good and evil constitute the basis of ethics" (19).

Equally illuminating is the concept of the Sphinx factor, which Nie developed from reading of the Sphinx Riddle in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*. In Nie's opinion, "the Sphinx Riddle can be interpreted not as an expression of issue concerning humanity's doomed failure to fight against fate, but an exploration of the mystery of why humans are such beings. The value of the riddle lies not in its difficulty, but in its implications for our understandings of humanity" (19). Since Sphinx is female with a woman's head, a lion's body, an eagle's wings, and a snake tail, it is thus a difficult question for people to tell whether Sphinx is a human being or an animal: the human head seems to imply that the Sphinx is a human being or more specifically a woman and the lion body suggests that Sphinx is an animal. Then the question will be what on earth a Sphinx would be? A human being or an animal? In the perspective of ethical literary criticism, Nie claims that the feature of the Sphinx's combination of a human head and an animal body suggests that "the most important feature of a human image lies in its head, which stands for ration of human beings emerged in the evolutionary process. Second, it indicates that human beings evolve from animals and thus still contain some features belonging to animals" (20). Nie names this feature the "Sphinx factor" composed of two parts: the human factor and the animal factor. In normal circumstances, the human factor is superior to the animal factor, thus the former can take control of the latter, which explains why a man could become a person with ethical consciousness. In contrast to the human factor, the animal factor refers to the human being's animal instinct, which is controlled by primitive desires. As an irrational element, the animal factor accounts for the animal instinct retained in human beings in the evolutionary process. Viewed in this light, the Sphinx Riddle can be interpreted as an ethical proposition for human beings to ponder over after their making biological selection, i.e., to be human or to be an animal. Put it differently, the Sphinx Riddle urges human beings to undertake one more step in their evolutionary process, namely ethical selection owing to which Oedipus is able to tell the difference between humans and animals. Nie concludes that "the various combinations and alternations of the human factor and the animal factor generate a variety of ethical events and ethical conflicts in literature, thus conveying different moral implications" (21).

When developing his ethical literary criticism, Nie aimed at offering a new approach to the study of literature in China. From today's vantage point, Nie has achieved as much he has aspired, which is evidenced in his many new and well-recognized conceptions. For instance, against the prevailing argument which sees literature as "an art of language" or as "an ideology or aesthetics," Nie considers literature as "an art of texts" and "a unique expression of ethics and morality within a certain historical period" (*Ethical Literary Criticism and Other Issues* 5). Further, according to Nie the primary function of literature is not aesthetics, but ethical enlightenment and education. These seemingly radical conceptions are now beginning to affect some traditional arguments about literature. Significantly, some college textbooks on literature and literary history in China have been compiled from an ethical perspective.

In "Accented Criticism: Translation and Global Humanities," Anita Starosta argues that "After so many turns in criticism, what remains? How to proceed and where to turn, after so much refashioning of critical languages? ... How can criticism escape this condition ... without seeking new false orders, without reproducing older ones in new guises? Now, in a time after Eurocentrism, Europe is presumed provincialized; the all-embracing, apparently centerless designation global in 'global literature' or 'global humanities' promises finally to put it all to rest — to abolish the logics of worth, compensatory valorization, and supplementarity that undergird inherited ways of imagining nonhegemonic languages, cultures, and texts" (163-64). To be free from Eurocentrism and Western hegemonic discourse, Starosta suggests adding "a foreign voice in which all criticism and theory speak" (165) which is assumed to be "the future(s) of criticism" indicated by the main title of two consecutive special issues in *boundary 2* entitled *The Future(s) of Criticism—I* and *The Future(s) of Criticism—II*. I think Nie's ethical literary criticism is one of the foreign voices that Starosta is seeking for, which is both timely and significant, as well as it is ambitious and provocative.

Although in Ethical Literary Criticism and Other Issues Nie does not address the future of humanities scholarship or criticism, he exemplifies the best resource for the study of literature by facilitating new ways of engaging with literature and fostering new understandings of literary history. In this sense, it resonates not only with Chinese scholars, but ought to resonate with scholars in the West.

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