

Ethical Judgement and the Nature of Literary Discourse

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Abstract: The close connection between literature and ethics is undeniable, whether we start from literature or moral philosophy. Using Fowles' novel *The Magus* as an example, we will show that the reason for this close connection lies in the a priori structural affinity between the nature of ethical judgement and literary discourse. Aristotle already noted that the ethical judgement or value of a given action depends essentially on occasional circumstances, on context. It is usually a singular matter that cannot be represented in theoretical discourse, but only in literature. Consequently, literature is a privileged instrument for discussing ethical issues.

Keywords: literature; ethics; ethical judgement; singularity of literature

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标题: 伦理判断与文学话语的本质

内容摘要: 无论从文学研究还是道德哲学的视角出发，文学与伦理之间的紧密联系都无可否认。本文以福尔斯的小说《巫术师》为例，论证二者深度关联的根源在于：伦理判断的本质与文学话语的本质之间存在先验的结构亲和性。亚里士多德早已指出，对特定行为的伦理评判与价值判定，本质上依赖具体情境与语境。这类伦理判断往往具有独一性，无法在理论话语中得到完整呈现，唯有文学能够承载其全部复杂性。因此，文学是探讨伦理议题得天独厚的载体。

关键词: 文学；伦理；伦理判断；文学的独一性

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As early as 1987, in *The Ethics of Reading*, one of the first works of the so-called ethical turn in literary studies, Joseph Hillis Miller, in a discussion of Kant's moral philosophy, showed how philosophy, when talking about ethics, necessarily resorts to a fictional example, literature.¹ And a few decades later, Nie Zhenzhao, the founder of the Ethical Literary Criticism², posited that literature is by its very nature "a product of ethic, or a unique expression of morality in a given historical period" (Nie, "Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism" 85).

The findings of Hillis Miller and Nie Zhenzhao are still valid today. The close connection between literature and ethics is undeniable, whether we start from literature or moral philosophy. In my talk, I will try to show as vividly as possible that the reason for this close connection lies in the a priori structural affinity between the nature of ethical judgement and the nature of literary discourse.

To this end, let me begin with philosophy. Much of traditional moral philosophy, both normative and descriptive, rests on the assumption that it is possible to define absolute ethical principles and values, and then to label individual acts as good or bad on the basis of those principles. For a theory of the ethical, this is, at first glance, a fairly reasonable thing to do. For example: We come to the conclusion that those behaviours and principles are good that we would like all people to follow, and then we test each individual behaviour and principle against that basic principle. Kant does this, for example, when he illustrates his argument with a false promise or lie in general:

I can will the lie but not at all a universal law to lie; for in accordance with such a law there would properly be no promises, because it would be pointless to avow my will in regard to my future actions to those who would not believe this avowal, or, if they rashly did so, who would pay me back in the same coin; hence my maxim, as soon as it were made into a universal law, would destroy itself. (Kant 19)

The universal law would not be in my interest in this case, because then everyone would lie and I could never know what is a lie and what is the truth. Therefore, we must adhere to the principle that "I ought never to conduct myself except so that I

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2 For further elaboration on Ethical Literary Criticism, please refer to Nie Zhenzhao, "Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory," *Forum for World Literature Studies* 2 (2021): 189-207; Nie Zhenzhao, "Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection," *Forum for World Literature Studies* 3 (2021): 383-398.

could also will that my maxim become a universal law” (Kant 18), and it then logically follows that the moral imperative obliges me to tell the truth and not to lie.

Although Kant’s thoughts are clear and logical in this respect, they are valid only in their generality and are therefore abstract, of little practical relevance, and therefore of limited use in ethics. It soon becomes apparent that this logic has significant, perhaps even insurmountable, problems that call it into question. If we move from this abstract formula to concrete examples, it quickly becomes clear that truth is not only not the highest value, it is also not absolute. And this is more or less true for all values. No ethical or moral value is absolute and universal in itself, so it is not really possible to establish absolute values or requirements for ethical behaviour, for instance like this: the truth is absolutely good, therefore we act ethically or morally, i.e. good or right, only if we always tell the truth; or: lying is evil, therefore we should (absolutely) never lie. Because sometimes speaking untruths, lying, can be good, moral, ethical. A simple example: to a terminally ill person who is very afraid of death, we may be able to relieve his suffering by lying to him about his actual health condition, and this kind of lying does not seem unethical.

What kind of definition, what kind of rule regarding truth as a value allows for such a situation at all, apart from a tautology (truth is a value if it is not a non-value) or a rule with exceptions, i.e. a rule to which we add lists of cases in which the rule to tell the truth does not apply, lists which are open, however, because we cannot really foresee all such cases, and therefore it is the case that the exceptions do not really confirm the rule, but simply “eat” it up because of their quantity?

To better illustrate what kind of principled problem we are dealing with, I will give a hypothetical, though sufficiently realistic, example. Let us imagine that during World War II the German Gestapo captures a resistance soldier and tortures him into betraying the outpost of his comrades. It is immediately clear to us how the prisoner should behave in order to be ethical: he must not reveal this information. It seems that this could even be established as a rule for such special cases, for example, in this form: Whenever the army captures an enemy soldier and tortures him to make him betray his comrades, the only ethical attitude is not to do so, not to tell the truth. (The English moral philosopher Hare actually has a similar example; he modifies the “do not lie” rule in this context as follows: “Never say what is false, except in war-time to deceive the enemy” (Hare 52). This rule and this value seem absolute at the moment.

But this starting position, for the time being given only in broad outlines, i.e. still schematically, can be further complicated in many ways. With the starting position unchanged, we can introduce small distinctions and ask ourselves again

which behavior is the most ethical. For example: Is it more ethical for a prisoner to remain silent or to inadvertently reveal a false location of his comrades? If he remains silent, an additional ethical dimension can be seen in this: He shows his contempt for the torturers and expresses his human dignity, which is otherwise put to the test by the torture of the body. But it is also possible that he remains silent because he simply cannot get anything out of the shock that the torture means for him, he gets a mental block; in this case the silence does not bring any additional ethical merit, although we will probably not deny its ethical quality as long as it is true that he would not betray his comrades in any case (even if the block would be released). But in the case that he remains silent because, for example, during the torture some of his brain functions failed due to the head injuries, and he cannot really betray his comrades (if he could speak, he might do so because he cannot bear the suffering anymore), we should seriously consider whether this silence can still be understood as an ethical act. So these kinds of possibilities—I have only pointed out a part of them here—are revealed when he is silent. But even if he speaks and lies, we have several possibilities: For example, this can bring additional ethical capital if he lies to mislead his enemies and thus cause them at least some harm because they waste energy, or he can even lure them into a trap. But he can also lie to make them stop torturing him, at least until they find out that he lied, so that he can delay his suffering a bit. Since he did not betray his comrades, his behavior is still ethical, but a shade less ethical to our ethical sensibilities than in the previous case of lying. If he lies because of trauma-induced amnesia, because he has actually forgotten where his comrades are, we have to ask ourselves again whether his behavior—even if it is not unethical for this reason—still deserves the label moral or ethical.

But all these possibilities—all these shades of ethical stance—arise only from a relatively ascetic, schematic version of the case of a man tortured by the Gestapo in order to betray his comrades. We can complicate the case much more seriously. Let us suppose that the prisoner is a member of a small resistance group of ten men. The Gestapo tortures him, but he does not betray his comrades. Then the torturers bring his relatives to the front, including children, for example, or all the villagers of a nearby village, and give him a choice: Either he betrays a handful of his comrades, or many more civilians die with him—perhaps even under torture, including the children. The complexity of the situation, of course, goes beyond a theoretical discourse and rather calls for a literary representation. And indeed, in literature we find depictions of similar situations and the moral dilemmas that arise from them, for example, in the novel *The Magus* by the famous English writer

John Fowles. Conchis, one of the main characters of the novel, is the mayor of his hometown in German-occupied Greece during the World War II. One day, the Germans capture several partisans who have killed four German soldiers. As a warning example, they are drawn to the village, brutally tortured, some are killed, and finally they demand that Mayor Conchis personally kill the remaining two partisans to prove his loyalty to the Germans. Otherwise, besides him, they will kill all the men of the village whom they have taken hostage (there are eighty of them). Only such more complicated cases, whether Fowles' or my own invented, present us with a real ethical dilemma. For we can see at once that even for an ethically extremely sophisticated and sound person the decision is not easy. On one side of the scale—but this is the most banal “theoretical” weighing—there is a handful of people, on the other side a whole lot. Which decision is more ethically justified? And further: on one side there are the soldiers, people who consciously decided to fight without compromise, risking to fall one way or another (in a “fair” fight or thanks to betrayal), on the other side (supposedly) innocent civilians, even children, who did not make this decision and are pushed into their position by the decision of those others. Or vice versa: on one side there are innocent people, relatives, even children, but on the other side there are comrades with whom the prisoner is bound by the deepest bond of a common decision and a common goal that is in the interest or for the good of all, including, for example, the villagers and many others, a goal, in other words, that is in its own way more important than the lives of the prisoner's relatives and even of all the villagers together, the goal that will not be achieved if the Gestapo kills his comrades. There are, of course, even deeper, philosophically tinged ethical dilemmas that can be briefly summarized, for example, as follows: One must not give in to evil and violence at any price (because—here one can add all sorts of justifications, for example as follows: such giving in only strengthens evil, etc.), therefore the prisoner acts ethically only if he does not give in, does not betray ten comrades, and thus allows eighty or a hundred or three hundred innocent villagers to be killed.

Such a situation, which requires an ethical decision—that the prerequisite for this is at least a minimum of subjective freedom is actually a tautology; but in Fowles it is even explicitly emphasized—is further complicated in Fowles' *Magus*. Either out of fear for himself or a sense of mayoral responsibility to his innocent fellow citizens (they protest loudly when he hesitates), Conchis is initially willing to kill the partisans. Although he calls his actions “without reason” because “Of course, in such situations one cannot think. All coherence is crowded out of one's mind” (Fowles 438), he decides logically, according to a rational mathematical

calculation (eighty is much more than two). “I have no choice” (Fowles 438), he therefore says. But, quite unexpectedly, another circumstance occurs that causes his decision to tip to the other side. The gun the officer gave him was not loaded; the Germans’ demand is even crueler than it appears. He must kill the prisoner with the hoof of the rapid-fire rifle. Conchis, in this changed situation and in the face of a terribly humiliated prisoner, experiences a kind of epiphany of Eleutheria, of freedom, which is also the freedom of choice and therefore the basis of ethical decision. Therefore, he changes his mind: he does not give in to the Germans, he does not kill the prisoners with his hoof, because he realizes that there is something much more important than his own life and the lives of his fellow villagers:

All I saw I saw in a matter of seconds, perhaps not in time at all. I saw that I was the only person left in that square who had the freedom left to choose, and that the annunciation and defence of that freedom was more important than common sense, self-preservation, yes, than my own life, than the lives of the eighty hostages. (Fowles 441)

I could go on developing the sub-variants of each of these situations, including the hypothetical one I invented, but for the point I want to make, the ones shown are quite sufficient. Even if we could find a description or definition for every ethical and ethical action or attitude or value that would be normative, general, and absolutely valid (past experience shows that this is unlikely), the vast majority of ethical actions or attitudes and values would still remain outside such a framework, since actions and decisions are usually tied to a purely specific, particular, singular situation with a complex of circumstances that cannot be measured in advance, translated into norms and prescriptions, and validly generalized. Ethical behavior, whether or not it conforms to existing ethical norms and codes, is in a sense independent of them, being in its deepest essence unique, singular and therefore incomparable. For this reason it is also not generalizable and it is incompatible with a law, a rule, a syllogism, a tenet. This is also true of my example with the Gestapo. It seems that for each specific situation we could establish some kind of—admittedly quite extensive and complex—universal rule for ethical and unethical behavior, but since situations can multiply at will into new versions that are no longer covered by this rule, the creation of the ultimate universal rule proves impossible.

The conclusion, then, would be that it is not possible to define a norm, an ethical rule, a value, an instruction for ethical behavior that would be able to cover all the complexity of even a single life situation (in our case, of course,

appropriately bifurcated in certain nuances, but essentially the same), let alone many or all of them. This is not just a principled theoretical conjecture; it is demonstrated above all by the practice of life. As Hannah Arendt notes about the loss of ethical norms in Nazi Germany:

Since the whole of respectable society had in one way or another succumbed to Hitler, the moral maxims which determine social behavior and the religious commandments—"Thou shalt not kill!"—which guide conscience had virtually vanished. Those few who were still able to tell right from wrong went really only by their own judgements, and they did so freely; there were no rules to be abided by, under which the particular cases with which they were confronted could be subsumed. They had to decide each instance as it arose, because no rules existed for the unprecedented. (Arendt 294-295)

As I have tried to show, what the famous philosopher states in this particular case can easily be generalized into a generally applicable principle. This principle is also consistent with what Aristotle wrote about ethical judgement and conduct in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. There he says the following:

But this must be agreed upon beforehand, that the whole account of matters of conduct must be given in outline and not precisely, as we said at the very beginning that the accounts we demand must be in accordance with the subject-matter; matters concerned with conduct and questions of what is good for us have no fixity, any more than matters of health. The general account being of this nature, the account of particular cases is yet more lacking in exactness; for they do not fall under any art or precept, but the agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion. (Aristotle 24-25)

So which discourse is appropriate for ethical situations? What discourse can do justice to the actual complexity of ethical positions—they are always (or at least often enough; if we go deep enough, really always) embedded in a specific context, which, of course, no theory can fully represent, and are therefore singular, unique, incomparable? – This discourse is literature because it is an image, a representation, a simulation of reality in all its fullness of life and complexity (thus also of real ethical situations), and also its reflection. Literature is indeed ethical reflection *in concreto*.

It is precisely this conclusion, which emerged simultaneously in the works

of several philosophers rather than literary theorists—Martha Nussbaum, Richard Rorty, and Alasdair MacIntyre, among others—that triggered the so-called ethical turn in literary studies in the second half of the 1980s. Philosophy, which had held disciplinary primacy over ethics—ethics or moral philosophy being one of the established philosophical disciplines—suddenly realized that when we discuss ethics, we cannot do without literature. As M. Nussbaum writes, the novel is a moral philosophy in itself, or, as Nie Zhenzhao says, literature is “a unique expression of morality” (Nie, “Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism” 85). This deep internal embedding of ethics in the nature of literary discourse is the basic building block of the field of research to which this scholarly conference is devoted and which we call Ethical Literary Criticism.

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