In the Remains of Theory: Ethical Criticism in Contemporary Literary Studies

LI Dian

University of Arizona, USA

If genuine "literature" should be read as offering no unequivocal advice about "real life"... then centuries of informed witnesses have deliberately deceived us or they have been self-deceived.

—Wayne Booth, The Company We Keep

True art is that which clarifies life, establishes models of human action, casts nets toward the future, carefully judges our right and wrong directions, celebrates and mourns... Moral action is action which affirms life.

—John Gardner, On Moral Fiction
1. The Argument of My Paper

Terry Eagleton has declared that we are now living in a time of “after theory.” As we nurture our fatigue over the explosion of theory in the decades past, work has begun to sort out the remains of theory—its lasting possibilities and its disappointing limitations. One such limitation is theory’s open hostility towards ethical criticism as expressed by Jacques Derrida, Fredric Jameson and others. This hostility has many causes, chief among which are the appearance of ethics as the normative and the universal and as the mask of an ideology that relies on binary oppositions. As a result, theory-informed literary studies commonly disavow any references to ethics and thus create a glaring absence of ethical criticism in contemporary literary discourse. It is time for us to rethink the meaning of ethical criticism and its relationship with theory, not because we are nostalgic about its past, but because literature has never existed without ethics. One can hardly think of one great narrative or dramatic presentation without a moral question or dilemmas embodied in characters, imagined agents, lives, selves, or subjectivities. If we take ethical criticism as a reflexive process by which a text is consciously read for its potential to yield some enlightenment as to how to live a life, then several strains of theory such as feminism, postmodernism, and cultural studies already contain ethical intentions despite their disavowals. Thus ethical criticism has the potential to rescue theory from its self-obsession; it can be a “theory” of criticism “after theory.”

2. End of Theory or Beginning of Criticism

We all know the name of Terry Eagleton, a man who has been one of the strongest proponents of theory since the 1970s. It is not an exaggeration to say his name has become synonymous to theory itself in the academic circle of the West. Among his numerous works, Literary Theory: An Introduction is the most well-known and most wide used textbook in the classrooms of American colleges and universities. Yet, in recent times Terry Eagleton has been among the first to voice his displeasure with the state of theory today, claiming, in effect, that the incredible run of theory is over after a thirty-year-long explosion. His most recent book has this surprising title “After Theory” and this is the book’s opening paragraph:

The golden age of cultural theory is long past. The pioneering works of Jacques Lacan, Claude Lévi-Strauses, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault are several
decades behind us. So are the path-braking early writings of Raymond Williams, Luce Irigaray, Pierre Bourdieu, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, Jurgen Habermas, Fredric Jameson and Edward Said. Not much that has been written since has matched the ambitiousness and originality of these founding mothers and fathers. Some of them have since been struck down. Fate pushed Roland Barthes under a Parisian laundry van, and afflicted Michel Foucault with AIDS. It dispatched Lacan, Williams and Bourdieu, and banished Louis Althusser to a psychiatric hospital for the murder of his wife. It seemed the God was not a structuralist. [3]

Two points are worth noting here. First, the dying of the old guards brings out a sense of sadness to Terry Eagleton, with whom he identifies closely, in age and in mind. Second, the younger generation has not created anything remotely resembling the works of the old guards is another source of disappointment for Terry Eagleton, who seems to take finding successors of theory to be his own last work. What is unspoken here, it appears to be, is the bemoaning of the changing cultural environment that has given rise to theory, that is, the pursuit of deep philosophy to an interest in pleasure—the pleasure of the body and the senses, as Terry Eagleton himself puts it several paragraphs later:

On the wilder shores of academia, an interest in French philosophy has given way to a fascination with French kissing. In some cultural circles, the politics of masturbation exert far more fascination than the politics of the Middle East. Socialism has lost out to sadomasochism. Among students of culture, the body is an immensely fashionable topic, but it’s usually the erotic body, no the famished one. There is a keen interest in coupling bodies, but not in laboring ones. Quietly-spoken middle-class students huddle diligently in libraries, at work on sensationalist subjects like vampirism and eye gouging, cyborgs, and porno movies. [4]

Adding a few “sensationalist” subjects such as “grave diggers,” “Kungfu masters,” and “exhibitionist poet,” I think the scene of contemporary Chinese literature fits Terry Eagleton’s description just as well. So reality has changed, leaving the old guards behind. I can sympathize with Terry Eagleton on this front, but is theory innocent? Has it contributed to the change that has buried itself? Has it planted the seeds for the prevalent culture of pleasure that undermines our presumption of literature that is open to ethical interpretation and that offers moral insights? There are no easy answers to these questions, but let me try.
3. Theory and the Ethical

First of all, there is no doubt that theory has been a revolutionary force in changing our views of culture and politics in modern society in many aspects. Its collective thrust of undermining received notions of various categories such as truth, power, meaning, gender, subjectivity, and ethnicity has indeed changed the face of literary and cultural studies as we know it. Many traditional ideas associated with Western humanist tradition have been ruthlessly scrutinized and "deconstructed," and in some way, they are being "exposed" as no more than unstable signs artificially constructed in service of unsavory power and hidden ideology. Ethics is one such category that theory has been deeply suspicious of because of its universal and therefore totalizing implications. It is no surprising that the American scholar Martha Nussbaum, a well-known critic of theory talks about the strange "absence of the ethical" in literary theory of the French kind. To her, this absence is significant in many ways:

It signals a further striking absence: the absence, from literary theory, of the organizing questions of moral philosophy, and of moral philosophy's sense of urgency about these questions. The sense that we are social being puzzling out, in times of great moral difficulty, what might be, for us, the best way to live—this sense of practical importance which animates contemporary ethical theory and has always animate much of great literature, is absent from the writings of many of our leading literary theorists. [5]

Before we rush to conclude that Martha Nussbaum is overstating her case—which I shall come back to in a moment, one can imagine that proponents of theory may conjecture the following scenarios to make known the incompatibility between theory and ethical criticism: 1. ethical criticism is monologic, reductive, and proselytizing and thus does violence to the aesthetic complexities of literature in order to promote a critic's moral agenda. 2. ethical criticism covertly endorses elitist and/or oppressive ideologies; 3. ethical criticism has no claim to objectivity and can never end in anything but opinion, which is not knowledge; 4. in its attempt to find a stable ideological position in a medium as indeterminate as language, ethical criticism ignores the rhetorical dimension of signification; 5. ethical criticism tries to standardize interpretation by threatening the exegetical freedom burgeoning from literary modernism and anti-essentialist philosophy. [6]

In a nutshell, these charges all work with the perception of ethical criticism's
tendency to thematize interpretation, to make reductive, dogmatic, monologic claims about the moral content of a literary text. This perception, of course, comes from traditional views about ethics and literature, which often reduce ethical criticism as merely moral judgments. In China, the shadow of the Confucian ideas of “writing as a vehicle to carry the Dao” (wen yi zai dao) is long and overwhelming, which has many modern versions including the familiar slogan “literature in the service of politics” (wenxie wei zhengzhifuwu). In the West, Plato may be the one responsible for the mechanism of ethical criticism as we know it. From a purely ethical standpoint, he dismisses imitative poets from his Republic on the grounds that mimetic poetry conveys a morally deleterious message to its readers. Two critical moves generate Plato’s estimation of mimesis, his most important legacy in literary criticism. First and most significantly, Plato self-consciously acknowledges that a fictional text can be a receptacle of morally instructive significance. Second, Plato’s detection of literature’s moral significance is a forthright demonstration of ethical textual practice. Unfortunately, one often takes Plato’s advocacy of ethical criticism as an outright endorsement of didacticism in literature, with moral judgment as its more potent form. Such a view naturally becomes the cause célèbre for raising all sorts of objections to ethical criticism, particularly during the time of theory in the later half of the 20th century.

While the above-mentioned dramatized charges highlight the difference between some positions of theory and traditional views of ethical criticism and may help to explain “the striking absence of the ethical” from theory, they seem to purposefully place ethical criticism in a limiting and untenable position, which is exactly what Martha Nussbaum bases her criticism on. If we accept such a limited understanding of ethics, we would have to indeed shy away from ethical criticism, for who is so dim-witted as to seek advice from Jacques Derrida or Michel Foucault about moral judgments. The word “ethical” comes from its Greek root “ethos”, which means “characters” or “collection of habitual characteristics.” Moral judgment is part of ethics but not its equivalent. In a broad stroke, ethics is an individual’s choices of conducting his/her life, a culture’s ways of expressing itself or a society’s codes of values that sustain its viability. The task of ethical criticism, then, to put it simply, is to make present the working of these choices, ways and codes. In this connection, theory has been inseparable with ethics. For sure theory has a great deal to say about issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality that are of tremendous practical and political implications in our “times of great moral difficulty.” In fact one can
argue that ethical concerns are an integral part of political and post-structural criticism that have proven so useful to speak about the underrepresented and the marginal. In its best form, ever the most linguistically focused recovery of the neglected Other of a logo-centric literary text at least implicitly links itself with the defense of those who have been the Other to the oppressive center of Power, be it imperialism, globalism, or patriarchy. This is, perhaps, why Wayne Booths, an American critic who first raised the issue of ethical criticism in the 1980s, describes “the new overtly ethical and political feminists, new-Marxists, and anti-racists as well as post-structuralists and deconstructionists as “having an ethical program in mind,” even though ethics was hardly a key word for any writings of theorists of the above strains and ethical criticism was out of fashion during the heydays of theory.

4. Ethical Criticism in the Remains of Theory

In case one is mistaken, I am not here arguing that theory is ethical criticism—in fact theory’s aversion to ethics is real—for reasons I have enunciated; what I am arguing is that ethics is embedded in theory and that theory functions as ethical criticism in many tangible ways, so much so that ethical criticism as a distinguished form of interpretation can benefit from components of theory and arise in its remains. Let me use the example of deconstruction to illustrate this intricate relationship between theory and ethical criticism.

Jacque Derrida offers a way of textual analysis that considers reading as a pathway to referential undecidability and the experience of intersubjectivity. Many people believe that the Derridanain way of textual analysis is at odds with the sort of nonnative and essential knowledge that ethical criticism traditionally aims to uncover in practice. Indeed, deconstructionist criticism has often been regarded as have provided, international or not, the most formidable conceptual ammunition in the last three decades to undermine the possibility of authoritative truth claims. With its insistence on the impossibility of the absolute, inviolable linguistic correspondence between works and the meanings or ideas they represent, deconstruction has asserted the constructedness of all knowledge. Categorical ethical claims are little more than pretense because all categorical claims are pretense. Every linguistic utterance is influenced by the context in which it is expressed. What gives a particular doctrine the authority is the willingness of certain individuals to invest in it with absolute authority. All linguistic meaning is human, thus temporal, and in some measure indeterminate.
Such a simple generation of deconstructionist criticism, of course, belies its complex formation about language and subjectivity. First of all, we can talk about a “Deconstructionist ethics” in broad terms. The sort of rhetorical readings favored by deconstructionists is an extremely effective conduit to a text’s moral dimension. The process by which tropes are interpreted can yield evidence of ideological contradiction that in turn betrays moral pressure. Moreover, even deconstructive readings that are read as repudiating an openly ethical moment of interpretation are themselves open to ethical interpretation. Additionally, deconstruction has demonstrated its relevance to the concept of an ethics of responsibility generated in the encounter with the Other. On this view, language originates in reasonability as a response to someone else; thus, from the moment of its articulation, it is ethical. Hillis Miller summarizes rhetorical readings as ethical readings as such: “Each reading is, strictly speaking, ethical, in the sense that it has to take place, by an implacable necessity, as the response to a categorical demand, and in the sense that the reader must take responsibility for it and for its consequences in the personal, social, and political worlds.”

There is no doubt that some deconstructionists regard ethics and morality with suspicion. This is because of their belief in the undecidability of meanings in a literary text, which necessitates the position of the very notion of determinate “moral questions” or “dilemmas” to be ultimately untenable. Following this view, they then treat the categories of ethics such as inner life, intention, meditation, and choice not as something prior to language but as a mere effect of language. This is why Paul de Man famously declares: “The passage to an ethical tonality does not result from a transcendental imperative but is the referential (and therefore unreliable) version of a linguistics confusion. Ethics…is a discursive mode among others.” What Paul de Man sets up to oppose is the view of an ethical man who is an autonomous and rational subject and who acts upon normative and universalized principle. Such a view of ethics and subjectivity, as we all know, is the dominant moral philosophy serving as the foundation of humanism since Hegel and Kant in the West.

Since the 1990s many a literary scholar have engaged in working between these two contrasting views of ethics in order to tease out some new ethical theories, of whom Charles Taylor’s work is the most noteworthy. He calls the “space between” these two contrasting views of ethics to be consisting of firstly of the idea that we are only moral subjects at all because we are parts of a language community;
we are only deliberation agents or selves within society’s “web of interlocution.” That is to say, the practical reason that is the cornerstone of ethics can only begin in what he calls our “moral intuitions.” These moral intuitions are indeed partly constituted by language and culture, but it is reductive and in any case beside the point to regard them as mere effects of language. Moral intuitions, Charles Taylor believes, offer the best account to the presence of ethics in our lives because they reflect our dialectical relationships with language in practical terms. Clearly, the idea of moral intuitions has an ontological ring to it, which can be traced back to Kantian foundationalist discourse but it is also squarely planted in the discursive power of language in the fashion of Deconstruction. Such an innovative understanding of ethics and subjectivity is inspired by theory but also compensates for its limitations.

5. Towards a New Ethical Criticism

The question is, in light of new understandings of ethics in literature, how does one conduct ethical criticism in practice? How does one break free of the trapping of the old ethical criticism that is only interested in moral judgments but yet uphold ethics as a focal point? Clearly, one needs to work in the remains of theory and one must contextualize ethics in all its cultural, social, political and historical conditions. Let’s call this kind of reading strategy “Responsible” or “New” ethical criticism. Based on proposals that I have gathered, I venture to offer the following suggestions:

Responsible or New Ethical Criticism should not be exclusively thematic in scope or agenda; neither should it be monologic. New ethical criticism is not a religious hymn to an ideal, what ever it might be. Rather, it is the record of the way critical codes influence interpretive judgments of both literary texts and commentary on those texts. Similarly, new ethical criticism is intrigued as much by how the ethical component of a literary text signifies—both as a self-contained aesthetic object and as a pedagogic instrument—as by what it signifies. It neither subordinates the aesthetic to the moral, nor the moral to the aesthetic; instead, it keeps both categories intact in its choice of forms and methods necessary for textual practice. Most critically, new ethical criticism does not pretend to find the moral of a story; it can, however, fairly discover a moral that does not betray the story’s aesthetic modality. As the American critic Christopher Clausen explains:

Ethical criticism requires agreement that the moral values and judgments asserted or
implied in a literary work are worth noticing, examining, and evaluating. It does not depend on acceptance of any particular moral code, or on any particular view of the status of moral judgments.\(^\text{[14]}\)

Here remains the crucial difference between ethical criticism of the past and new ethical criticism of today. While the former, in its worst forms of expression, practices overt didactic reading of a literary text with the sole purpose of endorsing or promoting one moral agenda or another, the latter is only interested in discovering the various ethical values embedded in literary works that are part of the manifestation of their significance. To do this, new ethical criticism must remain in dialogue with the aesthetic structures of a text, for the tension between these aesthetic structures and a text’s ideological components solidifies a production of textual meanings. Attention to these aesthetic structures may profitably contribute to a nonmonologic, nonthematic ethical criticism by demonstrating how to read literature for insight, not into the kinds of ethical claims a text might convey, but into the way ethical claims may be expressed or validated. This is not say that ethical themes can be sifted completely out of the process of ethical reading, but these themes need not be taken as the exclusive object of study; rather, they are understood as simply an ideological effect of an equally important signifying process. On this view, the structural example of ethically charged voices engaged in moral dialogue within a text may serve both as the object of ethical criticism and as a morally illuminating model for one way critics may articulate their own nonmonologic interpretive claims about a text’s moral component.

6. Conclusion: The Place of Ethical Criticism After Theory

My conclusion brings us back to the beginning, to Terry Eagleton and his book *After Theory*. What follows the previous quoted opening paragraph is this passage:

Those to whom the title of this book suggests that “theory” is now over, and that we can all relievedly return to an age of pre-theoretical innocence, are in for a disappointment. There can be no going back to an age when it was enough to pronounce Keats delectable or Milton a doughty spirit. It is not as though the whole project was a ghastly mistake on which some merciful soul has now blown the whistle, so that we can all return to whatever it was we were doing before Ferdinand de Saussure heaved over the horizon. If theory means a reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions, it remains as
indispensable as ever. But we are living now in the aftermath of what one might call high theory, in an age which, having grown rich on the insights of thinkers like Althusser, Barthes and Derrida, has also in some ways moved beyond them.

The sentiments that Terry Eagleton expresses here are akin to what is contained in this aphorism: You cannot go home again. Home is a resting place in life’s endless journey; home has become artifacts that you carry with you. I agree with Terry Eagleton that we are now living in an age of “after theory,” but “after theory” does not mean “without theory.” As long as we remain human, i.e., ethical beings living in a group setting, we will always have ideas about the self and the other, about the world and about life. These ideas are not the theory as we know it, but they function approximately the same way. Ethical criticism is one of these ideas about these self-interesting writings that we call literature. It may not live up to the greatness of theory’s old guards, but in this post-anything world of ours, it may be the best we can have at the moment.

Notes:
[1] Wayne C. Booth, The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1988), 15.
[2] John Gardner, On Moral Fiction (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 23.
[3] Terry Eagleton, After Theory (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 1.
[4] Ibid., 2.
[5] Martha Craven Nussbaum, Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 169-170.
[6] These charges are a summary of John Krapp’s views in his An Anesthetics of Morality: Pedagogic Voice and Moral Dialogue in Mann, Camus, Conrad, and Dostoevsky (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 2.
[7] For readers who want to draw their own conclusions about Plato’s sophisticated arguments about the poet and society, please refer to the last third of Book Two and the first half of the Book Three of The Republic, ed. James Adam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963).
[8] Wayne C. Booth, 5.
[9] See Simon Critchley, The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas (Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 1999).
[10] J. Hillis Miller, The Ethics of Reading (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 59.
[11] Paul de Man, Allergies of Reading (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 86.
[12] David Parker describes this “ethical turn” of literary criticism and moral philosophy in the 1990s. See David Parker, et al., eds., Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), esp. 1-17.
[13] Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity (Cambridge, MA:
[14] Christopher Clausen, “Moral Inversion and Critical Argument,” *Georgia Review* 42 (Spring 1988): 11.

**Bibliography:**

Booth, Wayne C. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1988.

Clausen, Christopher Clausen. “Moral Inversion and Critical Argument.” *Georgia Review* 42 (Spring 1988).

Critchley, Simon. *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

De Man, Paul. *Allergies of Reading*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979.

Eagleton, Terry. *After Theory*. New York: Basic Books, 2003.

Gardner, John. *On Moral Fiction*. New York: Basic Books, 1977.

Krapp, John. *An Anesthetics of Morality: Pedagogic Voice and Moral Dialogue in Mann, Camus, Conrad, and Dostoeyvsky*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2002.

Nussbaum, Martha Craven. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Miller, Hillis. *The Ethics of Reading*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

Parker, David, et al., eds.. *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Plato. *The Republic*, ed. James Adam. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963.

Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

---

**Li Dian** is an associate professor of Chinese Studies at the Department of East Asian Studies, the University of Arizona, USA. He has a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in Asian Languages and Cultures. His research interests are modern Chinese poetry, literary theory, and translation studies. He has published three books and over thirty articles and translations in Chinese poetry, cinema, and cultural studies. His monograph on Bei Dao remains the most complete and authoritative study of the contemporary Chinese poet in English.