

# Literature and Ethics

## (An Introduction)

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Already Aristoteles in his *Poetics* observes that tragedy addresses the spectator's emotional, cognitive and ethical competences in order to achieve the catharsis for which it aims. Tragedy provokes an emotional reaction, but the ability of cogitation and the ethical stance of the spectator are simply presupposed by Aristoteles, namely, when he lists the three possible forms of plot to be avoided: A good man – without committing a tragic fault – must not be seen to be passing from happiness to misery, a bad man from misery to happiness, and an extremely bad man from happiness to misery (1452 b 30). Especially the first situation is solely odious for Aristoteles, who does not allow for the possibility that a mature member of society who knows how to tell right from wrong could react differently. The relations between literature and ethics have often changed in the course of history. In the age of enlightenment, literature had to educate the reader; the concept of aesthetic autonomy relieved literature of this obligation; the ethical turn, meanwhile, once again started to review these relations. Occurrences, such as new forms of warfare, migrations and social anguish – that is, confrontation with the stories of people who passed into misery only because they were born in the wrong part of the world, in a body with the wrong skin color or sex, without even having had the chance to commit a tragic fault – also call on literary studies to examine the tools it uses to analyze the ethical dimension and its role in this context.

It is possible to speak about ethics on at least three levels: the ethicality of imagination, the ethicality of narration, and the ethicality of interpretation. While literature, which defines itself as a fiction, may be able to remove itself from such discussions, at another level it is caught up in them. Because literature shows “what could happen,” it becomes a privileged site of utopias and dystopias. Though postmodernism rejected these two “topias” on account of their being ideological, today they are, in various forms, returning to literature and giving rise to various questions that concern the burden of the past and the survival in aggravated circumstances of liberal capitalism.

Literary texts mediate value systems, norms and ethical questions through how they tell – that is, both through the specific use of language (semantics, syntax, rhetoric) as well as through narrative approaches. These approaches have, in the context of studies on narrative ethics, which has a tradition stretching back several decades, been much studied; and yet, with new literary praxes on the one hand and the development of narratology, postcolonial studies and gender studies as well as the development of new media on the other, new questions arise.

We can speak about the ethics of interpretation at the level of immanently literary approaches – that is, the ways in which literature interprets information that is generally accepted as real – and also at the level of how literary studies interpret literature. Precisely here questions arise that go beyond merely literary approaches, since they dispute the relationship literature has to the world and the place literature holds in the world. These questions penetrate to the very essence of our relationship to the world, to our fellow humans, and by this to the core of literature or what it could be: not only a reflection of these relationships, but a part of them.

Heinz von Foerster, in his article “Das Konstruieren einer Wirklichkeit”, discusses the relevance and the implications of radical constructivism. In his conclusion he gives a terse answer to the question of how this affects the concepts of aesthetics and ethics. He formulates two imperatives. “The aesthetic imperative: If you want understanding, act. The ethical imperative: Act always in a way that opens up new possibilities.” (60)<sup>2</sup> The set of thematic articles contained in this issue of *Primerjalna književnost* demonstrates that today it is possible to write about literature and ethics in many different ways and by this they, one hopes, open up possibilities for new discussions.

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The set of thematic articles begins with Tomo Virk’s contribution entitled “Ethical Literary Criticism between Cacophony and Plurality,” probing the basic relations between ethics and literature. The reflection on this topic is as old as the reflection on literature, which itself shows the general importance of ethical research. Virk’s treatise sum-

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<sup>2</sup> Foerster, Heinz von. “Das Konstruieren einer Wirklichkeit.” *Die erfundene Wirklichkeit. Beiträge zum Konstruktivismus*. Ed. by Paul Watzlawick. München: Piper, 1981. 39–60.

marizes the most prominent research directions of this topic after the so-called ethical turn in literary studies that happened in the 1980s. His article focuses on some basic concepts and relations of ethical literary criticism, such as the relation between ethics and morality, ethics and aesthetics, and between ethics and politics. Virk is convinced that ethical literary criticism is in many ways the most important part of literary criticism, but he identifies the so-called cacophony of ethical approaches to literature, characterized as it is by the lack of theoretical and methodological self-reflection. He makes a case for self-reflection and ethical reading as the basis for ethical criticism.

The complexity of the relations between art and politics, ethics and aesthetics, ethics and literature is central for Werner Wintersteiner in his article “From a Violent Past towards a Global Ethics? Twentieth Century Atrocities in Selected Novels of the Twenty-First Century.” Starting from the thesis that literature itself is not ethical and that, because of this, it can serve ethical purposes, he discusses three modern novels from different regions: *Burnt Shadows* (2009) by Kamila Shamsie, *The French Art of War* (2011) by Alexis Jenni and *The Walnut Mansion* (2003) by Miljenko Jergović. Although all three novels use quite different aesthetic strategies and offer different ethical “answers,” they are all searching for the causes of violence on a global level – either they are asking about a global ethics in the sense of a global society (Shamsie and Jenni), or about the global weakness of man (Jergović). The novels are never moralistic. They are aesthetically open and complex, focused on the narration of stories that concern everybody.

The ethics of narration is the major theme of Alenka Koron’s article “What is Ethical Narratology, or What Could It Be?” By taking into account different theories, especially Alain Badiou’s postmodern ethical theory, the author of the article reflects upon the methods of ethical narratology and shows how a literary text can sensitize the reader to the ethical components of the narrative.

The relation between ethics and aesthetics is the major theme of two articles in this set: Dejan Kos, in his article “Ethics and Aesthetics between Profanity and Numinosity,” provides a short outline of the historical development of these relations. He questions the idea of aesthetic autonomy and the basic logocentric evidence. As a possible solution to the inherent contradictions he suggests absolutizing the principle of openness. Vladimir Gvozden, in his article “What Makes a Good Book? *Bonae literae* in Twenty-First Century,” focuses on the qualitative criteria for literary works today. First, he explains the concept of *bonae literae* as understood by Erasmus of Rotterdam; then he

outlines the further development. Today there are no coherent criteria for the evaluation of literature, but there still exists a small residuum of Erasmus's view. Iztok Osojnik in his article "Freedom and the Unconscious: Some Observations on the Ethics of Poiesis" tries to find the ethics of literature in *poiesis*, creating, in an event of being, and demonstrates with the poem *Zaupanje (Trust)*, written by Muanis Sinanović, how this process works out from the within to outside.

The texts that form the second part of this thematic volume focus on the ethical aspects of single literary works. Daniel Graziadei's article "Towards an Ethics of Intercultural Misunderstandings" offers an analysis of three contemporary novels that describe misunderstandings arising in intercultural communication. He discusses the ethical dimension of these misunderstandings on the level of fiction and on the level of the act of reading. On both levels he points out the revision of the different processes that lead to the construction of truth and meaning. Also located in the realm of intercultural relations is the article "A Transgressive Ethics of Alterity in Jhumpa Lahiri's and Rodica Mihalîs' Narratives of Uprooting" by Adriana Elena Stoican. On the basis of modern theories that search for an intersection between poststructuralist and humanist ethics and try to overcome them, she develops a methodological approach and applies it to the works of two contemporary novelists that deal with the importance of intercultural encounters.

In "Staging the Ethical in the State of Emergency in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*," Stevan Bradić analyses selected excerpts from Coetzee's novel that show the problems of an ethics that stays within imperial logic. He stresses the necessity of a link between ethics and politics. The impossibility of separating ethics from politics is also made evident in the article "Ethics and Aesthetics in Jonas Lüscher's *Barbarian Spring*," by Yvonne Hütter. She offers a thorough analysis of that novel, while discussing fundamental questions about the function and the scope of literature in terms of the imparting of values in the tradition of the enlightenment and the forming of cognition that enable the reader to act ethically and politically.

Mateja Pezdirc Bartol's paper "The Specific Features of the Dramatic Form and Ethical Questions in Dramatic Works by Simona Semenič" deals with three "no longer dramatic" texts by the Slovenian playwright and considers the possibilities of formulating an ethical dimension without explicitly political statements, ethical imperatives, didactic points or depictions of violence. Here, the precondition is the aesthetic experience that poses ethical dilemmas and provokes the reader into actively looking for answers on his own. Gašper Troha focuses on "Ethics

in Modern British Drama.” He asks about the ethical dimensions of plays that aim to shock the spectator and depict the world as a radical dystopia. His main thesis is that in a world of fluid, instable values this is the only way to discuss ethical questions in the theatre. The concluding article – Irena Avsenik Nabergoj’s “Uncovering the Dark Truths of Society and the Unbreakable Power of the Good in Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*” – focuses on the question of how Dickens’s novel addresses the topic of moral values and points out that it is the narrative’s ability to imaginatively display the mental and spiritual states of its heroes that engages the reader’s practical moral sense.