Dilemmas Beyond Ethics: A Critique of Eastern Ethical Literary Criticism

Arleen Ionescu

West University of Timişoara, Faculty of Letters, History, Philosophy and Theology, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Bulevardul Vasile Pârvan 4, Timişoara 300223, Romania
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5764-8612
arleen.ionescu@e-uvt.ro

The aim of this article is to compare ethical literary criticism of the East with that of the West and to reveal some potential limitations of the emerging critical tendency of "ethical literary criticism" in China when applied to Western literary production. The first part sets out the conceptual framework by contrasting Nie Zhenzhao's understanding of literature as an expression of ethics, Jacques Derrida's conception of the institution of "literature" as having "the right to say anything," and Levinas's conception of ethics as "first philosophy" involving responsibility towards the Other, bearing in mind that Levinas's entire philosophical project was an ethical response to all forms of "absolute evil" that emerged in the twentieth century. Starting from this contextual definition, the article focuses on the opening of history after the Second World War as a "caesura" (Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe) to show that while Nie's application of ethics to literary analysis can work successfully for a corpus of works from the Middle Ages to nineteenth-century realism, his concept of "ethical choice" as an analytical fulcrum breaks down in the face of literature's response to twentieth-century atrocities. In the final section, therefore, I challenge Nie's ethical literary criticism by focusing on works in the tradition of the "Holocaust novel" and presenting a case study that demonstrates the limits of ethical criticism in the analysis of William Styron's Sophie's Choice*.*

Keywords: literature and ethics / ethical literary criticism / East and West / Nie, Zhenzhao / Derrida, Jacques / Levinas, Emmanuel / Styron, William: *Sophie's Choice*

Does the East meet the West in critical theory?

Recently, more bridges between the East, in particular China, and the West have been established in the field of the Humanities, following many collaborations between Asian, European, American and Australian researchers in sciences. More translations from English

into Chinese and from Chinese into English appeared. Many international journals have shown an increased interest in making it possible for modern Chinese fiction and theory to become global (see, for instance, guest-edited issues, such as Wang, *Modern Chinese Fiction*, *Comparative Literature*, and *Modern China*; Hu-DeHart et al.; Wang and Peng).

As also mentioned by Tomo Virk, an emerging critical trend called "ethical literary criticism" appeared in China in 2004, mainly through the works of Nie Zhenzhao (Virk, "Kitajska različica"). Aware that some of my points overlap with Virk's, yet in a dialogue with him, meant to contextualize my findings, I will briefly mention the main tenets of Nie's ethical criticism. After *Foreign Literature Studies* published several Nie's articles written in Chinese (Nie, "Ethical Approach," "Ethical Literary Criticism: On Fundamental Function," and "Ethical Literary Criticism: Its Fundaments"), some of his works were translated into English (Nie, "Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism"; Nie and Shang). Others were analyzed in English (Tian; Yang).[1] Junwu Tian explained that by the time Nie came up with his theory, China was in a "theory aphasia," caused by "the lack of an independent system of its own discourse" which "subordinated Western ethical criticism to other theories, such as narratology and ecocriticism" (Tian 406). The term "theory aphasia" coined by critic Cao Shunqing described "the cultural symptoms of Chinese literary criticism" (403). Nie set up his own "theoretical system of ethical literary criticism," attempting to enrich and perfect "the existing ethical criticism" (406) by assessing the values of literary texts within a specific social and cultural context.[2] In December 2012, Yichang hosted the 2nd International Symposium on Ethical Literary Criticism where the International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism (IAELC) was set up as "an international literary and cultural organization which aims to link all those working in ethical literary criticism in theory and practice and to encourage the discussion of ethical value in literary creation and criticism." Its current president is Nie.

Nie's 2014 book *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, which was translated into English in 2024, is made up of three main parts:

[1] Virk also engages with Junwu Tian's article, while he does not mention Liu Yang.

[2] Starting from Tian, Virk explained that Nie's theory is rooted in Chinese tradition, which may seem unfamiliar to the Western reader. He agrees with Tian that Nie's emphasis is on "the ethical and educational function of literature and art" in general (Virk, "Kitajska različica" 223). I am exactly on the same page as Virk and in the next part I will elaborate further on the relation of Nie's theory to Confucianism.

a theoretical exploration of ethical literary criticism which argues that "literature is an art of ethics," followed by "applications of ethical literary criticism, and its conceptual system" (Yang 172) which include analyses of *Oedipus Rex*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, "The Old Man and the Sea," *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and the poetry of the May Fourth Movement (a Chinese cultural and anti-imperialist political movement that started from student protests in Beijing on May 4, 1919).

In 2017, one of the issues of the journal *Primerjalna književnost* was dedicated to ethical criticism. The editors Špela Virant and Irena Samide proposed three different directions to approach ethics in criticism: "the ethicality of imagination, the ethicality of narration, and the ethicality of interpretation" (Virant and Samide 7). In the same issue, Virk made a comprehensive synthesis of the latest productions in ethical criticism and included Nie's theory among those directions "that branched into a series of individual directions, the most prominent of which are narrative ethics, rhetorical literary ethics, ethics of reading and ethics of otherness, along with others, such as ethics of writing, ethics of fiction, ethics of difference, ethics of criticism, ethics of interpretation, ethics of world literature, ethics of imagination, ethics of hypertext, ethics of empathy, etc."—a "potentially endless" list as he called it, pointing out that this "plurality" can end up in "cacophony" (Virk, "Etična literarna veda" 15).

Setting the conceptual stage

Nie's "ethical literary criticism" sees literature as "a product of ethic, or a unique expression of morality in a given historical period" (Nie, "Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism" 85). Hence, Nie's work investigates writers' moral values, the relations between the moral phenomena of literary works and reality, and the effects of the works' moral values on readers and society (see also Shang, "Rise"). And here comes the first difference between Eastern and Western ethical criticism: while Western ethics is of a more complex nature, Eastern ethics is often equated to morality. Tian asserts that for Nie "moral criticism functions as a lawful censorship, emphasizing the moral edification of literature, while ethical criticism behaves like a nonteleological historian, realistically recording and revealing the ethical relationships among literary characters without arbitrary judgments" (Tian 411–412). Thus, Homer's and Hesiod's stories of incest present immoral behaviors, yet Homer and Hesiod are not immoral, since their purpose was to

"artistically represent the ethical chaos of that period" (412). A clearer explanation is provided by Galin Tihanov in one of the two forewords to Nie's *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*. Tihanov asserts that there is a difference between moral and ethical criticism, "the former being guided by the need to pass judgement from the commentator's/reader's *current* perspective, while the latter sets out to understand the specific *evolution* of literature as a tool of facing and resolving dilemmas around good and evil, duty and pleasure, loyalty and freedom, and so on" (Tihanov xi; see also Virk, "Kitajska različica" 217–218). However, Tihanov's comments are contradicted by Nie's book itself in which morality and ethics are often interchangeable. Here are only a few examples:

> Ethical literary criticism differs from other strands of literary criticism in its view of the origin of literature, by claiming that literature is a product of ethics, or a unique expression of morality in a given historical period. (Nie, *Introduction* 8)

> The emergences of taboos signify the early formation of morality. … The formation and transformation of the ethical order of human society is institutionally premised on taboos. (15)

> [T]he literature of Realism and Sentimentalism are inevitably engaged with morality with a special focus on moral model. It is fair to conclude that the ethical concerns of literary criticism are defined by the ethical value of literature. (73)

To quote Laurent Milesi, there is a

> tendency to inadvertently rehabilitate two types of "moralizing" or ideological approaches that had prevailed in the West at a much earlier stage in the development of literary criticism, albeit at opposite ends of the political/ideological spectrum: F. R. Leavis's emphasis on the universalizing "moral significance" of the "Great Tradition" vs. Georg Lukács's "ethics of representation" (my terms) in his advocacy of a socialist-realist aesthetics (and debunking of modernism as bourgeois decadence). (Milesi, "Bringing the Ethos")

In other words, if a revival of these theories is at stake nowadays, there is also a strong "necessity of re-grounding ethics in its original ethos."

Tian attempts to convince us that "Nie's theory of ethical literary criticism has won critical acclaims from scholars, both Chinese and foreign," giving several examples of academics who showed interest in his theory according to an article co-authored by William Baker

and Biwu Shang for *Times Literary Supplement* (Tian 413; see also Lazer). Baker and Shang indeed spoke of ethical literary criticism as becoming "one of the most vibrant and productive critical theories in China," receiving "increasing recognition" from "eminent scholars" (Baker and Shang 15). However, Western scholars have a more nuanced notion of ethics which differs fundamentally from the huge number of teachings and moral lessons of Laozi and Confucius. Assuming the risk of taking perhaps too many shortcuts here, to make my point clear, I would say that Chinese culture can be regarded as a culture of stories and narratives. The *shi* ("poetry")—"the mainstream along the long river of Chinese ancient literature" (Liu 93)—tells stories. Laozi's and Confucius's teachings are based on concrete stories from which morals are extracted. The title of Laozi's main work, *Daodejing*, is composed of the words *dao* ("way," "road," or "path") and *dejing* which comes from *de* ("life force" or "vitality"). The figure of the Sage in *Daodejing* is "the person who epitomizes the teachings of a particular school of philosophy, how he should behave depends, of course, on the nature of the teachings concerned" (Penny xii). Moreover, according to Xinzhong Yao, "Confucianism underlined, and perhaps to a smaller extent continues to underline, the basic structure of society and community, to orient the life of the people and to define their moral standards and ethical ideal in most parts of East Asia" (Yao 32). The close connection between Confucius's thinking and ethics made several Western scholars define Confucianism as a form of ethics (Needham; Zaehner; see also Yao 32). Because the epic genre prevails in Chinese literature, narratology is omnipresent in Chinese scholarship. Nowadays, postclassical narratology "is far from being merely an American affair since, after Critical Theory entered the study of narratives in China, Chinese academics not only welcomed the concept but also valuably contributed to the field, including with their own home-grown version of narratology" (Ionescu, "Postclassical Narratology" 15; see also Shang, "Postclassical Narratology").

In a co-written article with Shang, Nie acknowledges that "it is striking that this scholarship has so far failed to consider ethical criticism as an independent discipline or school of critical theory," and points out the two directions which ethical criticism has taken: "In the case of Emmanuel Lévinas, Maurice Blanchot, and Nussbaum, ethical criticism has been more or less assimilated by philosophy; in the case of Wayne C. Booth, James Phelan, and Adam Zachery Newton, ethical criticism has been assimilated by narratology" (Nie and Shang 4).

Within the Chinese context, Nie's theory resonates with the latter. The concepts "in the practice of ethical literary criticism" that he proposes "to unpack the ethical features of literary works" are "[e]thical taboo, ethical chaos, ethical consciousness, ethical environment, ethical identity, ethical choice, the Sphinx factor, the human factor, the animal factor, rational will, irrational will and natural will" (Nie, "Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism" 89). These concepts are explained through examples from different stories from the Bible or Greek mythology. For instance, "the Sphinx factor" is illustrated as follows:

> The feature of the Sphinx's combination of a human head and an animal body suggests, first of all, that the most important feature of a human image lies in its head, which stands for reason as a result of the evolutionary process. Secondly, it indicates that human beings have evolved from animals and thus still contain some features belonging to them. This feature can be thus called the Sphinx factor, which is composed of two parts—the human factor and the animal factor. Normally, the human factor is superior to the animal factor, and hence the former can take control of the latter, which explains why a man could become a person with ethical consciousness. (96)

While Chinese scholars may find the Sphinx factor a thought-provoking tool to decode Chinese tales of the miraculous, such as *Journey to the West* and *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (see Tian 410), the Western academic is prone to interrogate these remarks, especially in the context of posthumanism which "rejects the idea that human beings should comprise the center of research or a benchmark for measuring nonhuman abilities" (Jagodzka 160). Nie's theory dismisses animal life which makes his work part of what Rodolfo Piskorski defined as criticism that considers animal life "irrelevant or inferior" (Piskorski 6). In the second decade of the twenty-first century, returning to the idea that the human being is superior to all other creatures—after so much research questioning "humanism's anthropocentrism, essentialism, exceptionalism, and speciesism" has been produced (Herbrechter et al. 4)—seems anachronistic.

For Nie, "the ethical turn" which took place in narrative theory at the end of the 1980s and in the beginning of the 1990s in the United States, "attempts to unpack the ethical values of literature, and the truth about social life depicted in literature from an ethical perspective. It should be reiterated that the ethical value of literature is historical, stable and objective, regardless of the changes undertaken in today's moral principles" (Nie, "Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism" 100). Nie connects this turn to the interest in narrativity. Indeed, as Liesbeth

Korthals Altes states, there was "a pointed interest in narrativity and narrative literature from the side of moral philosophy" in these two decades (Korthals Altes 142). Martha Nussbaum, Wayne C. Booth, Kevin McGinley and Daniel R. Schwartz are among the many scholars who suggested that literature can be read as moral philosophy or that the specific nature of literature implies moral exploration. Nussbaum, Booth, David Parker, and James Phelan also believed that "narrative fiction can play an important role in the moral development of readers by modelling their emotions, self-conception, and view of life" (143; see also Parker).

However, a second major difference between the Eastern and the Western interpretation of ethics appears here. For Western scholars, literature is "more about the failures of moral philosophy than about its successes" (Siebers 160). It is not a display of "moral examples for human beings to follow" in order "to achieve their self-perfection with moral experience," as Nie sees it (Nie, "Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism" 88). Moreover, Levinas's work offered "an ethical justification for the influx into criticism of the new and challenging questions, called 'theory,'" offering "a new and different way of attending to the ethical in the textual, and of the responsibility inherent in reading" (Eaglestone 7).

Nie uses the concrete example "of the choice between the identities of animals and the identities of human beings," bringing examples from Charles Darwin's theory that accounts for the evolution of men from apes through the natural selection process, and from Engels's belief that what differentiated human beings from animals was labor (Nie, "Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism" 94). However, Nie does not mention that many literary scholars put to the test Darwinian concepts of adaptation, natural selection, and survival of the fittest (see Milesi, "Zo(o)graphies"). Starting from the Genesis, Nie considers the difference between good and evil as "the basis of ethics" (Nie, "Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism" 95). He introduces the notion of ethical selection that Adam and Eve completed when they chose to eat the fruit of knowledge and claims:

> All literary works embed practical aims, which are mainly about moral enlightenment and education. This point can be aptly demonstrated by a huge number of literary works. For instance, Homer's poetry conveys to the reader the rules of living; Hesiod's *Theogony* helps the reader to know the world; Greek tragedy teaches the reader to abide by the ethical order and moral codes. The process of reading is closely related to the process of aesthetic appreciation, which ends in the receiving of moral enlightenment. Therefore, moral teaching is the fundamental function of literature. (88)

Nie's literary examples revolve mostly around classics: from ancient literature (Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*) and the Renaissance (Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) to nineteenth-century Russian and French literature (Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*). Except for D. H. Lawrence, Ernest Hemingway, and Eugene O'Neill, no other major twentieth-century writers are included in Nie's discussion. Thus, Eastern ethical criticism cannot lay claims to becoming an all-encompassing tool for the analysis of literature. The lack of theoretical self-reflection of Eastern ethical criticism is conspicuous, since Nie never acknowledges that in the twentieth-century Western world, ethical criticism is not exclusively reducible to the differences between good and evil but it also implies the obligation, responsibility that a certain author or reader takes when engaging in an act of writing or reading.

Nie's glossary to the *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* contains the term "ethical deconstruction" which "refers to the analysis and interpretation of the ethical structure of literary works" (Nie, *Introduction* 221). Nie contrasts "construction" to "deconstruction" without mentioning that deconstruction already contains the prefix "con" and is therefore not the opposite of "construction": "While ethical construction reveals the ethical structure, ethical deconstruction is a critical reading of the ethical structure with an aim to interpret its formative process" (221). Nie is paying lip service to the term "deconstruction" here, which brings us to what deconstruction means.

In his introduction to Jacques Derrida's *Acts of Literature*, Derek Attridge pointed out that literary texts "are acts of writing that call forth acts of reading" (Attridge 2). For Derrida, literature is a "historical institution with its conventions, rules, etc., but also this institution of fiction which gives *in principle* the power to say everything, to break free of the rules, to displace them, and thereby to institute, to invent and even to suspect the traditional difference between nature and institution, nature and conventional law, nature and history" (Derrida, "This Strange Institution" 37). The link of the institution of literature "to an authorization to say everything" means that the writer is given license to say anything he wanted or could say, while remaining shielded from all censorship, be it religious or political (37). Derrida's writing on literary texts was itself a form of ethics, which brought about "a strong sense of his *responsibility* toward them, the registering of a demand which they and their signatories make, of a call that seems to come from somewhere outside the orbit within which we comfortably go about our intellectual business—but an outside which cannot simply be classified as exterior" (Attridge 5). For Derrida, ethics implied a

responsibility towards the other, and, in relation to reading literature, it was a law that bound him to devote himself or to respond. That law was "*the text of the other*, its very singularity, its idiom, its appeal" (Derrida, "This Strange Institution" 66). As Martin Hägglund has argued, Derrida's "relation to the other" was grounded in a violent, "nonethical opening of ethics" (Hägglund 88). Derrida explained this violence as follows: "I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others. *Every other (one) is every (bit) other* [*tout autre est tout autre*], every one else is completely or wholly other" (Derrida, *Gift* 68). According to him, as Milesi showed, ethics was "ultimately singularly unjustifiable, the possibility of an impossibility, and its intrinsic violence once it is unleashed through a decisional act is … registered in this asymmetrical formula which ruptures the same from within a homology" (Milesi, "Breaching Ethics"). Ethics thus represents the link between alterity and singularity or "what one could call the universal exception or the law of the exception" (Derrida, *Gift* 87).

Responsibility founded in the non-reciprocal relation to the Other (*Autrui*), who takes precedence over "I," was essential to Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy. The Levinasian view of ethics as "first philosophy" involves responsibility to the Other, a "language, that is, responsibility" (Levinas, "Ego" 43). For Levinas, ethics was "not a moment of being" but "otherwise and better than being" (Levinas, "God" 165). With ethics, Levinas took further the project of phenomenology, grounded more in perception than critical reflection. As confirmed in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas's attempt was not to construct an ethics but to find its sense (34–50). To live "otherwise than being" meant for Levinas to live as "an ethical creature," or, as Michael Fagenblat put it, "to bear witness … to the undeclinable goodness of an exposure to the other that precedes self-identity and thus testifies, despite oneself, to the glory of the Good" (Fagenblat 197).

The context in which Levinas wrote his work is important. Although the Holocaust never became the explicit content of Levinasian ethics, it dictated much of its substance. Levinas's philosophy was written in the wake of the question whether one can still philosophize within the memory of Auschwitz. Levinas, whose life was endangered during the Holocaust, revealed the weak foundations of Western thought whose inability to conceive difference legitimated the Nazis' radical antisemitism. The "ethical response" was the only adequate response to unprecedented horror, whereby "I" recognizes his/her "supreme obligation," his/her "responsibility for the useless and unjustifiable suffering of

others," as well as his/her "responsibility to respond to the evil inflicted upon … fellow human beings" (Bernstein 266–267).

Richard J. Bernstein put forward the idea that "Levinas's entire philosophic project can best be understood as an *ethical* response to evil—and to the problem of evil which we must confront after the 'end of theodicy'" (Bernstein 253). He divided Levinas's work into "three moments of the phenomenology of evil: evil as excess; evil as intention; and the hatred or horror of evil" (260). The first category refers to the evil that cannot be adequately comprehended, synthetized, or integrated into a framework of reason, because it is "a malignant sublime" (260) and such reflections prompt "an ethical response to evil" (262), the epitome of which was Auschwitz, "the paradigm of that transcendent evil that ruptures all categories of knowledge and understanding, evil as non-integrable excess" (266). Nie's ethical criticism excludes evil as excess. His examples do not include any example of Holocaust texts.

The definition of "absolute evil" radicalizes the sort of traditional moral dichotomy envisaged by ethical literary criticism. We cannot talk about a traditional ethics of good and bad in the case of the Holocaust because this was a "caesura" which, "within history, interrupts history and opens up another possibility of history, or else closes off all possibility of history" (Lacoue-Labarthe 45). As I showed elsewhere, "this figure of historical disjunction highlighted not only that a certain continuous conception of (Western) history was brutally interrupted but also that confidence in the ability of speech to represent a commonality of experience was shattered" (Ionescu, "'Differend'" 255).

Limits of the East project of ethical criticism

On these thoughts, my article moves towards its final section, which focuses on a strand of literary production that shows the limits of Nie's project: Holocaust literature, more precisely the Holocaust novel that "bursts the already fuzzy generic boundaries of autobiography and fiction, memoir and fantasy, historical document and realist novel. The incredible invites the surreal, and the absurdity of mass death defies narrative conventions of life stories, the Bildungsroman, or the epistolary form" (Sicher xii). It is a taxonomic category used to gather texts written by survivors (Aharon Appelfeld's *The Man Who Never Stopped Sleeping*, *Katerina*, *Badenheim 1939*, *For Every Sin*, *All Whom I Have Loved*, and *The Story of a Life*; Primo Levi's *If This Is*

a Man, published as *Survival in Auschwitz* in the United States, and *The Drowned and the Saved*; Elie Wiesel's *Night*; Charlotte Delbo's *Auschwitz and After*; Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower*; Tadeusz Borowski's *This Way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*), the Jewish American post-Holocaust novel (Saul Bellow, Cynthia Ozick), historical Holocaust novels (Thomas Keneally, William Styron, D. M. Thomas), second-generation Holocaust fiction (David Grossman, Art Spiegelman), as well as postmodernist Holocaust fiction (Martin Amis, Don DeLillo).

In post-WW2 Western thought, morality, ethics and forgiveness changed meanings completely. When one attempts to use Eastern ethical criticism to investigate Holocaust novels, the most problematic concept of Nie's theory is that of "ethical choice," since all these works prove that the very notion of choice disappeared. For instance, in *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi "testified to the victim's experience in relation to ethics, the limits of language and representation" (Ionescu, *Memorial Ethics* 20). Dealing with the interpretation of survivor memoirs from the famous Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, containing fourteen hundred videotaped interviews of Holocaust survivors, Lawrence Langer's book *Versions of Survival* called for a post-Holocaust revision of ethics, arguing vehemently that traditional ethics is incapable of judging Holocaust victims' dilemmas and contradictions in the death camps.

Langer started with examples from literature, for instance, *Hamlet* and *Oedipus Rex* (which Nie also used in his demonstrations), yet showed the regression from Shakespeare's and Sophocles's ethical choice to lack of choice in survivors' stories:

> Both dramatic tragedy and religious martyrdom are based on the premise that the individual is free to risk certain choices with full knowledge—that the consequences may lead to extreme suffering or death. These choices, whether Hamlet's decision to duel with Laertes, Oedipus's to pursue the truth of his identity despite Jocasta's pleas, or Sir Thomas More's to adhere to his Christian principles, are necessary to the individual's vision of himself as a human being. In the deathcamps, such motives for choice survived for a time, but the consequences were quickly removed from the control of the individual, and made so unpredictable that it was virtually impossible to associate one's vision of oneself as a human being with the various modes of punishment and extermination in the surrounding environment. (Langer, *Versions* 21)

In his essay "The Dilemma of Choice in the Deathcamps," Langer coined the term "choiceless choices" which are situations "where critical

decisions did not reflect options between life and death, but between one form of 'abnormal' response and another, both imposed by a situation that in no way was of the victim's own choosing" (120). I will illustrate how we bring Langer's point to bear on Nie's conception of ethics, by looking not at an example of life writing (which is not fictionalized), but at a fictional work that belongs to literature, William Styron's emblematic novel *Sophie's Choice*.

In his novel, Styron brought Auschwitz to a universal status. *Sophie's Choice* focuses on a Polish Catholic victim of Auschwitz who faces the dilemma of choice (see Mathé; Rosenfeld). In this context, Styron's controversial choice of proposing a more general view of the barbarism of Auschwitz (and the fact that Slavic Christians were also caught up in its program of forced labor and extermination obviates the need for Christian guilt and sets aside historical arguments for Christian antisemitism as a causative agent in the Holocaust) is yet another problem of ethics that this article does not deal with. Sophie's worst, darkest secret is not revealed until the end of the novel, because even in the dreadful Auschwitz world that she describes, the reader needs to be prepared in several stages before reading about the most atrocious event of her life. Sophie's fragmented and repeated rewritings of her history attest to her attempt to avoid poignant choices in her life.

Adia Mendelson-Maoz reveals that, before the hardest choice of her life, Sophie was either submissive or neutral: she could have chosen not to help her father by typing and distributing his pamphlets advocating the annihilation of the Jews, but she chose to obey him; likewise, she could have chosen to help her sister-in-law Wanda by supporting her work in the resistance group, but, while admiring Wanda for her courage, Sophie refused "to fight for any principle or ideology, and saw herself as 'on the sidelines'" (Mendelson-Maoz 376).

Perhaps Mendelson-Maoz's term "neutral" is not appropriate for all Sophie's actions. If before marriage, Sophie was paralyzed by the authority of her father, after she had children, she chose a certain type of action with a clear purpose—refusing to help Wanda was rather a choice not to endanger her children, considering that they were helpless. However,

> to the extent that Sophie's familial anti-Semitism is interwoven with the deep secret of her personal loss, the novel puts us in a very difficult place, properly akin to what Levi called "the gray zone." And in this sense secrecy and its active complement, lying, provide much of the impetus for the novel's method of

> storytelling, which is focused intensively on gradual recovery of truths pertaining to the most awful and historically overdetermined personal history. (Spargo 153)

When Sophie was suddenly plunged into the Auschwitz "selection," she had to make what we would call choice in normal circumstances (Mendelson-Maoz 376). In this particular case her decision "lay beyond the control of Auschwitz's victims, Jewish or not" (Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust* 376). This is the kind of "decision" that victims were forced to make by the Nazis who mocked at their hapless victims, offering them cruel, inhuman and nonsensical choices. These choices were "choiceless" because they designated violent impositions. On the night when Sophie arrived in Auschwitz, a camp doctor made her choose which of her two children would die immediately by gassing and which would continue to live, albeit in the camp. Had she not chosen, both children would have been sent to the gas chamber.

Styron's controversial novel was based on the real story of Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*. Lengyel who was asked by the Nazi doctor, conducting the "selection," about her elder son's age thought that saying that Arvad was not more than twelve (his real age) was a choice to make him live. Thus, she persuaded her mother to go to the "left" where her two sons were sent, thinking that her mother could take care of them. Lengyel chose to send the three of them with other children and the elderly, without knowing that "'left' was the way to the gas chambers" (Roth 106).

In Styron's novel, Sophie chose to sacrifice her seven-year-old daughter, Eva, in a heart-wrenching decision that has left her in mourning and filled with a guilt that she could never overcome. She chose to save Jan, the blond, blue-eyed, German-speaking son. She later tried to convince Rudolf Höss, the commander of Auschwitz, to allow Jan to leave the camp and enter the Lebensborn program. And yet, despite using all her charms, including her power to seduce Höss, she could not save her son either. According to Mendelson-Maoz, at this point in the novel, for Sophie, "*there was no choice*, because it was quite probable that both of her children would die regardless of her decision. Sophie loses both Eva and Jan at this same moment (she only knows that Eva is going to be killed right away and that Jan is going to be in the children's camp. She never actually sees either of them again)" (Mendelson-Maoz 376). Although being saved from Auschwitz, Sophie prolonged her life only to tell her story; she fell prey to alcoholism and self-destruction with Nathan with whom she

eventually committed suicide, refusing Stingo's decent proposal to marry him.

Sophie's Choice proves the limits of ethics which are evaded not only by Nie's ethical criticism but in general by any moral theory. Lisa Tessman coined the term "unavoidable moral failure," a failure that many Holocaust victims encountered "either because they faced choices all of which were unthinkable or because they lost the ability or the opportunity to function as moral agents at all" (Tessman 162). Tessman places the unavoidable moral failures under two different conditions, one in which the character no longer acts as "a moral *agent*" and the other where "agency has been eradicated"; the first condition is "one of *dilemmatic morality*, where moral agents choose moral wrongdoings (of whatever kind or magnitude), unavoidably, because there are no morally good (or better) options available"; the second is "a condition of *absent morality*, where choice and moral agency are not even operative" (162; emphasis added).

Sophie's Choice cannot be investigated via Nie's theory, since it is not about moral dilemmas. Thinking of the twentieth-century Chinese literary scene, there are no equivalents of *Sophie's Choice*. On the contrary, China takes pride that approximately 20,000 Jewish refugees from Germany, Austria and Poland were saved in Shanghai during WW2 (see Eber; Kranzler; Ionescu, "Hospitality"; Ristaino). However, in 1937 there was the Nanking Massacre. Not one single narrative dealing with the Nanking traumas (see Chang; Zhu) can be analyzed through the lens of Nie's ethical criticism.

WORKS CITED

Attridge, Derek. "Derrida and the Questioning of Literature." *Acts of Literature*, by Jacques Derrida, edited by Derek Attridge, Routledge, 1992, pp. 1–29.

Baker, William, and Biwu Shang. "Fruitful Collaborations: Ethical Literary Criticism in Chinese Academe." *Times Literary Supplement*, 31 July 2015, pp. 14–15.

Bernstein, Richard J. "Evil and the Temptation of Theodicy." *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, edited by Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 252–267.

Booth, Wayne C. "Why Ethical Criticism Can Never Be Simple." *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*, edited by Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack, University Press of Virginia, 2001, pp. 16–29.

Chang, Iris. *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*. Basic Books, 1997.

Derrida, Jacques. *The Gift of Death*. Translated by David Wills, University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Derrida, Jacques. "This Strange Institution Called Literature." Interview by Derek Attridge. *Acts of Literature*, by Jacques Derrida, edited by Derek Attridge, Routledge, 1992, pp. 33–75.

Eaglestone, Robert. *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas*. Edinburgh University Press, 1997.

Eber, Irene. *Wartime Shanghai and the Jewish Refugees from Central Europe: Survival, Co-Existence, and Identity in a Multi-Ethnic City*. De Gruyter, 2012.

Fagenblat, Michael. *A Covenant of Creatures: Levinas's Philosophy of Judaism*. Stanford University Press, 2010.

Hägglund, Martin. *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*. Stanford University Press, 2008.

Herbrechter, Stefan, et al. "Critical Posthumanism: An Overview." *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism*, edited by Stefan Herbrechter et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. 3–26.

Hu-DeHart, Evelyn, et al., editors. *Towards a Third Literature: Chinese Writing in the Americas*, special issue of *Amerasia Journal*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2012.

IAELC (The International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism). "Introduction to the International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism." *Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies of World Literature, Zhejiang University*, 6 June 2022, http://journal06.magtech.org.cn/Jweb3_zdsjwxkxk/EN/column/item18.shtml.

Ionescu, Arleen. "The 'Differend' of Shoes: Van Gogh, Beckett, Wiesel, Levi, and Holocaust Museums." *Partial Answers*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2019, pp. 255–277.

Ionescu, Arleen. "Hospitality in Shanghai: The Russian Jewish Community as Hosts and Polish Jewish Refugees as Guests during WW2." *Slovo*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2022, pp. 1–25.

Ionescu, Arleen. *The Memorial Ethics of Libeskind's Berlin Jewish Museum*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Ionescu, Arleen. "Postclassical Narratology: Twenty Years Later." *Word and Text*, vol. 9, 2019, pp. 5–34.

Jagodzka, Magdalena. "Found in Narration: Nonhuman Voices in Jessica Grant's *Come, Thou Tortoise* and Colin McAdam's *A Beautiful Truth*." *Word and Text*, vol. 11, 2021, pp. 159–174.

Korthals Altes, Liesbeth. "Ethical Turn." *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, edited by David Herman et al., Routledge, 2005, pp. 142–146.

Kranzler, David. *Japanese, Nazis and Jews: The Jewish Refugee Community of Shanghai, 1938–1945*. Yeshiva University Press, 1976.

Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. *Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political*. Translated by Chris Turner, Blackwell, 1990.

Langer, Lawrence L. *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays*. Oxford University Press, 1995.

Langer, Lawrence L. "The Dilemma of Choice in the Deathcamps." *Echoes from the Holocaust: Philosophical Reflections on a Dark Time*, edited by Alan Rosenberg and Gerald E. Myers, Temple University Press, 1988, pp. 118–127.

Langer, Lawrence L. *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit*. State University of New York Press, 1982.

Lazer, Hank. "Ethical Criticism and the Challenges Posed by Innovative Poetry." *The Free Library*, 1 Mar. 2016, https://www.thefreelibrary.com /Ethical+criticism+and+the+challenges+posed+by+innovative+poetry.-a0453915590.

Levinas, Emmanuel. "The Ego and the Totality." *Collected Philosophical Papers*, by Emmanuel Levinas, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987, pp. 25–45.

Levinas, Emmanuel. "God and Philosophy." *Collected Philosophical Papers*, by Emmanuel Levinas, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987, pp. 153–173.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, 1969.

Liu, Yingjie. *Contrast between Chinese and Western Culture*. Shanghai, Fudan University Press, 2020.

Mathé, Sylvie. "The 'Grey Zone' in William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*." *Études anglaises*, vol. 57, no. 4, 2004, pp. 453–466.

McGinley, Kevin. "The Hermeneutic Tension and the Emergence of Moral Agents." *Literature as Philosophy/Philosophy as Literature*, edited by Donald G. Marshall, University of Iowa Press, 1987, pp. 14–23.

Mendelson-Maoz, Adia. "New Vocabulary of Attention: The Aesthetics of Ethics in Styron's *Sophie's Choice*." *On the Turn: The Ethics of Fiction in Contemporary Narrative in English*, edited by Bárbara Arizti and Silvia Martínez-Falquina, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007, pp. 366–384.

Milesi, Laurent. "Breaching Ethics: Performing Deconstruction." International Conference Ethos/Pathos/Logos: The Sense and Place of Persuasiveness in Linguistic, Literary and Philosophical Discourse, 18–20 Oct. 2012, Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiești, Ploiești.

Milesi, Laurent. "Bringing the Ethos (Back) into Ethical Literary Criticism." The Ethico-Political Turn in Literary Studies: Cross-Cultural and Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives, 9th Convention of the International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism, 8–10 Nov. 2019, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou.

Milesi, Laurent. "Zo(o)graphies: Darwinian 'Evolutions' of a Fictional Bestiary." *Word and Text*, vol. 11, 2021, pp. 15–41.

Needham, Joseph. "China and the West." *China and the West: Mankind Evolving*, edited by Anthony Dyson and Bernard Towers, Garnstone Press, 1970, pp. 19–34.

Nie, Zhenzhao. "Ethical Approach to Literary Studies: A New Perspective" [in Chinese]. *Foreign Literature Studies*, vol. 26, no. 5, 2004, pp. 16–24.

Nie, Zhenzhao. "Ethical Literary Criticism: Its Fundaments and Terms" [in Chinese]. *Foreign Literature Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2010, pp. 12–22.

Nie, Zhenzhao. "Ethical Literary Criticism: On Fundamental Function and Core Value of Literature" [in Chinese]. *Foreign Literature Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2014, pp. 8–13.

Nie, Zhenzhao. *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*. Translated by Jie Zheng, Routledge, 2024.

Nie, Zhenzhao. "Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism." *Arcadia*, vol. 50, no.1, 2015, pp. 83–101.

Nie, Zhenzhao, and Biwu Shang. "Ethical Literary Criticism: East and West." *Arcadia*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2015, pp. 4–8.

Nussbaum, Marta. "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy." *New Literary History*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1983, pp. 25–50.

Parker, David. *Ethics, Theory and the Novel*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Penny, Benjamin. Introduction. *Daodejing*, by Laozi, translated by Edmund Ryden, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. vii–xxix.

Piskorski, Rodolfo. "Introduction: Animal (As) Writing, Writing (As) Animal." *Word and Text*, vol. 11, 2021, pp. 5–12.
Ristaino, Marcia Reynders. *Port of Last Resort: The Diaspora Communities of Shanghai*. Stanford University Press, 2001.
Rosenfeld, Alvin H. "The Holocaust According to William Styron." *Midstream*, vol. 25, no.10, 1979, pp. 43–49.
Roth, John K. "Lengyel, Olga". *Encyclopedia of Holocaust Literature*, edited by David Patterson et al., Oryx Press, 2002, pp. 106–107.
Schwartz, Daniel R. "The Ethics of Reading: The Case for Pluralistic and Transactional Reading." *Why the Novel Matters: A Postmodern Perplex*, edited by Mark Spilka and Caroline McCracken-Flesher, Indiana University Press, 1990, pp. 215–236.
Shang, Biwu. "Postclassical Narratology in China: Receptions and Variations." *Word and Text*, vol. 9, 2019, pp. 47–64.
Shang, Biwu. "The Rise of a Critical Theory: Reading *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*" [in Chinese]. *Foreign Literature Studies*, vol. 36, no. 5, 2014, pp. 26–36.
Sicher, Efraim. *The Holocaust Novel*. Routledge, 2005.
Siebers, Tobin. *Morals and Stories*. Columbia University Press, 1992.
Spargo, R. Clifton. "*Sophie's Choice*: On the Pedagogical Value of the 'Problem Text.'" *Teaching Holocaust Literature and Film*, edited by Robert Eaglestone and Barry Langford, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 139–155.
Tessman, Lisa. *Moral Failure: On the Impossible Demands of Morality*. Oxford University Press, 2015.
Tian, Junwu. "Nie Zhenzhao and the Genesis of Chinese Ethical Literary Criticism." *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2019, pp. 402–420.
Tihanov, Galin. Foreword. *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, by Nie Zhenzhao, translated by Jie Zheng, Routledge, 2024, pp. xi–xiii.
Virant, Špela, and Irena Samide. "Literature and Ethics." *Primerjalna književnost*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2017, pp. 7–11.
Virk, Tomo. "Etična literarna veda med kakofonijo in pluralnostjo." *Primerjalna književnost*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2017, pp. 13–31.
Virk, Tomo. "Kitajska različica etičnega literarnega kritištva." Review of *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, by Nie Zhenzhao. *Primerjalna književnost*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2024, pp. 215–225.
Wang, Ning, editor. *Modern Chinese Fiction in a Global Context*, special issue of *Neohelicon*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2010.
Wang, Ning, editor. *Comparative Literature: Toward a (Re)construction of World Literature*, special issue of *Neohelicon*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2011.
Wang, Ning, editor. *Modern China and the World: Literary Constructions*, special issue of *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2012.
Wang, Ning, and Qinglong Peng, editors. *Modern Chinese Literature in the Context of World Literature*, special issue of *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2021.
Yang, Liu. "Ethical Literary Criticism: Critical Reception and Theoretical Impact." *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2017, pp. 171–176.
Yao, Xinzhong. *An Introduction to Confucianism*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
Zaehner, R. C., editor. *The Concise Encyclopedia of Living Faiths*. Hutchinson, 1988.
Zhu, Chengshan, editor. *Qinhua Rijun Nanjing Datusha Xingcunzhe Zhengyan* [*A Collection of Survivors' Testimonies of the Nanjing Massacre*]. Beijing, Social Sciences Academic Press, 2005.

Dileme onkraj etike: kritika vzhodnega etičnega literarnega kritištva

Ključne besede: literatura in etika / etična literarna veda / Vzhod in Zahod / Nie, Zhenzhao / Derrida, Jacques / Levinas, Emmanuel / Styron, William: *Sophiejina odločitev*

Namen članka je primerjati vzhodno in zahodno etično literarno kritištvo ter odkriti morebitne omejitve kitajske različice etičnega literarnega kritištva pri obravnavi zahodne literarne produkcije. V prvem delu je vzpostavljen konceptualni okvir, in sicer s primerjavo med Nie Zhenzhaovim razumevanjem literature kot izraza etike, Derridajevim konceptom literature kot institucije, ki ima »pravico povedati vse«, in Levinasovim stališčem, da je etika »prva filozofija«, ki vključuje odgovornost do Drugega, pri čemer je treba upoštevati, da je bil celoten Levinasov filozofski projekt etični odgovor na vse oblike »absolutnega zla«, ki so se pojavile v 20. stoletju. Na podlagi te kontekstualne opredelitve članek v ospredje postavi odpiranje zgodovine po drugi svetovni vojni kot »cezure« (Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe) in pokaže, da je Niejevo teorijo sicer mogoče uspešno uporabiti pri preučevanju korpusa del od srednjega veka do realizma 19. stoletja, vendar pa se njegov koncept »etične izbire« kot analitičnega oprijemališča zlomi ob odzivu literature na grozodejstva 20. stoletja. Zadnji del članka se osredotoča na romane o holokavstu in predstavi študijo primera, ki prek analize romana Williama Styrona *Sophiejina odločitev* razkrije omejitve Niejevega etičnega literarnega kritištva.

1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek / Original scientific article
UDK 82.0:17
DOI: https://doi.org/10.3986/pkn.v47.i3.09