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The View from Beyond: Ethics and Literature

An attempt to evaluate literariness in terms of its moral relevance for the implied reader – the perspective of ethics and literary theory

‘... while the others talked on and he talked on himself, he tried as he did everywhere and always to imagine the inner, transparent motion of this or that other person. He would carefully seat himself inside the interlocutor as in an armchair, so that the other’s elbows would serve as armrests for him, and his soul would fit snugly into the other’s soul...’

Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift*

The world of searching for reasons of ethically questionable actions appears to relentlessly inspire the search for the sources of enhancing moral thinking. One of the common ethical questions is why humans are morally good, yet more interestingly: why are we able to be deliberately cruel? The mutual interest between the fields of philosophy and literary studies leads to a further question: would we choose to be benevolent, helpful rather than harmful if we read fine literature? For centuries, ethics and literature have remained in epistemological and normative relations, mutually facilitating the cognition and illustration of certain moral values. Especially, the contemporary *philosophy of literature* and *ethical criticism* contribute to the debate on the influence of reading on moral decision-making process and human flourishing. Still, the debate seems to be an ongoing process, which leaves many questions open. In an attempt to give a plausible answer the above question, I’d like to confront the way the content-form-ethics relationship is assumed to function and suggest an alternative justification of such a relation. I reach for the notions from the domain of epistemology, aesthetics and ethics. The thesis on the moral aspect of literature is defensible with reference to the concept of *detachment*, or *transcending towards the other*, stemming from the moral sense theory. The notion of detachment introduced into the field of ethical criticism could be named *the poetics of transcending*. My analysis tries to show that detachment and perspective change is a condition of moral judgment, which enables moral understanding both of oneself and the other. On the basis of this statement, a complementary

claim further proposes that literature may aid the strategy of detachment and that developed literary imagination enriches individual moral sense.

Art might be considered as a source of normativity under the assumption of it being in a sense useful, applicable for ethical considerations, and hence, having a particular didactic or obliging function. On the other hand, products of art can be seen as devoid of normative factors whatsoever. The two views build a tension of the ancient/modern, normative/neutral, useful/for-its-sake oppositions of equally justified reasoning. In the present account, literariness – as a particular form of art – will be given attention under ethical consideration. Literariness in the genre of a novel can be taken under examination as an aesthetic object, so as to specify the possible extent to which it can be considered in terms of ethics. Literature and ethics – compared with the pair of notions of *form* and *content* – have been viewed as inseparable, i.e. literature is assumed to have influence on moral choices of the audience¹. Following this line of thought, one is not supposed to talk either about literature or about ethics, since – just like form and content – considering them separately does not make sense. This statement is a travesty of the long functioning claim of literary theory: we cannot talk about form as detached from content, since form is content and we can only talk about *structure*². Form is the function of structure; content cannot get changed without the change in form. Such argumentation triggers a question: how are philosophers justified to travesty the claim on the aspects of literary structure in their claim combining two, seemingly different, branches of human thought? What brings literature – a form of art, the narrative, imaginative – close to theoretical, rational, normative ethics?

One objection I'd like to make is directed towards theories, which treat literature as an illustration of certain philosophical and ethical concepts, or taking a literary *theme* as a guide, motivation for the reader's action³. For instance, literary depiction is supposed to direct

1 Cf.: Martha Nussbaum, 'Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature', in: *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 3-53.

2 After the poetics of structuralism, elucidated among others by Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics. Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, London: Routledge, 2002.

³ Especially widespread in neo-Aristotelianism, for example: Anthony Cunningham, *The Heart of What Matters. The Role of Literature in Moral Philosophy*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2001. The story, or the 'aboutness' of a novel is assumed to have influence on the evaluation of certain aspects in human life, like emotional attachments, e.g. Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* are supposed to show that the absence of passion and human intimacy leads to moral blindness, or Zora Neal Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* – to show the interdependencies between 'good character' and vulnerability.

readers ‘to what should rightly command our attention. By reading the right kinds of novels in the right way, we can literally read for life, thereby honing our capacity to see clearly and choose wisely when it comes to real life’ (Cunningham, p.3). This view is shared by Richard Rorty and Martha Nussbaum⁴. Rorty’s philosophy concerning the postulate of replacing theory with narrative form states that reading of novels relates to the claim that topics of political justice can be treated more effectively in works of literature than in philosophical treatises. The account reviews the notions of *contingency*, linked to the philosopher’s foregoing claims in the philosophy of language, and *liberal ironism* which may lead to reviewed understanding of the idea of human *solidarity*. Narrative description is assumed to be a condition of essential empathy with other human beings, especially within the genre of a novel. Vladimir Nabokov and George Orwell are brought as a narrative exemplification of the study on individual and social practice of cruelty. *Re-description* is the crucial element of literary reading in terms of enhanced sensitivity to the suffering of other human beings, attainable through the literature classified and analyzed as describing cruelty. The idea behind Nussbaum’s work is to show literature as having impact on the development of moral judgment within the practice of law. It reveals how a certain type of narrative literature expresses and develops a conception of humanistic public reasoning, and what benefits this conception might offer for the public sphere. However, what my analysis focuses on is the connection which the philosopher traces between literary imagination and both compassion and mercy. According to Nussbaum, literary works – especially novels and poetry – have a unique contribution to our imagination, emotions and consequently to our moral judgments. Literary readership is assumed to develop a reader’s imagination and to give emotional experience which is crucial for the enhancement of one’s moral sensitivity. Good literature is disturbing – in opposition to purely scientific texts – it evokes powerful emotions, disconcerts. The role of imagination is also enriched by poetry, by metaphorical way of thinking, which the author calls *fancy*. It is the ability to see one thing in another, a perception which is pointing to something beyond itself, seeing in the things that are perceptible other things that are not before one’s eyes. The philosopher brings the statement to the conclusion that there is a kind of charity in this willingness to go beyond the evidence in perception, and this charity is a preparation for greater charities in life.

⁴ See the focal works devoted to literature: Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. The work of Martha Nussbaum is in a large part devoted to literary criticism (e.g. *Love’s Knowledge: Essays in Philosophy and Literature*, 1990), however the main claim can be found in: *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.

As far as the mentioned theories can constitute a basis for further study, I would like to, however, point out that they promote certain inconsistencies. The theories seem to intermingle different approaches to literature, as in the analysis of the relationship between a narrative and a narratee – when Nussbaum treats reading as experiencing the possible and Rorty classifies literature according to the ‘books which talk about’ certain ethical problems – with the analysis of particular levels of a novel’s structure, i.e. the plot⁵. As opposed to that, the emphasis of the present account is placed on the fact that, while analyzing certain levels of literary structure, one should focus on a more theoretical approach to a literary text and eschew to trace possible influences that the *story* of such a text in itself may have on the implied reader in terms of ‘what it is about’ and how it may ‘influence the reader’s ethical choices’. It is firmly intended here to defend a view that such statements may belong merely to the category of *intuitions*, and thus may leave too great a room for mistaken speculation. Aspects like, for instance, irony, criticism, or persuasion, concerning that which comes from the reality outside the text, should not belong to the realm of ethical criticism. One may consider an example of literature depicting immoral behaviour, just to mention Jonathan Littel’s *The Kindly Ones*, Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*, or Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, in order to defend my statement. The themes and main characters presented there may in no way provide moral guidance to their readers.

Answering the question of a possible relation between literary structure-ethics is a starting point to more basic consideration, namely that of the relationship between a reader and a literary text, and the possibility which it offers of attaining greater moral awareness. My proposal is left with a possibility of an approach to particular levels of narrative structure, the consideration of its aesthetic effect on the narratee and possible justification of its moral aspects. The aim should be to further examine the following questions: how actually being exposed to a novel makes the reader identify with the characters? And why this *poetic experience* could possibly lead to moral enhancement of an individual? What should undergo further scrutiny is a possible parallel between the *aesthetic-* and *moral experience*. In that case, special attention ought to be paid to the process through which the very bond of *identification* and *sympathy* is created between the characters and the implied reader, to the very aspect of reading, which makes the reader situate herself elsewhere – in the fictional reality.

⁵ For instance, pointing at the ironic themes which ridicule utilitarian views in Charles Dickens’ works, which are supposed to serve the development of a reader’s critical thinking.

In this point, the epistemological internality-externality debate and the problem of perspective with its role in ethics seems to be a relevant reference. Let us take Thomas Nagel⁶ and the problem of combining perspectives of the particular with the perspective of the whole, for he sees it as ‘a problem that faces every creature with the impulse and capacity to transcend its particular point of view and to conceive of the world as a whole’ (Nagel, p.4). It is claimed that the issue includes, among others, the aspect of morality and affects the conception of ourselves and our relations with others. The possibility of taking each of the standpoints into account is the fundamental question, and the philosopher defends the possibility of treating the perspectives as inseparable, which is necessary for his consideration of the normative question, desires, values and obligation. The relation between intentionality and various reasons of our action are considered as inseparable from the perspective of viewing it. My proposal relies on Nagel’s statement on the very *ability to transcend*, on the *shifting of perspectives* and its consequences for moral judgment. In his view of both consequentialist and deontological ethics, Nagel shows that an objective view, coming ‘from nowhere’ within the world goes too far in the pursuit of objectivity; one act viewed from two perspectives may possess quite different quality. I agree that any viewing is principally never from nowhere, but *from beyond* – it includes both the view and the viewer.

The border between the transcending self and the other can be recognized, however, moral judgment could not do without understanding through the act of detachment. Morality requires the view of transcending of oneself, and the appropriate moral understanding of the other requires the ability to enter their situation, or mind. The last requirement, as I suggest, can be fulfilled through the practice of reading literary texts, which allows the implied reader to enter the minds of fictional characters. The suggestion of the view from beyond is a tentative polemic with the view from ‘nowhere’, since the notion of *going beyond*, of *viewing from beyond* seems to grasp nuances of the subjectivity/objectivity relationship. Eventually, it is strongly desired here to introduce this concept on the ground of philosophical inquiry and make it applicable for an analysis of literary works.

Considering these, I attempt to defend the thesis that *detachment, change of perspective* of viewing is a *condition* of moral judgment, which enables moral understanding both of oneself and the other. On the basis of this statement, a complementary claim further

⁶ See: Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989. The philosopher’s claims on the subjectivity-objectivity problem are given special attention, with an intentional omission of the author’s consideration of the normative question in ethics, since the study is intended to treat the theme in descriptive terms.

proposes that literature may aid the strategy of detachment. I shall propose that reading literary texts as such develops one's moral sense because it facilitates the pursuit of perspective change. The process of reading brings the implied reader to the state in which one experiences the possible, one imaginatively detaches from one's environment and enters the fictional reality, transcends towards the fictional other. The ability of 'fancy', imagining the possible, may be treated in terms of transcending – trespassing the border between oneself and fictional reality – which in this way becomes a *condition* of moral sensitization, as well as of self-viewing from the standpoint of the other.

It ought to be added that the present account aims to treat literature and its relation to ethics only in descriptive terms. Though, on the other hand, it is difficult to escape the normative question connected with literature if it can be justified to have a moral value for the reader. Considering its value would inescapably be followed by considering its utility, and then the account enters the ground of normative ethics, where we can talk about the reasons to promote literature for the common good. Still, it ought to be admitted that such analysis lies beyond the scope of this study, and may only be touched upon in the remarks about aesthetics and literary text as an obliging form of art⁷, or in connection to the notion of value and aesthetic experience in literature as considered, for instance, by Peter Lamarque⁸.

In order to examine and justify the possible parallel between the aesthetic- and the moral experience, I shall refer to classical ethical theories which discuss the idea of detachment, or transcending. The notion of *sympathy* and the accompanying perspective change can be brought to attention while comparing the narrative experience of reading with the experience of *moral judgment*. The moral sense and *communication of sentiments* theory by David Hume⁹, the theory of moral sentiments interpreted under the focus on *self-viewing* as mediated through the *impartial spectatorship* by Adam Smith¹⁰, complemented by an

⁷ This statement opposes the one defended by most philosophical approaches to literature, especially that by Martha Nussbaum in her defence of literature's role for the moral development and grasping of the idea of justice on the level of society. It does not state pretensions to any such far-reaching pragmatic effects.

⁸ See: Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, Blackwell, Oxford: 2009.

⁹ The theory developed in: David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. by L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978; and *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. by L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

¹⁰ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, New York: Prometheus Books, 2000. Sympathy discussed in the context of the sense of merit (an indirect sympathy with the gratitude of those who receive the benefit from someone else's action).

indication of the way it has reached the highest moral relevance together with the notion of sympathy and the effacing horizons of the self- and the other-experience (*Einsfühlung*) propounded by Max Scheler¹¹, may constitute a basis for my justification, since what they have in common is the changing point of view as a condition of moral judgment. Also, Immanuel Kant's theoretical concept of *sensus communis*, which takes thinking from the position of the other as a condition of aesthetic judgment¹² supports the claim about the indispensability of the procedure of transcending of oneself for the aesthetic, as well as moral experience and judging. The notion of sympathy, the 'fellow-feeling', is treated as an important sentiment which enables one to empathize with the other. Impartial spectator is the idea, through which the optimal moral judgment is explicated. The impartial observation comes from a third person, who is detached and shares no interests with either of the parties involved. I shall point out that the sympathy of the observer is grounded on the ability to imagine oneself in the situation of the other, the ability to step into the other experience. This sympathy can be gained through the process in which imagination plays a crucial role; the willingness to imaginatively obtain the same state as the observed leads to the experiencing of the other. It may be treated as a special attempt of merging the boundaries of each other's experience. The attempt of fellow-feeling is also proposed in another case, in which, for instance Smith describes the possibility of a person's sympathizing with an impartial spectator's feelings about oneself, which may be treated as the *viewing of oneself* from the perspective of a possible, imaginary observer. This change of perspective implies an activity which, on the side of the observed, means *relinquishing* one's perspective, an ability to look at oneself from an observer's point of view; that may be treated as detachment from oneself, which enables one to accomplish moral judgment over oneself. Thus, Smith's and Scheler's theories can serve the support of further argument on the ground of literary criticism.

As for the notion of literariness, let me make a few remarks regarding theoretical framework of literary criticism, on which an analysis of literary works ought to be based in my view. It derives from the one propounded in structuralism, after theoreticians like Victor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, reviewed among other by Jonathan Culler, Stephen Hawkes and Andrzej Zgorzelski. According to the definition of literariness, which derives from Jakobson's theory of language, literary text is the one in which poetic function prevails. The theory of

¹¹ See: Max Scheler, *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*, Francke, Bern: 1974.

¹² See: Immanuel Kant, § 40. 'Vom Geschmacke als Einer Art von Sensus Communis', in: *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, ed. by W. Weischedel, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main: 1974.

language and communication has led to the definition bridged between formalism and structuralism, which states that literary text draws attention to itself, and does not refer to any reality beyond itself¹³; following this claim, tracing relationships between the content of fictional reality and its possible use or influence for the reality surrounding the implied reader should be avoided. Therefore, I claim that an ethical-critical analysis should consider texts as they draw our attention to their structure, and in which the predominating *poetic function* evokes a certain *aesthetic experience*. The analysis of selected works ought to be structural, since every literary text creates its ‘supercode’ and constitutes a ‘structure’, and as it has been proposed, form and content have to be treated as one while analyzing the structure of a literary text¹⁴. That is why a possibly optimal ethical-critical approach should embrace the following levels of the structure: narration techniques, point of view, characterization (presentation of fictional characters) and fictional time, and treat them as meaningful and contributing to the passing of information about the fictional reality of a work as a whole.

The concept of detachment introduced into the field of literary studies may constitute a mode of reconstructing a literary work, and thus be named as *the poetics of transcending*. Therefore, the poetics combines the findings of narrative theory with the idea of the act of transcending as depicted through certain aspects of a narrative structure. Introduction of the poetics of transcending as a mode of analysis may reveal that not only the structural levels, but also a theme of a literary work itself reflects this strategy. The thesis here is that the poetics is signalled at the level of narration, as well as it constitutes one of the rules governing the fictional reality and the particular supercode of a literary text. The idea is put forth with the intent to suggest a direction, among many other possible directions, a way of reading literary texts as articulating the idea through their textual strategies.

The analysis of literary works which is claimed for here should serve to show literary illustration of the strategy of detachment. The implied reader enters the character’s minds and identifies with their experiences. Consequently, the pursuit of abandoning one’s perspective and sympathizing with the other enhances the reader’s ability of moral judgment. The reader also shares with the novel’s characters the experience of transcending and looking at oneself, thus developing the ability for oneself. Having considered the aspects of moral judgment as

¹³ Cf. T. Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, London: Methuen, 1985, p. 86.

¹⁴ ‘A new supercode is created for the use of a single literary text and an addressee is required to reconstruct the rules of its additional organization (the supercode) directly from the text. Structure is a phenomenon built of interrelated elements that is not equal to a simple sum of its parts, but constitutes a new self-sufficient and functional whole.’ After: W. Krajka, A. Zgorzelski, *On the Analysis of a Literary Text*, PWN, Warsaw: 1984, p.

compatible with the literary structure, according to the poetics of transcending, I further suggest that novels can be considered as those which hold the limited point of view and those with unlimited point of view, treating them as promoting the strategy of transcending or containing the failure of transcending respectively. Therefore, one of the claims is that the poetics of transcending is the governing rule in, for example, selected modernist works like *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf, or *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner, as they epitomize the notion with their experimental character, while attempting to give fidelity to human internal world and the point of view merging between the characters and the narrator who has access to their minds. It is also relevant for those texts in the structure of which it is not possible to reconstruct the aspect of detachment and changing perspective. Thus, the case where narration techniques exclude the shifting point of view and present only a limited one, where the characterization does not contain changing perspectives, can be categorized under the notion of *the failure of transcending*. Under this category fall Faulkner's *Rose for Emily* with the narrator's limited knowledge, or the novels like *The Golden Bowl* by Henry James with its omniscient narrator who does not reveal all his knowledge, *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov with the narrator's point of view limited to that of one main character of Humbert Humbert, as ignoring the point of view of his victim Dolores.

The reference to the condition of moral judgment – which is assumed to consist in thinking from a changed perspective – serves to defend the claim which can be plausibly justified about the moral aspect of literature: that it may be a ground on which one can practice the viewing of the other and oneself through the shifting perspective. And thus, the only feasible effect for the reader in the reality outside the text is the developed ability of moral judgment. Another arising issue is the notion of motivation. Consideration of the effect of literature on the reader's action entails the question of the skill of judgment as having place in motivation. Therefore, the effect of literature could be considered as motivation for action only if the skill of judgment did have a place in motivation.

It may be presumed that the approach, after being adequately developed and accomplished, will cast a new light on the treatment of literature in philosophy, and that it could constitute a plausible argument defending the importance of reading for moral enhancement. As a consequence, a claim might be put forward that reading, understood as not only experiencing the possible worlds, but also the experience of detachment, brings about a special kind of moral elevation, which could be normatively promoted at the social level, and thus a better developed social life of humans. If that is conceivable, it would by all means be intended for the present account to serve the defense of such statement.

Abstract

The present account aims to show that *transcending towards the other* is an immanent feature of literary structure and that its reconstruction provides justification for the moral aspect of literature. Literariness and the genre of a novel is taken under examination as an aesthetic object, so as to specify the possible extent to which it can be considered in terms of ethics. The proposed account defends a thesis that literature contains aspects which may have implications for the enhancement of individual morality. This can be shown at the level of the relationship between a reader and a literary text, and justified with reference to the ethical theory of moral sense, particularly through the notions of sympathy and detachment.