

On Ethical Literary Criticism and Game Theory

—An Interview with Professor Nie Zhenzhao

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In 2014, Huang Kaihong, a professor at School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Southwest University of Science and Technology, interviewed the Doctoral advisor Professor Nie Zhenzhao during the period of his academic visiting to Central China Normal University. As early as in 2005, Huang Kaihong conducted an interview with Professor Nie Zhenzhao on the topic of the general introduction of ethical literary criticism. So around 11 years later, the second interview mainly covers not only the ethical literary criticism theory, but the game theory and the relationship between them as well. Professor Nie thinks whether the game theory can be applied to literature research is still under discussion. The theory of ethical literary criticism is a kind of methodology based on science and it can get the attention of literary critics at home and abroad, which is because it fits the practical needs of literary criticism, draws the literary criticism away from only emphasizing criticism genres and the research of criticism terms, and pays attention to the true nature of the literary text in literature research. After consulting Professor Nie Zhenzhao about some related questions from the perspective of game theory. Huang Kaihong gets some significant information concerning literature research and understands the latest core terms and the concrete application method of ethical literary criticism, especially the relationship between the instructing and aesthetic functions of literature.

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Huang Kaihong (hereinafter referred to as “**Huang**”): Professor Nie, since my interview in 2005, the influence of ethical literary criticism theory has really been prevailing. This time, my theme is about the relationship between the ethical literary criticism and game theory. First of all, please allow me to talk about my personal understanding of the game theory. My definition of a game is much more generalized. Generally speaking, it refers to every active and passive activity—activities are games. Specifically, as broad as the life, as small as the trifle in personal behaviors, words and deeds, thoughts and consideration, all of which can be defined

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by the word “game”. These are included in the broad connotation of the game theory. Each game, of course, due to the differences of the factors of participants, participation purpose and participation occasion, can lead to the differences of participation attitude, participation time, input of participation effort and participation effect. But in general, once the participant involves in a game, he/she always focuses on the game either consciously or unconsciously and works on it unless he/she quits (for whatever reason). Just because of all kinds of activities, the absolutely meaningless game turns into a relatively meaningful one. That is to say, we can treat everything as a meaningful game, shifting “I need to do it.” to “I want to do it!”, or passive to active, or negative to positive. This is my personal opinion about a game.

Next, I will talk about some personal opinions on the relationship between the game and ethical literary criticism theory. On a certain meaning, literature is also the crystallization of a game! That is to say, the purpose of literature is teaching, which is a result of the author’s subjective intention (other intentions may include entertainment, etc.). The whole process is as follows: the author sets the game psychology as the starting point (the motive and attitude), then creates literary works (the game process) and achieves teachings or other purposes ultimately (the game purpose). Let’s take the ethical literary criticism theory which was initiated by you as an example. It can be said that in nearly ten years it has been the most successful game and of greatest positive influence in the literary criticism field in the whole world (“the game” is my personal opinion). According to your opinion on this theory ten years ago, it is not predicted that the theory can have such a significant positive impact in literary criticism field.

Since you firstly brought forward the theory and method in 2004, three academic seminars has been successively held. There are more than one hundred participants (I call it “participants who are involved in the Game directly”.) in the first seminar in 2005. Seven years later in 2012, the theme of the seminar has been successfully upgraded to international academic exchanges, and the number of participants has increased to nearly two hundred. It is only one year later in 2013 that the third international seminar was successfully held, and more than two hundred experts and scholars got together from a dozen countries and regions all over the world, and the influence of the theory extended to Asia, Africa, America, Europe and other continents. Just as Professor Su Hui (Who is a literature professor at Central China Normal University.) summarized in the closing speech of “The Third International Conference on Ethical Literary Criticism” in 2013, the seminar presented three highlights: firstly, its international feature is more obvious. Secondly, the discussion topics and the perspectives are broader. Thirdly, more distinct issue consciousness and exploring spirit are reflected.

All these fully prove that your pioneering ethical literary criticism theory is still constantly attracting more and more participants and its positive influence is more and more profound. Besides, the 4th international symposium on this topic will be held in the second half of this year. According to this, I think it is necessary to summarize the development of ethical literary criticism during these ten years. On the basis of these, I hope that Professor Nie could talk about the goal, the strategic intention, the confusion and misunderstanding of ethical literary criticism theory in China and all over the world, so that the Game participants can be reassured and more actively involved in the Game, which can contribute to the more brilliant and more interesting future to this Game.

Nie Zhenzhao (hereinafter referred to as “**Nie**”): What you have just said is pretty good. But I think treating the game theory as the breakthrough point in writing research papers, you’d better take it into a more

comprehensive consideration. Moreover, the combination of the game theory and ethical literary criticism is still an issue to be discussed. Where is the connection point of the game theory and the literature and literary criticism? This question must be firstly answered, not only making use of the term of game theory superficially, but also figuring out what the game theory really functions in literary research?

Huang: Do you mean that we need to make it clear as to its theory?

Nie: Right! If you don't firstly take serious consideration and spend a lot of time on studying the game theory, you finally may harvest little and achieve little; probably you'll not find it worthwhile devoting to it.

Huang: As for the entry point and the conjunction between the game theory and the literature ethics, I thought for a moment, the game theory is actually a kind of "game theory". The ultimate goal of the game theory should be a kind of benefit and stake, and all these are involved in ethics. For example, what we should take? What we should not take? We should take proper things in proper ways. Literature can teach us how to do that. As for the benefit, I think it can be divided into three levels: small, medium and great. If it only benefits oneself, it is just a small benefit, but if it is beneficial to a larger group or even the whole human beings, it can be regarded as a medium or a great benefit. Therefore, on this basis, I think we can analyze and explain the details of the literature.

Nie: Well, as for your opinion, these may be related to your own research topic! What is the title of your topic? What are you going to do with the research of your topic?

Huang: The title of my research is "Research on 'American dream' and the Game Theory in American Literature". I want to take the method of ethical literary criticism as a starting point and analyze all kinds of subjective and objective factors why people pursue this kind of dream by studying the details of the "American dream" in some American literary works. In general, I regard all the activities in the process of pursuing dreams as a big game, and each different detail is the smaller round in a big game. All the details that the author described can be appreciated and analyzed as different scales of activities of the game. In addition, regardless of whether the game is active or passive, as long as people are involved in it, it means that the game has a certain value or benefit, and that is the reason why people participate in it. Here let me make it clear what the benefit really means? From my personal understanding, the benefit not only includes all the gains—tangible material things that people can see and touch in their real life, but also should include the invisible spiritual things. For example, when people participate in some activities, they get spiritual pleasure during the process of it, and it can also be considered as a kind of benefit. Everyone has the instinct that they may pursue the benefit and try to avoid damage. This is my personal perceptual view on benefit.

Nie: But you have to consider that except researching from the perspective of the game theory, is there any better way to do the research on the American dream? In my personal opinion, it is not the most appropriate method to do the research on literature by using game theory. You study everything of literature on the basis of the game theory; I also can do it in another way, maybe I can do it even better. As a kind of theory, how to use the game theory itself in the study of literature? Because the theory itself cannot be used to do literature research, we can only use some method in the light of theory to do the research. Psychoanalysis, for example, is a kind of theory, but its methodology is embodied in the Oedipus complex being made use of in literature analysis. Psychoanalysis has its own basic theory and relatively basic methods, so what is the methodology of the game theory? The study of literature is not using theory itself, but to use the methods of the theory for research. Theory

can't be used in research directly because it is a kind of thought, a kind of manners and a kind of cultivation of human beings. There is a kind of methodology on the basis of this theory. Taking Marxism theory for instance, we cannot use it to analyze literature directly since it is only a guiding thought, and it is methodology in the dialectical materialism and historical materialism which is also known as Marxist dialectics. So whether in the study of literature, philosophy or sociology, we should use this methodology to do specific researches.

Huang: Oh, yes. I suddenly think of this: why have a lot of people been pursuing the “American dream”? In my view, the process of pursuing the American dream can be regarded as a game process. I want to apply the game theory in it. In this way, I can analyze the American dream in literature works, analyze the entire process that people pursue the American dream, and all kinds of psychology, a variety of behavior and its causes and effects in this process.

Nie: It is not accurate for you to regard the “American dream” just as a sort of game because the American dream is not just a game in literary works. The essence of the American dream is that in such a so-called free country like the United States, everything is possible. As long as you are willing to work hard, you can do anything and you can achieve whatever you like there.

Huang: Mentally speaking, in the process of pursuing the American dream, people feel very free as if they are playing their favorite game!

Nie: But it is serious and honest to pursue the American dream, not just a game!

Huang: That's right! The American dream itself is not a game, but I just treat it as a game from the angle of game theory. My understanding of the term “game” is relatively broad. In my opinion, the term “game” can not only mean the kind of activities such as pure entertainment, but it can also cover any other kind of activities—as big as life itself, and as small as a spark of thought. Taking ourselves for example, we sometimes wander freely as if we are playing a thinking game with ourselves. This is a kind of relatively micro game. There are some slightly bigger games, for example, some people write a short poem or play charade game, etc., and they enjoy themselves very much during the process. These all can be regarded as a game in their mind. In addition, some people play games like chess, cards and mahjong, etc..

Nie: Activities such as playing chess and other forms are also described in the literature, but the description is only the carrier of the thinking activities and it functions for the higher and more serious content and target. Sports activities (such as the Olympic Games, etc.) are of game characteristics, but we can't only just regard sports as a game. The essence of it is to strengthen our body, enhance communication among people and promote the peaceful communication development of the world. If we only place it on the game level, it is a little superficial. Taking the children's games for example, there are some contents about the game in children's literature, but its purpose is to arouse children's interest in learning by the way of game, and the game is only a means, a way and a method.

Huang: Game activities, in my understanding, mainly depend on the activity itself. No matter what the activities are, the (feeling in the) activity process is the essence.

Nie: Even if you have this kind of opinion, you should firstly figure it out what kind of theory the game theory is? Can it be used in the study of literature? Is it a kind of effective analytical method? These are questions that you have to consider clearly. For example, a method may be very good and effective, but you may not adopt

it; another method is not so good, but you may turn to it and think that that method is better, so it is a personal problem. Besides, whether you use the game theory or not has no direct relationship with the game theory.

Huang: Do you mean that it is the question whether to choose to use it or not?

Nie: That's right. As for the use of a theory or method, we firstly need to get it clear from the principle: what is the theory? For example, what is exactly the game theory? Can it be used in the study of literature? When it is used in the study of literature, specifically speaking, what is the core theory of it? If it is useful, then we can figure it out and then use it. If it can't be used, we should change the way. Because as for your topic itself, you can do it well in another way. If you want to write a book on the basis of the game theory, it may take at least one to two years! If all the work in these one or two years is in vain, it may not very good for your career.

Huang: Oh yes! Then I have to consider about it seriously. Now let us go on to the topic talked about just now, which is involved in the strategy problem in the developing process of ethical literary criticism. These strategies are scientific methodology which is initiated by you and your followers—experts and scholars who participate in the game. All of you have been doing a serious, hard, and systematic scientific research. The methodology can and must be realized, understood and used by more and more people and followers. I think it is a great success for you to initiate, advocate and develop the strategy of the application of ethical literary criticism.

Nie: It can't be thought of as the application of a strategy. Let's again take the ethical literary criticism as an example: we should make it clear in theory firstly and turn it into scientific methods. We should not do the research based on utilitarian things such as strategy. It is not proper to do so. We should first analyze and expound the new method clearly, and we also need some relevant application examples. That is to say, we should be aware of what is the theory? How to use this method? Where should it be applied to? Specifically speaking, ethical literary criticism involves some basic problems of ethics, such as the ethical choice, ethical identity, and ethical dilemma, etc., and these problems also involve some basic methods.

Huang: That is to say, it should have a set of scientific and systematic structure of its own?

Nie: That's right. For example, the ethical criticism of America was very popular for a period of time, but finally it declined gradually. What is the reason? Because it doesn't construct its methodology and lacks the sufficient scientific argument in theory, the method of its application is also uncertain, or we can say that it does not have its own way and its own academic discourse power. On the contrary, the ethical literary criticism has its own basic theory, its own way and its own academic discourse power. At present, many people are very interested in it at home and abroad. As a result, it also has some positive influence.

Why can the international seminars of ethical literary criticism be set up? It can be proved that this method has, in fact, already become a kind of scientific method. It has basic theory, basic method and its academic discourse system—it is more than a kind of academic discourse, and it has formed a system, which will be available based on these basic factors. But in the study of literature, how should we understand the game theory? Where is the connecting point between the game theory and the literature? As a kind of theory, what is it composed of? What is the core of it? What is the methodology of it? What is the value of it in literature research? What problems can it illustrate of literature? What problem can it solve of literature? All of these problems have to be figured out firstly. If it cannot be figured out clearly, it is useless. If the basic problems of the game theory are not clear, how can we use it to study the literature? Figuring out all these problems, we could know whether it is suitable for literature research. If it is suitable, we can use it; if not, we need to think about some other methods,

since there are many other theories available nowadays. Of course, research on the relationship between the game theory and the literature is still rare.

Huang: I talked about the American dream in the research of the game theory. The American dream is one reflection form of the western ethics. It is related to the pursuit of ideals and freedom of westerners. Therefore, I plan to set the reflection of the American dream in the literary works as the main line, and interpret it by using the game theory from the perspective of ethical literary criticism. I am considering in this thinking framework. This is my first question.

My second question is: the perspective from ethical literary criticism applied to literature study is of great fundamental significance. Because it puts forward its own new views and new ideas on the basis of the source of literature and makes everyone rethink the basic function and the basic principle of literature. It means doing the substantive work to clarify matters and get to the bottom of the origin of literature. Therefore, I hope you can talk about what are the major evidences that can prove that the literature is originated from the moral?

Nie: Aiming at this problem, ethical literary criticism has a new theory, of which there are two cores: natural selection and moral selection. As for the natural selection, it refers to that according to the point of evolutionary view, people evolved into human beings from apes and had the shape characteristics of the human beings. People were similar to other animals long time ago, since they can neither speak nor have the intelligence of thinking. As they evolved into human beings, they can walk upright and have reasonable distribution of limbs and facial features and so on. Finally, they also have the appearance of human beings. However, people are still barbarian in this period; they have no essential difference with other animals. Why can they be told apart from the other animals later on? The key point is that they have gone through the ethical choice. Ethical selection belongs to the essential selection; people become the real human beings through ethical selection. We all have to go through these two selections, natural selection and moral selection, which can also be said as the form selection and the essential selection in another word. For example, baby who was just born is the result of natural selection. The baby has the appearance of a human being, but it still can't completely be regarded as a human being. Actually, it has not many differences with other animals. If you let it live with wolves, it will turn into a Wolf child; if it lives with monkeys, and it will turn into a Monkey boy, not a human being. Why does that happen? This is because it does not go through ethical selection. Only after the ethical selection, it can have the ethical consciousness, have the moral values, and know the good things and bad ones and to be a good man but not a bad one. So, in the process of this selection, people gradually get their own human nature. Therefore, from the aspect of origin of people, everyone should go through these two selections.

Huang: As for the content of selection, you bring up the third selection—scientific selection! This is an innovative theory that you first mentioned?

Nie: Yes, it is so. But this idea has not been fully expounded; only after further arguments can it stand up to scrutiny and to be done effectively.

Huang: This idea will create a new hotspot in the research of the literary criticism! As we mentioned the two selections before—natural selection and ethical selection, the former one refers to people getting out from the form of animals; the latter one refers to the people getting out of the characters of animals in mind and rational ways. Then we come to the third selection—scientific selection. Scientific selection involves problems of human cloning, robots and other “person” of this kind, the last kind of which is to be called science person (or I call it

“immortality”). The emergence of the science person or immortal person means that all the order of the world could be broken and rebuilt. In this case, will all the ethical relationship be reconstructed? For example, you mentioned the problems such as ethical issues—social relations, family relations, psychological problems between the cloned and the original body—all these will produce a very big change, even a revolution. Therefore, I think it is of epoch-making significance that you put forward the third selection. Because these kinds of idea point out the reconfiguration problem of human values, value selection, even the entire human ethics value system in a long period of time from now on. It is of remarkable meaning to the change or revolution of the whole society and the family structure. Therefore, the idea really has sobering effect; it may become a hot topic for many years from now on!

Nie: We live in a generation of science. On the one hand, we create science and it serves us, we benefiting from it, but on the other hand, we are bound to science and more and more inseparable from science. It means that science and our human beings are related more and more closely with one another. For example, if there is no electricity in our life now, it seems that we cannot survive well as everything is very inconvenient. It is hard for us to do the work without computer; everything will be a mess without cell phone and clock, so we and science are combined together closely. In fact, science not only attaches to our life, but is also relevant to our bodies. Such as the transplantation and replacement of human organs which shows the close combination of science and the human body. In addition, there is the problem of human-made people. People get married and then give birth to babies in the past; it is natural combination and natural selection. But in the future, it may be the result of scientific selection, which means that dozens of people may be produced in the factory. You can get whatever kind of person you need, and whatever requirements such as height, weight, character, etc., can be customized and made in the factory. You just need to order them from the factory! That is to say, all these can be possible if the cloning-technology develops to a certain point.

If this is the case, it will cause many problems of the ethical issues. For example, can those people who have been produced in factories be regarded as human beings? How can we define this kind of person? What is the relationship between this person and the real human beings now? In the future, more and more people will be produced in this way. People who are of the natural selection may be less and less. If one day, people of the natural selection disappear in the world, what will the whole world be like? As a result, there will be a lot of similar issues that need us to consider and explore. In fact, we are now in the face of such a situation: robots now are already equipped with many functions of human beings, and people are still doing the research on biological robots.

Huang: So it is! It is reported that some single people don't want to get married. They would rather live with some artificial human bodies; it is also reported that a robot committed suicide as it could no longer endure its life, etc. To a certain extent, it is a matter of new ethical issues. Now we can make a hypothesis. For example, if people are completely replaced by machine, can there be any ethics or literature in this circumstance?

Nie: It is impossible that people will be completely replaced by machines. We can only say that people will still be like who they are in the era of scientific selection, although the living environment is different from the present. But at that time, there will certainly exist some specific norms in the era of scientific selection, which will be their norms or rules. Since the generation of the scientific selection will become more scientific and more orderly, the norms or rules will be also more scientific at that time. Comparatively, the present norms or rules may

not be scientific enough, but it is likely to become more scientific in the scientific selection era. So in the process of scientific selection, there are many problems that we have to encounter and think.

Huang: Ok. I think we have talked much today! I will trouble you some time in the future. Thank you very much for your patience and directions.

Nie: All right. I think all those questions you mentioned are worthwhile. You must have thought about them carefully. I'm very glad to have a talk about these questions with you!

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