



The Ethical Significance of Literature: Moving Beyond the Moralism versus Autonomism Debate

Edebiyatın Etik Önemi: Moralizm – Otonomizm Tartışmasının Ötesine Geçmek

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Abstract

The last twenty years have seen a growing interest in the ethical value and ethical significance of literature. Some argue that literary works have moral affects on their readers while some others claim that literature can be approached only from an aesthetical point of view. If literary works have such an effect on the reader, the question is how do they achieve this function? What differs them from other kinds of texts? In this paper my aim is to reveal the peculiar ethical significance of literary works. In order to achieve this aim, I will argue that these works should be approached as fictional and aesthetic texts. Hence, I will also side with autonomist who defends the aesthetic and fictional autonomy of literary works. I will try to show that moralism and autonomism do not have to be formulated as rival camps, rather one can defend the ethical significance of literature by staying in the autonomist sphere. Moreover, one has to stay in the autonomist sphere if she wants to understand the peculiar ethical power of literature; the ethical power of literature as literature.

Key Words: Moralism, Autonomism, Literature, Aesthetics, Ethical Significance, Fiction, Reading Event

Öz

Son yirmi yıldır edebiyatın etik değeri ve gücü üzerine yapılan tartışmalarda bir yükselmeye tanık oluyoruz. Bazı düşünürler yazınsal yapıtların okuyucu üzerinde ahlaki bir etkisi olduğunu iddia ederken bazıları da edebiyatın hiçbir şekilde etik değerlendirmenin konusu olamayacağını, ancak estetik açıdan ele alınabileceğini savunuyorlar. Eğer yazınsal yapıtların okur üzerinde bu tür bir etkisi varsa soru bu yapıtların bu etkiyi nasıl gerçekleştirdikleri. Bu bağlamda yazınsal metinleri diğer metinlerden ayıran şey ne? Bu yazıda yapmak istediğim şey tam da bu özel etkileme durumunu, yazınsal metinlerin kendilerine özgü etik önemlerini açıklamak olacak. Bunun için bu metinlerin her şeyden önce birer kurgusal ve estetik metinler olarak ele alınması gerektiğini iddia edeceğim. Dolayısıyla yazınsal yapıtların estetik ve kurmacasal otonomisini savunan otonomistlerin de yanında saf tutacağım. Göstermeye çalışacağım şey moralizm ve otonomizmin rakip kamplar olarak formüle edilmek zorunda olmadığı olacak. Aksine otonomist çemberin için de kalarak da moralist bir tavır takılabileceğimize, hatta eğer amacımız edebiyatın özgül etik önemini ortaya koymak ise yapmamız gerekenin tam da bu olduğunu göstermeye çalışacağım. Ancak edebiyatı bir estetik ve kurmaca metin olarak ele alırsak onun özgül etik gücünü, bu estetik ve kurmaca niteliğinden çıkıp gelen özgül gücünü anlayabiliriz.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Moralizm, Otonomizm, Edebiyat, Estetik, Etik Önem, Kurmaca, Okuma Olayı

Does something important happen to us when we engage as readers with literary texts? I pose this question because of a hunch, shared by many, namely that literature matters to our lives. Those who seek to develop and defend this view claim that literary works, in one way or another enhance a part or parts of human life. Such claims have been opposed by those who argue that literary texts should be approached merely as works of art, that is they should be evaluated only from an aesthetic point of view, and that they do not need to say anything to the reader about herself or the world she inhabits. These views are usually signaled under the labels, autonomist, non-cognitivist, and aestheticist and their formulations of the problem show differences. We may for present purposes group all these positions together under the title autonomism. The common point of the autonomist ideas is their insistence that the value of literature rests on the containment of it as an autonomous discourse which saves it from the encroachments of political, moral or commercial interest.

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In this paper, I argue that literary texts are ethically significant for their readers. That is, there is an affective relation between a literary text and the reader. Hence, I side with those who claim that literature matters to our lives. However, I also argue that the autonomists are right in their concern that literary works should be appreciated for their fictional and aesthetic character. I will claim that in order to reveal the peculiar significance of these works for the reader, we need to heed this concern of the autonomists. In addition, such an attitude is also necessary to save literature from the instrumentalist attempts of the clumsy types of moral and political criticism that tend to reduce literature to a mere subservient role, to moral didacticism and ideological propaganda. In order to achieve my aim, I will mainly focus on the act of reading; the advantage of this approach is that the act of reading shows the ethical engagement of the reader without neglecting the aesthetic and fictional character of the literary work.

In this paper, I situate my understanding of the ethical significance of literature amongst those given in current discussions. I first reveal the recent debates on the autonomy and ethical significance of literature along with the important paradigmatic changes in contemporary literary theory and philosophy in order to make my position clearer.

The Moses Affair

Wayne Booth starts his seminal work, *The Company We Keep*, by recounting an incident that was regarded as a scandal by the members of the humanities teaching staff at The University of Chicago in 1960s. One African-American staff, Paul Moses, indicates his annoyance with the involvement of a particular book in the list that has been assigned, and most likely would again be assigned to the students of the department. The book is *Huckleberry Finn*, which has been in the curriculum of the department for years. As his story was reported in the corridors and coffee lounges among the faculty, it goes something like this:

It's hard for me to say this, but I have to say it anyway. I simply can't teach *Huckleberry Finn* again. The way Mark Twain portrays Jim is so offensive to me that I get angry in the class and I can't get all those liberal kids to understand why I am angry. What's more, I don't think it's right to subject students, black or white, to the many distorted views of race on which that book is based. No, it is not the word "nigger" I am objecting to, it's the whole range of assumptions about slavery, and its consequences, and about how whites should deal with liberated slaves, and how liberated slaves should behave or will behave towards whites, good ones and bad ones. That book is just bad education, and the fact that it's so cleverly written makes it more troublesome to me. (Booth, 1988: 3)

Booth reports that Moses' reaction was regarded by the faculty members as violating academic norms of objectivity. He could neither read properly nor think properly about what criteria might be relevant to judging a novel's value. Booth says, "we had been trained to treat 'a poem as a poem and not another thing' and to believe that the value of a great work of fiction was something much subtler than any idea or proposition derived from it or used to paraphrase its 'meaning.' *We knew that sophisticated critics never judge a fiction by any effect it might have on its readers*" (Booth 1988: 4; emphasis mine). In this sense, at that time, Wayne Booth and his other colleagues in The University of Chicago blamed Moses to commit "what in that context seemed an outrage: an overt, serious, uncompromising act of *ethical criticism*" (Booth 1998: 3; emphasis mine).

What should we understand from the concept of ethical criticism? Alessandro Giovannelli defines it as "the art critical practice of considering a work's ethical status or value in the assessment of its artistic worth" (2007: 117). This definition is shared by many contemporary analytic philosophers writing on the topic. Discussions turn mainly around the question of whether the ethical value of a literary work is a determining factor of its aesthetic value. Contemporary moralists argue that the ethical value of a literary work of art bears on the work's aesthetic value, whilst autonomists argue that although literary works may be subject to ethical evaluation, such evaluation never has bearing on the value of the work as art. In their moderate versions, both positions have been modified to accommodate some points of their opponents: moderate moralist claims that the ethical value of literary works bear on their aesthetic value *systematically*, but it does so only in some kinds or genres, whereas moderate



autonomists claim that the ethical status of literary works bear, *on occasion*, on their artistic value, but it always does so in an *unsystematic* way. Hence, the autonomist approach does not ban ethical talk about the literary works, but claims that such a talk is inappropriate for the simple reason that it says nothing about the literariness of the work in question.¹ Thus, for the autonomist the aesthetic interest is fundamentally different from the practical interest and it will be an error to assess an aesthetic work from an ethical point of view. It is obvious that the concern of the autonomists is to save the autonomy of the aesthetic characterization of the literary work since giving up this autonomy may result in reducing the work to a mere pretext where the aesthetic properties are handled simply as ornamental devices to express certain thoughts, ideas, or feelings.

Another source of resistance to the ethical criticism is the recent distinction between the fictional world of the literary work and the world of the reader which is formulated by Louis O. Mink with the gnomic sentence "stories are not lived but told" (1970: 557). This relates to the distinction between the life and narratives, the real and the fictional, the world and the word.² The fictional autonomist defending this distinction claims that the literary texts refer not to the world, but only to themselves and to other texts. Hence, the fictional world of the literature is independent from the extratextual world. In this sense, it does not say anything to its readers about the world she inhabits. As a result, we cannot talk about any ethical significance that these works may have on the reader, or it will be a naïve error to ask how these works speak to and about its readers. In this sense, fictional autonomism seems to take a stand against what we call literary humanism. At this point, it will be illuminating to say a few words about this approach.

We can broadly define literary humanism as the approach, which argues that literary works have something to do with the human being, human self, or human existence.³ One's engagement with literary works expands one's understanding of her position in the world. In this sense, literature has an ethical and cognitive significance for the reader. John Gibson characterizes the literary humanist intuition as

the thought –or hope– that literature presents the reader with an intimate and intellectually significant engagement with social and cultural reality. It is the idea, one familiar to all of us in some respect, that literature is the textual form to which we turn when we want to read the story of our shared form of life: our moral and emotional, social and sexual –and so on for whatever aspects of life we think literature brings to view– ways of being human. (2007: 2)

Fictional autonomist, on the other side, claims that literary works have nothing to do with the world of human praxis. What they do is to create imaginative words and imaginative characters living in these words. In Gibson's words,

The other intuition concerns how we understand the fiction that goes into a work of literary fiction. For it strikes us as equally intuitive to say that the imaginative basis of literary creation presents to the reader not

¹ For a summary of recent discussions on the issue of ethical criticism in analytic philosophy see (Carroll, 2000). Here Carroll introduces another category, that of radical autonomism: "the view that the ethical evaluation of artworks is always conceptually confused" (360). This characterization has been accepted by others such as Berys Gaut who claims that in the extreme version of autonomism, "it makes no sense morally to evaluate works of art, in the same way that it makes no sense for instance morally to evaluate numbers" (2001: 343). However, I agree with Alessandro Giovanelli that "no one seems to hold it." Even Oscar Wilde, who has been taken as the paradigm of radical autonomism by Carroll "talks ethically about artworks in the very Preface [of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*], if indirectly, when he refers to morality as offering the content upon which an artist creates" (2007: 118). Here I follow Giovanelli's taxonomy instead of Carroll's.

² See (Gibson, 2007). Here Gibson states that before twentieth century the thought that literature has a general cultural significance was canonical, it was "when philosophy took its initial steps toward the so-called linguistic turn of the twentieth century, discussions of the nature of literature began to focus on the logic and semantics of literary language rather than out of its power of cultural articulation." (5-6)

³ Literary humanism has been discussed and defined by many thinkers in various ways. The common point of these different interpretations is the claim that, literary works, in one way or another enhances a part or some parts of human life. For different interpretations of literary humanism, see (Gaskin 2013), (Gibson 2007), (Mousley 2011), (Sheehan 2002).



her world but other worlds, what we commonly call 'fictional worlds'. If we think that literature tells us about our world, we have to make this square with the fact that we understand, and certainly read, literature as exempt from the task of worldly exegesis. A work of imaginative literature trades in aesthetic creation rather than factual representation. It speaks about people made of paper, who inhabit worlds made only of words. And from this it seems quite natural to conclude that literature is therefore essentially and intentionally silent about the way our world is, choosing instead to speak about worlds none of which are quite our own. (2007: 2)

In consequence, we can talk about two kinds of autonomism that seem to resist ethical criticism of literary works. I shall call them respectively aesthetic autonomism and fictional autonomism. The common point of these two positions is their concern about the main function of literature. They struggle to prevent the reduction of literary works into something else, into mere pretexts for introducing certain ideas about the world. In such a case, the aesthetic and fictional character of literature turns into a mere instrument for the introduction and propagation of these ideas. The concern here is totally understandable. However, we can ask at this point whether it is not possible to defend the ethical significance of literature without giving up its aesthetic and fictional character. I believe that it is possible to defend ethical criticism while staying in the autonomist circle, in other words, that we do not need to formulate these two positions as a dichotomy and that a way can be found to talk about the ethical significance of a literary work as a work of art. It seems to me that the distinction between moralism and autonomism is not as much clear-cut as the recent analytic philosophers' claim.

One of my aims in this paper is to show that in order to defend the ethical significance of literary artworks, we do not need to take an anti-autonomist stance. Central to my argument is the distinction between the evaluation of literary works from an ethical point of view and the claim that engaging with these works is ethically significant. It is the latter claim that concerns me here since what I want to establish is the ethical significance of the engagement of the reader with the literary works. In order to achieve this aim, we should focus on the act of reading, the point where the world of the reader and the world of the work intersects; we should question whether something important happens to us when we engage as readers with literary texts during the act of reading.

At this point, we should say a few words about the notion of the reader. The reader I have in mind is a knowing reader. She is aware of the fact that what she encounters is a literary text, that is the world presented by the work is a fictional world, and this world is presented to her by means of certain aesthetic devices. Hence, our reader will not mis-read the literary work; that is she will not reduce the work to something else, she will not commit violence against the text and destruct the aesthetic and literary character of the work at hand.

As a result, my problem is not the significance of the ethical value of the work on its aesthetic value, rather it is the significance of the aesthetic and fictional characterization of the work on its ethical significance. I argue that, by formulating the problematic in this way we can reveal the ethical significance of literary works as works of art. But before formulating my position in a more detailed way, I want to dwell on the recent discussions a bit more so that we can see that the problem is indeed a very complex and multifaceted one which requires us to reflect both on the structural properties and literary strategies of the text and how these structures and strategies are apprehended by the reader in the act of reading.

The Playful Character of Meaning and the Eventful Character of Text:

I will now once more turn to the Moses affair. Moses' protest is, indeed, a precursor of the controversy on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which had hitherto been accepted as one of the classics of American literature.⁴ In 1960s a reaction to Twain's novel arose mostly among African-

⁴ T.S. Eliot declares *Huckleberry Finn* as "a masterpiece" (2004: 17), while Lionel Trilling marks it as "one of the world's great books and one of the central documents of American culture" (2008: 105), and Ernest Hemingway states that "All modern



American critics who claim that the novel depicts African-Americans as dehumanized, objectified, and stereotyped. One critic even accuses the book to be "the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written" (Wallace 1992, p.16). The reactions to the book even spread among the public and many African-American families demanded the book to be removed from the high school curriculums claiming that reading the book in class annoys their children.⁵ Hence, there is a vast difference in the reception of the same novel by different readers in different epochs. And this difference results from the changing social conventions about the issue: due to the growth in awareness of racial stereotyping since Twain's time, present-day readers are bound to be more struck than readers of earlier times by certain features of the work related to race issues.⁶ In other words, the change in the horizon of the reader brings about a change in the meaning of the work.

What we refer by "meaning" here is not something that is pre-given before the act of reading. It can neither be identified with the intentions of the author, nor be searched in the text in the same way as a miner searches for the mine buried in the soil. The meaning of a literary work is constructed by the co-creative acts of the reader through the event of reading. The reader, in this formulation, is not a mere receiver of a meaning buried in the text or intended by its author. As Georgia Warnke aptly puts it,

The understanding of a work of art involves participation in its meaning. The audience of a work of art is not as much a mere receiver of information as a catalyst of content. It follows that the audience does not simply acquiesce to the viewpoint of a work of art in coming to understand it, as the defense of mimesis suggests. The audience rather participates in the meaning and truth the work of art has . . . The meaning of a work of art is shared by creator and audience. (1987: 68).

This understanding helps us to understand how the meaning of *Huckleberry Finn* and its significance for its readers have changed in recent times; it reveals how a work that has once been declared as the "masterpiece" of American literature can now be interpreted as "the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written." The changing perceptions of *Huckleberry Finn* also shows us the historical aspect of the perception of the one and the same work. This historical aspect can be more clearly understood by the notion of "the life of a work." This notion implies the changing interpretations of one and the same work in different epochs of history. The meaning that is attributed to the work by its readers is not independent of the social and historical conditions that circumscribe the reader, in other words the social horizon of the reader. Hence, during its lifespan the same work may be attributed various meanings and the meanings attributed to the work by the readers sharing the same social and historical conditions may show similarities. These similarities constitute what we shall call an "interpretative canon". However, these canons, as seen in the case of *Huckleberry Finn*, are always subject to be displaced by other canons that may appear later. I will talk more about the historicity of the perception of one and the same work in the following pages. However, I now want to look at the other part of the discussion; the literary convention held by the colleagues of Moses who blamed him to be unable to recognize a great classic when he met one.

The reaction of the faculty members to Moses' position exemplifies the dominant attitude of the day against literature; that of formalism; the position of which is clearly revealed in the following quote from Booth:

We continued to resist, in class or in print, of the twin questions that seemed to us blatantly non-literary: Is this "poem" morally, politically, or philosophically sound? and, is it likely to work for good or ill on those who read it? If we knew of critics who questioned our happy abstract formalism –Yvor Winters, F.R. Leavis, the

American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. ... There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since" (1998: 23).

⁵ The debate about the exclusion of *Huckleberry Finn* from school curriculums is neatly discussed by Allen Carey-Web in (Carrey-Web, 1993). For an overview of criticisms about the race issue in *Huckleberry Finn*, see (Leonard, Tenney, and Davis, 1992).

⁶ For a history of change in the reception of *Huckleberry Finn* see (Arac, 1997).



Marxists– we considered them dogmatic mavericks, either the last remnants of moralistic, pre-aesthetic past or the would-be forerunners of a totalitarian revolution. (1988: 5)

Of course, this attitude is not peculiar to formalism, various theoretical schools in the beginning of 20th century took a similar position. And what is common to these schools is their supposition that the literary work as the object of a literary science is an objective text. In Edward Wasiolek's words:

There were many movements during the years 1930-1960, but they diverged like spokes from a hub, and what brought them together was a common and unquestioned assumption that critical discourse was a commentary about, and measured by, an objective text. ... criticism was an act of approximating in language a "work that had objective status, and that its intelligibility and worth were measured by that objectivity." (1973: 6)

At this point, in order to claim that the recent responses to *Huckleberry Finn* –of which Moses' affair can be seen as a paradigm– are legitimate, we need to challenge this *sine qua non*. We mentioned above that formalist and structuralist schools of literary criticism in twentieth century tried to establish a "science" of literary studies by attributing the text an objectivity. They achieved this aim by suspending the referential function of the text and focusing on its structural properties. This is how Paul Ricoeur describes the situation:

It proceeds from the suspension, the *epoché*, of the ostensive reference. To read in this way means to prolong this suspension of the ostensive reference to the world and to transfer oneself into the "place" where the text stands, within the "enclosure" of this wordless place. According to this choice, the text no longer has an outside, it has only an inside. Once more, the very constitution of the text as text and of the system of text as literature justifies this conversion of the literary thing into a closed system of signs, analogous to the kind of closed system phonology discovered at the root of all discourse and that de Saussure called *la langue*. Literature, according to this working hypothesis, becomes an *analogue* of *la langue*. (1981: 162-63)

A literary text says something to the reader. Formalist criticism focuses on this something that the text says, and by means of structural analyses it explains what is said by the text, it reveals its logic. But explaining a text and interpreting it are different things: "We can, as readers, remain in the suspense of the text, treating it as a worldless and authorless object; in this case, we explain the text in terms of internal relations, its structure. On the other hand, we can lift the suspense and fulfill the text in speech, restoring it to living communication; in this case, we interpret the text" (Ricoeur, 1981: 152). Hence, a literary text does not only say something; it says something *about* something. Formalism achieves its objectivity claim at the expense of this *about*. To put in another way, by formulating literature in analogy with *la langue*, formalism suspends what Gadamer calls "the matter of the text." And by suspending the matter of the text, we also lose sight of the *significance* of the text, see it as a close system that has nothing to do with the world of the reader. What is at stake in Moses' situation, however, is the significance of the literary text for the reader. Hence, if we are to claim that a literary work is ethically significant for its readers we should go beyond the formalist formulations and scrutinize again on the relation between the world of the text and the world of the reader. This can be done by apprehending literature not as an analogue of *la langue*, but as a discourse. As Emile Benveniste puts, "discourse is language put into action" (1971, p.223). This formulation gives discourse an eventful character. Paul Ricoeur –who draws his theory of discourse on Benveniste's basic assumptions on discourse– defines the eventful character of discourse as in the following:

All discourse is produced as an event; as such, it is the counterpart of language understood as a code or system. Discourse *qua* event has a fleeting existence: it appears and disappears. But at the same time – herein lies the paradox– it can be identified and re-identified as the same. This 'sameness' is what we call, in a broad sense, its meaning. All discourse, we shall say, is realized as an event but understood as a meaning. (1981: 167)

Hence, by apprehending literary work as a discourse and not as an analogue of *la langue*, we attribute to the reading act an eventful character. In this sense, every individual reading becomes a unique event; a communicative event between the text and the reader. And the significances of this event may exhibit differences among themselves. This is due to the involvement of each reader in the event of reading with her unique horizon. To put in a Gadamer like fashion, the reading act is the fusion of



the horizon of the reader and the horizon of the text. The meaning, and the significance of the text arises from this fusion. The meaning of the text is constructed through the realization of discourse *qua* event.⁷

The eventful character of the reading act also negates the dogma of fictional autonomism we mentioned above. The autonomist distinction between the world of fiction and the extratextual world also stems from the theories of structuralist linguistics. In its extreme mode, this position claims that literary language is by its nature self-referential, thus literature is something that is totally self-contained. Judgements we find in a literary work does not refer to any extra-textual situation, hence a literary work can only be legitimized in and through itself. The aim of the distinction is indeed to save the autonomy of the fiction, and in this sense, it is a reaction to the understanding of nineteenth century literary realism which finds its basic formulation in Stendhal's mirror metaphor: "Ah, sir! a novel is a mirror travelling down the road. Sometimes it reflects the blue of the heavens to the eye, sometimes the mud of the filthy puddles on the road." (2002: 374)

The Problem of Referentiality: Reality or Realities?

At this point we should say a few words about the referential function of the fictional narratives. The nineteenth century understanding of literary realism belongs to an era in which literature was seen to be one of the main means of promoting social enlightenment. Literature was supposed to help us to recognize the reality in a clearer way. By pointing the mirror to the corners of the world that we are not accustomed, it was showing us the aspects of reality that we were not hitherto aware of. This aspect of reality, however, was a pre-given, it had already been there, though we had not realized it till the novel reflects it to our gaze. In this sense, a novel was not different from a work of sociology or a documentary. Is it possible for an author today to write novels like these; like the novels of Zola, Stendhal or Balzac? Paul Ricoeur, for example, says that it is not, "because one of the functions performed in the past by the novel –taking the place of sociology– no longer has any reason to exist" (1998: 177). The sociocultural enlightenment, which was once one of the main functions of literature, is now carried out by other media, such as documentaries, newspaper articles, reportage and other means of culture industry. No one any more need to read a novel in order to gain information about a minor group, or a social class in the society that is least-known to us, or about the least-known cultures and geographical regions of the world. We have now access to other mediums through which we can feed our epistemological hunger in a more direct and easy way. As Wolfgang Iser says, "as a medium, literature is put on a par with other media and the ever-increasing role that these play in our civilization shows the degree to which literature has lost its significance as the epitome of our culture. The more comprehensively a medium fulfills its sociocultural function, the more it is taken for granted, as literature once used to be" (1993: x).

In addition to the developments in alternative media, the change in the horizon of the reader also stimulated a change in the understanding of how literature intercourses with reality. The realist authors of nineteenth century were concerned with human reality. However, this concern is shared by the great literature of other ages. As Nietzsche observes, "all good artists imagined they were realistic" (quoted in Sheehan 1989: 820). This phenomenon is clearly exemplified by Erich Heller as in the following:

Dante claimed that the world of the *Divine Comedy* was the real world. Cervantes meant his Don Quixote to rehabilitate the true sense of reality in his readers' minds, which had been perverted by manufacturers of abstruse unreality. In the literary debates of the eighteenth century in Germany, Shakespeare was held up before the adolescent poetical talent of the nation as the supreme example of realistic insight . . . Goethe praised Homer for his realism. Ortega y Gasset blamed Goethe for his obstinate refusal to face his true

⁷ The appropriation of a text that belongs to an era that is unfamiliar and alien to the reader is another problem that should be considered in more detail. However, such an elaboration will exceed the limits of this paper. For a well-constructed summary of the problem, see (Jauss, 1985)



reality. Nietzsche extolled Goethe as a "convinced realist" who had conquered and transcended the deeply anti-realistic insight of his age. (1966: 89).

The problem here is, then, not that some literary works represent reality while some do not, but that the understanding of reality they claim to represent is different from each other. As Nietzsche says, "What then, is it that the so called Realism of our writers tells us about the happiness of our time? . . . One is indeed led to believe that our particular happiness does not spring from what really is, but from our *understanding of reality*" (quoted in Heller 1966: 95, emphasis mine).

The "realistic" subject matter of the great novels of the nineteenth century literary Realism is by no means new. As Erich Heller observes, "from Petronius to the English eighteenth century, many writers have given us weighty literary documents of life as it was lived, enjoyed, or bungled by people in the unheroic and unspectacular regions of the world" (95). What is new in the pages of Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, or Tolstoy is the passion and desire for understanding the human world in a rational way; an ambition for the rational conquest of the world. In this sense, the distinctive quality of nineteenth century Realism, according to Heller, is a Hegelian quality:

How tedious would be Balzac's descriptions if they were not alive with the zeal for absolute rational possession of the things described; how cheap would be Stendhal's melodramas if the emotions were merely evoked without being completely controlled by the analytical intelligence and made transparent by the master eye that sees through everything. And Dostoyevsky's genius is closely allied to the spirit of detection, his singular greatness being due to the fact that the light by which he searches is also the fire by which he is consumed. Nor is that a mere accident that Tolstoy –who certainly was not a Hegelian– repeatedly protested: Reason, that is, good – almost as if he were Hegel himself. (1966: 95-96)

At this point we can say, in a Ricoeur-like fashion, that it is not possible any more to write novels like that of Zola, Stendhal or Balzac, because the world we are living in is different from the world of those authors. That is, our understanding of reality shows significant changes from their understanding of reality. And consequently, we need new forms, new textual strategies, and new ways of representation in order to depict this new understanding of reality. The modernist novel, indeed, is an attempt to answer the problems raised by this new understanding of the world; the world of modern times and the individual subject's experience of this new world. Theodor Adorno defines the modern world as a disenchanted world. The human beings are torn from one another and from themselves. If one depicts this world in the same way as a Realist author, she would be guilty of a lie: "the lie of delivering himself over the world with a love that presupposes that the world is meaningful, and [s]he would end up with insufferable kitsch along the lines of local-color commercialism" (Adorno 1991: 31). Hence, to depict this enchanted world or the shattered, fragmented reality modern novel needs to redefine realism: "*if the novel wants to remain true to its realistic heritage and tell how things really are, it must abandon a realism that only aids the façade in its work to camouflage by reproducing it*" (Adorno 1991: 32).

We mentioned that for nineteenth century realism, the novel is seen as a mirror-reflection of reality; a reality that can be conquered rationally. Hence for these novelists, reality is characterized as an ordered unity which can be grasped and represented by the novel in a direct way like a mirror which reflects us the world, we live in. However, modern novel has revealed that such an understanding of reality is indeed an illusion. As Wolfgang Iser observes, "only in memory do we have the freedom necessary, if we are to bring the disordered multiplicity of everyday life into the harmonious form of a coherent gestalt – perhaps because this is the only way we can retain meanings of life. Thus, the gestalten of memory extract meaning from and impose order on the natural heterogeneity of life" (1980: 125). In this sense, what Realistic novel represents is not the real life, but the configured representation of it by memory. This is what Umberto Eco means when he claims that modern novel is more realistic than the Realist novel: "Naturally, life resembles *Ulysses* more than *The Three Musketeers*, but we prefer to think of it as the other way around." (1989: 118). Hence, the modernist novel is a reaction to the "lie" of Realist novel, the lie of the meaningfulness of the reality itself. What the modern novel suggests, instead, is a reality, the meaning of which is a construction: The meaning of reality is constructed by human beings inhabiting this reality:



The traditional realistic novel can no longer be regarded as a mirror-reflection of reality, but is, rather, a paradigm of the structure of memory, since reality can only be retained as reality if it is represented in terms of meaning. This is why the modern novel presents reality as contingent and 'meaningless', and in so doing it shows a reaction to conventional habits of perception by releasing reality from the illusion-making structure of memory. (Iser 1980: 125).

To put in another way, what the classical Realist novel does is to configure the external reality, which have a discordant character into a concordance through the configurational acts of the author. The modern novel, on the other hand, lays the burden of configuration on the shoulders of the reader. It achieves this aim by turning away from the techniques of representation of nineteenth century novel and moving towards formal experimentations. This movement has been interpreted by some critics as a renunciation of the referential function. However, what is renounced is only what Ricoeur calls the "ostensive reference": the first order reference, which points directly to the external world is replaced with a second order reference which reveals aspects of the external world which were unknown to the reader before she confronted with the world of the work. We can understand this new kind of mimetic relation more clearly by looking at the achievements of twentieth century abstract painting. As Paul Ricoeur aptly puts,

It is in the twentieth century when painting ceased to be figurative that the full measure of this mimesis could be taken, namely, that its function is not to help us recognize objects but to discover dimensions of experience that did not exist prior to the work. It is because Soulages or Mondrian did not imitate reality, in the restrictive sense of the word, because they did not make a replica of it, that their work has the power to make us discover, in our own experience, aspects up to then unknown. On a philosophical plane, this leads us to question the classical conception of truth as adequation to the real; for, if one can speak of truth in relation to the work of art, it is to the extent that this designates the capacity of the work of art to break a path in the real by renewing the real *in accordance with the work itself*, so to speak. (1998: 174)

Similarly, the modern novel has taught us that in order to understand the creative relation between the world of fictional narratives and the world of the reader, we need to apprehend the mimetic relation between these two worlds not as a mere replica, but as a productive reference. In other words, everyday reality is metamorphosed by fictional narratives through imaginative variations; this metamorphosed reality, in turn, engenders our understanding of reality. Consequently, fiction proposes to us a new world. This new world, of course, is not cut-off all external reality. As Theodor Adorno observes, "even those that are novels of fantasy as far as their subject matter is concerned attempt to present their content in such a way that the suggestion of reality emanates from them" (1991: 30). What is suggested by fiction, however, is not a mere replica of reality, but a "suggestion of reality". The reader through the act of reading enters the "kingdom of as if," in Paul Ricoeur's words, or, to Use Ingarden's terminology, into a "quasi-world" created by the author according to the following formula: "be such and such, have those particular properties, exist as though you were real" (1985: 137). This imitation of reality is constituted by what Wolfgang Iser calls the "repertoire" of the text: the familiar elements in the text that are borrowed from the extratextual world. But we will see that even these elements are used in the fictional text in a configured way: they are de-pragmatized by the text by being removed away from its social context.

As a result, the fictional autonomist is right when she claims that the world of fiction is independent from the external world in the sense that what is represented by fictional narratives is a metamorphosed world, the world of the text. However, that does not necessarily bring about the conclusion that this world does not have any relation to the extratextual world, and that literature should be apprehended in itself. The world of the text refers to the external world, however the reference here is not a direct, ostensive, first order reference. What is at stake is an indirect reference that fulfills its function in the act of reading. We mentioned above that the discourse has an eventful character, so the act of reading. The reader, in her reading act, finds herself in a communication with the narrative text. Hence, the act of reading is a discursive event. And, at the end of this event, the reader cannot remain the same person as she were before the reading act. Her world, her understanding of reality is dislocated by the proposed world of the text. This is what we shall later call the "refigurative power" of literature. And if we are to understand the referential function of literature, we should scrutinize at this point; the point where the horizon of the reader and the horizon of the



work intersects. It is also at this point that the ethical significance of the literary work finds its uppermost functionality. The literary work does not give us a prescription of a good life, but by dislocating, disintegrating our position in the world in virtue of proposing us new possibilities, or by revealing the aspects of our moral conventions that we had not realized up to that time. And this dislocation forces us to reflect our position once more, to question it. Hence the truth of literature should not be searched for in its adequacy to represent the already given reality, but in its power to augment this reality. As Paul Ricoeur says, "Narratives, folktales, and poems are not without a referent; but this referent is discontinuous with that of everyday language. Through fiction and poetry, new possibilities of being-in-the-world are opened up within everyday reality. Fiction and poetry intend being, not under the modality of being-given, but under the modality of power-to-be" (1981: 86).

The discussions up to this point have significant results for our purpose. First of all, they show us the importance of the historical aspect of the human activity that we call literature. The historicity of literature can be understood mainly in two ways: first, a particular work has its own history which we tried to explain by the notion of "the life of the work". Second, our understanding of what literature is shows differences in different historical epochs. Indeed, this understanding is no more than a convention among the interpretative community. And the change of this convention depends on the horizontal expectations of this community which is affected by the changes in the social norms and paradigms. The changing conventions in the understanding of literature is also significant for what we called the life of the work because a particular work may gain new meanings through the interpretation of readers that belong to a different convention; by means of these interpretations, a work that belongs to an old paradigm may appear in a totally new way in the new paradigm. This is indeed what happened to the Realist fictions in modern times. They were once seen as the true representations of the extratextual world; but due to the change of social and literary convention they are now mostly interpreted as representations of a particular understanding of reality.

Conclusion

As a result, the historicity of literature once more shows us the complexity of the issue. As a historical phenomenon, the human activity we call literature always resists our denotational efforts; whenever we think that we have grasped its definitive characteristics, it escapes from our definitional circles by invalidating the literary conventions of its day and by re-appearing in new forms and by adopting new strategies. Through this new forms and strategies, literature denounces not only the literal conventions, but also the social conventions of its time. This situation makes the things more complex and harder for us to handle. However, this unstable character of literature also gives it a fruitful character for our purpose because by destructing the current conventions it opens for us new ways of thinking about our moral disposition on the world.

Another important significance of our discussion so far is about the distinction between the autonomist and ethicist positions. I claimed before that in order to defend the significance of literature, we do not need to give up the autonomist claim. Our analysis about the fictional character and referential function of literature has also shown us that we neither need to give up the fictional autonomist claim in order to defend the ethical significance of the work. Rather, we need to stick up for the fictional character of literature if we want to reveal the ethical significance of fictional narratives that are unique to them. Hence, we do not have to formulate autonomism and moralism as rival opinions about the ethical status of literature. In order to reveal the peculiar ethical significance of literature, we should defend its aesthetic and fictional autonomy and search for the ethical significance of the work by concentrating on the experience of the reader going through the event of reading.



Extended Abstract

In this paper, I discuss the ethical significance of literary work of art on its readers. I claim that literature matters to our lives. This view has been defended by many in literary criticism. However, there are also other critics who oppose this view and claim that attributing such a significance to literature has the risk of deducing it to a mere instrument for transmitting ethically significant ideas to the reader. In order to prevent such an instrumentalization, these critics defend the autonomy of literature.

We can categorize literary autonomy under two headings; aesthetic autonomism and fictional autonomism. Aesthetic autonomists claim that literary works are essentially aesthetic objects; thus they cannot be evaluated from an ethical point of view. Similarly, their main function can be defined only from an aesthetical point of view. These works are supposed to give the reader an aesthetic experience. They do not need to educate their readers in an ethical manner. Fictional autonomist, on the other hand, claims that the literary works do talk about fictional worlds; hence they are silent about the extratextual world. In that sense, they do not say anything to their readers about the world they inhabit, accordingly they are silent about the readers' ethical dispositions and ethical concerns.

In order to support my claim, I first scrutinize these two kinds of autonomisms. I agree with their concern and their claims that literary works are essentially aesthetic and fictional structures. However, I additionally claim that their aesthetical and fictional character does not necessarily result in their being silent about the extratextual world. On the contrary, they speak about the world we inhabit through this aesthetic and fictional character, and it is this unique way of speaking that reveals their peculiar ethical significance. In other words, if we are to talk about the ethical significance of literature as literature, we should reveal how these works affect our ethical disposition through their fictional and aesthetical character.

To show that literary works are ethically significant through their aesthetic and fictional character, we need to think on the nature of these two characterizations and deal with some related problems. The first problem arises from the common understanding of identifying aesthetics with the formal properties of the work. This understanding formulates the literary work as a closed structure and suspends the ostensive referential function of the work. Hence, if we are to apprehend the work as an aesthetical structure, we should evaluate it through its formal structure, not through its reference. Apparently, such an understanding also supports the fictional autonomists who claim that the literary work is completely silent about the extratextual world. This is the second problem that we should deal with; the fictional limitedness of the work. These two problems are interrelated and need to be thought accordingly.

A literary text says something to the reader. Autonomists focus on this something that the text says, and by means of structural analyses they explain what is said by the text, revealing its logic. But, explaining a text and interpreting it are different things. A literary text does not only say something; it says something *about* something. To interpret a text is to reveal its *about*. Autonomism achieves its claim at the expense of this *about*. To put in another way, by disregarding the *about* of the text, autonomism suspends "the matter of the text." And, by suspending the matter of the text, we also lose sight of the *significance* of the text, see it as a close system that has nothing to do with the world of the reader. Hence, if we are to claim that a literary work is ethically significant for its readers, we should go beyond the formalist formulations and scrutinize again on the relation between the world of the text and the world of the reader. This can be done by apprehending literature not as a closed structure which is formulated by autonomists as an analogue of Saussurean *la langue*, but as a discourse. As Emile Benveniste puts, "discourse is language put into action" (1971, p.223). This formulation gives discourse an eventful character. Hence, defining literary work as an analogue of discourse we attribute the reading act an eventful character. Reading becomes an event for the reader and it is through this event that the meaning and the ethical significance of the literary work are revealed. Through this event, the text is not necessarily deduced to something else by the reader. The reader we have in mind reads the work as an aesthetic and fictional structure. She is aware of the



fact that the work does not directly refer to the extratextual world. However, this does not mean that the work is silent about the world that she inhabits. It talks *about* the world in an indirect way. It is through the reading event that the reader is forced to reflect on her ethical disposition.

As a result, we need not to give up the fictional autonomist claim in order to defend the ethical significance of the work. Rather, we need to stick up for the fictional and aesthetical character of literature if we want to reveal the ethical significance of fictional narratives that are unique to them. Hence, we do not have to formulate autonomism and moralism as rival opinions about the ethical status of literature. In order to reveal the peculiar ethical significance of literature, we should defend its aesthetic and fictional autonomy and search for the ethical significance of the work by concentrating on the experience of the reader going through the event of reading.

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