

*Comparative Literature, World Literature and Ethical Literary Criticism. Literature's "Infra-Other"*¹

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Abstract. Relying on some of the ideas of Yuri M. Lotman on “semiosphere”, the dynamics and dialogue between “centres” and “peripheries”, as well as on my own ideas on cultural symbiosis expounded in my essay books *A Call for Cultural Symbiosis. Meditations from U* (Toronto, 2005) and *Kümme kirja Montaigne'ile. "Ise ja "teine" (Ten Letters to Montaigne. 'Self' and 'Other', in Estonian: Tartu, 2014; in English, 2018)* and inspired by the recent foundation in China of the International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism, I will try to meditate on the interrelation of Comparative Literature, World Literature and Ethical Literary Criticism both in theory and in the practice of teaching and researching literature at universities and high schools. The main purpose is to look at the ways how a “self”-centred practice of literary research and teaching (formalistic as well as sociological approaches, restricting World Literature to the Western mainstream, or just dealing with one's own national literature, avoiding its comparative contextualization) could be gradually replaced by a symbiotic-dialogical treatment of literature, capable of providing our activity with a firm and solid ethical dimension, something that would definitely strengthen the position of humanities in the world academia.

Keywords: ethical literary criticism; interdisciplinary studies; moral dimension in literary research; Kristian Jaak Peterson; Jidi Majia; Juhan Liiv; literature's “infra-other”

Does ethical literary criticism mean the (only) righteous and correct one?

Since the term “ethical literary criticism” has been launched and is spreading among the world community of humanity scholars, it transparently hides a seed of ambiguity. It is because the adjective “ethical” itself is ambivalent. On the one hand it denotes activities related to moral or ethical questions. Beyond any doubt, re-orientating cultural and literary research towards discussing questions related to ethics has been the main goal of the recently founded

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IAELC (International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism, founded in Yichan, China, in 2012).

Yet on the other hand it has become a commonplace to use “ethical” as a synonym for “correct”, “just”, “righteous” – in the sense of a behaviour or activity corresponding to certain established and accepted moral norms. A younger scholar belonging to the postmodern generation once asked me: “Once you know beforehand what type of criticism and literature is ethical, what is the meaning of such research? Would criticism and literary creation not lose their sense altogether, if the goals are so explicit and transparent?”

It would be in vain to start explaining that the meaning of “ethical” in the sense of “morally righteous” is misleading and erroneous. Once it has been included in most dictionaries and has spread in the consciousness of wide communities, such an understanding has to be accepted.

Similarly, with ethical literary criticism (in this article further abbreviated as ELC), we cannot ignore ambiguities relating to other terms involved in my topic. Thus, comparative literature (further abbreviated as CL) is more often than not understood as being aimed at making a comparison between two or more literary works. Or, to the contrary, in the recent decade the much-exploited term of interdisciplinary studies seems to denote above all relating literature and literary studies to other fields of research, such as history, sociology, politics, economics, biosciences, and what not. As for world literature (further abbreviated as WL), it has often been imagined as a closed and defined canon established as if forever by the scholars of “major” and “leading” nations. Or, to the contrary, it has been identified with the truly unapproachable corpus of universally created literary, meta-literary, as well as non-literary texts.

We certainly cannot deny anybody the right to understand, interpret and also to question terms that at least to some extent have been consecrated in our containers of knowledge – universal dictionaries and encyclopaedias.

The moral function and challenge of ELC, CL and WL

Yet what we surely can do is to accentuate and ground some aspects of the terms and phenomena we consider more important than others. When determining the nucleuses and dominants of the fields of ELC, CL and WL, the first criteria for me would be discerning the functions that the mentioned fields could hope to cover and meet more completely than other branches or areas of research. My personal intuition and experience foretell me that the moral function would strongly stand out in this context.

Since 19th-century positivist philosophies the highest goal of science has been to describe and interpret objectively, departing from concrete and measurable data, the natural world. Any transcendence to God and the supernatural has been denied, while subjective and personal approaches have been criticized from the standpoint of science. The interference of moral criteria has been seen rather as a disturbance, a trouble-maker.

As the natural and technical sciences developed and triumphed, producing in societies miraculous changes, called the “progress of civilization”, the same principle of a claimed objectivity came to be ever more applied to the humanities, including history as well as literary history.

However, the stumbling block in achieving tangible progress in this enterprise has been that the object of research in humanities appeared to be rebellious, capricious, passionate and not at all measurable in physical and mathematical terms. It explains at least in part the failure of 20th-century structuralism. It could not cope with the living and ever-changing object. The schemes, models and structures built and shaped by structural scholars were nice, but the most original part of literary creation nearly always managed to escape their grasp by means of individuality, subjectivity and personality.

The deception was then reflected in post-structuralism. The current initiated in the 1980s may still have some influence, but its first charm seems to be rapidly fading. In my opinion its nihilist theoretical seeds strongly contradicted the nature of primary literary creation itself. Postmodern theory clearly underestimated literature’s role and function both in society and our individual lives. Thus, one of the claims of postmodernism was that lofty aesthetic and philosophical aspirations of modernist writers were old-fashioned and that literature could hardly aspire to more than simply rewriting already existing previous texts, in the paradigm of intertextuality. Literature came to be viewed as just one more product in the profit-orientated market economy. Furthermore, it was claimed that authors or writers were incapable of knowing the true value of their work, as the value was really created by the meta-textual-theoretical genius of criticism, rather than by primary authors themselves.

There was thus a transparent attempt to bridle primary literary creation and make it submissively follow the theoretical precepts and signals emitted above all from the Parisian and US academia and then echoed by numerous adepts both in the centric and peripheral areas. Ethical or moral categories seldom entered that reign; these were considered ingenuous, inferior, if not altogether inappropriate for intellectual-theoretical reasoning.

Differently from the linguistic-rhetorical line, the sociological trend (postcolonial scholarship, gender studies) did pay attention to ethical questions, but its scope was mainly limited to the exterior contours of literary creation.

Individuality and especially the aesthetic dimension of a creative act often came to be consciously neglected.

The challenge to fill axiological-ethical voids, and the “other”

My conclusion from the above said is that in the present world as it is, with its endless violence, wars, economical as well as ecological crises, there is an obvious void in social as well as private axiology. The void in humanities becomes above all visible when it is compared to the continuity of primary literary creation around the world, now with more, now with less luck aspiring to novelty (originality) of expression and imagery. There is continuity also in that practically every outstanding literary work of our days and the recent past, by discussing fundamental axiological relations and attitudes, reveals its strong ethical or moral nucleus.

Contrary to this continuity in primary literary creation, literary and cultural scholarship under the banner of postmodernism has greatly failed to meet one of its principal functions and tasks: to explain the axiology as well as the moral-spiritual dimension of literary works. Instead, scholars waste a lot of their energy discussing different formal aspects in the works of mass and trivial literature, as if trying to convince us that the higher goals of literary creation have become obsolete.

Building up an axiology in which spiritual values are involved can hardly be achieved without ethics. The wide complex of axiology, as well as of ethics, seems to have an intrinsic liaison with the ontology of “self” and “other” and the ever vital need of reaching a kind of a dialogue or elementary understanding between both. Ideally it would presuppose a “self’s” admittance of the “other” as a different “self”, and the traditional “other” developing its conscience as a “self”.

The history of the existing canon of WL provides the vastest imaginable opportunities to discuss interrelations between “self” and “other”. Quite surely one could speculate and reason about different “selves” as well as varying “others”. Thus, Francesco Petrarca in his treatise *Secretum* (mid-14th century), written in the form of an intense dispute between Franciscus and Augustinus, exposed a conflict of his interior “self”, driven at the same time by divine love and love for an earthy young noblewoman. Michel de Montaigne in his essays written in the final phase of the European Renaissance demonstrated eloquently that a person’s reason-based “self” is nothing definite, as it changes under the impact of varying circumstances and depends fundamentally on habits and traditions of different places and stages of age. Baltasar Gracián in his *Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia* (the mid-17th century, or the mature

European Baroque) – a collection of philosophic miniatures – exposed in an admirable psychological detail the different male logics clashing in power rivalry, something that has never been absent from the world of politics, West or East, past and present. And so on.

Yet my purpose in the following is to concentrate on the relationship between “self” and “other” in the most radical sense, in which the former (“self”) appears as a historical derivate of predominantly male reasoning, representing political-economical-military power structures, vastly relying on the advances of science and technology, while the latter (“other”), represents the generic otherness (womankind), the ethnical-linguistic “other” (the world’s peripheral and minority nations and nationalities), as well as the racially or socially oppressed and deprived “other”. The common feature of this traditional “other”, with all its sub-species, is that it has not been capable or willing to adapt to the historical “progress” envisaged and planned first and foremost by the Western centres of power. Instead, and to the contrary, that “other” has been an ally of nature in resisting the kind of “progress” of which the essence would be to destroy the natural basis of life on earth, in the name of power ambitions and materialistic greed.

The changing and continuous “other” of literary creation in the past and present

A lot has changed in the world since the times when most the infamous humiliation of the traditional “other” was the norm. Western centres, with its writers, philosophers, intellectuals and culturally creative people in the vanguard, have definitely contributed to the painful but gradually expanding process of democratization. Let me provide some examples of the (cultural) history of Estonia, my own native country, a minority and peripheral nation par excellence.

The father of **Kristian Jaak Peterson** (1801–1822), whom we in Estonia celebrate as the first autochthonous poet of major significance, by a happy miracle managed to escape serfdom, to which our forefathers were fettered during long centuries by the Baltic-German landlords, with the benediction and approval of the Russian tsarist empire. Peterson thus grew up in the first generation of the Estonians liberated from serfdom. He was among the first autochthonous students of the University of Tartu, excelling in linguistics, philosophy and poetry. During his unjustly short lifespan he managed to publish only fruits of his linguistic research. His poetry started to be published posthumously, a hundred years after his birth. For the first time it was gathered in a book in 1922, on the occasion of the centenary of Peterson’s death.

Although totally belatedly and having irreparably fallen out of the “Western canon”, now at the start of the 21st century we have come to understand that in reality Peterson was a forerunner of Walt Whitman, as he wrote his poetry exclusively without end-rhymes, in free verse. He prophetically defended the diversity of culture as an extension of nature’s diversity and praised the beauty and poetic capacity of his native Estonian language. In his pastoral odes and eclogues he showed friendship and love that transcended gender barriers and taboos, of simple Estonian shepherd boys and girls. (Undusk 2012: 11–29, 103–122; Talvet 2015: 7–22)

My other example of literary creation with a similarly strong moral nucleus that can be found in the work of the founders of Estonian national literature, K. J. Peterson, F. R. Kreutzwald, comes – maybe surprisingly – from China, from the era that in the West under the dictate of its centres has been called “postmodern” (from the 1980s to the early 21st century). It is inspired by my recent translation into Estonian of a poetry selection by **Jidi Majia** (born in 1961); his first personal anthology appeared in 1992; by today his poetry has been translated into a number of Western languages, including two selections in English translation: *Time* (2006), translated by Yang Zongze, and *Shade of Our Mountain Range* (2014), translated by Denis Mair. (Jidi Majia 2006, 2014).

Jidi Majia’s poetry is originally written in Chinese, in free verse without end-rhymes. Its moral nucleus is the same as Walt Whitman’s. It is the defence and praise of natural diversity of cultures and peoples, the bio-totality and natural-telluric integrity as the very source and basis of human existence. However, differently from Whitman, the son of a big nation (by today, one of the world superpowers and principal “centres”), Jidi Majia’s pathos does not derive from the greatness of a super-nation, but, to the contrary, is almost exclusively devoted to the traditions, history, culture and spiritual values of his native ethnical minority nationality (one among the so many “others” in China), the Yi nation.

Yis, whose population according to different sources varies between two and six million, do not have their own autonomous region. Beside their historical centre in the southern part of the Sichuan province, the Yis live dispersed also in other nearby provinces.)

Jidi Majia’s poetry is thus written from the basic position of a historically humiliated and neglected “other”, the smaller and weaker whose existence and culture (above all in the (post)modern socio-economical turn of globalization) is destined to be pushed to the verge of extinction. Jidi’s poetry is not really a cry of protest against historical injustice towards his own nation, the Yi, but he addresses at the same time all other numerous smaller nations, who in so many parts of the earth have shared the same fate in the distant as well as recent history.

My country Estonia has fared somewhat better, at least since the collapse of the Soviet empire, at the end of the 20th century. Yet the roots of historical wounds are exactly the same as those of the Yi people. Philosophically, the closest to Jidi is our Estonian poet **Juhan Liiv** (1864–1913). The younger generation of Liiv’s contemporary Estonian writers would have liked to have seen him as a forerunner of symbolism (or the early modernism) – the fashion that came from the Western centres, especially from France. Liiv rejected it and assumed a thoroughly independent existentialist position, combined with holistic philosophy of life’s spiritual integrity, in which all parts of nature, the smallest and weakest included, are equally indispensable for life’s continuation.

Both for Jidi and Liiv the highest moral goal for a nationality, as for an individual, would be embodied in its freedom to be fully conscious of its identity, to represent and provide continuity to its traditions, language and culture. At the same time both advocate a dialogue and a symbiotic relationship of that traditional “other”, their native minority nation and culture with all other nations and cultures, small and big.

Within the respective contours of the ethnic-linguistic “other”, both poets, Liiv and Jidi, make stand out the generic “other”, woman, as the bearer of the highest moral values of a nation, such as love, generosity of soul, faithfulness, tenderness, infinite self-sacrifice, peacefulness and the fullest possible harmony with nature.

The “infra-other” of literary creativity

What concerns scholarship and criticism, in all cases concerning CL, WL and ELC one should not neglect one more “other” – if not an inalienable “self” – within any literary creation and poetics as such. I would say it comprises literary creativity’s infra-ontology despite the fact that under the pressure of different times and socio-historical circumstances its position has varied. That “other” is the aesthetic dimension of a literary work. I can hardly imagine or mention any masterpiece of WL either in its active, passive or potential canon, that would have failed to bind its philosophy with a search of a proper aesthetics, capable of generating ideas in the way that they are not perceived as mere thoughts but are just felt as something that concerns the individual life of a receiver, or the very self of a receiving culture.

“Aesthetics” derives from “senses”. One could claim that any act of great literary creation has been “ethical” in the sense that it has conveyed ideas melted into and mixed with senses, or to say more exactly, beyond mere intellect or reason it has captured in an image simultaneously ideas and feelings through

senses, thus representing the world and human existence in its totality and making its message audible to the widest possible public, including all varieties of the “other”. In other words, it has captured and conveyed significant fragments of life in sensually shaped poetic images, thus avoiding degenerating into mere brainwork.

Deprived of its aesthetic aspect, ELC would easily lose its identity, and become a field dominated by “noospheric” ratiocinations, without much if any contact with the “other”.

Among basic “infra-others” of literature, the metaphoric image in its unrepeatable genuineness has always been the main distinction and at the same time the axiological nucleus of literary works. A metaphor conveys sensuousness by its very nature, as its source is the establishment of the analogy between two or more natural-concrete and sensually perceived objects. Thus, its highest imaginable concentration of metaphors in the work of William Shakespeare or Federico García Lorca is in all likelihood the special feature that makes moral-philosophical conflicts stand out with an extraordinary expressiveness. In these greatest creators, the poetical image never degenerates into an idea of morality forcefully imposed on reality – a feature generally perceived as moralization. On the contrary, a high metaphorical concentration has not at all become something obsolete or to be “overcome” in our contemporary poetics. One could claim that original metaphoric imagery has in fact continuously provided the measure of permanent value in any literary creation. In the context of the above mentioned “peripheral” poets of minor nationalities, both Juhan Liiv and Jidi Majia excel because of the metaphorical intensity of their philosophically orientated poetry.

In all literary creation, a parallel “infra-other”, rivalling metaphor, but definitely less intense in its effect, has been the application of allegorical or allegorically shaped imagery. In general, allegory is just the opposite of metaphor: it means a forceful imposition of some idea, and very often of morality in the sense of righteous or correct behaviour, in accordance with the established norms, on a society or a community. For that reason, allegory was highly popular in the late European Medieval literature, as well as in the Baroque. The 20th-century expressionism provided allegory with novel individual features, but the essence was still the same. The ideas of a creator, more often than not echoing some contemporary political-ideological current or trend, were forcefully imposed on natural reality.

Allegory is thus definitely more closely related to the traditional reason-based “self” than metaphor. The latter can be viewed as a part of literature’s “infra-other”, representing a strive for natural-biological-generic “otherness”, for freedom and independence, and the individual.

Yet even within the general framework of allegory, the greatest writers of WL have managed to create admirable works expanding allegory's traditional limits and introducing in its reign powerful metaphorical images. Thus Baltasar Gracián, being at the same time one of the outstanding European thinkers and a principal aesthetic theorist of the Baroque, wrote a curious allegorical-symbolist novel *El criticón* (1651–1657), perhaps a forerunner of the modern intellectual-cultural novel. Its allegory, saturated with witty philosophical comparisons and puns, as well as a constant play of intermingling the rational-cultural and the sensual-natural, is by far closer to the modern sensibility, ever open to ambiguities, than John Bunyan's well-known *The Pilgrim's Progress*, published some ten years after Gracián's novel.

In the same fashion, one of the miracles of the Baroque theatre is Pedro Calderón de la Barca's play, *El gran teatro del mundo* (The Great Theatre of the World). The one-act theatrical genre of *auto sacramental* strongly limits its expression. The play is exemplarily allegorical and thus a descendant of the late medieval *moralité* genre, having among its characters, devoid of any individual concreteness, such entities as World, Author (God), King, Richman, Poor, Beauty, Child and Voice, among others. Yet Calderón managed to bring to the theatre scene indeed the entire world and to reflect in World's monologues the major stages of human history, corresponding to the Bible's vision and predicaments, as well as every individual's existential life limits, from birth to tomb. Calderón's vision loses its abstractness because it is trapped within the limits of any individual human life, with its basic passions and aspirations, nobleness and misery.

The same can be said about the work of many later creators, including the Estonian Juhan Liiv, a contemporary of early modernism, and the Yi poet Jidi Majia, coeval of postmodernism. Both can be seen as rebels against the dominating social ideology as well as the aesthetic current of their time, with its origin in the Western centres. Both have a strong propensity to a philosophical vision of the world, as the imperative of ideas is powerful in both.

Yet even when Liiv and Jidi apply allegorically shaped imagery in their poems, they find means by which they manage to escape monologues of an omniscient "self". Instead they catch moments of life in its contrasts, contradictions, change and ambiguity, all of which have to do with sensuous shades of the total image. For me, Liiv has among his outstanding achievements a longer poem without title (its first line beginning: "Kes see vahib vainu pääalta..."), a semi-allegorized vision of the advent of spring. Written in a rhythm pattern very close to the traditional Finno-Ugric folk-poetry, Liiv's poem² shows by means of a series of

² The mentioned poem was published for the first time almost half a century after Liiv's death, in 1953. It has not yet been translated into English or any other foreign

metaphorical images the triumph of Spring, in its supreme beauty and at the same time its sexual cruelty (something that is constantly present, for instance, in the telluric-tragic poems of the Andalusian Federico García Lorca).

In a greater part of his poetry, García Lorca was inspired by late medieval Spanish romances and lyrical folk-song, of which the most notable feature is a loose assonant rhyme, the famous Spanish *rima asonante*. Juhan Liiv did not apply in most of his poems Estonian (that is, Finno-Ugric) folksong's metrics – which does not have rhyme in the traditional sense, but instead forms repetitive sounds by artificial word-endings, relying heavily on alliterations. However, in the above-mentioned poem about spring's advent as well as in some other allegorized poems, like for instance “Mure” (Anxiety) he indeed showed a masterful use the Finno-Ugric folksong's rhythmic pattern.

Curiously enough, the Yi poet Jidi Majia, whose poetry is basically written in free unrhymed verse and has thus followed Western poetics in the vein of Walt Whitman, Pablo Neruda and many others, achieves an analogous wonderfully magic blend of metaphorical allegory (or allegorized metaphor) in his poem titled “Folksong” (which by its use of repetition is also close to ancient traditional poetry, either Chinese, Yi, Spanish or Estonian), insofar as its imagery is utterly concrete and sensual (thus in a way contradicting the essence of allegory).

“Poetry” in Jidi's poem is an allegorized character, embodying and symbolizing love: first a human being, presumably a maid, in the rapture of love, with the traditional harp *kouxian* in her hand. Then in the next stanza it becomes sheep (picked out for copulating – sexual domination by the leader ram). Finally, she is a maid in despair, because human love is much more subtle than mere sexual intercourse. Thus, the poem alludes by its ending to the male tyranny, one of the main causes and sources of tragedy both in nature and in history.

民歌

赶场的人们回家了
可是我的诗没有归来
有人曾看见它
带着金色的口弦
在黄昏路口的屋檐下
喝醉了酒
沮丧徘徊

language – the obvious fate of a significant part of poetry created originally in minority or minor languages. For the most comprehensive selection in English translation of Liiv's poetry to date, see Liiv 2013.

TALVET

坡上的羊儿进圈了
 可是我的诗没有归来
 领头羊曾看见它
 在太阳沉落的时候
 望着流血的山岗
 欲哭无泪
 独自伤感

四邻的乡亲都安睡了
 可是我的诗没有归来
 一个人坐在门前等待
 这样的夜晚谁能忘怀?!

RAHVALAUL

Kõik rahvas on turult koju tulnud
 mu luule aga ei ole tagasi tulnud
 Teda nähti
 õhtuhämus teeristil
 jobnuna
 meeltesegaduses
 kuldne suupill *kouxian* käes

Lambad on mäenõlvalt alla tulnud
 mu luule aga ei ole tagasi tulnud
 Juhtoinas ei lasknud teda kordagi silmist
 kui päike loojus
 Mu luule silmitses veritsevaid mäenõlvu
 hoides tagasi pisaraid
 süda sees murtud

Naabrid magavad juba kõik
 mu luule aga ei ole tagasi tulnud
 Istun värava ette maha ja ootan teda
 Kuis saaksin unustada sellist õhtut?!

(Jidi Majia 2016: 24–25)

FOLK SONG

Folks have all come home from market
 But my poem has not come back
 It was seen drunk
 Pacing heavy-heartedly
 With a golden mouth harp in hand
 Under eaves of a house
 Near a crossroads at dusk

Sheep have come down from the hillside
 But my poem has not come back
 The lead ram caught sight of it
 As the sun edged downward
 It was watching the bleeding hills
 It was past the point of weeping
 Grieving to itself

The neighbours are all asleep
 But my poem has not come home
 I sit at a gate to watch for it
 How could I forget that night?!

(Jidi Majia 2014: 9)

Conclusions

To resume the above said: literary creation as the object of CL, WL and ELC has nearly always achieved its highest perfection by forming a strong moral nucleus in discussing the relations of the traditional “self” to the traditional “other”. More often than not it has taken the side of the weaker – the neglected, the humiliated, the suppressed, the suffering. There is little reason to suppose that the moral criteria of outstanding literary creation would have changed in our time (or would change in the future).

The primary task of all scholars of the mentioned three fields, as far as I can see it, would be to explicate the moral nucleus of literary processes and works. At the same time only by fully including in its discussion the “infra-other” (or aesthetics), CL and ELC can hope to explain satisfactorily why this or that work has been able to make its philosophical message audible far beyond the limited lifetime and the country of origin of their creators, or in other words, why some

works have deserved (and should deserve) to enter the canon of WL and others have failed to do so. The best prepared for this arduous task are quite surely CL scholars, if ever they manage to maintain on the horizon of their studies the “other” in the radical sense, instead of reducing it to a mere fragment of the traditional “self”. There is no reason why CL scholars should not include in their area of research ELC. By doing it they can only corroborate the position of CL in the world’s academia, responding at the same time to one of the major challenges of humanities in our contemporary world.

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