

## Literature as a Moral Laboratory: reading selected 20th century Hebrew prose

ADIA MENDELSON Bar Ilan University Press, 2009

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Ethical literary criticism is the axis around which Adia Mendelson-Maoz's book revolves, applying philosophical theories of ethics to the interpretative practices of literary texts. This study of the relations between literature and philosophy asks what the moral questions arising from the fictional world of literary texts are, how literary texts influence moral convictions and what ethical reading is. These questions inform the study of a selection of Hebrew/Israeli works of the twentieth century, in which ethical issues that Israeli society is engaged with are reflected.

The fictional world that literary works construct lends itself, argues the book, to be used as a "moral laboratory", as the conduct and decisions of characters within their controlled worlds represent a site of human experience from which moral skills can be learned. Literary works present particular cases of complex ethical problems, enabling safe access to experiences beyond our own and the facilitation of empathy. Thus, they can be used to develop not only ethical introspection but also ethical practice. These characteristics of any intuitive engagement with literary texts are conceptualized in the book by an interdisciplinary framework, integrating philosophical theories of ethics and literary aesthetics in order to formalize "ethical reading" as a new method of literary critique. Ethical reading, as the author asserts, expresses responsibility towards the "other" as it emerges in the text and aims to understand how the text itself is constructed as otherness. Reading from this perspective furthers the call for ethical literary criticism, namely the committed engagement of literary critics with the ethical meanings of literature.

The book presents selected principles of ethics in the writings of Aristotle, Kant and Levinas, and corresponding aesthetic paradigms by which literary works could be classified and interpreted within the framework of ethical reading. Thereafter, the book suggests a typology of associations between philosophical theories of ethics and literary forms of narratives. Kantian universal moral categories and the duty to act in compliance with them are associated with literary texts focusing on a specific event or events that call for a moral choice of action. Moral decisions in these cases are not necessarily related to the personality or merits of characters, but to the universal moral imperatives, as for example in war narratives. Aristotelian ethics on the other hand, concerns itself with questions of human virtues as applied to individuals and the manner in which they conduct their life. This form of ethics corresponds to literary works referred to as life stories, namely detailed accounts of characters' personalities, experiences and development, underlined by the quest for a better way of life. Levinas's ethics, perhaps more than the other two philosophical approaches, shift the discussion from the fictional world to the relationship between readers and texts. In the context of Levinas's conceptualization of ethics as the face-to-face encounter with the other, the act of reading constitutes a confrontation: firstly with the otherness that literary texts present through their aesthetic apparatus; secondly with the recognition of otherness within oneself; and finally with the consequential empathy and responsibility it evokes and the ethical stance it calls for.

Three aesthetic paradigms are set alongside the philosophical perspectives: the terrible deed depicting a moral failure, whether subjective or objective, thus deviating

from the Aristotelian terminology which refers to irreversible tragic error (“*hamartia*”); multiplicity of narratives in the Bakhtinian sense; and dissonance as moral conflict.

In the second part of the book the theoretical paradigms are applied to the study of selected Hebrew literary works, arranged in three groups following the three philosophical approaches to ethics: war narratives guided by Kantian ethics; life stories following Aristotelian ethics; and confrontation and otherness relating to Levinas.

A study of the relations between the disciplines of literary criticism and philosophical discourses of ethics is a complex and challenging endeavour. It is difficult to conceive of any literary evaluation, whether intuitive or mindful, which is free of moral and aesthetic conventions or psychological insights. Thus one might question the contribution of the elaborate theoretical framework the book develops to literary critique. Aware of the problematics entailed, the author presents ethical criticism as a departure from the focus of aesthetic literary criticism, which was prevalent until the shift towards deconstruction, feminism and post-colonialism. However, this argument is quite contentious, considering that the rise of Structuralism, New Criticism and Russian Formalism was in itself a revisionist response to common critical practices attending to the biographical and historical background of literary texts, rather than to their aesthetic/linguistic particularities. Modern Hebrew literature in particular was heavily engaged with the ideological commitment, frequently expressed in ethical terms, of authors, readership and critics, from its onset. So much so that any deviation from ideological conventions was and still is immediately noted and named.

The author also acknowledges the possible reductive effect inherent in the attempt to apply well-defined philosophical categories to literary texts that are complex and fluid by nature. Consequently, the discussion of literary works cannot be contained within the philosophical categories it intends to focus on. For example, war narratives contain elements identified as belonging to “life stories”. The rationale for classifying Grossman’s *See: Under Love* and Kaniuk’s *The Last Jew* as “life stories”, whereby Aristotelian ethics is applied, seems quite debatable, since it excludes the historicity of the texts.

Ethical criticism is innovative, as the book argues, due to its emphasis on the moral obligation of readers and critics, following Levinas’s ideas. However, attention should be drawn to the relativity of ethical conventions that affects the expression of this obligation. A more rigorous articulation of the ways in which ethical criticism differs from previous traditions and its actual practices would have highlighted the innovation of the research.

Applying cross categories of ethics to the interpretation of literary works enriches the study of selected Hebrew literary works in the second part of the book. This is especially apparent in the discussion of war narratives, for which three well-known works were chosen: Yizhar’s *Hirbet Hiz’eh* (1949), describing the expulsion of Arab villagers during the 48 war, Brenner’s “The Way Out” (1921), presenting the moral dilemma of the *yishuv* facing the plight of refugees during WW1, and Kaniuk’s *Himmo King of Jerusalem* (1965), confronting the question of mercy killing in the context of war’s casualties. War narratives by definition place the individual in the ultimate confrontation with moral decisions, whether in the midst of the “terrible deed” or its periphery, and written from a contentious perspective, whether they are endorsing the ideological cause of war or subverting it. In this context they are a natural choice for the application of ethical reading, especially of the Kantian categorical imperatives.

Reading these works from a cross-categories viewpoint, combining Kantian with Aristotelian and Levinasian ethics, offers a new insight and depth of understanding. Kantian categories would deem the protagonists of the three works as failing to carry out moral action. However, informed by Levinasian ethics, the encounter with the otherness of war and the ensuing introspection suggests that underlining the Kantian failure is a quest for a better and ethical selfhood in the Aristotelian sense. Thus, the works represent the multifaceted struggle with the realities of war that negates a clear-cut political judgement. Against the background of the ongoing revisions of historiography in Israel, this ethical reading of the works augments the power of literature to question and transform perceptions.

War narratives are clearly defined by their themes and therefore the rationale behind their grouping is self-evident. The selection of works for other groups is less clear, attesting to the fluid nature of literary works in general and perhaps the inadequacy of philosophical categorization as a means of literary classification. This is rather conspicuous in the group classified as “life stories”, considering that a large proportion of literary narratives could have been thus catalogued.

One literary work, A. B. Yehoshua’s *Voyage to the End of the Millennium* (1997), was chosen to illustrate the application of Levinasian ethics. The novel describes the journey of the East into the heart of Europe, revolving around the issue of polygamy and the tragic consequences of its uncompromising rejection by Western/Ashkenazi Jewry. Examined from a Levinasian perspective, the novel is a “face-to-face” encounter of readers with their own otherness, thereby empathizing with the rejected Other in the text. However, it falls short of demonstrating the contribution of this perspective to the existing scholarship on the novel and its cultural/political agenda. This agenda seems to be a more accurate terminology than that of morality, as used in the book. Polygamy, after all, is not a moral but a cultural and legal issue. Nonetheless, using A. B. Yehoshua’s novel and his writing on the power of literature to transform our perceptions and subsequently our moral stance seems to be an appropriate ending for a research calling for ethical criticism.

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### **Gender and Jewish History**

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Today’s scholarly projects in gender studies are wide-ranging and by nature interdisciplinary, much like the essays collected in Marion A. Kaplan and Deborah Dash Moore’s impressive edited volume *Gender and Jewish History*. By means of a transnational approach spanning several centuries, this collection sheds light on many new research perspectives of gender and Jewish studies. Owing to the calibre of its scholarship and