CONTROVERSY

NORBERT GROEBEN

Less Would Be More!

Where the Ethical Intentions of Gregory and Rabinowitz are too good…

In their initial contributions to this controversy, Peter J. Rabinowitz (*JLT* 4:1, 2010) and Marshall W. Gregory (*JLT* 4:2, 2010) criticize the postmodern thesis that ethical criticism is impossible, seeing in it a self-contradictory, self-defeating overgeneralization. They challenge it with the thesis that ethical appraisal is unavoidable in the scholarly analysis of literature. For Gregory, the change in a person that reading brings – which for him is always an ethical effect – is central. Rabinowitz, on the other hand, postulates that reading implies (unavoidable) ›lateral‹ consequences on the plane of social relationships. Both cases, though, also involve an overextended generalization, one that undermines the position of a ›new‹ ethical criticism as much as it reinforces it. A convincing, rational explication of this ethical criticism would need, by turning to various text-types and empirically determined reader-responses, to model not just the possibilities of ethical appraisal but also its limits.

The point where Gregory and Rabinowitz are in complete agreement – as Rabinowitz himself explicitly mentions (2010, 159) – concerns the overextended rejection of ethical judgements in the scholarly analysis of literature in postmodernism and post-structuralism. They argue against the thesis of these movements that ethical judgements are (for a wide variety of reasons; see Gregory 2010, 274 ff.) impossible (not least) in the study of literature and are thus not to be expected of it. In principle, postmodernism takes issue with the traditional expectation that literature be evaluated ethically by referring to the meta-ethical bridge principle that ›should implies can‹. Gregory and Rabinowitz, though, believe that the justification given for why it is a case of ›cannot‹ is a self-defeating generalization. In this respect, Gregory discusses, among other things, the (post-structuralist) explanation that everything is constructed and thus ethically relative – which is indeed open to criticism as the generalization of a relativism that through that generalization becomes a contradiction in itself and thus self-defeating (2010, 275 f., 291 f.). In my view, this criticism is entirely correct. Nonetheless, even at this stage, it must be pointed out that it is not correct to argue in reverse and infer from the

demonstration that ethical judgements can be made the (overgeneralizing) thesis that they universally should be made (see below for details).

The point where Gregory and Rabinowitz take different paths concerns the justification for, and thus the way in which ethical judgements can (and should) be developed in the scholarly analysis of literature. Almost always, the questions of why and how coalesce in their studies; for reasons of space, I concentrate in what follows on the methodological perspective of the ›how‹. Rabinowitz explicitly describes his approach as a consideration of the »social«, »*lateral* dimension« (2010, 159; emphasis in original) of reading that concentrates on the relationship between the last two components of the triad of author/text, reading, and (social) surroundings; Gregory, though, sticks to the better-established ›central‹ route, in which the relationship between author/text and reader is fundamental (2010, 283 ff.). He sees the necessary new beginning for ethical criticism in the generation of rational arguments for the ethical judgements that are made. In his view, traditional literary criticism fails for three reasons to meet this requirement (ibid., 288 ff.): (1) only anecdotal evidence is provided (methodological confusion); (2) lessons drawn (by an individual) are stated, but these are by no means necessarily the only ones possible (intellectual confusion); and (3) the ›right‹ messages that readers should draw from a text are stated normatively (ethical and rhetorical confusion). These three (traditional) shortcomings coalesce in the concept of the ›lessons‹ (drawn by a critic) that tell readers how they are to ethically evaluate a text but do not »ask or discuss with them, how they identify and evaluate the good and bad influences in their lives« (ibid., 289).

His alternative model therefore treats texts as »invitations« to the reader, specifically in three dimensions: feeling, belief, and ethical judgement (ibid., 291). The reader responds by interpreting the perspective represented in the text as a possible »field of reference« – which is an ethical activity: »Assuming another person's field of reference, however, is an *ethical* activity because entering this alternative field of reference actually reconfigures our own« (ibid., 293 f.; emphasis in original). Through reading (as an acceptance of the »invitations« of the text), the reader becomes a »*different* person« (ibid., 296; emphasis in original) – and that cannot but indicate an ethical effect, independently of whether I have become morally better or worse in character as a result (ibid., 298). In my view, though, this model itself represents an (unnecessary) overgeneralization. With regard to the role of the text, this applies to the three postulated dimensions of invitation. There are certainly texts that imply a very strong ›ethical invitation‹ (e.g. Greek tragedy, as well as anti-war novels such as *All Quiet on the Western Front*). Likewise, however, there also exist texts that determinedly avoid making such an invitation – by doing without a positive or negative hero entirely (cf. the theory of the *nouveau roman* and corresponding texts, such as Robbe-Grillet's *Snapshots*, which are concerned primarily with the revitalizing contemplative renewal of objective perception). In such texts, too, the »aesthetic tactics« that Greg-

ory describes are out of place, for they all presuppose an object of identification (ibid., 294 f.). This problem, though, is ›fixed‹ by an overextension of the concept of ›ethos‹: if we look for an explicit definition of ›ethos‹, the first point of reference that presents itself is (unfortunately) no more than a circular definition of ›ethical influence‹, specifically »as *any influence that exerts shaping pressure on one's ethos, on who we become as a result of bending with or internalizing that influence*« (ibid., 297; emphasis in original). From the remarks that contextualize the analysis of the poem (one of which I quoted above), though, it is pretty obvious that any change in a person is viewed as a ›change of personal ethos‹, even if it is only a matter of expanding fields of perception, subsets of knowledge, and so on. This, though, makes it entirely unclear what is *not* ethos: because every input necessarily changes a person in some way, everything and anything is ethos, ultimately making the concept vacuous as a result of this overextension.

The overextension of the concept of ›ethos‹ appears to offer an advantage, specifically that ethical criticism of literary texts (and their reception) becomes inescapable if it is adopted. But this unavoidability of ethical judgements, which Gregory obviously sees as an advantage of his model, itself represents a source of self-contradiction in it, for he thereby falls short of the stipulation cited above that it is necessary to speak to readers in order to clarify what ethical effects are (or indeed are not) to be found in their case. The content of the text, after all, is only an ›invitation‹, a potential effect, from which it is not possible to determine (with certainty) how the text will affect actual readers: *»No one* can ever foresee exactly what sense, meaning, or application of *any* literary content that *any* particular reader may draw from any work, see in any work, or impose on any work« (ibid., 288; emphasis in original). He lays claim to this very foresight, though, with his thesis of the unavoidable ›change of personal ethos‹. In my view, Gregory allows himself to be led astray here, by the overgeneralizing negative thesis of post-structuralism that ethical criticism is impossible, to the opposite generalizing positive thesis that ethical criticism is unavoidable. This is completely unnecessary and does not meet the need for rational argumentation that he himself called for in order to progress beyond the traditional ethical standpoints as is necessary. To annul the post-structuralist thesis of impossibility, it is entirely sufficient to demonstrate that and when ethical criticism is possible and sensible. The justification of ethical criticism becomes – to follow Popper – much stronger if it substantiates when such criticism is appropriate and when it is not, rather than allowing itself to be infected by the virus of post-structuralist overgeneralization and hopelessly overextending its own position. Less would clearly be very much more here.

And the outline of this constructive ›less‹ is, in fact, in my view, laid out entirely convincingly in Gregory's model. On the side of the text, we can and should identify which texts do (or do not) contain an ›ethical invitation‹. And on the side of the reader, we should indeed determine empirically how (more or less ethically) read-

ers react to the proposition of the text. This does not mean making ourselves (completely) dependent on the scholarly analysis of reader-responses when practising ethical criticism: we can certainly still criticize reader-responses as inappropriate to the text (and that in both directions – as cases of unduly ethical or of unduly non-ethical reception). That is to say: even if we take seriously Gregory's original methodological insistence that we should (systematically) observe reader-responses, ethical criticism most certainly still has much terrain to survey – a broad field that is not gained by an ethical criticism whose self-contradictory overgeneralization of concepts brings with it a self-defeating assertion of universality.

According to Rabinowitz, the ›lateral‹ dimension certainly offers a fruitful path for the systematic consideration of reader-responses. Rabinowitz too, though, tries to establish this path as an unavoidable necessity in ethical criticism. For him, it is unavoidable because aesthetic and ethical judgements are inseparable (in contrast to the post-structuralist thesis that aesthetic judgements alone are possible, which assumes that the two classes of judgement can be separated (Rabinowitz 2010, 159 f.)). He sets out the structure of his argument with exemplary clarity; it is based on the following two premises: (1) »*ethics [...] involves relationships among people [...] in particular situations*«, and (2) »*reading is a social activity*« (ibid., 159; emphasis in original). It follows from this that literary criticism must always include a consideration of the consequences of literary reception in its social surroundings, and this means that ethical criticism constitutes an unavoidable subset of such literary criticism. If we accept the premises, the conclusion is indeed unavoidable – but in this case, the overextension of the position lies in the premises. Even the first premise could be criticized as (too) broad, but, for the sake of simplicity, I shall treat it as appropriate in what follows. I do not find myself able to do so with respect to the second premise, though. Here, in my view, Rabinowitz turns the situation and his well-founded conceptual elaboration up to this point on its head. For him, the scholarly interpretation of literature is a solitary act in which concentrating on the aesthetic dimension (and thus evaluation) of a literary work can be possible, while its direct reception always and unavoidably has a social nature (and thus ethical implications; ibid., 160 f.). This classification is incomprehensible from the perspective of the theory of scholarship, because the scholarly interpretation (of literature), of all things, must under all circumstances be designed around discussion with other experts in order that, in the consensus of the knowledgeable, the validity of interpretive theses can be tested. In contrast, it is the intimacy of what is initially only a personal, individual generation of meaning that is much more likely to be associated with direct reception. The distinction between the result and the consequences of an action in the analytic theory of action can and should be considered here. The immediate aim (and result of the act) of textual reception is the (re)construction of a textual meaning; changes (inside) of a person (Gregory – see above) and effects involving communication with their social surroundings (Rabinowitz's ›lateral dimension‹) can then be considered as

the effect or consequences of the meaning arrived at during reception. In German work on teaching literature, these forms of ›lateral‹ communication with a peer group or a (student) study group are subsumed under the heading *Anschlusskommunikation* (›adjoining communication‹), which thus identifies a competence that for many is anything but a matter of course and must instead be acquired with a greater or lesser amount of effort. For this reason, it should be recognized that separating aesthetic and ethical evaluation is at least as clearly possible in the (direct) reception of texts as it is in scholarly interpretations of literature. Certainly: at any rate, it must be conceded that it is possible that a case of reception can operate only on the dimension of aesthetic appraisal and not that of ethical appraisal. Rabinowitz's thesis that we cannot separate aesthetic and ethical judgements must be countered with »No, we can…!«

From this, though, it (again) in no way follows that we should therefore (always and everywhere) do without ethical evaluation/s. Ethical criticism is neither always and everywhere impossible (post-structuralism), nor is it always and everywhere unavoidable (the ›new ethics‹ of Gregory and Rabinowitz). The overextended claim to universality does ethical criticism more harm than good. We certainly can and should undertake ethical evaluations by referring to the potential effects of texts, be they primarily individual (Gregory's ›central‹ dimension) or social ones (Rabinowitz's ›lateral‹ dimension), albeit – and this is the point – depending on whether and how the potential effect of a text actually unfolds on the side of the recipient. That, though, must be determined empirically, for here Gregory is entirely correct in his criticism of traditional ethical criticism: the text has only a *potential* effect from which it is not possible to determine (for sure) how it will actually take effect on actual readers (see above). It is precisely this, though, that both Gregory and Rabinowitz (again) draw conclusions about with their overextended thesis of universality, Gregory with respect to the ›unavoidable‹ change in a person as a result of reading a text, Rabinowitz with the consequences of ›unavoidable lateral‹ communication. If we replace this unnecessary, unjustified, incoherent thesis of universality with the systematic empirical observation of (ethically relevant) textual effects, the justification for ethical criticism is reduced to that core that can indeed convince in the form of the rational argumentation that Gregory calls for. As mentioned above, this core represents such a broad field that there can be no doubt that there is plenty for a ›new‹ ethical criticism to do. One variant, for example, may lie in evaluating ethically by distinguishing between aesthetic and ethical judgements. Only in this way, for example, can we explain that many right-wing texts, because of the musical aesthetics of the songs that transmit them, have a considerable attraction to certain young people and influence their belief system.

In conclusion: a ›new‹ ethical criticism has a much, much stronger position if it abandons the incoherent, overgeneralizing thesis that ethical evaluation is universally unavoidable and develops those areas in which ethical judgements are indeed

rationally justified in the context of the scholarly analysis of literature. This justification should consider the different content (and thus the more or less ethical *potential* effect) of texts just as much as the distinction between dimensions of textual effect (›central‹ or ›lateral‹) – and above all the systematic empirical observation of (ethically relevant) textual effects, in order to be able to undertake ethical evaluations on the basis of them. So that there is no doubt, it must be emphasized again that such reference to empirically observed textual effects does not define scholarly ethical criticism. There can and will be cases in which it is precisely the lack of an ethical response on the side of the reader that should be ethically criticized. By the same token, though, the possibility that texts (in certain contexts of reception) should be evaluated only aesthetically, not ethically, must be acknowledged and elaborated theoretically and methodologically. A ›new‹ ethical criticism will only be able to convince in rational terms when it also models when and why an ethical evaluation is not appropriate.

Norbert Groeben
Seminar für Deutsche Philologie
Universität Mannheim

References

Gregory, Marshall W., Redefining Ethical Criticism. The Old vs. the New, *Journal of Literary Theory* 4:2 (2010), 273–301.

Rabinowitz, Peter J., On Teaching the Story of O. Lateral Ethics and the Conditions of Reading, *Journal of Literary Theory* 4:1 (2010), 157–165.

In: JLT 5/1 (2011), 131–136.