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**POST-KANTIAN AUTONOMIST AESTHETICS AS
APPLIED ETHICS**

**ETHICAL SUBSTRATUM OF PURIST LITERARY
CRITICISM IN 20TH CENTURY**

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Ethical assessment is directed at people's character, motives and actions; yet works are not persons: they have no will, exercise no choices, have no feelings and do not act. So how could an artwork intelligibly be the object of ethical assessment? In assessing it, one is not assessing its actual consequences, nor the morality of its actual author: it is the work that one is assessing.

(Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*)

Abstract

The present thesis is meant to be a study in aesthetic theory and also a study in metacritic and it tries to provide a theoretical approach of the problem of literary criticism's status. In this context, the intention is to offer a pertinent answer to the question "What is literary criticism?" (and the variants: "With which domain of knowledge is it most related?"; "What kind of tools should be used when literary criticism becomes the study object?").

Probably the major weakness of this research comes from the fact that the answer (to all these questions and hence the final solution) had already been determined even before the first line of this paper has been written. That's why in this thesis there is no narrative of a research; there is not a research in progress (like writing as you go). In fact it is rather an attempt to create a proper argumentative structure for a single idea which is present in the paper from the beginning to the end.

The answer I tried to formulate is, as stated in the title, that the field of literary criticism (generally speaking, no matter the theoretical direction or the chosen methods) belongs in fact to the larger field of ethics. In this regard, the conclusion should reach at a very general level which most of the time is difficult to manage in the current practice of demonstration. For that reason I decided further to narrow the area and to cover especially that segment which would usually be the most problematical and would normally raise the biggest number of contra arguments. Therefore I narrowed the research area to the literary criticism which takes the thesis of aesthetic autonomy as theoretical basis and so it is by default in opposition with the very idea of ethical basis of aesthetic judgment. Because of its peculiarities in approaching the literary text and because of its specific answers to the questions about the status of literature and about the role of criticism, this narrow area seems to be in contradiction to my hypothesis. For that reason I believe that if I point out my demonstration strictly for this zone, I could implicitly accomplish the target of generalization which was initially in my intention.

In order to prove this idea I needed two bundles of premisses. The theme of purist (autonomist) criticism which is also ethic (ethical) criticism is tangential to two different theoretical themes (problems), usually approached independently, in two different classes of studies.

Therefore, on one side there is the problem of defining the study object (the literary criticism) by genus proximus and specific difference and in this regard, the attempt to

assimilate the field of criticism to another field already explored and well-organized. Here there were two options: (1) the field of art (in which case literary criticism is seen as a kind of literature) and respectively (2) the field of science (the exact sciences, generally speaking). In the first chapter I reviewed the main arguments for each of the two theoretical approaches which mainly characterize the previous research on this topic. And I also expressed my preference for a third possible answer, namely to assimilate literary criticism to the field of ethics.

In this stage of my proof, the option for a third solution meets (or requires) two lines of reasoning. This is much clear in sub-chapter 4, where I accomplish three case studies. Firstly, the two previous solutions (as science and as art) seems to be inconsistent from the theoretical point of view, since they can be simultaneously applied to the same bundle of texts, but letting, each and every time, a remaining. This means that the texts of literary criticism which explicitly assumes (in the normative register) that they belong to the field of literature or to the one of science, might be proved (in the descriptive register) to belong also to the opposite domain. But the normative stage as well as the descriptive one leaves a remaining. Exactly this remaining is usually the one which makes room for the opposite theory. Sometimes (quite often) the arguments are polemically stated, omitting or delaying to provide the positive arguments necessary (sufficient) in order to positively prove the belonging to a field or another. By choosing a third answer, my intention is also to avoid this strategy and therefore to bring, in the third chapter, some positive arguments, instead of the rather negative (polemical) proof.

In the second bundle of required premises is all about the ethic – aesthetic dichotomy and about the established solutions to this problem. Thus, in the second chapter I briefly approach this problem, insisting on the recent debates about the reconsideration of the relationship between ethic and aesthetic and thus about the possible resurgence of ethical criticism which could reconnect the literary theory with the pre-autonomist stage of ethical criticism and ethical aesthetic theory. In this point, I notice that the two moments in the history of discipline are not similar, they should not overlap. Because of its different theoretical basis and terminology, the pre-autonomist ethicism can never be the same with the post-autonomist ethicism, as the new ethicist wave (which is also explicitly anti-autonomist) claims to be. My proposal in regard with this problem is that the contemporary ethical aesthetics could or should include the autonomist movement in its theoretical background (even if only as a kind of autonomist stage of ethicism), if its intention is to restore the

ethicist movement (or solution). A consistent part of this chapter is dedicated to the problem of kantian heritage which, paradoxically, is interpreted and claimed by both theoretical directions, providing arguments for autonomism as well as for ethicism. By accounting this deadlock, I already suggest the solution which will be provided in the next chapter. This double usage of Kant's thesis (to support the autonomist ideas and to defend the ethical art criticism or the moral theory in art) make some philosophers to admit that the two movements (autonomism and ethicism) might have something in common, they might not be that different as we usually believe they are.

This is mainly the theoretical path I chose to follow in the third chapter where I sum up the provisory conclusions of the two previous chapters and I try to provide positive arguments to prove not only the possible link between ethicism and autonomism, but also their coincidence. For this reason I approached themes such as: the autonomy of literary text seen as the autonomy of a moral subject, freedom and responsibility (the problem of free will) in the practice of reading and interpretation, the idea of aesthetic value seen as moral value in the light of the aesthetic intention which is fundamental for the mere existence of a work of art, the aesthetic equivalent of the concept of evil, the critical relationship and the condition of the text as alterity, as a subject created (conceived) by similitude and dialog, and not as a mere object etc.

A very important aspect on which I often insist in the present paper is my demarcation from that peculiar literary criticism which explicitly applies moral theories in the field of aesthetics. First of all, since I narrow my field of study to the literary criticism which has obvious autonomist basis, this zone of moral criticism does not fit with the area of my interest (or if and when it does, it is only incidentally). On the other side, by developing the proof for the coincidence between aesthetic autonomy and ethicism, I actually suggest that this segment of literary criticism (namely the ethical or moralist one) does not follow most of the requirements of ethical aesthetics.

The final theoretical formula (which is the conclusion of this study) is that aesthetics, especially the autonomist branch, equates to ethics. This is even easier to prove if we have in mind especially the new metaethics, instead of some traditional ethical system, be it a prescriptive, normative or descriptive one. In this regard, the aesthetic theory equates to metaethics, while the current practice of literary criticism, of textual hermeneutics, equates to applied ethics and embodies a peculiar ethical movement or another.

In my thesis I didn't approach these aspects, I didn't study the actual connection between certain patterns in (autonomist/ purist) literary criticism and certain movements or directions in ethics (such as utilitarianism, Kantianism, casuistry etc.). The only proofs about the literary criticism as applied ethics were thematic proofs provided by commenting on the strong similitudes at the thematic level. I should have also done few case studies to assess how a peculiar ethic theory (utilitarianism for instance) can be find as a general structure of judgment in the applied esthetics, in literary criticism. This kind of approach was included in my initial project. But the theoretical argumentation (the first two chapters) grew up more than it was expected and I never reached to this part of my plan (this being definitely a weakness of my thesis).

Keywords: kantianism, aesthetic autonomy, art for art, literary criticism, ethics, moral criticism, ethical ctiricism, metaethics