

Text in Western Literary Theories

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Abstract—In various trends of western literary theories, text is always the one that literary theorists could be left out, especially after the turn of Linguistics. This paper delves into the fate of text under three major western literary theories, namely, New Criticism, Structuralism and Cultural Criticism. Individual text is being the center by the new critics, while a set of texts are discussed by structuralists. And cultural critics take text as a way to discuss politics. Furthermore, merits and drawbacks of their ways to deal with text will be mentioned in this paper. This research concludes that once text is created, its fate is out of control and it is literary theorists that decide text's fate and then support their own ideas. And for contemporary literary theorists or critics in China, what needs to be done is to make a detailed analysis of the history and theoretic configuration of western literary theories on the basis of Chinese literary background, and then make effective interpretations and criticism.

Keywords: *text, New Criticism, Structuralism, Cultural Criticism*

I. INTRODUCTION

Text covers not only traditional literary forms like fictions, poetry, drama, but also monuments, dress style, music, etc. The interpretation of literary works depends on the literary theories; likewise, the development of literary theories couldn't leave literary texts. The international scholar Li Oufan stated that literary theories are much more like heroes, and literary texts are like castles...After three days' battle, to the heroes' astonishment, the "castle" stands still, however, the heroes are wounded. Therefore, "castles" couldn't be defeated by any "heroes". [1] The whole castle couldn't be attacked, but parts of it could be. Further, heroes could decide the ways they attack the castle. That is, literary theories could decide the fate of texts, which either are laid to be the center or the marginality. Instead of "textuality", "text" is largely discussed in this paper. Moreover, "literary theories" only aims at "western literary theories", particularly three major literary theories after the turn of Linguistics in literary criticism in the 1930s.

II. TEXT UNDER NEW CRITICISM

Before New Criticism, there are mainly two types of traditional critical approaches to literature, the Historical-

biographical and the Moral-philosophical. Put simply, the former sees a literary work chiefly, if not exclusively, as a reflection of its author's life and times or the life and times of characters in the work. [2] Author is treated as "father" of "text", that is, author plays a decisive role in a literary work. And this is strongly influenced by positivism, which put its emphasis on the relationship between literature and history. Thus, the aim of this approach is to acquire the knowledge of history, or learn about the author with the spirit of the age. The basic position of the latter approach is to teach morality, like principles in Horace's *Poetica Arts*, and to inquire philosophical issues. In short, text is laid in a marginal area in the traditional literary theories, which guides critics to their destinations and then be casted away.

In the early 20th century, the traditional approaches collapsed with the discredit of positivism. And by the end of WWI, various poets experimenting with form and language and it's hard to judge of read their poetry on the basis of old literary criticism. Later in the 1920s, a new criticism started in Britain, which stressed on the coordination of reason and sensibility, rather than "reason" only as what old/traditional literary critics did. Then the literary movement flourished in the 1940s and 1950s in the American literary circle, either in literary creation or literary critics. In *The New Criticism* (1941), John C. Ransom's named T. S. Eliot and Richards as "New Critics", who distinguished from those old/traditional critics like Samuel Johnson. Since then, the new criticism derived its name as New Criticism. And T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, William Epton, etc. were among the forerunners and tycoons of New Criticism.

Formalists always keep away from probing into the content and the relations among literary text, history and society. However, the emergence of New Criticism was in great association with historical and cultural factors. After WWII, the rapid growth of capitalist economy made a change of the relationship between man and man, also man and the world. T. S. Eliot, one of the pioneers of New Criticism, deemed that Southern Agrarians responded to Northern pressure in a correct way, and coal, petro, steels, factories, etc. changed the relations between man and the world. Moreover, aesthetics by Henri Bergson, Benedetto Croce, etc. had great influence on New Criticism. As a formalist movement, New Criticism kept conservative in

many ways, which distinguished from the formalists in the 19th century and structuralists in later period. Like T. S. Eliot, the New Critics attempted to seek for eternal values in a changing world, which propelled the New Critics to find the “fixed” values in literary texts, particularly in poetry.

As a literary movement, it is less a coherent literary theory than a congeries of critical and theoretical approaches all of which agree that the literary work is AUTONOMOUS, that its unity and meaning are constituted primarily by formal and rhetorical features, and that it is free from any burden of reflection on the social world in which it is produced or from any connection to the author who produces it. [3] In other words, new critics considered that text was the absolute center while interpreting literary works and any attempts to read literary works beyond themselves would be futile. In literary practice, they kept distance from “outer” issues like social backgrounds, life of author, readers’ response, moral judgment, etc. Instead, they focused solely on diction, rhetoric, rhyme scheme, pauses and so on, or “close reading” as they named it. New Critics did a great deal of “close readings”, particularly of poetry and short fictions. Cleanth Brooks’ *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* devoted to close reading of poems by John Donne, William Shakespeare, Alexander Pope, T. S. Eliot, etc. Moreover, Brooks displayed attentiveness to nuances and interrelation of the language and form which contribute to the work’s complete unity in the book, which became the classics for theories and practices of literary criticism for New Criticism. Focusing on ambiguity, paradox, irony, and the effects of connotation and poetic imagery, the New Criticism sought to show the contribution of each element of poetic form to a unified structure. [4] All in all, Anglo-American New Critics attached much significance to text until the emergence of literary theories like Structuralism.

As the first major shift in the early 20th century, New Critics made pathbreaking contributions to a new trend of literary criticism, that is, text was firstly laid at the center of literary criticism, which broke away from the old approaches completely. Furthermore, New Critics did lots of readings of literary critics, setting paradigms for the later literary critics. However, there are also some negative sides of New Criticism. New Critics isolated literary text with author and reader, and other works, leading to its decline in the 1970s. In the subsequent trends of literary criticism, the critics overcame the constraints of New Criticism, particularly the sole focus on individual text, studied readings and receptions, and surpassed New Criticism.

III. TEXT AFTER THE TURN OF STRUCTURALISM

In the 1960s and 1970s, structuralism attracted intellectuals who had lost confidence in different kinds of humanism for its rationalism and scientism, after long dominance of existentialism in French intelligentsia. However, structuralism had a long history in Europe, which could date back to early 1900s, mainly in France and Russian Empire. Furthermore, modes of apprehending the world changed a lot for the intellectuals’ emphasis on system and

whole. The burgeoning subject like system theory, information theory and cybernetics had great impact on science technology and ways of thinking. In the context of society and natural science, rationalism and macro vision grew quite important in structuralism. Furthermore, structuralism is a type of reasoning which applied into a range of fields, like anthropology, psychology, sociology, literary criticism, etc.

As is well known, a structuralist approach was introduced into linguistics quite early due to the influence of Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics*, and it was not long before members of the Prague linguistic circle, Roman Jakobson and Jan Mukařovský, began to apply it to the poetic use of language and the complex wholes of literary works of art. [5] Saussure is widely recognized as one of the forefathers of Structuralism, while Jakobson initially interpreted poems with structuralism theory. Then, structuralists like Roland Barthes, Algernon Julien Greimas, Gérard Genette, etc. flourished in literary circle and became backbones as structuralism literary critics in France, while Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Michael Foucault and Levi-Strauss were called four tycoons of structuralism. Structuralism sprung up in France, but spread to the whole Europe, America, even Soviet Union, Japan, etc. Though different strategies were employed by different structuralists in various countries, all of them focused on the deep discourse structure instead of a surface one. And structural poetics, narratology and semiotics are sub ranches of structuralism in literary criticism.

In his *Course in General Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure treated “langue” and “parole” the most basic linguistic unit. However, the former is not the assemble of “parole”, but a system in that it has a large number of elements whereby meaning is created in the arrangements of its elements and the consequent relationships between these arranged elements. Therefore, literary criticism influenced by Saussure’s structural linguistics put more focus on the structure and function of literary discourses, instead of the individual literary text.

As a new formalist theory, text is still in the center of theory or literary criticism. Structuralists rejected the “closed reading”, instead, they treated the literary world as a “closed” whole, and then searched for a deeper macro structure instead of a micro one. What structuralists wish to do was to generalize a/some mode(s) of all literary phenomena rather than close reading of an individual literary text. E.g. In *Morphology of the Folktale*, Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp, a Soviet folklorist and scholar, made an analysis of the basic structural elements of Russian folk tales to identify their irreducible structural units. He paid no attention to details or arts of those folk tales, but made devotions to find out the common structural patterns, then induced different types of men and their relations. Similar to Propp, structuralists cared nothing about the plot or story of a single text, but its forms, so they can be called formalists either. Moreover, structuralists considered literary text as an independent and closed system, which is similar to New Criticism, and they

rooted out factors beyond literary text like history, author, morality, philosophy, etc.

Emphasis was put on the macro structure of text by structuralists, which left the detailed analysis of individual text in literary criticism. However, that also becomes its shortcoming, that is, the specific literary text is only the route to findings of general laws, rules and patterns of discourse of literary works as a genre. Or, the individual literary text is out of structuralists' sight. You will see that your structuralist 'approach' to it is actually taking you further and further away from the text, and into large and comparatively abstract questions of genre, history, and philosophy, rather than closer and closer to it, as the Anglo-American tradition demands. [4] Meanwhile, the artistic beauty of text is neglected. If we can say that literary criticism was confined to history, philosophy and author, which led to the neglect of literary text before 20th century. After that, literary text is brought to full attention like New Criticism and Structuralism, while factors like author, history and readers are completely excluded from literary criticism.

In the late 1960s post-structuralism emerged in France. Some scholars maintain that post-structuralism is a continuation and development of structuralism, while others believe that it's a form of rebellion against it. They share some similarities, while they also make some differences. Roland Barthes is one of the two key figures with post-structuralism. Barthes once was a structuralist, whose essay "The Structural Analysis of Narrative" (1966) kept account of his structural ideas. Then came the crucial essay 'The Death of the Author' (1968) which is the 'hinge' round which Barthes turns from structuralism to post-structuralism. In that essay he announces the death of the author, which is a rhetorical way of asserting the independence of the literary text and its immunity to the possibility of being unified or limited by any notion of what the author might have intended, or "crafted" into the work. [6] Hence, text is still the focus of post-structuralists, but it's not the authority any more. In the other key post-structuralist, Jacques Derrida's book *Of Grammatology*, the slogan is "There is nothing outside the text". Text is quite independent from its author or context, but its readers. In post-structuralism, texts are shown to be fragmented, self-divided, and centerless.

IV. TEXT UNDER CULTURAL CRITICISM

On the whole, New Criticism and structuralism are formalism criticism, which downplay ways to interpret literary works from the outer factors like society, history, author and reader, but stress the importance of forms and language of literary texts. Contrary to scientism protested by structuralists, cultural critics doubted science technology and its scientism, that is, modernity. By the end of 1970s, cultural studies were introduced into literary criticism, and were named "cultural criticism", which became the main trend rather than formalism. Factors beyond literary text were absorbed into cultural criticism and have been growing into the main branch of literary criticism in the contemporary era. However, cultural criticism didn't emerge in the end of 1970s, but came into view as the result of capitalism, urban

life and print culture. Moreover, capitalist consumerism and cultural crisis in the 1970s and 1980s had great influence on cultural criticism. The development of Marxism, Semiotics, structuralism and cultural anthropology became important theoretical sources for cultural criticism.

Cultural criticism doesn't mean a specific or fixed literary criticism. On the one hand, cultural criticism includes feminism, Marxism, new historicism, postcolonialism, etc. For its absorption of literature, society, nation, history and politics, cultural criticism is affected by various trends of thought, and has an interdisciplinary, strategic, critical, political and practical distinction, which means cultural criticism isn't confined to the interpretation of an individual literary text, but moves towards cultural studies. Nowadays, the studies of cultural studies and cultural criticism are correlative dependence, interplay and moves towards a new direction. On the other, cultural criticism witnesses different developments in different periods, e.g. the Hermeneutics turn put forward by American anthropologist Clifford Geertz in the 1970s, the Performance turn by Victor Turner in his *Anthropology of Performance* in the 1980s, the translation studies, cultural memory study, spatial turn, ecologic turn and transcultural turn since the 1990s. For the emergence of different cultural theories since the 1970s, there has been great shift in cultural criticism.

The idea of Text is extended to a larger section influenced by cultural studies. Besides the traditional paper text, films, TV programs, songs, advertisement, cultural phenomenon, etc. can be the research subject of cultural criticism. E.g. biographies, souvenirs, archives, ceremonies, celebrations, etc. could be read in the perspective of New Historicism. A common criticism of Cultural Studies is that it regards literary and cultural texts as pretexts for the study of culture as such. The text is therefore, as Richard Johnson argues, "only a means in cultural study." It is "no longer studied for its own sake... but rather for the subjective or cultural forms which it realizes and makes available". [7] Feminist literary critics not only take paper text as their focus, but also take films, TV serials or programs, advertisements, even females' social conditions and movements. And Spivak's subaltern studies group employed females' social conditions in the Third World as their research focus, then made in-depth investigation and analysis of them, and considered that women in the third world are oppressed both by western white anthropocentrism and local patriarchal discourse. Therefore, their image was distorted and defamed, and even they couldn't make their voice aloud, which made women in the third world be the "voiceless" ones.

In contrast with New Criticism and Structuralism which emphasized on diction, narratology, structure of text, cultural criticism stressed more on issues beyond text, such as politics, history, women, ecology, etc. However, text still plays a vital role in cultural criticism. E.g. in Edward Said's analysis of postcolonial discourse, literary works by Joseph Conrad, Gustave Flaubert, Jane Austen, etc. were the main focus. Cultural critics don't consider literary texts as self-consistent, and their goal is not to expose texts' aesthetics or literariness. Instead, they concentrate on the hidden

relationship between culture and power in the process of production, consumption, collection and preservation. Thus, cultural criticism owns clear political aims, which was a very consequence of social changes. The personal and local are becoming the focus of cultural critics, who make connections with history, economy, and culture in a wider sense. Literary feminists take films, TV serials, songs, etc. as their research focus and study the male chauvinism, patriarchy and Phallogocentrism in media text. Cultural criticism doesn't deviate from traditional literary criticism, but be a way to question and supplement to New Criticism and Structuralism, which clung too much to literary text, and a natural extension of traditional literary criticisms.

Since 1990s, cultural criticism has been flourishing for a long time and is still the dominance of contemporary literary criticism. And it enlarges the horizon of literary theory, social text gradually be the study object of literary research. For instance, the long neglected females, colonized, and the mass are becoming research focus of literary critics. Mechanisms of class, patriarchy, imperialism, and orientalism started to come into view. However, cultural critics put too much emphasis on politics in the production, communication, etc. of literary texts, then they ignore forms and content of texts, such are "literariness" and aesthetics.

V. CONCLUSION

From the perspective of western literary theories, once text was created, its fate was out of control and it is literary theorists that decide text's fate and then support their own ideas. But literary theorists seem to neglect the activeness and revolt, even some modernists and postmodernists rejected interpretations of their works from some -isms or theories. As for China, western literary theories have been employed by contemporary literary critics. The introduction of western literary theories started in the early 20th century by the mainland scholars, then in the 1980s, more literary theories were introduced. Therefore, in the 1990s, some scholars criticized that Chinese literary critics suffered from "aphasia", which means that there was no originality or creation of Chinese literary theory, but only an imitation of western literary critics. Nowadays, fates of literary texts in China are quite similar to texts in the west. And for contemporary literary theorists or critics in China, what we should do is to make a detailed analysis of the history and theoretic configuration of western literary theories on the basis of our Chinese literary background, and then make effective interpretations and criticism.

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