



New Viewpoint on Readers' Reception in Formalist Literary Theory

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Abstract

Formalist Literary Theory is an important link in the development process of the research focus of western literary theory from the author to the reader. Formalist Literary Theory advocates the independence and self-sufficiency of literature, trying to cut off the connection between works and external society, including authors and readers, and establishes an independent and systematic literary science in centripetal criticism centered on the language form of works. However, it is only a theoretical assumption that literature can be independent completely from factors other than works, and literature can not exist without the subject of acceptance. This paper attempts to make a systematic and in-depth analysis and summary of the readers' acceptance of Formalist Literary Theory, and discusses its theoretical gains and losses from the perspective of the development of literary theory.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

Formalist, Literary Theory, Readers' Acceptance, Literary Review

1. Introduction

Generally speaking, Formalist Literary Theory refers to a school of literary theory with strong worship of form or a tendency of emphasizing form over content, from Aestheticism and Symbolism to Russian Formalist Literary Theory, British and American new criticism, and then to Semiotics, Structuralist Literary Theory and Post-structuralist Literary Theory. Its peak period was from 1920s to 1950s and 1960s, Formalist literary theory has been moving towards self termination in its development process. The Western formalist literary theory represented by

Russian Formalist Literary Theory, British and American New Criticism and French Structuralism is not only an important context of the development of Western Literary Theory in the 20th century, but also an important link in the development process of the research focus of western literary theory from the author to the reader. In the context of aesthetic modernity, the formalist schools that appear with the independence of art and aesthetic field advocate the independence and self-sufficiency of literature, try to cut off the connection between works and external society, including authors and readers, and establish an independent and systematic literary Science in centripetal criticism centered on the language form of works. However, it can only be a theoretical assumption that literature is completely independent of factors other than works, and literature can not exist without the acceptance subject (Ren Hujun, 2005) [1]. Therefore, formalist literary theory inevitably involves the reader factor of literature and implies a unique thought of artistic acceptance. For example, the “Defamiliarization” of Russian Formalist Literary Theory is relative to the feelings of readers, and the “Defamiliarization” of literary form is ultimately based on the feelings of readers. Similarly, the literary view of the ontology of new criticism works and the semantic analysis method under the command of this literary view is based on the premise of reading and acceptance of literary works, revealing the implicit purpose of finding a fixed order of literary reading. Structuralist literary theory also establishes a “super reader” and endows this reader with the important task of reading the literary structure model. From the perspective of mathematical reasoning, the author can also explain that formalist literary theory inevitably involves the reader factor of literature.

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{The significance of the work} &= \text{the meaning of the text} + \text{the reader} \\
 &= \text{constant value} + (-\infty, +\infty) \\
 &= (-\infty, +\infty) \\
 &= \text{a meaningless value}
 \end{aligned}$$

As we all know, the significance of works mainly depends on the text’s meaning and the reader. Because the text meaning is an objective entity, its value is a fixed value. However, in the eyes of a thousand readers, there are a thousand Hamlets, and its assessed value is uncertain. It is an interval value from negative infinity to positive infinity, and the sum of the two is a meaningless value. Then the final result is that the meaning of the work is meaningless, which is obviously unreasonable. Therefore, we only need to focus on the definite value, that is, only the meaning of the text itself. However, part of the text’s meaning comes from the interpretation of readers, so the evaluation of the meaning of works is essential for the consideration of readers.

It can be seen that Formalist Literary Theory can not completely seal literature into an airtight iron box. Moreover, “although works of art should be regarded as a closed system, what constitutes works of art depends on the social and historical environment (Victor Erlich, 1955) [2].” What’s more, how can the literary “technique” excluding the recipient or the subject of criticism be felt and

recognized? Without the acceptance and research of works as a pillar, how can the literary theory building of Formalist Literary Theory be established? In fact, many propositions of formalist literary theory hide the inextricable connection between literature and the real world, and reserve a place for the recipients of literature. It can even be said that the establishment of formalist literary theory can not leave the dimension of readers' acceptance.

In the development of western literary theory, Formalist Literary Theory inherits traditional literary theory and reception aesthetics. Its unique readers' acceptance directly opens the era for readers. Here comes the significance and purpose of this research. Through the research on the readers' acceptance thought in the two representative schools of Formalist Literary Theory, this paper aims to deepen the understanding of Western formalist literary theory, and strengthen and deepen the weak links in the current research on the reader acceptance thought in Formalist Literary Theory. It also provides some theoretical resources for the dialogue of relevant theoretical discourse of Chinese and Western literary theory and the construction of contemporary Chinese literary theory.

2. Readers' Acceptance in Formalist Literary Theory

In the context of aesthetic modernity, "Formalist Literary Theory" is in the efforts to attribute the literariness of literature to language form and pursue scientific literary research and attempts to eliminate the factors of authors and readers and advocate the absolute independence of literature. However, it is self contradictory to talk about the nature of the object by excluding the receiving subject, and the work itself as the object cannot be completely separated from the reader and become literature. In fact, many viewpoints of formalist literary theory imply the problem of readers' acceptance, which reserves a place for readers. Starting from the core literary viewpoints of the two representative schools of Formalist Literary Theory, this chapter discusses the readers' acceptance thought behind the independence and self-sufficiency of form.

2.1. Readers' Acceptance in Russian Formalist Literary Theory

All the efforts of Russian formalist literature research can be attributed to the exploration of "literariness". Then, what is literariness? In the words of Russian formalists, literariness as the object of literary research is the characteristic that makes a specific work become literature. In this way, another problem comes one after another, because to talk about characteristics, we must compare literature with non-literature. At the same time, literariness is expressed through the language of the works. Therefore, the question, what is literariness, becomes the difference between literary language and ordinary daily language from the same dictionary. In the view of Russian Formalist Literary Theory, language in daily life mainly plays the functions of communication and information transmission. Language does not have an independent status and exists only as a reference of things outside itself. In literary language, the communicative function is replaced

by the aesthetic function, and language has become an independent and self-sufficient signifier system with aesthetic value. The consideration and research of Russian Formalist Literary Theory on literature starts from exploring the characteristics of literary language different from daily language, and puts forward its most core theoretical concept “Defamiliarization”. The concept of “Defamiliarization” is a new word created according to the Russian word formation in the paper *The Resurrection of Words* published by Shklovsky, the leader of the Russian Formalist Literary Theory movement in 1914. Its main meaning is to make it strange and unusual, and completely different from what we are familiar with. In Shklovsk’s view, the Defamiliarization technique is that he doesn’t refer to things by their names, but describes them like things he sees for the first time, just like things that happen for the first time. At the same time, the name he uses when describing things is not the name of the common part of the thing. It’s called like the corresponding part of something else. In other words, “Defamiliarization” is to make things take off the old language coat worn in daily communication and put on new clothes. It can be seen that Russian Formalist Literary Theory does not generally transfer the object of literary research from the external factors of literary works to the words constituting literary works, but focuses on the procedures and skills of “Defamiliarization” language. The standard of defamiliarization still refers to the old names or expressions of things outside the language. This shows that this school has not completely cut off the relationship between language and the object. Although strangeness is applied to literary language in the direct sense, this treatment of language should point to the non-verbal existence referred to by language in the final analysis.

It can be said that in an indirect sense, the purpose of “Defamiliarization” is to liberate things from the state of being enslaved by daily language, and present their original face in a new way in the deformed language (Huang Nianran, 2016) [3]. In fact, this theory is the same as Heidegger’s thought that “language is the home of being”. The earth is locked by itself. Only language can make the earth into the open and clear field as an existential. If there is no language, there will be no openness between stones and all animals and plants. The above analysis shows that the connotation and characteristics of “Defamiliarization” do not completely stay at the level of language, but are still closely related to foreign objects. Both “old names” and “new names” point to other objects other than the names composed of language, and all things can be displayed only in language, in literature. The customary language of describing things has been replaced by a newly organized language that has never referred to the thing. In other words, in literature, the relationship between the signifier and the signified, and the relationship between language and real life have been replaced by the way language creates experience of things. In Li Bai’s poem *Lodge in a Temple on the Hill for the Night*, the towering temple architecture in the eyes of ordinary people completely presents another novel appearance: *The towering building, a hundred ells high; I can almost pick the stars with hands bare. To speak aloud I really do not*

dare, Afraid to disturb people living in the sky. Extreme exaggeration is far from the referential meaning of ordinary discourse, but it makes the mountain temple directly enter an open and clear field as an existential. The function of literature is to free people from the abstract and stereotyped cognition of things, from the cognitive state paralyzed by this habitual cognition, to experience and feel the complex life world in an intuitive way, and to enjoy this difficult experience process in the presentation of abnormal things. The Important information revealed by Shklovsky is that the deformation of language cannot obtain judgment or speech without being separated from the receiver. It is in this way that “Defamiliarization” not only emphasizes language change, but also revives the world in the changing language. Whether it is to make the language strange or to make things open and clear in the language depends on feeling. Without the subject of feeling and experience, there is no so-called Defamiliarization or no Defamiliarization.

2.2. Readers’ Acceptance in British and American New Criticism

Throughout the whole development process of British and American new critical literary views and literary criticism methods, although their school members and theoretical views are complex and controversial on some theoretical issues, the fundamental direction of their efforts is the same, that is, to establish the ontological status of literary works from the centralized research of literary language. However, the works as the ontology and the language characteristics of the works cannot be proved by the works themselves, but must be the ontology that has a relationship with the readers and the language characteristics that enter the readers’ acceptance. Therefore, the reader factor is an indispensable existence in the ontological activities from beginning to end. As the whole literary view of the new criticism, the “work ontology” actually talks about the work ontology from the perspective of readers. A result of the literary research of the new criticism is to establish a normative system for literary reading and acceptance. In the defense of the ontology of works by the new critics, Wimsatt and Beardsles put forward “intention fallacy” and “feeling fallacy”. The former inherits Eliot’s “non-personalization”, and the latter means that in literary activities, readers’ response is the most changeable and unreliable factor, and the effect of literary object is the most important to readers in different times. Therefore, literary criticism should exclude this uncertain reader and focus on the work itself. Although the “feeling fallacy” is the product of the New Critics’ opposition to the previous “impression criticism”, it is also a theoretical summary of Wimsatt and Beardsles’ dissatisfaction with the “ideal readers” of the early representatives of the new critics, because in their view, the so-called “ideal readers” are still different readers, and there is still no objective standard for literary criticism. Therefore, the urgent task is to find a fixed “normative system” for such different readers. “Poetry is a way to fix emotions, which can also be said to be a way for readers from generation to generation to feel their feelings.” Wimsatt

wrote more clearly in his later period poetry can stand thinking, criticism and judgment; it is materialized into an object. Don't think that poetry should reach the impossible perfection or metaphysical standard of absolute entity. It's foolish to require poetry to have a hardness or self-sufficiency. It can be seen from Wimsatt that the judgment of poetic aesthetic value cannot become a castle in the air without the support of readers' acceptance. Even in the hard rejection of readers by "feeling fallacy", the ontological status of literature can only be obtained from readers' reading.

3. Evaluation and Analysis of Readers' Acceptance in Formalist Literary Theory

Readers are essential elements of a complete literary activity. In a sense, the development process of Western literary theory from external research to internal research and then to external research, and the research focus from the world and author to the text and to the reader is the process of reader factors from passive to active and from implicit to explicit. Formalist literary theory, which is in the middle of this development process, inherits traditional literary theory and enlightens reception aesthetics. It can be said that Formalist Literary Theory places the focus of literary research on works, which is creating conditions for the arrival of the era of literary appreciation and acceptance, and its preset "ideal readers" also breed the factors of creative readers who talk with the text (Huang Nianran, 2016) [4]. At the same time, the pursuit of artistic independence and self-sufficiency in formalist literary theory is to pay attention to the uniqueness of art different from secular life, and endow art forms with criticism and resistance to daily stereotyped life.

3.1. To Fill the Interpretation Gap of Readers' Acceptance in Traditional Literary Theory

Any existence is an objective existence and an existence in the relationship with other things (Leonard Jackson, 1991) [5]. As a cultural product of mankind, literary works must naturally exist in the object relationship with the subject, that is, with the reader. Whether or not entering the central vision of literary theory, readers are an indispensable and important factor in literary activities, the undertaker of the ultimate significance of literature, and the cornerstone of the establishment of literary theory.

Formalist Literary Theory gives all the attention of literary research to the language form of literature without stinging. We should ask what is "real" literature from the form itself, so as to require its preset ideal readers to be also literary receivers who are engrossed in the formal characteristics of literature and have the ability to recognize this characteristic (Simon Eliot and W.R. Owens, 1998) [6]. In traditional literary theory, readers are the recipients of the content of literary works, that is, the stories told or the emotions expressed. They should obtain mental inspiration, knowledge accumulation and moral education from

literary works, move from backwardness to civilization through the acceptance of literary works, or take literature only as a tool of entertainment, The form and technique of literature can be passed through by readers like a transparent glass. The focus of formalists' literary research is the language form of literature itself. In their view, the foreign objects reflected or expressed in literature are insignificant as non literary things, and the "literariness" of literature is in the language form of literature itself. Therefore, what readers need to pay attention to and understand is the formal methods of literature. There seems to be no fault in the one-sided emphasis on the acceptance of readers' literary content in the traditional literary theory. Which foreign wanderer can not be reminded of a trace of homesickness when reading Li Bai's *Meditation on a Quiet Night*, completely forget the poems and immerse himself in homesickness? How many young women feel sorry for this sad love after reading *The Troubles of Young Witt*? How many people read *Homer's Epic* without any desire to understand the war stories of ancient Greece? In the impulse of human beings to understand historical events and people's feelings of love and hate, sadness and joy, the form and technique of literature may only be a bridge that can be removed after crossing the river. However, the reading acceptance of literature ignores the formal factors and gives unlimited emphasis to the literary content, which will lead to a series of problems. Why can't historical works with full and accurate records of historical events replace historical novels? Is there a work that praises love enough? Are there any good or bad differences in many works with patriotic theme? Compared with a poem expressing sadness, it also contains emotion and even releases more emotional crying. Why can't it be included in the scope of literature? Obviously, such problems can not be solved in the readers' acceptance of traditional literary theory, and the readers' reception thought of formalist literary theory emphasizes the attention to literary forms and techniques, which can provide an answer to these problems.

3.2. To Promote the Emergence of Readers' Acceptance

In addition, Formalist Literary Theory not only paves the way for the development of aesthetics and literary theory as a subverted object, but also provides rich nourishment for Reception Aesthetics with its readers' acceptance thought, and directly promotes the emergence of Reception Aesthetics (Zhang Yonggang, 2009) [7]. It can be said that the "implied readers" and their "horizon of expectation" and appreciation level, which can realize the potential significance of literary works, are the further development of the "defamiliarization" feeling ability, semantic analysis ability and mastery ability of literary structure that the ideal readers of formalist literary theory should have (Mark Jancovich, 1993) [8]. Of course, the acceptance ability of readers in formalist literary theory is still limited. The ideal readers preset by the three schools are only those who are particularly good at some literary form. For example, the readers of Russian Formalist Literary Theory are only the readers of unfamiliar poetry, and the readers

of new comments in Britain and America are only the detailed readers of dialectical works. The readers of French structuralism are the preference of narrative works.

4. Conclusions

The Western formalist literary theory represented by Russian Formalist Literary Theory, British and American New Criticism and French Structuralism is not only a very important stage in the development of Western Aesthetics and literary theory, but also a key link from traditional literary theory to reception aesthetics (Ang Zhihui, 2005) [9]. After grabbing literature from authors and readers, formalist literary theory can not fundamentally change the fact that literature needs to be accepted. Therefore, formalist literary theory can not completely exclude readers from the independent territory of literature. It is not difficult to understand that formalist literary theory strongly advocates that literary works should be separated from readers, In this theory, it reserved a seat for literary recipients and invited the contradictions of ideal readers.

Of course, the reader in formalist literary theory is only an internal constituent element of literary works. It is an object preset for the form of works to enter understanding and acceptance, not an independent receiver, let alone any initiative and creativity of literary acceptance. The task of this reader is to truthfully present the internal essence of the works considered by the formalists, which is not difficult to understand that the readers in the Russian Formalist Literary Theory are only the readers of the unfamiliar poetic language, the literary readers in the British and American New Criticism are the analysts of the dialectically unified works, and the readers in the French Structuralism are the readers of the narrative literary model. Analyzing the readers' acceptance thought is an aspect that can not be ignored in a comprehensive understanding and grasp of formalist literary theory. Only in this way can we liberate formalist literary theory from the prejudice and misunderstanding of "form", and avoid the rough practice of breaking it into scientific literary theory. This paper only makes a basic, tentative and superficial analysis and reflection on the thought of reader acceptance in formalist literary theory, and some conclusions need to be further verified.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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