

Comparison of Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism

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Abstract

Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism are both text-based critical methods, and their critical philosophy of understanding works and their literary significance from the perspective of the text is the same. There are differences between the two in terms of textual views and critical approach. In terms of textual views, Russian Formalism emphasizes that text is a language object that has been defamiliarized. While, New Criticism regards the text as a closed organic whole, an objective existence that is unrelated to the author's intention and the reader's feelings. In terms of critical approach, Formalism reflects a focus on the lower level of literary language, namely the level of form. New Criticism emphasizes the close reading analysis of specific literary works from the upper level of language, namely the semantic level, to analyze the integrated meaning of the organic whole composed of various distant and heterogeneous language elements that are not coordinated.

Keywords

Russian Formalism, New Criticism, Textual views, Critical approach.

1. Introduction

Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism are both important Western critical theories. Russian Formalism and New Criticism are both text-based critical methods, and their critical philosophy of understanding works and their literary significance from the perspective of the text are the same. There are differences between the two in terms of textual views and critical approaches. In terms of textual views, Russian Formalism emphasizes that text is a language object that has been defamiliarized. New Criticism regards the text as a closed organic whole, an objective existence that is unrelated to the author's intention and the reader's feelings. In terms of critical approaches, formalism reflects a focus on the lower level of literary language, namely the level of form. Formalism studies the artistic (literary) nature of works of art, examines the formal structure of works of art, and analyzes what special techniques or means are used to achieve the effect of defamiliarization (Zhongzai Zhang, 2002:9) that makes the recipient perceive it. New Criticism emphasizes the close reading (Thompson, 1971: 34) analysis of specific literary works from the upper level of language, namely the semantic level, to analyze the integrated meaning of the organic whole composed of various distant and heterogeneous language elements that are not coordinated.

2. Textual ontology

Russian Formalism and New Criticism are both text-based critical methods, and their critical philosophy of understanding works and their literary significance from the perspective of the text are the same. Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism focus on language itself, opposing the incorporation of philosophical and moral factors into the analysis of literary

works, and opposing the use of author experiences and psychology as the basis for analyzing works. They advocate for direct analysis of language and techniques in literary works.

Russian Formalism refers to the change in the object of literary criticism in the hands of these formalists, shifting from the content expressed in the work, such as social reality, the life of the writer, and the dominant ideas of the work, to the literary form (technique) itself. Traditional literary criticism mainly explores the content expressed in literature, by examining the life of the writer, social events related to the work, and the thematic ideas nurtured by the work. It places the organizational form of literature and the reasons why literary works become literature in a secondary position. Russian Formalism shifted the focus of criticism towards the form and structure of texts, attempting to scientifically describe the characteristics and functions of narrative techniques in works, because according to them, the object of literary research is literary nature. According to Roman Jakobson, "The object of the science of literature is not literature, but literariness-that is, that which makes a given work a work of literature." (Zhongzai Zhang, 2002:27) The exploration of literariness became the core of Russian formalist theory.

New Criticism has many similarities with Russian Formalism, with the main purpose of exploring the unique literariness. New Criticism believes that literary criticism is separated from the study of literary origins, detached from social background, intellectual history, politics, and social effects, and seeks pure literary criticism that does not consider "external" factors, but only focuses on the literary object itself; And it focuses on exploring the structure of the work, without considering the author's ideas or the reader's reactions. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe Beardsley mentioned that "A poem can be only through its meaning since its medium is words yet it is, simply is, in the sense that we have no excuse for inquiring what part is intended or meant." (Zhongzai Zhang, 2002:54)

Russian Formalism and New Criticism both aimed to break the outdated rules of traditional literary criticism, focusing instead on the language and writing of works, and striving to discover the charm of literary works themselves through various techniques such as defamiliarization, deformation, obstruction or tension, irony, and reinterpretation.

3. Textual views

Russian Formalism emphasizes that texts are linguistic objects that have been defamiliarized. Russian formalists believe that literary quality exists in the special use of ordinary language in works, and literary language deviates and distorts ordinary language. The latter is mainly used for communication, while the former does not have this practical function. The technique of "defamiliarization" (Zhongzai Zhang, 2002:9) used by Shklovsky is the special use of ordinary language. Shklovsky believed that "material obviously created to remove the automatism of perception, the author's purpose is to create the vision which results from that deautomatized perception" (Zhongzai Zhang, 2002:19-20). In order for literary language to be perceived by the recipient as literary language rather than anything else, it must be distorted and made difficult through techniques such as deformation, because only distorted and difficult language forms will attract the recipient's attention, and "the great possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception". (Zhongzai Zhang, 2002:20), and the recipient can feel and recognize things in their daily life that they have become accustomed to knowing but not aware of. The main task of literary criticism is to criticize the degree of defamiliarization of language form and analyze various defamiliarization techniques. Literary language has become the core of the text, the object of criticism, and focuses on the level of language form and structure.

One of the meanings of defamiliarization lies in the acceptance of artistic aesthetics, defamiliarization is a necessary means of artistic aesthetic acceptance, which basically conforms to the psychological and behavioral patterns of the recipient. Victor Shklovsky once

said, "Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known."(Zhongzai Zhang, 2002:9) Defamiliarization means placing things at a certain distance, establishing a set of techniques to pursue things that are accustomed to and never doubted, and seeing novel beauty from them, so that the aesthetic subject can obtain a sustained, novel, and unfamiliar aesthetic experience in the tension and conflict caused by the constant variation and collision between the pre perception paradigm and the new paradigm.

The limitation of defamiliarization lies in the ambiguity inherent in the concept itself. The pure psychological rules implied by defamiliarization precisely lead formalists to repeat the mistakes of subjectivism they criticize. Because everyone's knowledge background is different, the technique may be unfamiliar to this person, but it may no longer be fresh to another person. However, it cannot be said that this work is a literary work for this person and not for another person. And equating the value of a work with its degree of defamiliarization is certainly an oversimplified approach.

New Criticism also compares literary language with ordinary language and scientific language to illustrate the uniqueness of literary language. However, New Criticism views the text as a closed organic whole, an objective existence that is unrelated to the author's intention or the reader's feelings. In order to make critical activities truly scientific and objective, it is necessary to eliminate the influence of subjective factors of the author and readers, because if this is involved, it will lead to the fallacy of intention and perception. One of the tenets of New Criticism is that literary criticism primarily focuses on the whole, that is, whether a literary work has successfully formed a harmonious whole, and what kind of interrelationships exist among the various parts that make up this whole. In the organic whole of this language, there are some discordant heterogeneous elements that merge and organically unify with each other. As Tate said, "What I am saying, of course, is that the meaning of poetry is its 'tension', the full organized body of all the extension and intension that we can find in it. The remotest figurative significance that we can derive does not invalidate the extensions of the literal statement. Or we may begin with the literal statement and by stages develop the complications of metaphor: at every stage we may pause to state the meaning so far apprehended, and at every stage the meaning will be coherent."(Tate, 1936:71) New Criticism focuses on the internal and external meanings of various parts of language as a whole, as well as how these parts form a unified whole.

One of the significance of New Criticism is to place the intrinsic meaning of the work in the eternal river of human history and truly discover the objective and eternal value of literary works. Literary works are independent objects composed of language and characterized by their own features. This topic does not belong to individuals, but to humanity. The author has passed away, and the reader, as an individual, must also disappear from history. However, the existence of the work as an object will forever exist in human history, placing the inherent meaning of the work in the eternal river of human history and highly valuing the eternal value of the meaning of the work. It values not the temporary relevance and timeliness of the meaning of the work, but the significance that transcends historical time and space and belongs to the common values of humanity. The New Criticism strives to reconcile the opposition between literature and reality, rationality and sensibility, insisting on studying problems centered on the text, especially emphasizing the complex and polysemous characteristics of literary language, in order to explore the value and meaning of literary works themselves. The New Criticism seeks an objective path for literary research, in order to truly discover the objective and eternal value of literary works from this perspective.

The significance of New Criticism also lies in providing people with a method to criticize the complex and polysemous language of poetry. Tate's "tension" emphasizes the extension and

intension of poetry. Empson divided the ambiguity of literary language into seven types in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Empson, 1949:253), fully revealing the complexity, variability, and profound meaning of literary language, providing an effective method for analyzing, studying, and appreciating the language of New Criticism poetry. New Criticism interprets the complex and multiple meanings of poetic language through tension, paradox, and ambiguity. A simple poem may also be able to interpret complex meanings, and people can freely express themselves about the same poem because every viewpoint is correct, as long as the language is reasonable. This will encourage popular exploration of literature and enhance people's interest in literature.

The limitation of New Criticism lies in the fact that New Criticism's isolation and closure of the work is clearly too limited. A complete artwork has a close connection with the author, readers, and the world. Although the artwork is higher than life, it also originates from life and to some extent reflects life or the author's inner world. And New Criticism carries accusations of theoretical narrowness and lacks profound support from social, historical, and cultural theories. At the same time, the pursuit of professional criticism in New Criticism (focused on universities, where scholars construct critical professions and break away from conventional book reviews) also limits its scope. Therefore, it cannot provide a truly scientific criticism, a sociological criticism, or even a precise interpretive criticism.

4. Critical approaches

Formalism reflects a focus on the lower level of literary language, namely the level of form. Formalism studies the artistic (literary) nature of works of art, examines the formal structure of works of art, and analyzes what special techniques or means are used to achieve the effect of defamiliarization that makes the recipient perceive it. Formalism in critical practice focuses on analyzing the phonetics, prosody, rhythm, morphology, syntax, and arrangement of plot in literary language. This is also a natural expression of their textual view of the language object in practice, reflecting their attention to the lower level of literary language, namely the level of form. Shklovsky believed that "to make a unique semantic modification" is "the purpose of parallelism, like the general purpose of imagery" (Zhongzai Zhang, 2002:19) And "In studying poetic speech in its phonetic and lexical structure as well as in its characteristic distribution of words and in the characteristic thought structures compounded from the words, we find everywhere the artistic trademark." (Zhongzai Zhang, 2002:19) Shklovsky believed that the main characteristic of poetry is not image, but the technique of processing words. Poetic image has the same function as other techniques such as comparison, repetition, symmetry, and exaggeration, all of which are used to enhance people's direct perception of poetry and deepen readers' impressions. The purpose of using these techniques is to eliminate the automatic perception methods that people are already accustomed to, prolong and strengthen new perception methods, and achieve the effect of defamiliarization. Shklovsky mainly used Tolstoy's "Kholstomer" as an example to analyze the important role of defamiliarization techniques in prolonging and enhancing aesthetic feelings. Tolstoy did not call things by their names, but deliberately kept a distance from the object of description, as if he had seen such things for the first time. He observed the world through the eyes of horses, revealing the various absurdities of private ownership in human society, which people take for granted in their daily lives. This method of defamiliarization is more effective in leaving a deep impression and alerting readers to the artistic appeal of the work and the author's unique craftsmanship, rather than criticizing private ownership from a positive and righteous perspective.

Unlike Russian Formalism, which focuses on the formal structure of language objects such as phonetics, syntax, and plot in literary criticism practice, New Criticism emphasizes the close reading (Thompson, 1971: 34) analysis of specific literary works from the upper level of

language, namely the semantic level. New Criticism believes that criticism must first focus maximum attention on the works formed by the mutual movement of words - that is, the technical techniques of literature. New Criticism focuses on the ontological criticism of texts, emphasizing that literary texts are a complex and polysemous linguistic organic whole composed of pseudo declarative language. It believes that a literary work is not a simple thing, but an extremely complex combination interwoven with multiple levels of meaning and relationships.

New Criticism adopts a close reading approach to analyze the semantic level of language, hoping to find structural unity, balance, and harmony through the analysis of parts of the language as a whole. The processing and organization of various forces in the text, such as the analysis of tension, conflict, and disagreement, are all aimed at achieving structural harmony. As Tate said, 'What I am saying, of course, is that the meaning of poetry is its 'tension', the full organized body of all the extension and intension that we can find in it. The remotest figurative significance that we can derive does not invalidate the extensions of the literal statement. Or we may begin with the literal statement and by stages develop the complications of metaphor: at every stage we may pause to state the meaning so far apprehended, and at every stage the meaning will be coherent.'"(Tate, 1936:71) New Criticism focuses on the internal and external meanings of various parts of language as a whole, as well as how these parts form a unified whole. Empson divided the ambiguity of literary language into seven types in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Empson, 1949:253), fully revealing the complexity, variability, and profound meaning of literary language. New Criticism advocates the use of close reading methods to analyze and explain the semantic level of language, and to analyze the integrated meaning of the organic whole composed of various distant heterogeneous and uncoordinated language elements.

5. Conclusion

Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism are both important Western critical theories. Russian Formalism and New Criticism are both text-based critical methods, and their critical philosophy of understanding works and their literary significance from the perspective of the text are the same. There are differences between the two in terms of textual views and critical approaches. In terms of textual views, Russian Formalism emphasizes that text is a language object that has been defamiliarized. New Criticism regards the text as a closed organic whole, an objective existence that is unrelated to the author's intention and the reader's feelings. In terms of critical approaches, formalism reflects a focus on the lower level of literary language, namely the level of form. Formalism studies the artistic (literary) nature of works of art, examines the formal structure of works of art, and analyzes what special techniques or means are used to achieve the effect of defamiliarization that makes the recipient perceive it. New Criticism emphasizes the close reading analysis of specific literary works from the upper level of language, namely the semantic level, to analyze the integrated meaning of the organic whole composed of various distant and heterogeneous language elements that are not coordinated.

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