

# On the “Productivity” of Contemporary Literary Criticism\*

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The “Productivity” of literary criticism refers to the composition of the literary organization that constitutes the text and its contradictions and deficiencies in the reading activities, and actively explores the meaning of the text, and discovers what is not spoken in the text, and separates the meaning of the text, that is, criticism is an interpretation of practice and productive behavior. Since the 20th century, Althusser, Macherey, Jameson, and Eagleton have revealed the complex relationship between text form and ideology and social history, aiming at clarifying the process of text structure participating in the entire literary production. The creativity and constructiveness of productive criticism is also in line with the trend of contemporary literary criticism from textual criticism to cultural criticism. The reason why criticism is productive is that it can roughly seek the reasons for its existence from the aspects of linguistics, reception aesthetics and paradigm.

*Keywords:* productivity, literary criticism, text production

As a practical activity to communicate writers and readers, works and the world, literary criticism plays an important role in the theoretical interpretation, value judgment and rational reflection of literary works and literary activities and literary phenomena. Wellek believes that the title of “the era of criticism” is only enjoyed in the 20th century because the literary criticism of the 20th century has gained a new sense of self and has a higher status in the public mind than ever before. Obviously, after the literary criticism of the 20th century came out of the traditional authors and works, it began to turn to readers, that is, the emergence of reader-centered literary criticism. Especially in reception aesthetics, the literary function points to the social effect of the work, and the realization of this social effect is through active accepting activities. As a result, criticism has a different consciousness from the past and begins to construct new theoretical forms. The hallmark is that criticism is not just a matter of tradition, but an annotation and derivation of the work. It also bears the function of interpreting the works and constructing meaning. In other words, as a process of “production” of knowledge, criticism is the interpretation and creation of the meaning of the text, that is, the emergence of “productive” criticism.

## The Rich Meaning of “Productive” Criticism

Since human beings have had literary creation activities, the reading, analysis and criticism of the works have emerged. With the development of the times, the connotation of criticism is increasingly rich, especially

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with the changes in the status of readers or critics, the dynamic and constructive functions of criticism are prominent. Generally speaking, literary criticism contains two modes. Firstly, critics should recognize the consciousness expressed by the works and the authors, and realize direct analysis, general evaluation and perception of specific works. Secondly, Based on relevant theories or discourses, critics excavate the profound meaning of the works from the linguistic organization that constitutes the works and its symbolic form, and realize the value-added meaning of the works. The former criticism mode highlights criticism as the expression of the consciousness of the work and the understanding of the author’s intention. The latter mode of criticism regards the criticism as a kind of creative activity, embodying the generation of the meaning of the text and realizing the return of criticism to itself. Obviously, emphasizing criticism is that interpretation and construction act open up a new field of criticism, trigger a world of intentions that relies on the thinking of readers or critics, and realize the interpretation of criticism from objectivity to subjectivity. The text is thus no longer the object of the reader’s consumption, and it becomes a multi-voice dialogue body that the readers produce meaning, which is the productivity and creativity of criticism.

British scholar Catherine Belsey proposed “consumptive criticism” and “productive criticism” based on Roland Barthes’ distinction between two types of readers. Catherine Belsey believed that consumptive criticism is the spontaneous disclosure of the subject as the author’s subjectivity, and the reader becomes passive consumption. The productive criticism is to regard the work as the object of the reader to produce meaning, that is, the work is the result of the reader’s construction.<sup>1</sup>

Specifically, because there are a lot of contradictions, gaps and gaps in the works, the criticism is not satisfied with the direct aesthetic response to the text or the objective statement made by it, but the text is a contradictory and changeable polysemy. By entering the inside of the text, discovering what is not spoken in the text and separating the meaning of the text. In this way, the reading activity is the process of actively seeking the meaning of the text from the discourse organization that constitutes the text and its incoherence, omission, contradiction and lack. It is an interpretation of practice and productive behavior, that is, the meaning of the text is in the critics’ production. Catherine Belsey’s “production-centered” approach to reading and criticism will effectively enhance the interpretive function of theoretical intervention in reality and strengthen the reader’s active construction in reading. In this respect, the French theorist Julia Kristeva put forward the concept of “intertextuality” and believed that any text should be influenced by other texts, which is the absorption, adaptation and transformation of other texts. The meaning of the text must depend on the interpretation of other texts, that is, “text is a kind of productivity”, each text determines its position and meaning in dialogue with other texts. Roland Barthes distinguishes text into “reading text” and “writing text”, which are readable text and writable text. In Roland Barthes’ *S/Z*, readable text is a text with a fixed meaning, clear meaning, signifier and correspondingly clear, for the reader to consume. Writable text is a meaningful multiplicity, content difference, language-generating text, which requires the organization, creation and production of text polysemous materials through the reader. This means that no single text can be created independently, it is a pile of “pre-text”, and it is constantly being generated.

The key word for productive criticism is clearly “production”. Of course, the “production” here is not the

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, Translated by Hu Yamin, Beijing: China Social Science Press, 1993, pp. 130-133, 155-160.

production of matter, but the processing and materialization of similar material production in literary reading and criticism, and the way of production with similar material production. The productive criticism is to examine the production process of the text. Through the reshaping of the text material, it is found that the material is not expressed and the latent factors of the text edge, that is, to find another text clue at the edge and space of the text, to achieve the revealing of the meaning of the text. This process presupposes that literary activities focus on the “creation” of the author’s genius and the “production” of the work, from the pursuit of the “essence” and mystification of literature to the revealing of the production “process”.

### **The Paradigm of “Productive” Criticism**

Referring to the “productivity” of literary criticism, we must return to Marx’s original context of “art production”. Marx regards art activities as a form of production practice and the active construction of subject and object, forming a historic revolution in the past artistic concept. Since the 20th century, Western Marxists have inherited and developed Marx’s art production theory, and have political economics, philosophy and culture. For a long time, People pay more attention to the “art production” in the field of literary creation, and rarely study the relationship between art production and ideology, cultural politics, social criticism and other aspects from the perspective of literary criticism. In this regard, Althusser’s “symptomatic reading”, Macherey’s “centrifugal” structure, Jameson’s “formal ideology” and Eagleton’s “formal politics”, etc. The revealing of the complex relationship between form and ideology and social historical implication is intended to clarify the process of text structure participating in the entire literary production, reflecting the creativity and constructiveness of productive criticism.

Structuralist Althusser believes that there is some kind of eternal universal structure in all things. The task of theorists is to find the underlying structure that governs the superficial phenomenon and to explore how the “structure” produces reality, all of which can only be manifested through symptomatic reading. Symptom is a medical term that refers to the general symptoms of a disease manifested in the body’s function. In the results of the special study class of *Capital* in the 1960s, Althusser proposed to read the text as a patient, and to delve into the theoretical problems behind the illness that are easily overlooked and ignored. Because there are a lot of traces and blanks hidden in the text, symptomatic reading is through the conversion of perspectives, deepening the silences, omissions and vacancies in the text that are suppressed and neglected, but not publicly expressed but exist. Obviously, symptomatic reading is the process from the implicit text of “silent expression” to the explicit text pointed to by “literal expression”. Only when the implicit text is read can the explicit content be fully understood, and the process points to “cognition is production”. Of course, Althusser’s emphasis on symptomatic reading is inextricably linked to his ideology. Since people are always surrounded by the reality of ideology and do not realize the state of ideology in which they live, the purpose of criticism is to use the symptomatic reading to explore the hidden ideological essence in the works and realize the ideological production of literature and art.

The French theorist Pierre Macherey was deeply influenced by the mentor Althusser, pointing out that literary criticism is not a simple reading, interpretation and appreciation activity, but by means of certain means and scientific methods. According to a certain production process, the ideology materials are processed and reshaped to produce a literary “product” that conforms to the scientific rules. In *Literature Production Theory*, Macherey proposed that literary criticism aims to recreate the meaning of contradictions, gaps, and ambiguities

contained in the text, and to construct a literary criticism model that can produce knowledge. “The speech of the book comes from a certain silence, a matter which it endows with form, a ground on which it traces a figure. Thus, the book is not self-sufficient; it is necessarily accompanied by a certain absence. Without which it would not exist. A knowledge of the book must include a consideration of this absence.”<sup>2</sup> Due to silence and default, text moves away from the center of ideology, thus forming a “centrifugal” structure of text-ideology. The production of this ideology-based material is not about the integrity of the text, but the incompleteness of the text. This deconstructs the organic holistic view of Western literary theory.

Literary production and ideology are important concepts in Western Marxist literary theory, and the relationship between the two has been receiving attention. As a master of Marxist art production theory, British critic Terry Eagleton explores the operational mechanism of text ideology from both the ideology and the production mode. In Eagleton’s view, literary production is the process of materializing the “special aesthetic field in general ideology” through the processing of aesthetic forms. However, how does ideology appear in structure, image, and form, and it has a relationship with class, politics, etc., exerting influence on people? Eagleton believes that ideology can only be obtained from the literary and literary forms. The text establishes a transformation relationship between formal skills and ideology, enabling people to feel the operational mechanism of ideology behind the form. That is to say, as an important carrier for the realization of ideological function, literary form can make various ideology materials enter the text and be revealed, forming the existence of absence. Therefore, the review works should proceed from the literary form, highlighting how the form succeeds in realizing the production and exposure of ideology within the literature, and forming a “formal political” effect. “The text, rather, is a certain production of ideology.”<sup>3</sup> In a word, Eagleton explores the ideological nature of the text form and the interaction mechanism and internal connection between the two, and distinguishes it from formalism, providing a theoretical reserve for the text to intervene in social political criticism and social power production.

In the perspective of contemporary Marxist hermeneutics, the literary hermeneutics of American scholar Fredric Jameson is unique. Jameson puts the interpretation of the text in the context of history, politics, and culture. Through the symbolic transformation of text interpretation, the text form is given historical factors, forming a new discourse interpretation mode from form to politics, revealing the production process of the text and its implications. In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson believes that all literature, no matter how weak, must infiltrate political unconsciousness. Therefore, the purpose of literary criticism is to pay attention to the aesthetic and formal problems, and to implement the imaginative solution to social contradictions through narrative forms. This reflects Jameson’s criticism and transformation of formalism theory and the pursuit of historical texts.

From the literary criticism model pursued by four critics such as Althusser, Macherey, Eagleton and Jameson, we can see the core content of the pervasive criticism, that is, the attention to the text form. Whether it is the symptomatic reading and centrifugal structure analysis of the text, or the pursuit of the text form-politics, it highlights the characteristics of Marxist literary criticism and reflects the concerns of ideology, culture politics, history and reality. This development model is also in line with the trend of contemporary literary criticism from text criticism to cultural criticism.

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<sup>2</sup> Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1978, p. 85.

<sup>3</sup> Terry Eagleton. *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*, London: Verso, 1976, p. 64.

Of course, the productive criticism is also manifested in post-structuralism and deconstruction. Post-structuralism and deconstruction emphasize the task of literary criticism by analyzing the uncertainty of linguistic signs, producing the meaning of textual materials, and establishing a new way of reading and criticism. This forms Kristeva's intertextuality, Roland Barthes' readable text and writable text, and the critical strategies of Jacques Derrida's Reading 1 and Reading 2. This kind of text is a contradictory and ambiguous text that reflects the reader's ability to read and interpret. Compared with Marxist literary criticism, deconstructive criticism reveals the uncertainty of the meaning of the text through linguistic studies including rhetoric, metaphor, and intertextuality, making the text a purely self-referential free game. Therefore, the criticism lies in the object of criticism. Western Marxist art production theory introduces social reality and politics into the text, and puts literature in the context of social history and culture. Although it pays attention to the language form, it is not only the language form, but also the ideology, history and politics outside the language form, thus maintaining the realistic critical power of Marxist literary criticism.

### Why is Criticism Productive?

Why is criticism so productive? We can roughly seek the reasons from the aspects of linguistics, aesthetics and paradigm.

First of all, Saussure's linguistic theories have led to the transformation of modern linguistic theories, that is, from the study of language individuality, diachronicity, combination and external research to the synchronicity, aggregation, difference and relationship of language. The profound change it caused was that theorists used the "linguistic model" to analyze the composition of knowledge and promoted the shift from language to discourse. This makes the discourse model a powerful force of production in reading and criticism. Because the discourse reflects a certain sense of social activity, reflecting the specific ideological content. For example, Michel Foucault actively promotes the power association rules of discourse analysis, which promotes the interaction of discourse with other knowledge in the field of criticism.

Second, productive criticism is closely related to changes in readership in the 20th century. For a long time, readers have been absent in literary activities. Whether in China or in the West, the reading mode of "author said" and "readers listen" makes the reading process subject to the natural presentation of textual truths, and the text becomes the tool for the author to convey ideas. All this, until the emergence of Hermeneutics and Receptional Aesthetics, the reader's subjective position in literary activities began to receive attention. Gadamer's "pre-understanding", Iser's "implicit readers", Fish's "knowledge readers", and Culler's "literary competence" suggest that the text is full of uncertainty, reading The process is not merely fascinated and attracted by the work, but the work as a means of aesthetic enjoyment and self-verification. Thus, the reader's reading paradigm has undergone a transformation from traditional passive acceptance to active meaning interpretation. It is in the perspective of the reader's reading paradigm shift that contemporary criticism reconstructs the poetic function of the text in the understanding of the language structure.

Third, paradigm shifting and literary production. The emergence of productive criticism is closely related to the transformation of the literary production paradigm from self-discipline, self-discipline to other laws and construction. The American philosopher Thomas Kuhn put forward the paradigm theory in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, arguing that the development of science is not a linear, continuous progress process, but a

transformation of the old and new knowledge systems and the process of the paradigm shift. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* was published in 1962. At that time, the academic circles appeared to reject centralism, rationalism, and fundamentalism, advocating pluralism, incommensurability, and irrationality. It is precisely in the transformation of paradigm that literary production changes the concept of linguistic centralism in the pre-modern period, enabling people to re-examine literary theory knowledge and examine the problem of text paradigm.

Based on this, from the perspective of paradigm shifting to examine the production of text, and to trace the development trajectory of text dynamics, we will see that the text is a combination of multiple values such as heterogeneity, pluralism, difference, overpass, mutual infiltration and dialogue. It can generate new theoretical discourses, fully explain complex literary phenomena, effectively promote the scientific and systematic study of literary studies, and embody the transcendence of traditional text paradigms. Under such circumstances, criticism no longer ends with the internal research of literature, but broadens the territory, crosses the literary boundary, touches many fields such as mythology, culture, sociology, politics, etc., and realizes the expression of non-literary discourse. This is the spread of “literariness”. Thus, literature ruled the academic field, including all forms of discourse and text form. literariness no longer became a unique attribute of literature. It permeated all levels of social life, making all historical narratives, philosophical concepts, and theological stories all inclusive. The literariness has become the attribute of history, politics, philosophy and other theories.

### Remark

The “Productivity” of literary criticism emphasizes the reconstruction of textual materials and the significance of reproducing the texts. This process determines the formation of a certain interaction mechanism between art production and contemporary literary criticism. Through the reflection and deconstruction of the formalism literary theory in the first half of the 20th century, the literary criticism has returned to the fields of society, history and politics, which effectively promoted the transformation of contemporary literary theory. Of course, the expansion and variation of the two themes of aesthetic discourse and political discourse caused by “productive” criticism, as well as the aesthetics of literature and ideological nature of literature, how to deal with the relationship between aesthetics and politics. All this needs to attract our attention and thinking.

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