

Felski's Literary Sociological Thought From the Perspective of Actor-Network Theory

SHANG Qinghua, DING Man
Dalian University of Technology, Dalian, China

The relationship between literature and society has been a subject of continuous exploration since the inception of literature itself. On the one hand, from Plato's theory of mimesis onward, literature has consistently been viewed as a representation of social reality, positioning literature as subordinate to society. On the other hand, with the rise of structuralism and the New Criticism, certain schools of thought have focused exclusively on literature itself, deliberately overlooking the complex connections between literature and society. The growing tension between these two perspectives has increasingly placed contemporary literary studies in a polarized state, leading to a crisis in the legitimacy of literary scholarship. In response to this, Rita Felski's exploration of the uses of literature embodies a new literary sociology that offers a way out of the current impasse in literary studies.

Keywords: Rita Felski, Actor Network Theory, literary sociology, Bruno Latour

Introduction

The relationship between literature and society has been a topic of continual discussion among critics since the inception of literature. Literary sociology is an interdisciplinary field of study aimed at exploring the relationship between literary works and their social, cultural, and historical contexts. The concept and practice of literary sociology can be traced back to the mid-20th century, influenced by structuralism, Marxist critical theory, and cultural studies. It emphasizes that literary works are not merely products of artistic creation but also reflections and expressions of social, historical, and cultural backgrounds. This article attempts to explore a literary sociology that treats literature and society as both equal and associated by analyzing the functionality of literary reality as discussed by the contemporary American literary critic Rita Felski, within the framework of Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT). In the perspective of ANT, "society" is viewed as "a movement during a process of assembling" (Latour, 2005a, p. 1). In this sense, society ceases to be a stable ontological concept and becomes perpetually in process, always filled with change—a dynamic association. Applied to the relationship between literature and society, literature cannot be reduced to society, nor can society be reduced to literature. Therefore, understanding the irreducible relationship between these two necessitates exploring the interactions of literature and society at a micro-level. Literary sociology should break away from binary oppositions and historicist thinking. The relationship between literature and society is not simply one of "reflection" versus "determination", but rather a multilayered, dynamically generating association where literature and society are intricately interconnected and mutually constitutive.

Literature as a Node of Self-Recognition and Society

In the past, literary sociology within the Marxist framework has explored the relationship between literature and society. Within this framework, literary studies have encountered issues of “overinterpretation” and “forced interpretation”. To address this issue, this article applies Latour’s concept of nodes to discuss Felski’s literary sociology, which views literature as nodes between readers’ self-awareness and society. In ANT, nodes are not just passive points of connection but active agents that influence and shape the development and evolution of the network through interactions and exchanges. Therefore, from Felski’s perspective, literature acts as a node that facilitates the evolution of social networks.

In Felski’s view, literature serves as a node facilitating the evolution of social networks, and she uses reader as an intermediary to dismantle the dichotomy between literature and society. To eliminate the dualistic cognitive model that has dominated since modern times, Latour advocates for a focus on the “middle ground” that constructs connections between opposing poles, as well as the mutual relationships and influences between them. Latour’s advocacy for dissolving dualism aligns with Felski’s approach. To explore the utility of literature and trace its role in the evolution of social networks, Felski adopts a similar method of introducing the “middle ground” to break the binary opposition between literature and society, thereby incorporating the reader into the discussion of the relationship between literature and society.

According to Felski, the role of literature as a node between self-recognition and society is based on the relationship among literature, the self, and the Other. Felski’s view exemplifies Ricoeur’s view of the self and the Other; Ricoeur attempts to transcend the dualities of self and other, proposing the dialectic of “Oneself as Another” (1992, p. 1). Felski integrates the aforementioned viewpoints and posits that recognition is dialogical and exists within intersubjective relationships. The ability of self-awareness, or the ability to consider oneself as an object of thought, can only be realized through encounters with the Other. Therefore, the difference between the self and the Other is the prerequisite for recognition and the basic condition for constructing self-identity. However, unlike Marxist and post-structuralist critics who emphasize the role of ideology and discourse structure in constructing self-identity, Felski advocates for the shaping of individuals through interpersonal interactions within society. Sociality is an essential attribute of humans, and human survival and development rely on the interaction between the self and specific, concrete Others. The Other is not a limitation of the self but a condition for its formation. Literature serves as a crucial channel for facilitating interaction between the self and the Other, acting as an active intermediary that connects the self with the Other. Consequently, Felski incorporates the reader into her research framework to explore the interactive relationship between literature and society.

The role of literature as a node is demonstrated through the self-recognition of the reader that serves as middle ground. Felski divides recognition into two inseparable parts: knowledge and acknowledgement. Here, recognition no longer pertains merely to cognition but takes on an ethical dimension, emphasizing acceptance, respect, and inclusivity in public life. Knowledge pertains to the self, while acknowledgement pertains to the other. Felski’s views on recognition reflect both a self-understanding centered on self-enlightenment and self-empowerment, as well as the self’s need for public acceptance and acknowledgement. First, the role of literature as a node is manifested in the dialogical relationship between the text and the reader, mediated through language. Based on Habermas’s theory of communicative action grounded in universal pragmatics, communicative interaction achieves mutual understanding through language. Therefore, language serves as the ultimate path through which the self achieves self-understanding and self-recognition in interpersonal communication. As

Heidegger stated, "Language is the house of Being" (1982, p. 63), indicating that it is not humans who use language, but language that utilizes humans. Language symbols constitute a vast discursive system that envelops everyday human communication. Factors such as beliefs, traditions, history, and culture can thus only shape and influence the formation of the self through language. Felski concurs with this view, affirming the positive significance of language in shaping the self. However, she also notes that the dialogical nature of the self should not be entirely regarded as harmonious, balanced, or solely based on mutual understanding. Just as there are opposition and conflict in social relations, although language does not belong to humans and yet exerts tremendous influence on them, the self's capacity for reflection can recognize the shaping role of language and thus alter one's mode of existence. Language, as a medium, possesses a tangible effect on shaping the reality of the self. As Ricoeur said, "Poetic discourse brings to language a pre-objective world in which we find ourselves already rooted, but in which we also project our innermost possibilities" (2003, pp. 361-362). Therefore, Felski argues that language is the primary means to achieve self-recognition.

Secondly, the node function of literature lies in its ability to connect the reader's self with the Other, establishing a network between them. In terms of acknowledgment in recognition, Felski views literary works as "a generalized other", where literature serves as a crucial means for readers to embody the dimension of acknowledgment from the other within themselves. Through imagination, readers achieve a unity of self with the other. "The idea of the generalized other is a way of describing this broader collectivity or collectivities with which we affiliate ourselves. It is not so much a real entity as an imaginary projection" (Felski, 2008, p. 32). Reading leads the reader into the imaginary variations of the ego (Ricoeur, 1998, p. 117). It can express one thing through another, thereby endowing imagination with creative capabilities. The innovative power of imagination lies in transforming old meanings into new ones, establishing associations between two different semantic fields. Thus, Felski argues that literature's role is to provide readers with a sense of belonging, constructing an imagined community. Literature offers readers a broader world, where the individuals, things, and events within works intertwine to form "a generalized other". In the individualized act of private reading, the emotions and resonances that readers experience when engaging with literary works demonstrate moments of self-recognition by this literary other. There are also moments of recognition that occur in non-private reading activities, such as individuals collectively reading a work in a literary salon or audiences participating in group viewing activities, all of which enable individuals to feel part of a larger community. Therefore, literature's associational aspect implies Felski's conception of literary communities. On the one hand, readers in the process of reading experience a sense of association with this literary other, recognizing a part of themselves that is not acknowledged, affirmed, or recognized in real life. On the other hand, the formation of a literary community is based on readers' engagement with the same work; as they navigate through the twists and turns of the story, readers may develop similar emotional experiences and reading perceptions, thereby creating a sense of community among readers. However, the reader community is also created by literature itself and occurs during the process of reader reception, thus serving as an expression of the literary community.

Above all, from the perspective of ANT, Felski views literature as a node between the reader's self-recognition and society, using the reader as middle ground to explore a literary sociology that transcends the binary opposition between literature and society and investigates the utility of literature. The uses of literature lie in its ability to facilitate connections between the self and the Other, as well as between society and individuals, thereby achieving common ground while respecting differences and fostering mutual understanding.

The Creative Mimesis of Literature as Translation of Society

Felski argues that literature creatively imitates society, translating it for people and thus placing literature and society on equal status. "Translation" is a key term in Latour's Actor-Network Theory, functioning as an intermediary that transports meaning within the network of associations that constitute society (Latour, 2005a, p. 39). Felski agrees with Latour's reconfiguration of society. Latour replaces traditional "sociology of the social" with a sociology of associations, where society as a predefined entity is dissolved, leaving only chains of associations between humans and nonhumans. Thus, rather than studying society, it is more pertinent to study how human and nonhuman entities come together. The dynamic evolution of social networks is influenced by actors. "Anything that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor—or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant" (Latour, 2005a, p. 71). Literature, in this sense, is an actor that translates society, enabling readers to see different aspects of society and thus altering social relations. This section will discuss in detail Felski's discussion of the specificity and practicality of literature, specifically how literature translates society through its unique means of mimesis: deep intersubjectivity, ventriloquism, and language still life.

Firstly, deep intersubjectivity reflects that literary works are no longer objects to be coolly scrutinized; literature and readers are on equal footing. The term "deep intersubjectivity", introduced by George Butte, describes a subtle perceptual characteristic (2004, p. 4). It is through deep intersubjectivity that one can perceive the other and be perceived by the other. Compared to the traditional concept of intersubjectivity, deep intersubjectivity not only embodies the interactive relationship between the text and the reader but, more importantly, the term "deep" implies a microscopic perspective. The deep intersubjectivity translates society at a microscopic level. Using micro-level narrative techniques, deep intersubjectivity allows readers to recognize the emplotment of events, thereby gaining life experiences. As a unique mimetic technique of literature, deep intersubjectivity reflects the unique "mind-reading" ability of literature, particularly in novels where third-person fiction grants the narrator an epistemological privilege not found in real life or historical writing: unrestricted access to the inner life of other persons (Felski, 2008, p. 89). Felski uses Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* as an example, a novel filled with implicit knowledge of various cultures and subcultures, social norms, and totemic symbols. Every character's speech, behavior, and demeanor carry implicit meanings. It is through the meticulous unraveling of these implicit meanings that readers can vaguely discern the principles of society. "Society, not as being opposed to the particular, but as reproducing itself through the accretion of endless particulars, through the steady accumulation of everyday events, fleeting observations, and microscopic judgments" (Felski, 2008, p. 88). Literature's translation of society regards entities as "living" entities, vividly expressing lived experiences through vibrant language, thereby demonstrating the dynamic process of societal generation. Therefore, literature, through the deep intersubjectivity, reflects a phenomenology of society. It enables readers to return to the relationships that constitute society within metaphors. Readers can intuitively and rationally instantiate the meaning of society from within, understanding it through sensory perception and thoughtful reflection.

Felski also emphasizes literature's ventriloquism in translating society. Ventriloquism is closely related to the truthfulness of language. Etymologically, "ventriloquism" is the Latin translation of the Greek word *engastrimythos*, meaning "speaking through the stomach". "This term referred to a particular manner of speech which gave rise to the illusion of a voice proceeding from elsewhere than the person of the utterer" (Connor, 2000, p. 50). Ideological criticism directs the truthfulness of language represented by ventriloquism onto a

singular path. Althusser's concept of the ideological state apparatus indicates that ideology operates in an inherent, non-transparent manner, and for this operation to be effective, it must remain hidden. Therefore, within the scope of ideological criticism, the dialogues of characters in literary works function as ideological ventriloquism. Felski's deeper exploration of ventriloquism reveals how literary language shows the diverse possibilities of human existence, ultimately pointing towards commonalities among people and placing them within a shared world rather than as isolated individuals. Felski's concept of ventriloquism emphasizes the metaphorical aspect of voices. In Felski's view, ventriloquism in literature is achieved primarily through dialogues between characters. Different characters exhibit distinct linguistic features, including idioms, dialects, speech styles, and mannerisms. Thus, literary mimesis also allows readers to engage in auditory associations with society through ventriloquism. Felski explores literature from non-standard English-speaking countries to highlight how different linguistic practices underscore the cultural and political barriers to communication. However, these epistemological challenges do not imply that readers cannot achieve communication with others through literary language. On the contrary, it is precisely these unique modes of speech that require readers to immerse themselves in the sea of literary language. "Rather than being safely confined within a fictional universe, such differences announce themselves forcefully, even intrusively, as readers strive to make sense of unfamiliar idiolects, grappling with modes of expression that seem eccentric or strange" (Felski, 2008, pp. 94-95). The language of literature is not clear-cut but rather untranslatable. Felski argues through an analysis of the Australian dialect used in Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* how literary elements such as slang and idioms translate and convey social knowledge to readers. Firstly, this ventriloquism exposes readers to the daily lives of others. Literary language and everyday language are not in opposition but integrated. Winton's use of slang and idioms immerses readers in dialogue with the characters, facilitating a deeper understanding between self and other. Language presence serves both as a barrier and as a gateway to another world. *Cloudstreet's* simulation of local spelling accentuates the everyday language, showing the lifestyle of the locals. Winton constructs a textual web by configuring various forms of language, creating a way of life. This is achieved not through exploring people's feelings but by immersing readers in their manner of speaking (Felski, 2008, p. 98). Language can present the forms of the world it inhabits. Therefore, literature can translate society through its unique linguistic forms, allowing readers to gain knowledge about society. This knowledge, in essence, is an understanding of another world.

Language still life is also a way that Felski emphasizes literature's translation of society. Originally a technique term in oil painting focusing on "things", still life, when extracted by Felski from literature, emphasizes literature's attention to "things" in everyday life using language as its medium. This exploration delves into the interconnectedness among language, things, and humans. Since Descartes' philosophy of subjectivity, "things" have been marginalized as mere objects. Against the backdrop of renewed attention to things, Felski proposes the literary characteristic of language still life. Language still life, while focusing on things, does not treat them as alienated commodities but as meaningful entities in themselves, intertwined with human existence. Here, Felski emphasizes the poetic genre. In poetry, the materiality of things and their social-historical dimensions achieve a harmonious unity through language still life. Felski discusses how poetic language revitalizes things through an analysis of Pablo Neruda's poetry. Felski regards poetic language as a field that unifies the function of displaying things with the being of things themselves, thereby revealing the truthfulness of poetry. In Neruda's ode to scissors, a poem themed around things, Felski finds that in poetry, the beauty of things depends on their functionality rather than disregarding their intrinsic purpose. "Two long and treacherous/knives/crossed and

bound together/for all time/two/tiny rivers/joined” (Felski, 2008, p. 101). When scissors are used for haircutting, “a fish that swims across billowing linens/a bird/that flies/through barbershops” (Felski, 2008, p. 101). In this poem, scissors, as commonly used things in daily life, profoundly reveal their connection to human daily existence. Furthermore, poetry can also illustrate that the relationship between things and people is interactive and mutual. While poetry uses language to depict things, these things are not closed, isolated, or static; instead, they are open, interconnected, and dynamic. As described in Neruda’s verse, “scissors/have gone/everywhere/they’ve explored/the World” (Felski, 2008, p. 101), the focus of language still life is no longer on the “stillness” of things, but on the “life” of things. Through language, things are organized and re-described to rejuvenate vitality in new ways. In language still life, the role of language is manifested through a series of flexible arrangements and potentialities. Truly seeing a thing may require the absence of words rather than their accumulation. Poetry, with its unique linguistic simplicity, provides greater space for the manifestation of the things themselves. Felski emphasizes that the language still life in poetry achieves a dynamic unity of the thingness and historicity of things, showing both the materiality of things and the networked relationships between things and people. The thingness and poetic quality are unified through language. Consequently, readers gain an understanding of the relationships among things, people, and society through the translation of society enabled by language still life.

In summary, Felski elucidates how literature translates society through its unique mimetic techniques—deep intersubjectivity, ventriloquism, and language still life—demonstrating that literature, through its distinctive forms, enables readers to recognize their connections with things and the world.

Shock as a Method for Literature to Unveil the Social Black Box

Previous literary sociology treated modern society as a “black box”. The concept of the black box refers to scientific theories, facts, and instruments that have been accepted as true, accurate, and useful. When a theory reaches a certain level of acceptance, it is treated as truth rather than theory; it becomes a black box, used as the basis for other theories. Gradually, these black boxes are so widely accepted that they become invisible, taken for granted like the air, unquestionably solid “facts” (Latour, 2005b, pp. 6-7). In this sense, within the perspective of previous literary sociology, modern society became a black box that obscured multiple possibilities under the dominance of historicist causality. Felski discovered that behind traditional literary sociology lies the developmental logic of historicist views of time. According to historicist critics, textual meanings are anchored in the historical context in which they originate, leading to literature’s subordination to society. Historicist perspectives fail to explain why certain literary works can resonate and connect with contemporary readers.

Therefore, time becomes crucial in resolving the relationship between social-historical context and literature. Felski proposes that “History is not a box” (2015, p. 154), opposing clear periodizations of history. Felski starts from the historicist view of time to elucidate the contradictions between historicist criticism and the literature’s function across time and space. Historicism is supported by a continuous, linear view of time. To liberate literary studies from the “box of history”, one must depart from this view of time. Historians have long asserted the existence of “great interactions of history” among historical phenomena (Ranke, 1981, p. 241). This historical perspective, through the listing and narration of historical events, views historical development as successive and continuous, progressing linearly towards a future-oriented view of historical progress. This notion forms the core of historicist narrative and has been used since the Enlightenment era to justify the legitimacy of capitalism,

guiding people to view capitalist society as a new form “evolved” from the accumulation of time, shaping its evolution over time. Felski, inspired by Benjamin, believes that the view of historical progress is misleading because it points towards a singular outcome, thereby obscuring the diversity and contradictions inherent in social development processes. The greatest characteristic of literature, on the other hand, is its uncertainty and multiple possibilities, which contradicts the singular direction of historicism.

Felski, drawing from the “shock” power of literature, finds energy to counter the historicist conception of time. The notions of rupture, suddenness, and “*Nachträglichkeit*” temporality inherent in “shock” facilitate a reflection on the relationship between historicism and literature, thereby breaking the binary opposition between literature and its historical context. The “shock” that Felski explores is a reaction to what is startling, painful, even horrifying (Felski, 2008, p. 105). The attention to “shock” as a literary theoretical term is inseparable from the rise of avant-garde literature. Avant-garde literature, with its extreme rebellion and spirit of attempting to destroy all existing forms and systems, seeks to resist and transcend capitalist modern society. However, the ultimate result is being tamed and co-opted by capitalism. Therefore, there is an argument that the power of “shock” also ended with the taming of the avant-garde, becoming a routine. Their reasoning lies in the capitalist modern society that has co-opted avant-garde literature, where people have become accustomed to viewing various novel artistic forms, thus developing immunity to “shock”.

Felski argues that the power of literary “shock” has not disappeared, and one should not consider the failure of avant-garde trends as a failure of “shock”. The failure of avant-garde movements is due to their inability to completely overturn and transcend the linear conception of modernity’s time, instead becoming a part of modernity itself. According to Compagnon, one of the paradoxes of modernity is reflected in its continuous pursuit of “progress” and the “new”, which leads to the prevalence of “critique” and “negation”. “Make it new” is the most essential slogan of modernity (Compagnon, 1994, p. xv). Under the developmental logic endorsed by historicism for modernity, modernity itself will eventually be negated and become tradition. It is precisely modernity’s pursuit of the “new” and its negation of the past that plunges it into crisis. The failure of avant-garde movements stems from similar reasons: Their core and the developmental logic of modern capitalist society both involve negating the past and tradition. They fail to break free from the linear time conception of historicism, ultimately leading to their co-option by modernity. Critics who argue that the power of “shock” has disappeared often cite the failure of avant-garde movements as evidence, without acknowledging that “shock”, avant-garde movements, and the conception of time behind modernity are distinct. Critics opposed to “shock” often equate it with formal novelty and freshness. However, Felski views “shock” not as a sensation brought about by the novelty of literary form, but as a psychological state induced by fear. It is a blank state of mind shocked after encountering literature with violent or repulsive themes. Thus, the temporal perspective revealed by “shock” is “*Nachträglichkeit*” and “suddenness”, characterized by a ruptured, non-continuous emotional experience that is delayed following an encounter with the unexpected. Felski uses the “*Nachträglichkeit*” and “suddenness” of shock to counter the synchronic, continuous temporal view of historicism.

The “shock” brings precisely this sense of rupture to the reader. Felski points out that the crucial aspect of “shock” lies in its “suddenness”, where time is split into “before” and “after”, leaving the reader’s psychological state in the blank space in between. The reader’s coherent experience during reading thus shatters into unrelated fragments, with the task of connecting these fragments left to the reader, thereby weakening the ideological influence behind the continuous narratives of historicism. In this sense, it is often modernist literature, rather than

realist literature, that possesses the power of “shock”. Felski’s concept of “shock” emphasizes the emotional experience that literature brings to the reader. In Felski’s view, the sense of rupture induced by “shock” does not lead to repetition but rather opens up more possibilities. Drawing inspiration from Benjamin’s historical conception of time, Felski argues that the ruptured sense of time in “shock” can infuse new energy into contemporary feminist and Black literature. Traditionally, within the historicist framework of time, the conditions of women and Black people have often been explained according to the causal logic of capitalist societal development, primarily pointing to patriarchy and white centralism, forming an orderly interpretive framework. However, the factors contributing to the plight of women and Black people cannot be fully encapsulated by the logic of historicism; instead, they are the result of the interrelation and intertwining of various factors. Thus, from the anti-historicist ruptured temporal perspective of “shock”, readers can explore non-reductive explanations for marginalized individuals by examining the ruptures between events, thereby establishing more diverse connections between the past and the present.

The power of unveil the social black box manifested in literature by “shock” lies in its “after-effectiveness”. The meaning of a text is not fully formed at its moment of creation but is fragmented throughout time. The reason why literary works from the past can impact and resonate with the present lies in the ruptured zones between them. “Due to the delay between an event and its resonance, meaning is deferred, propelled into the stream of the future rather than anchored at a crucial moment”. Readers experience shock through literary reading, which drives the construction of their own historical identity, forging diverse connections with the world and promoting the diversity of collective history. Literature, through “shock”, establishes richer and more varied connections between tradition and the contemporary, rather than adhering to a simplistic historicist uni-dimensional causality.

Above all, the traditional view in literary sociology that seeks a “center” between literature and society essentially reflects the influence of historicist determinism, which perceives society as a stable entity, a black box. This perspective is, in fact, underpinned by the linear conception of time inherent in the development logic of modern capitalist society. Felski disrupts the continuous temporal view of historicism with the ruptured temporal perspective of “shock”. The cross-temporal association in literature lies in the sense of rupture that “shock” brings to the reader, thereby enabling people to gradually unveil the social black box.

Conclusion

To conclude, from the perspective of ANT, Felski’s analysis of the function of literary reality explores a kind of literary sociology in which literature and society are both equal and connected, thus exploring a new turn for the sociology of literature—decentralisation. Literary sociology should break away from binary oppositions and historicist thinking. Literature and society are not merely reflective and deterministic, but are interconnected and intertwined in a multi-layered, dynamically generated linkage.

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