

A SHORT HISTORY OF
WESTERN LITERARY THEORY

西方文论简史

吕长发 著

河南大学出版社

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PREFACE

The purpose of this book is to provide the readers with some basic knowledge of Western literary theory and the history of its development. It is my sincere desire that, with the help of the knowledge, the readers will obtain a deeper understanding of the poems, novels, dramas, stories and essays they read and do a better job in writing their own theses about literary works.

As it is a short, or concise, history, I had to confine my discussion to the major types of literary theory or schools of criticism and the most important literary theorists, critics, philosophers and writers. The book offers, at the beginning of each part, some background information, that is, the information relative to the historical and cultural conditions under which a certain type of literary theory or school of criticism emerged and developed. A brief introduction is given to the philosophical ideas of Plato and Aristotle, Kantian aesthetics, Freudian psychoanalysis, Saussure's linguistics, and other fruits of human research and investigation which have had tremendous and profound influence on the development of literary theory and literary criticism.

Western literary theory has been an important component of the treasure of Western art and literature and of world art and literature. I have greatly benefited from the books and treatises on literary theory written by scholars and professors both at home and abroad. I am deeply indebted to the authors, compilers and editors whose works I consulted and drew a lot of quotations from, and whose ideas I borrowed when writing this book.

Acknowledgements must also be made to my colleagues who gave me valuable advice and suggestions on my work and helped me in many other ways. I'd like to express my special gratitude to Cheng Ruochun who spent a lot of time and energy in editing the book, to Wang Sizhou, Wei Xinjun and Gao Juan who helped in finding the sources and typing the manuscript of the book and to Sun Xiaoqing who helped in proofreading.

Lu Changfa

Kaifeng

March, 2006

INTRODUCTION

There have been various types of theory concerning the essence of literature, and critical theory continues to expand and take new forms yearly. There are literary theorists, critics, writers, aestheticians and philosophers who discuss what literature is and theorizes about the laws governing the development of literature on the basis of their observations and research. There are also literary theorists, critics, writers, aestheticians and philosophers who discuss what literature should be and lay down principles and rules for literary creation, literary appreciation and literary criticism in accordance with their philosophical, political, moral, ethical or aesthetical ideas. M. H. Abrams, an American literary historian, in his *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*(1953), points out that all critical theories, whatever their language, discriminate four elements in “the total situation of a work of art”, and he locates each of the four types of critical theory he summarizes in one of the elements being stressed above the others. They are: the **universe**, the “nature” that is imitated if art is viewed as imitation, the materials of the real world or the world of ideal entities, people and actions, ideas and feelings, material things and events, or supersensible essences, out of which the work may be thought to take its subject; **the artist**, the poet, or the creator; **the work**, that is, the thing made by the maker, the poem produced by the poet; **the audience**, the readers, spectators, or listeners to whom the work is addressed, or to whose attention, at any rate, it becomes available.

The mimetic theory, the explanation of art as essentially an imitation of aspects of the “nature”, describes the relationship of the literary work to the world or the “universe” in which the work is conceived or is being read. **The pragmatic, or rhetorical, or affective theory**, which looks at the work of art chiefly as a means to an end, an instrument for getting something done, and tends to judge its value according to its success in achieving that aim, emphasizes the effect

of the work on the audience. **The expressive theory** proposes the study of the relationship of the work to the writer, that is, views art as expressive of the artist, his perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. **The objective or formal theory** is concerned with the work in and for itself without reference to the world in which it exists, its effect on its audience, or its relationship to the author, that is, sees the work as a self-contained entity.

A study of the history of criticism in the light of the theory mentioned above shows that most critics have concerned themselves with all the four orientations to some degree though they usually emphasize one of them. The mimetic theory is characteristic of the criticism of the classical age, with Aristotle as its great expounder. Horace, however, introduced the idea of instruction—*utile et dulce*—and thereby put the effect upon the audience in the center of his view of art. From Horace through most of the eighteenth century, the pragmatic theory was dominant, though there was a revival of the serious interest of the Neoclassic critics in imitation. With the beginning of Romanticism came the expressive theory, in a sense the most characteristic of the Romantic attitudes. When Wordsworth calls poetry “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling”, the artist has moved to the center. Now the poet’s imagination is a new force in the world and a source of unique knowledge, and expression is the true function of art. Beginning in the nineteenth century and becoming dominant in the twentieth has been “poem *per se* ... written solely for the poem’s sake” as Edgar Allan Poe expressed it. Form and structure, patterns of imagery and symbols, become the center of the critic’s concern, for he looks at the work of art as a separate cosmos. However, increasing interest in psychology has kept the contemporary critic also aware of the fact that the audience functions in the work of art, and views of the myth current today tend to bring the artist back to a central position and at the same time to value in terms of the audience the truth he speaks through his archetypal patterns and images from his racial unconscious. Modern literary theory has not only been influenced by the study of contemporary aesthetics and modern artistic practice, but also by various trends of thought in culture and development of new branches of learning. The twentieth-century literary theory mainly centers on the expression of the author’s psychology, the “form” of literary works, the reception on the part of the reader as well as on the criticism of society and its culture. New types of literary theory will emerge and develop with the development of literature while some old types remain popular and continue to exercise influence on the development of literature.

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VOLUME ONE

CLASSICAL WESTERN LITERARY THEORY

(FROM GREEK CLASSICAL LITERARY THEORY

TO NEOCLASSICISM)

Western literary theory emerged and started to develop in ancient Greece with the emergence and development of art and literature. Classical Western literary theory includes, besides Greek classical literary theory, Roman classical literary theory, Neoplatonism, literary theory in Christian theology in the Middle Ages, literary theory in the Renaissance and Neoclassicism.

Chapter One Greek Classical Literary Theory

1.1 Greek Civilization, Greek Literature and Literary Theory

The source of classical literary theory, that is, the source of Western critical theory of art and literature, is the critical theory of ancient Greece, which is part of the brilliant ancient Greek culture.

The culture of the ancient West originated in the littoral places of the Mediterranean Sea. From the eighth century B.C. to the sixth century B.C. when most parts of Europe remained barbarian, production began to develop in Greece, occupying parts of the Greek Peninsula and nearby islands. The development of production brought about the transition from the primitive clan society of ancient Greece to slave society, and by the sixth century B.C. many city-states had been established, the most important of which at the start of the fifth century B. C. was Athens. The power of the city-states was in the hands of slave owners who were former chieftains of primitive clans. Later maritime traffic and trade grew, and the people of Athens and some other cities began to engage in handicraft and commerce. Changes in economy gave rise to changes in politics, and in the year of 510 B.C., the rulers of Athens established a democracy of free citizens, which means that all male citizens—men who were not slaves or of non-Athenian origin—were allowed to have a voice in matters of politics and government. With the development of industry and commerce, a group of slave-owners consisting of new free citizens grew in strength, and they waged a struggle for equality and democracy against the slave owners who were hereditary noblemen. There were two political sects of the slave-owning class—the democratic sect of the slave owners and the sect of nobles.

Impressive civilization had developed even in prehistoric Greece. Sailing the seas to engage in trade, pirating and exploiting the colonies they had set up, the Greeks longed for adventures, loved freedom, and developed a virile and sturdy character. For the ancient Greeks, the outside

world was mysterious, Nature was uncontrollable and human life was full of changes which were unpredictable. They were dominated by the religious doctrine of fatality. Man had to submit to fate, but he was able to bring into full play his ability and potentialities and do whatever he desired to do at will within the compass determined by fate. Fate not only filled the heart of man with perplexity and fear but developed his self-consciousness and individuality. Greek literature displays the liveliness and beauty of human nature in its description of man's pursuit of the worth of this life, the contradiction between man and fate and man's struggle.

"In the infancy of societies, [men's] passions have nothing to restrain them, their imagination has nothing to check it. They display themselves to one another without disguise, and converse and act in the uncovered simplicity of nature." Hence, because it was then free from the restraints and refinements of civility, "poetry, which is the child of imagination, is frequently most glowing and animated in the first ages of society"^①.

The Greeks were full of imagination. They created things according to their own ideas. They invented sublime fables suited to the popular understanding, and the myths they created are an attempt to explain natural and human events: the changing of seasons, cataclysmic occurrences like deluges and earthquakes, civil wars, blood feuds between clans, extreme family situations, for example, one branch of a family opposing another, or a difficult relationship between a husband and wife or between parents and children. Myths seem to sum up the way that society views human relationship and the problems and opportunities life presents to individuals. They are "the first histories of the gentile nations"^②. From Greek mythology developed Greek art.

The Greeks had developed a friendly, personal and human attitude towards their gods, an attitude that emphasized the here rather than the hereafter, and that called for expression, not repression. Greek literature was to meet man's needs, to serve man's interests, and to facilitate man's progress. Greek civilization probed man as well as the world. For it, man was the reflection of the world and the world the reflection of man. The Greeks laid stress on man, and placed man above nature and society.

Homeric epics, which had begun to spread orally among the masses in the ninth century B.C., appeared in the form of writing in the sixth century B.C., and there were works of art and literature of different types such as Hesiodos's poems, Sappho's lyrics and Aesop's fables. Early

① Hugh Blair. *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian*. In: *The Poems of Ossian*. In: M.H.Abrams. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. London: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1971.105

② Giambattista Vico. *The New Science*. In: Hazard Adams, ed. *Critical Theory since Plato*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971.294

in the fifth century B.C., the Persians had attempted to conquer Greece, but the Greeks defeated them. In the mid fifth century B.C. the democratic sect of the slave owners headed by Pericles came into power, bringing forth the prosperity of economy and the enhancement of democracy. There were then great achievements in politics, philosophy, astronomy and mathematics, and advances were made in various art forms—in painting, music, architecture, sculpture, and especially in drama, which provided the Greeks with an almost perfect medium of expression for their emotions—their love for life, their curiosity about the world around them, their spirit of independence, the pride they took in their military glory, etc. During the single century from 500 B.C. to 400 B.C., ancient Greece gave the world four of its greatest playwrights: Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes.

Theory of art and literature is based on literary and artistic practice, and the rich and colorful literary and artistic practice paves the way for the development of theory of art and literature. The Greeks were great proponents of competition, and in the Athenian drama festivals, plays of different dramatists were presented competitively. The best tragic and comic playwrights were awarded prizes. A similar competitiveness applied to many other occasions of poetic performance. Questions about what made one work better than another would certainly be asked in the evaluation of works, and an evaluative stance naturally led to a critical stance.

In the late fifth century B.C. Greece entered on the age of philosophy, and such great philosophers and aestheticians as Pythagoras, Heraclitus (Herakleitos), Democritus (Demokritos), Socrates, and notably, Plato and Aristotle emerged one after another, and it is Socrates, Plato and Aristotle who laid the philosophical foundation of Western culture. Literature and art, as an important social phenomenon, became their concern and the object of their study, and there arose theory of art and literature as part of philosophical aesthetics.

1.2 Plato

Plato (ca. 427~347 B.C.) was born into the family of a hereditary nobleman, and received a good education in his childhood. At the age of twenty he began to study under the guidance of Socrates. Plato was much attached to Socrates, and his writings show the extraordinary influence their association had upon him. When Socrates was executed by the democratic sect in 399 B.C., Plato left Athens to live at Megara, and then visited Cyrene, Egypt, Italy and Sicily, studying the culture of the places he visited and seeking for support for his political ideas. He returned to Athens about 386 B.C. and established a school called the *Academy*, in which he taught until his death. It was in his Academy that Plato began to write his dialogues, which are writings of a

popular type treating particular points he wished to elucidate. His writings mainly deal with ethics, metaphysics, education, and philosophy. Most of the historically important and meaningful issues with which philosophy has been concerned are issues that he raised. Plato brought forth the question concerning the relationship between art and the objective world and that concerning the social utility of art.

1.2.1 Plato's Idealism and His Theory of Imitation

Plato's idealism, his theory of Ideas, is the doctrine of a permanent realm of eternal Forms that shape our mutable material world, and upon this thought he bases his philosophy, his aesthetics and his literary theory. He locates reality in what he calls "ideas" or "forms", rather than in the world of "appearances" that we experience through the senses, and his ideas are but entities existing forever in a region outside time and space, changeless themselves, and unaffected by changes in material objects. His most real reality is a reality of underlying abstractions, and the world of perceptual appearances is secondary and derivative. For him, objects we perceive through the senses are merely copies of the ideas.

Plato, developing the theory of imitation advanced by Democritus and Socrates, identifies *poiesis*—art as imitation or *mimesis*, positing that what artists do is hold the mirror up to nature. Artists copy the appearances of men, animals, and objects in the physical world.

In discussing the nature of art, Socrates, who speaks in Plato's dialogues and who is talking to Glaucon, in the tenth book of the *Republic*, makes the point that there are three beds: the Idea which "is the essence of the bed" and is made by God, the bed made by the carpenter, and the bed found in a painting.

Beds, then, are of three kinds, and there are three artists who superintend them: God, the maker of the bed, and the painter?

Yes, there are three of them.

...

But would you call the painter an artificer and maker?

Certainly not.

Yes if he is not the maker, what is he in relation to the bed?

I think, he said, that we may fairly designate him as the imitator of that which the others make.

Good, I said; then you call him whose product is third in the descent from nature, an imitator?

Certainly, he said.

And so if the tragic poet is an imitator, he too is thrice removed from the king and from the truth; and so are all other imitators.