Practical Stylistics

实用文体学

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H. G. Widdowson 著

牛津应用语言学丛书

出　版　前　言

　　这是一部讨论诗歌在文体学中的地位、诗歌的意义和价值、以及如何进行诗歌教学的学术专著。作者 H·G·威多森为伦敦大学教育学院对外英语教授,著名应用语言学家,从事应用语言学研究近40年,成果丰硕,对该学科的发展有深远的影响。

　　在书中,作者阐述了他对于诗歌作为语言创作形式的本质的理解,指出了这种理解对于教育所具有的意义,并具体说明了在实践中应采用何种教学方法才能真正达到诗歌教学的目的。

　　全书分为两大部分。第一部分题为"诗歌的意义",主要探讨诗歌作为一种语言创作形式的本质。作者指出语言中尚存在着许多未被人们意识到的可能性,而诗歌正是运用了语言的这些可能性来表达社会现实。那么,诗歌的存在意义何在? 尤其是它在教育中有什么价值? 作者认为人们对诗歌的理解普遍存在误区,而且在诗歌的教学方法上也存在偏差,从而使得我们几乎无法证明诗歌教育仍然存在的合理性。习惯上,因为诗歌语言表达的非常规性,人们已不知不觉地将诗歌神圣化,将之归为一种特权话语,一种只有少数精英才能理解、欣赏的话语。它被视为一种遥不可及,同时又无实用价值、不被需要的东西,而在进行诗歌教学上我们又往往要求学生按照权威的注释去理解诗歌。这不仅使得诗歌在人们心目中变得高高在上,而且因为学习的被动性使得学生对诗歌学习感到索然无味。威多森提出应当揭开诗歌的神秘面纱,去掉它头上的光环,让它走近生活;应当允许并鼓励人们对诗歌有自己独特的理解。而诗歌教学的价值在于它给学生提供了一种自娱的方式。学生们对诗歌应有独特的理解,而诗歌教学教给他们的应

是如何通过参照原文和分析原文来论证自己的观点。这个观点反映了本书的主旨所在,即对诗歌的理解不存在对与错,关键在于能否找到根据来证明自己的观点。

第二部分题为"诗歌教学"。作者针对在第一部分中所阐述的观点提出了将它们应用在教学实践上的方法。他认为学习诗歌与体会它的意义的最佳方法莫过于亲自体验当作者的感情。同时,要缩短诗歌与学生的距离,要消除或减轻学生对诗歌这种非常规语言使用的陌生感,使这种非常规使用与学生们所熟悉的语言使用方式联系起来。因此,威多森提出了一系列可供实践的方案,如打乱诗句的排列次序,填入缺漏的词语使诗歌完整,比较诗歌与散文在描述上的异同,将散文改写成诗歌等等。作者的意图在于通过将诗歌与散文、甚至与通俗歌曲、打油诗等进行比较来消除学生对诗歌的恐惧感、距离感,通过重新排列诗句,填入诗歌中缺漏的词语,改写诗句,直到最后自己创作,使得学生得以领会诗歌的奥秘,从而真正对诗歌产生兴趣。

本书不仅见解独到,实践性强,而且在写作方面也颇具特色。在第一部分中,作者并非按一般学术著作的模式论证自己的观点,而是逐渐展开,叙述自己对这项课题的探索、研究过程,从而使读者产生了一种参与的亲切感,而少了一份读学术专著的枯燥感。本书的另一显著特色是它对诗歌的广泛引用。作者在论证每一个观点,提出每一项建议时几乎都要举出一两首诗作为例子进行分析,从而使得论证更为有力,建议更为清晰。尤其是在第二部分,作者甚至周到地列出了许多诗篇作为供练习选用的资料。而且书中所选用的诗歌绝大多数是短小精悍、脍炙人口的名篇佳作,使得人们在研究诗歌教学法之余也获得了欣赏诗歌的享受。

总之,这是一本具启发性、权威性的诗歌教学法专著。它适用于攻读应用语言学或教学法专业的硕士生、博士生,从事英语诗歌教学的教师,以及对文体,特别是诗歌研究有兴趣的读者。

本社编辑部

To my sister Jennifer

Acknowledgements

Introduction

In this book I present a view about the nature of poetry as a use of language, suggest the relevance of this view for education, and demonstrate how it might be acted upon in pedagogic practice. As such, it can be read as a development of ideas about stylistic analysis and its application expressed in my previous book (Widdowson 1975). It has been suggested that what I have to say is really a version of the old (and for many, discredited) ideas associated with Practical Criticism, dressed up deceptively in stylistic guise to give the appearance of novelty. Naturally I would deny this, although I acknowledge that there are resemblances. It would be appropriate, therefore, to indicate in this introduction how the view I take relates to that of other lines of thought in literary criticism.

The very title of this book invokes—or provokes rather, since it is a matter of deliberate design—the notion of Practical Criticism, the approach to the interpretation of poetry first proposed by I.A. Richards. This approach, brilliantly exemplified by the work of Richards' pupil William Empson (1930–1961), became established as an orthodoxy, sustained by such influential books as Cox and Dyson 1963 and 1965, each reprinted several times over the years. The question arises as to how this approach differs from that which I adopt here under the name of Practical Stylistics.

In both approaches the poetic text is considered in dissociation from context and subjected to close scrutiny in the search for its significance. But where is this significance to be found? There are three possibilities. It might be found in using the text as evidence of writer intention: what is significant is what the writer means by the text. Alternatively, one might take the view that the text signals its own intrinsic meaning, whatever the writer might have intended: what is significant is what the text means. Or, thirdly, one might say that what is significant is what a text means to the reader, whatever the writer may have intended, or whatever the text itself may objectively appear to mean.

Practical Criticism wavers between these three positions. Sometimes it looks as if it is directed at discovering the intrinsic meaning contained within the text, its semantic content. Thus Richards talks about respecting the autonomy of the poem (Richards 1929:277), and cautions against the intrusion of idiosyncratic readings, as evidenced by the reactions of his own students. Similarly, Cox and Dyson talk about poems as if they had their own independent organic life:

> A poem that is in any degree successful blossoms under our careful attention, and comes into fullness as we proceed.
> (Cox and Dyson 1965:12)

Analysis, they say, reveals the poem's 'totality' so that reading it

> ... includes a new sense of the poem's structure and imagery, its tone and verbal delicacy, its precise effects.
> (ibid.:13)

The implication seems to be that these effects are the property of the poem itself as an autonomous artefact and are in principle recoverable from the text, totally and intact. Nevertheless, there is an acknowledgement that an author is lurking somewhere in the background and that meaning has something to do with his (*sic*) intentions:

> The poet writing the poem has certainly been conscious of many effects he precisely intended.
> (ibid.:13)

One cannot help noticing how non-committal this statement is in its curious wording. Surely the poet would have been conscious, necessarily, of *all* effects he precisely intended. And what if he is? Are the effects to be recovered those which were intended, or those which are intrinsic to the text as an autonomous totality?

For other critics, notably those in the tradition of New Criticism, any consideration of author intention is a fallacy. Their concern is emphatically with what the text means and not with what the author means by the text. Nor are they concerned with what the text might mean to the reader. This too is a distraction, another fallacy. Thus Wimsatt:

> The Intentional Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its origins ... It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism

from the psychological *causes* of the poem and ends in biography and relativism. The Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does* . . .). It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism. The outcome of either fallacy, the Intentional or the Affective, is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgement, tends to disappear. (Wimsatt 1970:21)

The poem itself, as it *is*, its essential being: this is the object of literary study. It would seem that the effects that Cox and Dyson speak of, even those emanating as results from the text itself, are to be eliminated from consideration. What counts is what the text means, and nothing else.

But of course what the text means has to be apprehended. You can get rid of the writer and consider a text in complete dissociation from the conditions of its production. But reception is another matter. The only meaning that a text can have is what is read into it by the receiver. On its own it is simply an inert object. You cannot eliminate the reader, for the reader is the only agent whereby meaning can be activated. The essential issue is what role the agent is to play.

Generally speaking in Practical Criticism the reader is cast in a subservient and submissive role: the task is to *discover* the meanings which are immanent in the text. Distinctions made by Goffman are relevant here. He points out (Goffman 1981) that the producer of language (speaker or writer) may simply be making manifest somebody else's script, acting as a mouthpiece, an *animator* and not an *author*. Or the producer may be author, but an author with limited initiative, acting on the dictates of some other authority, responsible for the wording of the text but not for the ideas it expresses: author but not *principal*. These distinctions can be applied at the reception end of the communication process as well. Thus the reader can assume the role of animator, whose task is simply to activate meanings deemed to be in the text, but who takes no initiative to engage creatively with the text and so to act as author of personal reaction. As animator, we might say, the reader provides an exegesis. As author, the reader provides an interpretation.

But the animator role in this receptive sense requires a great

deal of special expertise in the reading of signs and the assigning of significance. Exegesis is an élite and privileged activity, reserved for such people as scholars and priests. Anybody can provide an interpretation based on personal reaction. So it is that typically in Practical Criticism we find the autonomy of the text combined with the authority of the critic, each a guarantee of the other.

Though this position, this positioning of the reader as animator of the text, still seems to be the prevailing orthodoxy in literature teaching, it has been called into question over the past fifteen years or so. The reader has been cast in the role of author. This shift results in what Fish calls Affective Stylistics (Fish 1980) or what is most commonly known as Reader–Response Criticism (Freund 1987). The title of Freund's book is *The Return of the Reader*; but it is not so much that the reader has returned, for he or she was always and inevitably there, but that the role has changed. Reading is seen now not as a matter of submitting to the authority of the text so as to provide an exegesis of its integral meaning, but of asserting an interpretation on the reader's own authority. You do not read meanings out of a text but into a text. A problem then arises about interpretative promiscuity. How do you prevent individual readers authorizing *any* meaning no matter how idiosyncratic? One answer is to socialize the reader by making him or her representative of a group sharing the same basic ideology, the same schematic set of assumptions, beliefs, values, etc. In other words, you cast the reader in the role of principal so that the significance assigned to the text carries with it what Fish calls (in the subtitle of his book) *The authority of interpretive communities*. Hence the reader interprets a text not as an individual but as a member of, say, a Marxist or a feminist community.

Where, then, do I stand in relation to these perspectives? Essentially, I argue that the experience of poetry, and its educational relevance, depend on the reader assuming an author role. For me, meaning is not in the text, to be animated by the expert reader. But equally, it is not derived from the text by the socialized reader acting as principal and representative of some ideologically informed interpretative community. In both of these cases, it seems to me, you deny the divergence of individual interpretation and defer to the judgement of an informed élite. The essential elusiveness of poetic meaning is thereby fixed, and falsified.

But people will surely come up with diverse and divergent interpretations anyway. They hardly need to be encouraged to do

so. What, then, is the teaching of poetry to do, if not to acquaint students with the exegesis of expert animators, or with the evaluations of principals of a particular ideological persuasion? My answer would be: to provide them with ways of justifying their own judgement by making as precise reference to the text as possible.

It is important to note that I am talking about precision of reference to the text in support of a particular interpretation. What I am emphatically not talking about is precision of interpretation itself. This is a distinction which is crucial to my argument, and central to the purpose of this book, so it would be as well to dwell on it for a moment.

In the introduction to the Cox and Dyson textbook on the practical criticism of poetry, reference is made (as I have already noted) to the 'precise effects' of a poem. 'This precision', the authors say, 'is what practical criticism exists to achieve' (ibid.:13). But the effects of poetry are never precise: they are evocative, suggestive, allusive—elusive indeed. If they were made precise, they would become referential. The poem would then simply conform to the normal conditions of conventional statement and lose its point. We can, however, be precise about what it is in the poetic text which induces us to read a particular meaning into it. In other words, precision is appropriate in identifying cause in the text, but not in describing the effect on the reader. And it is this, I would suggest, that is distinctive about the practical stylistic approach that I propose in this book.

Consider one example: comments made in Cox and Dyson (1963) about Philip Larkin's poem *At Grass* about racehorses in retirement:

> The old racehorses in this poem are first seen lost in shadow, almost undistinguishable until the wind moves a tail or mane. Using only very simple words, Larkin invests this situation with a richness of emotional effects. The horses seem to be fading into death, their unique identities slipping back to the darkness from which they came. We are reminded of the pathos of old age and the swift passing of time. It is as if the horses were the shades of all human ambitions and triumphs. They have left behind them all that gave significance to their lives. Their movements have no meaning; one *seems* to look at the other, but probably sees nothing. No purpose gives them an identity,

or rescues them from anonymity. It is as if all existence proceeds in the same direction, as time wastes away the shapes we have tried to make out of our lives.
(Cox and Dyson 1963:138)

Here the effects of the poem on a particular reader are stated very precisely indeed. What is imprecise, indeed virtually non-existent, is any reference to what it is in the actual language of the text which gives warrant to this impressionistic account of what the poem means to these readers. We are told that Larkin uses only very simple words. How is the concept 'simple word' to be defined? The second verse of the poem, for example, runs as follows:

Yet fifteen years ago, perhaps
Two dozen distances sufficed
To fable them: faint afternoons
Of Cups and Stakes and Handicaps,
Whereby their names were artificed
To inlay faded, classic Junes—

Are these words really only very simple ones? If they are, the criteria for simplicity are not at all obvious. And just how do these words, simple or not, have the effect claimed for them? What is it about them that 'invests this situation with a richness of emotional effects'? To pose such questions is not to deny the validity of this particular interpretation (or any other, for that matter) but to ask what textual evidence might be adduced to provide it with validation. Many of the observations that Cox and Dyson make are very persuasive. Given their academic prestige, this is hardly surprising: they speak with authority. And that is, precisely, the problem. Students are likely to be convinced into conformity and to accept their interpretations as definitive, or at least more authoritative than their own. It is not difficult to imagine the phrases in the passage I quoted earlier cropping up in essays and examination answers. And so it is that students are encouraged to put their trust in the secondary texts of literary criticism (the study guides and notes that are published in such profusion) and discouraged from engaging with the primary texts of the poems themselves. Thus students are assigned the role of animators, mouthing the authorial or principal judgements of others, not acting as interpretative authors in their own right.

The approach I propose in this book seeks to stimulate an engagement with primary texts, to encourage individual interpretation while requiring that this should be referred back to features of the text. What is important here is not the interpretation itself, but the process of exploration of meaning; not the assertion of effects but the investigation into the linguistic features which seem to give warrant to these effects.

This exploration is itself a fascinating experience and I have tried to draw the reader into participating in the pleasure that I find in it myself. For this reason I have presented the discussion in the first part of the book as an unfolding personal narrative of enquiry rather than as an argument of a standard academic kind located in the theoretical context of scholarly thought. I have provided this context separately in the notes, which are, therefore, rather more extensive than is customary. These notes also acknowledge the contribution made by the ideas and practices of other people who have been working on an approach to pedagogy which integrates the study of language and literature.

But there are other acknowledgements to be made as well. The book has emerged over the years from courses I have taught in London at the Institute of Education, and on Summer Institutes in Tokyo, Barcelona, Flagstaff, and Georgetown. I am grateful to the participants on these courses for their comments and encouragement. I am grateful, too, for the stimulation and support that I have received from my colleagues in the profession: my thanks in particular to Christopher Brumfit, Ron Carter, Guy Cook, Alan Maley, and Andy Murison-Bowie, all of whom commented on an earlier draft of this book. Some were negative about it, some positive, but all had valuable points to make which I have taken note of (though not necessarily acted upon) in the revision. My thanks also to Jennifer Bassett for her detailed comments on the last draft, based on both editorial expertise and literary perception.

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H.G. Widdowson
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