



RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE OBJECTIVISTIC POETICS OF FORMALIST CRITICS AND REACTIONARY APPROACHES: AN INSTRUCTIVE ACCOUNT

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Abstract

In the general context of literary criticism, the literary work of art has been multi-dimensionally approached through the different and sometimes opposed orientations advanced by literary critics. The multiplicity of these approaches is usually concretized through two main and differently oriented approaches incarnated in the objectivistic poetics of formalist critics and the reactionary approaches that emphasize relatively a non-word constructionist treatment of the literary work. In this respect, the focus of this paper is to highlight the main differences between the two approaches to the literary work of art in the light of the thoughts of the exponent theorists of each approach.

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Introduction:

In *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1999), M.H.Abrams defines literary criticism as “the overall studies concerned with defining, classifying, analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating works of literature” (49). He argues that theoretical criticism suggests an explicit practice of general principles of theory(ies) of literature applied and activated to identify, evaluate and analyze literary works. The discussion of particular works and writers is what Abrams refers to as practical criticism, or applied criticism, implicitly based on theoretical frameworks that shape the mode of analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. Abrams considers Aristotle’s *Poetics* (4th century B.C) to be the earliest and most significant work of theoretical criticism. He mentions also Longinus (Greece), Horace (Rome), Boileau and Sainte-Beuve (France), Baumgarten and Goethe (Germany), Samuel Johnson, Coleridge, and Matthew Arnold (England), and Poe and Emerson (America). According to Abrams, important critiques of the first half of the twentieth century are *Principles of Literary Criticism* (I.A.Richards, 1924), *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Burke, 1941), *Mimesis* (Auerbach, 1946), *Critics and Criticism* (Crane, 1952), and *Anatomy of Criticism* (Frye, 1957). The second half of the twentieth century, especially from the 1970s, has witnessed a serious proliferation of Continental, American, and English new and radical forms of critical theory.

Abrams classifies literary theories -traditional critical theories and applied criticism- into four main categories, based on the relationship between the work (text), the universe (the outer world), the artist (author) and the audience (the reader): 1) Mimetic theories, based on the relationship between the work and the universe. They consider the literary work as an imitation, a reflection, or a representation of the outer world, and “the primary criterion applied to a work is the “truth” of its representation to the subject matter that it represents, or should represent.” (51) They date back to Plato and Aristotle, according to which the artist is a mere imitator of the outer reality around her/him: the universe. 2) Pragmatic theories, based on the relationship between the work and the audience. According to Abrams, pragmatic criticism has been the dominant mode of analysis from Horace to early 19th century. It has also

been endorsed by some structuralists, considering the text as a system of codes which activates readers' responses. 3) Expressive theories, based on the relationship between the text and the author as an artist. This approach was developed by romantic critics in the early nineteenth century and applied mainly in psychological, psychoanalytic and consciousness critiques as with George Poulet and the Geneva School. 4) Objectivistic theories based on the analysis of the work as an entity in itself. One of the main sustaining figures to such an objectivistic approach is the Victorian literary critic Matthew Arnold who argues that the objectified work of art should not be considered outside its formal boundaries, activated only and only through "the critical power". Later, T.S. Eliot would announce the high place of art as art rather than as expression of social, religious, or political ideas. This approach would mark a continuity with Victor Shklovsky, René Wellek, Mukarovsky and Jakobson, to be challenged by the new critiques developed mainly during the second half of the twentieth century.

In this scope, this paper scrutinizes the main differences between the objectivistic poetics of formalist critics and the reactionary approaches that emphasize relatively a non-word constructionist treatment of the literary work, in the view of the theories of each approach.

The Objectivistic Poetics of Formalist Critics

It has been largely advanced by objectivist theorists that the literary work of art is by no means an object usually received as a construction of words. One of the main sustaining figures to such an objectivistic approach is the Victorian literary critic Matthew Arnold much known for his essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1865), in which he argues that the objectified work of art should not be considered outside its formal boundaries activated only through what Arnold has called "the critical power". Thus, any attention, if paid, should be directed towards the literary work of art in a complete "disinterestedness" of social, cultural, historical, political or biographical external aspects, stressing the text's objective nature and urging thus the need to deal with works of art as independent objects.

Arnold initiates his argument about literary criticism by stressing the need for and importance of criticism in English literature, as the prevailing tendency was to privilege the creative effort over the critical one. He criticizes Wordsworth's disdain of criticism "hold[ing] it [...] very low, infinitely lower than the inventive [...] If the quantity of time consumed in writing critiques on the works of others were given to original composition, of whatever kind it might be, it would be much better employed; it would make a man find out sooner his own level, and it would do infinitely less mischief." (1)

Wordsworth considers the critic's fine sensitivity towards genuine poetry lower than that of the poet; affirming in one of his letters "while they [reviewers] prosecute their glorious employment, they cannot be supposed to be in a state of mind very favourable for being affected by the finer influences of a thing so pure as genuine poetry." (1)

Matthew Arnold acknowledges the superiority of creativity and admits that "the critical faculty is lower than the inventive" (1) and that malicious criticism is harmful, yet he argues that the exercise of free creative activity is the highest function of a human being. For him, while the creative power is activated through the best of ideas, literary genius is not manifested in discovering new ideas. A literary work is a work of synthesis and exposition, not analysis and discovery. Great poets like Goethe used their creative faculty to produce important criticism. He associates the creative power with the artist's high sensibility towards outer reality and a suitable environment: the power of the man and the power of the moment, which are not really in the artist's zone of control. Then, the creation of art is not possible in all spatio-temporal environments. The function of criticism is to nourish creative art and guarantee its continuity, as it creates a suitable environment and provides necessary materials through which the artist can forge ahead.

Arnold assents that "It is the business of the critical power, [...] in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is." (3) By defining criticism as a "business", Arnold stresses the idea that criticism is based on technique and that it is not inherited, but rather learned by great labor; as T.S. Eliot would introduce in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) while referring to tradition. Arnold valorizes the critical power, implying that it has nothing to do with external factors, but rather he argues that it should be restricted only to the internal factors, as emphasized by all new critics like Wimsatt and Beardsley in "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946), T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis. The verb "to see" implies that the critical process is operated by the factors of insight as well as blindness, and hence the critic's moral judgment is inclusive as well as exclusive, being related

to assumptions, as emphasized by René Wellek in "The Mode of Existence of a Literary Work of Art" (1942). "To see the object as it really is" illustrates Arnold's demand for disinterestedness and objectification of Art; an idea defended throughout the essay. Then, for Arnold, "The rule may be summed up in one word, disinterestedness." (7)

Real criticism, argues Arnold, is a patient flexible exercise of curiosity: trying to discover the best that is known and thought in the outer world, with no other considerations whatever. The critic "must keep out of the region of immediate practice in the political, social, humanitarian sphere, if he wants to make a beginning for that more free speculative treatment of things." (10) Criticism must claim its "practical spirit" and "dissatisfaction". It must be fully aware of the intimate association between politics and practice that can shape to a great extent critical formations, "know[ing] how to attach itself to things and how to withdraw from them. [...] It must be apt to discern the spiritual shortcomings or illusions of powers that in the practical sphere may be beneficent." (12), and then "betaking [oneself] more to the serener life of the mind and spirit." (13) Thus, it is only through textual hints that the reader/critic could unveil the impersonalized. The critic is not only a well-read person, but her/his main function is rather to promote 'culture' based on her/his knowledge of letters. S/he contributes in endorsing nobility. S/he should be detached and disinterested: s/he should be objective, showing no predefined personal, political and social considerations.

In 1919, T.S. Eliot comes with his "Tradition and the Individual Talent", an essay that seeks primarily the "depersonalization" of the literary work of art. In Eliot's objectivistic poetics, it is assumed that the literary work, should be detached from any allusions to its author/poet, as the focus on the intention of this latter would stand as a hindrance to achieving multiple concretizations of the literary work. Hence, dealing with a literary work of art becomes a matter of rendering the personal impersonal, which makes poetry "not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." (8)

The tendency to disregard all that is outside the boundaries of the literary work of art has been advocated, later, by the critics of the Russian Formalist school which emerged in the second decade of the 20th century as a reaction against the Romanticist school that focused on the artist as a great intellect.¹ From a Russian formalist perspective, literature is a specialized mode of language; a systematic set of structural and linguistic components to be analyzed. It is a poetic language based on aesthetics. It totally differs from prosaic language: practical language, the main function of which is to communicate through extrinsic references.

In his essay "Art as Device" (1917), Victor Shklovsky defines poetic language as "impeded [language], distorted speech [...] structured speech." (7). The main function of literary language is to provide readership with a special experience generated through poetic linguistic qualities based on internal connections of the linguistic signs, thus the poetic language's own formal features which constitute the poetic image, considered by Shklovsky as:

One of the means by which a poet delivers his greatest impact. Its role is equal to other poetic devices, equal to parallelism, both simple and negative, equal to the simile, to repetition, to symmetry, to hyperbole, equal, generally speaking, to any other figure of speech, equal to all these means of intensifying the sensation of things (this "thing" may well be nothing more than the words or even just the sounds of the literary work itself). (3)

Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; not the object itself

Shklovsky defines art as a means of experiencing the process of creativity. Its purpose is "to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition." (6), stressing the artfulness of the object rather than the object itself: "Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artefact itself is quite unimportant." (6)

To support his theory of the artfulness of the object, Shklovsky favors the device of language over symbolic images, arguing that it is only by means of the textual device that the artfulness could be revealed. One of his formalist key

¹Russian Formalism originated in Moscow and St. Petersburg in the 1920s. The leading figures of this school are Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum, and Roman Jakobson. The term "formalism" was applied derogatorily by the movement's opponents, due to its focus on form and technical devices, then it had become a neutral designation. The formalist school was restrained by the Soviets in the early 1930s, which caused its shift to Czechoslovakia to join the Prague school (Prague Linguistic Circle) led by Roman Jakobson, Jan Mukarovsky, and René Wellek. Russian formalists' theories are based on Ferdinand de Saussure's structural theory of language. They were thus closely correlated with the structuralists, flourished mainly in the 1950s and 1960s.

concepts is the notion of 'defamiliarization' (ostraneni) which has been used to make the familiar object unfamiliar so that the value of the object is uplifted and the artfulness becomes clarified. For Shklovsky, "By defamiliarizing objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and laborious." (6). Therefore, though the focus has been shifted to the artfulness of the literary work of art rather than the work itself, the approach is still objectivistic in that there is always the framework of the object and the textual device of language as two inescapable elements in the study of the literary work of art.

The concept of 'defamiliarization' marks a continuity of Matthew Arnold's objectivist poetics foregrounded through the concept of 'disinterestedness' and goes hand in hand with the concept of 'depersonalization' introduced by the new critic T. S. Eliot, through which he argues for the necessity of rendering the personal impersonal, considering poetry "not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." (8), treating thus a poem as such.

Following the same trend of locating and defining the literary work of art, the Czech-German comparative literary critic and one of the Prague School linguists René Wellek attempts to find for the literary work of art a unique mode of existence. In his essay "The Mode of Existence of a Literary Work of Art" (1937), Wellek argues that "the real poem must be conceived as a structure of norms." (150) In other words, the work of art, according to the essay, should be perceived as timeless in that no attention should be paid to any of the conventions of its production including the artist.

Wellek highlights the importance of the literary work as being historical. This approach to the literary work aims at spotting light on its different concretizations experienced by different readers/critics throughout the historical development of that literary work. In this respect, one can sense Wellek's tendency to disregard any attempts to imprison the literary work of art either within the author's framework or through a monolithic reading. For the formalists, the main purpose of literature is to defamiliarize through deranging ordinary discursive modes of language to make familiar objects unfamiliar. It is to defamiliarize common cognizance of systemic order and activate readership's fresh modes of receiving and perceiving outer reality(ies) through a poetic image which functions as an object of aesthetic scrutiny and "the purpose of [which] is not to draw our understanding closer to that which this image stands for, but rather to allow us to perceive the object in a special way, in short, to lead us to a "vision" of this object rather than mere "recognition." (10)

The formalist theory of literature is based on the linguistics of literature, stressing the importance of artistic devices - formal features- to produce genuine works of art and thus foreground their fresh effect. Formalists refer to these artistic features as "literariness", defined by Jan Mukarövsy (1976) as the text's acts of speech. In this respect, Jakobson (1978) argues that the literary science's object of study is not literature but literariness: poetic language that makes a text a literary text. It consists of form, diction and unity. Formalism calls for the study of the text as a self-contained unity. Some of the main elements to examine are rhythm, the repetitions of sounds in alliteration and rhyme, stanza, grammatical construction, syntax, narrative devices, figurative language and key words.

Then, considering the main characteristics of the objectivistic poetics of formalist critics, the approach to the literary work of art is more or less the same among most adherents to this trend. There has been always a sort of dealing with the literary work of art as a construction of words paying no attention to any external conventions that might be believed to contribute to better approaching the literary work, for it is an object that stands in itself and by itself.

The Reactionary Approaches to the Objectivistic Poetics of Formalist Critics

The objectivistic approaches to the literary work of art have been challenged with the new critical tendencies that were developed mainly during the second half of the twentieth century, especially with theorists such as George Poulet, Wolfgang Iser and others. These new tendencies have come to take up the literary work of art proportionally from a non-objectivistic perspective. Poulet and Iser for instance are propounding a subjective approach to the literary work of art in their essays respectively "Phenomenology of Reading" (1969) and "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach" (1972).

Poulet is a literary critic who belongs to the Geneva School: a group of modern structural linguists based in Geneva and literary theorists and critics who approach literary works from a phenomenological perspective. In a general sense, "Phenomenology of Reading" forms a sort of continuity in the history of literary criticism, as it highlights the relationship between the reader and the literary work and the way the latter should be dealt with.

In "Phenomenology of Reading", Poulet argues that it is the reader/critic who turns the literary work of art- namely a book, from a material entity to a mental entity, through her/his act of reading. It is the encounter between the reader and the book that brings the latter into its new existence. This new existence, in fact, manifests itself not in 'ink' and 'paper' but rather in words, images and ideas which are given life by the reader's innermost self. Poulet asserts: "Words, images and ideas disport themselves, these mental entities, in order to exist, need the shelter which I provide; they are dependent on my consciousness." (54-5)

The notion of consciousness in the above statement is a key concept used to allude to the reading self. The dependence of words, ideas and images upon the reader's consciousness makes it clear that this consciousness plays a paramount role in constructing them in their path to become mental entities. The kind of result sought after by transferring these books into mental entities is the detachment of books from the material objective self for the sake of attaining an "apprehension of a subjectivity without objectivity". (17)

In his essay "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach", Wolfgang Iser also sets forward a subjective approach to the literary work of art. In establishing his arguments, Iser highlights the importance of the relationship between the reader and the text as favoured over the relationship between the author and the text. In so doing, Iser distinguishes between two different poles; one is artistic referring to the text and the author and the other is aesthetic describing the reader and the text. Iser suggests that the critic should concern her/himself with the aesthetic pole which portrays the way the reader generates meaning out of the text regardless of the artistic pole, as the latter is quite irrelevant.

One of the key concepts introduced by Iser is "text effect" as opposed to text as object. Iser's theory of the aesthetic pole, along with what has been initiated by Poulet, assumes that the text is no longer an object as confirmed by objectivistic critics, but rather an effect by which the reader activates her/his own interpretive and analytic mechanisms through knowing the text's workings. In this respect, Iser comes to the conclusion that the reading activity becomes instrumental in concretizing the aesthetic dimensions (the reader and the text), stressing the reader's major role in assigning meaning to the text and assuring its continuous active regeneration through modes of interaction and interpretation.

The reading process allows the text's virtual dimension, through the interaction between the author's consciousness and the reader's imagination. Every literary work consists of two parts: a written part and an unwritten one. The written part gives knowledge; the unwritten part activates the reader's imagination. The critic's task is not to explain the text as an object, but rather to formulate and nurture its imaginary dimension, formulating the unformulated.

Within the framework of postcolonial theory, Edward Said introduces new politics to approach human knowledge in general. In his essay "The Politics of Knowledge" (1991), Said rejects the politics of knowledge that are based on the assertion and the reassertion of identity, advocating the notion that there should be a worldly awareness because whatever your intellectual creativity is, it should belong to the world. Said argues that an intellectual has the choice to affiliate and position her/himself wherever s/he wants; however, it becomes a matter of commitment when discussing the politics of knowledge in that the intellectual is no longer an independent entity, but rather a part of the global world.

In an attempt to locate Edward Said within the new critical tendencies that have come to dispute the objectivistic approach to the literary work of art, it should be clearly stated that Said, in his essay challenges the doctrine of "disinterestedness" that was advocated by Matthew Arnold, arguing that literary criticism should deal with politics and, thus, literary critics should develop a political awareness. Such a tendency makes it clear that, according to Edward Said, the text is not an object that can be enough to reveal its own meaning; "works of literature are not merely texts." (152)

Closely related to Said's notions of "worldliness" (151) and belonging to the global world, Homi Bhabha in his essay "The Commitment to Theory" (1989) upholds the idea that there should be a "third space" where theory can take place as theory not as polymeric. It is, in fact, a call for not polarizing or polymerizing theory and, thus, talking about theory of the west and theory of the subaltern, for theory is abstract and can not exist outside the should-be-created third space. Third space allows a sort of cultural difference and influence that help much establishing an effective knowledge, generated both out of the "master" and the "slave" who- by necessity- should locate themselves, as theory is about location; "the language of the critique is effective not because it keeps forever

separate the terms of the master and the slave, the mercantilist and the Marxist, but to the extent to which it overcomes the given ground of oppositions and opens up a space of translation.” (25).

Thus, third space is not about oppositions and the consolidation of hegemony, it is rather about what Bhabha calls “a solidary collective will” (29). The in-between or the meeting point established between the “master” and the “slave” should welcome negotiation and discussion that generate judgements and identifications which in their turn aim at informing a political space of its enunciation, as has been clearly stated in the essay. Yet, there is always a sort of how come that two differently oriented entities the master and the slave, whose previously established relationships are built on notions of ambivalence, can share a uniform space that is supposed to be the locus of enunciation.

In the general context of the new orientations advanced during the twentieth century, both Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault introduce very determined views concerning the approach to the literary work of art, focusing mainly on the element of the author. In his essay “Death of the Author” (1986), Barthes attempts to confirm the idea that authority has gone; the author is denied authority for he is regarded as a mere collector of words: “his only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others.” (170)

According to Barthes, if the writer or the author writes through a medium which is not her/his own, how can the work belong to her/him? This suggests that the author does not have a sense of creativity, as s/he is a mere scripter just like a car mechanic. In this respect, the text would be then “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (171).

Following the trend of unfamiliarizing the familiar, Foucault has entitled his essay “What is an Author?” (1969) in an attempt to bring more focus on the author. In doing so, Foucault argues that while writing, a space should be created “into which the writing subject constantly disappears” (343). However, Foucault does not admit definitely the disappearance of the author and he keeps, throughout his essay, questioning whether to deal with the literary work of art as a structure which stands by its own, or to regard the author as an important element and thus the center of criticism. This comes as a result of Foucault’s attempts to question, for instance Roland Barthes’ assumption of the death of the author that has been taken for granted by many critics.

Conclusion:

Based on the relationship between the text, the author and the reader, the work of art has been approached differently, waving between trends of objectivistic literary theories and reactionary approaches. Through the objectivistic approach, a work of literature has been considered as an entity which stands free from “extrinsic” relations to the author/poet, the audience and the universe, being analyzed solely by “intrinsic” criteria (Abrams 52). This suggests certain “depersonalization” of the text often detached from any allusions to its author, as the focus on the latter’s intention would stand as a hindrance to achieving multiple concretizations of the literary work. The text is then an independent object which stands by its own. Nearly one century after objectivistic poetics of formalist critics, different critical orientations have emerged with new literary philosophies and scopes, marking a dissatisfaction with the centrality of the work of art as it really is, and addressing thus new issues in relation to the status of the literary work as a mental entity (as with Poulet), the reader (Poulet and Iser), the author (Barthes and Foucault), the universe (Edward Said), and the colonial enterprise (Bhabha).

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