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SPECIAL ISSUE: THE RESPONSE OF THE WORLD TO THE “IMPOSED INTERPRETATION” OF WESTERN LITERARY CRITICISM AND ONGOING DISCUSSION

Literature, Literary Criticism and the Historical Index of the Readability of Literary Texts

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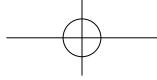
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针对张江教授在《强制阐释论》一文中提出的观点：文学诠释必须是客观的，并且符合“作者原意”，德国学者威格尔从四个方面驳斥这一衡量文学诠释是否正确的标准。首先，她认为，就文学的本质来说，诠释文学的核心问题不在于参透其作者原意，而在于剖析文本的创作理念；第二，一个唯一、客观的“作者原意”之所以不可得，是因为不同背景的读者的诠释视角、方法与目的也千差万别；第三，通过引入“文本可读性的历史指数”这一概念，威格尔试图找到历史和现代化诠释视角的最佳结合点；最后，威格尔认为，今天中国文学和文学诠释无法排除西方文学理论的影响，而构建中国文艺理论的关键在于传统与现代相结合。

关键词：作者原意 文学批评 文学诠释 历史指数

The German scholar Sigrid Weigel takes issue with Professor Zhang Jiang's view on the "correct understanding of a text," which holds that literary interpretation should be objective and should reflect authorial intention. She raises four points to rebut Zhang's criteria for determining whether an interpretation of literature is correct. Firstly, the central concern of literary interpretation is not authorial intention, but rather the dissection of the creative ideas in the text. Secondly, it is impossible to identify a single objective "authorial intention" when readers' backgrounds, perspectives, methods and purposes vary dramatically. Thirdly, with the concept of the "historical index of readability," Weigel attempts to establish an optimal meeting point between history and modern interpretive perspectives. Finally, Weigel makes it clear that literature and literary criticism in China today cannot eliminate the influence of Western theories and that the key to the development of Chinese literary theory lies in the combination of tradition and modernity.

Keywords: authorial intention, literary criticism, literary interpretation, historical index



In his examination of literary criticism and the newest literary theories, Zhang Jiang criticizes “imposed interpretation,” or the interpretive practice of letting particular theories dominate the interpretation of a literary text, a practice he sees as the “main feature” of Western literary criticism. The theorists criticized and quoted by Zhang include German, French and American authors, who, in fact, represent quite different schools of 20th-century philosophical and literary studies. In the discussion of his paper (presented in Berlin in June, 2015), Zhang explained his motivation for believing that “Western” theories have too much influence in China today. He believes these theories will crowd out traditional Chinese thought and in any case are not suited to Chinese literature. Zhang specifies what he understands by literature and formulates criteria for the “correct understanding of a text.” His standard and ideal for this is that interpretation should be objective and should reflect “the author’s original intention” or the “original meaning of the text.”

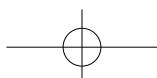
Professor Zhang’s paper touches upon many issues in literary studies. I will concentrate on a few central ones: (1) The concept of literature as a central concern of literary theory; (2) the various issues encountered in the interpretation of a text, arising from the processes of reading and literary criticism; (3) the position of literature and its relationship to history; (4) the issue of globalized (literary) theory.

I. On the Concept of Literature

In a number of places, Zhang Jiang criticizes the idea of a literary analysis that transcends time, with good reason. Such an analysis is impossible, for a literary text is not just the “artistic expression of human thought, emotions and psychology”; it reflects not just the author’s “subjective mental activity,” but also the experiences of a particular age, within particular cultural and historical constellations, that are at the author’s disposal. As Professor Zhang states, literature is a “unique aesthetic and creative expression.” As such, assuming one is not talking about an aesthetic of “art for art’s sake,”¹ what is important is that it lends linguistic expression and aesthetic form to human perceptions and inquiries. It is, therefore, as important to the reader as it is to the author. All literary works, be they novels, plays, essays or poems, play an important role in processing and comparing the memories, experiences and problems of a particular age.

On the other hand, the world created by a literary text is a fictitious one, in which the author uses poetic language to present experience in a unique way, thereby rendering visible or perceptible things that have not manifested themselves or are hidden below the surface in the real world. For example, by presenting a particular phenomenon of a given age in a form and manner that may not actually be possible, so as to reflect on its implications or take something to its highest point, literature can bring forth aspects that are latent within it but have not yet unfolded. In this realm of possibilities that surpass reality, literature displays great potential,

1 Zhang Jiang, “On Imposed Interpretation.”



the potential for creativity, reflection and critique.

Hans Blumenberg (1920-1996), a co-founder of the research group “Poetics and Hermeneutics,” discussed the “possibility of the novel” in 1963. Unlike Georg Lukacs, he asked not which reality the novel represents, but, far more fundamentally, what concept of reality the novel creates. Blumenberg acknowledged the potential of the new art (the novel), claiming that it represents no longer just things in this world, not to imitate *the* world, but to bring *a* world into being, a world represented by the themes and claims of the novel, which is no less important. To distinguish this type of representation from realism, he called it “fictional reality based on reality,” namely, “the extension of the scope of human potential,” applying “the most liberal interpretation of Aristotle’s ideals of imitation (...) to the possible in nature.”²

The emphasis on human potential lies in the human. This space for possibility in literature is not to be mistaken for the naïve idea that literature can construct a Utopian ideal or model for a future (better) society. Such an idea results from a confusion of the sphere of *production* with the sphere of *action*, the essential difference between which was specified by Hannah Arendt in her book *The Human Condition* (1958):³ literature and the imaginary world of literature are produced in the same way as artifacts, whereas society and politics fall into the sphere of action involving interpersonal relationships. Social conditions are not formulated and produced; they result from the way people communicate with each other, the way they act and negotiate.

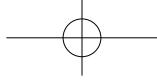
Literature at all times begins with a specific individual and historical situation, but it is not a pure copy or “reflection” of the situation. Rather, it always engages in an active dialogue with it and is a poetic expression as well as a reflection and response. In literary studies, the most productive question to ask of a text is not what its meaning is or what the author’s intention is or was, but *for which question the text is seeking an expression or answer*. The reason a literary text is written is not to be reduced to a specific intention. There are a variety of motives behind it, some conscious and some not. For different writers, too, motives may vary a great deal. Besides experience, observations, memories, belief, affection, fear and hope, desire for expression, and aesthetic feelings are all important, as well as attention to and use of language, rhetoric and habitual ways of speaking.

When authors wish to embed a specific *intention* in a text, they are likely to drop some hints in the form of comments in or outside the text, but the text itself will not be confined to that intention; it is always something else, either more or less. In contrast to that problematic term, “purpose,” a more meaningful question would be to ask about the *conception* or design which underlies and precedes a writing project, although the final text is often far removed from it. “The work is the death mask of its conception,”⁴ wrote Walter Benjamin in his *Einbahnstraße* (1927).

2 Hans Blumenberg, “Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Möglichkeit des Romans,” pp. 47-73. Quotations from pp. 61, 73.

3 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. German trans., *Vita Activa oder vom Tätigen Leben*.

4 Walter Benjamin, “Einbahnstraße,” p. 107.



II. Reading, Literary Criticism and Interpretation

The different poetic forms or narrative methods adopted by a literary text demand different *modes of reading*. The way we read a nature poem, which relies mainly on the use of images, is different from the way a poem on a more practical subject is read; in the latter case, although the poem is likewise built around rhythms and sound, the meaning is fragmented. The watching of a play, i.e., the reception of a performance given in real time by actors on the stage is even more different from the reading of a novel, which, depending on the narrative perspective, already has an “implicit reader”⁵ embedded in the narrative structure that predisposes the reader towards the plot and characters. Even with the same text, different readers may give quite different interpretations due to their different expectations, different tastes in language and aesthetics and different perceptions. And different cultures and ages also bring about different readings and interpretations, for what is represented corresponds specifically to the predominant experiences, knowledge and affective states of a culture or age.

In literary criticism, it is difficult to judge the quality or value of a text, for it is almost impossible to formulate universal criteria for good or bad literature—at least, one should not say that a text is less original simply because the author works with clichés, stereotypes and trivial narrative patterns and therefore has nothing to contribute to the development of the theme. Only when the quality of a text is examined in conjunction with its cognitive value, with the style and methods used to illuminate and develop its theme, can literary criticism be brought to a level where it becomes communicable and where theoretical perspectives can be exchanged and contested.

In her *Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesungen* (1959/60), Ingeborg Bachmann (1926-1973), one of the most distinguished postwar German authors, has discussed one compelling criterion for authors and readers: What makes us consider a poet “unavoidable”? To Bachmann, “unavoidable literature” emerges where an author is driven by a particular knowledge, perception and problem consciousness to seek their expression. “With any new language, we are brought face to face with a reality where we feel a jolt in our sense of morality and knowledge, not where we attempt to create a new language as if the language itself could collect knowledge and disclose experiences that humans have never had. When only such a language is used, it feels ingenious, but it will soon take its revenge and its true purpose will be exposed. A new language must have a new ‘gait,’ which is possible when a new soul resides in it.”⁶

In her poetic language, Bachmann formulated a criterion that places at the center the dimension of language use and writing methods in cognitive criticism, a dimension through

5 Wolfgang Iser, *Der implizite Leser: Kommunikationsformen des Romans von Bunyan bis Beckett*.

6 Ingeborg Bachmann, “Fragen und Scheinfragen.” In *Werke*, eds., Ch. Koschel, I. v. Weidenbaum, C. Münster, vol. 4, pp. 182-199. Quotation from p. 192.

which a literary text gives expression to its own concerns. When the “jolt in knowledge” is expressed through a “new gait” in language, the concerns of the text and the aesthetic form intermingle in a way that truly turns the text into a unique artistic expression of human thoughts, emotions and psyche.

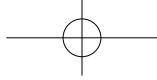
Professional literary reading is different from other types of reading in two respects: when literary critics or theorists read a complex novel, such as Bachmann’s *Malina* (1972), they follow the plot and narrative as ordinary readers, but at the same time they use a trained eye, attuned to theory, to observe the features of the novel in terms of composition and creation. In the case of *Malina*, this involves reflection on the work’s distinctive tripartite composition and triadic characterization; the scenes involving reading, correspondence, interviews and telephone calls that reflect the relationship between close contact and love, between the public and the literary world; the quotations from philosophy, music and literature; the way names, space and places are assigned symbolic meanings; and many other features tinged with inscrutability and mystery. These observations are the starting point for subsequent systematic study.⁷

Unlike the methodical analysis of a literary text, that is, unlike philological work in the narrow sense, and to some extent unlike structural analysis as textual critique (that is, investigation of textual layers and the formation of the text), metaphor, rhetoric, narratology, etc., always play an important role in the interpreter’s imagination, expectations, literary and linguistic knowledge, and cultural memories. An interpreter who asks about the meaning of a text will find that no objective and unambiguous interpretation can be given, for the question about the meaning of a text goes beyond the text as it stands, that is, its linguistic and literary materials. A text never has a single unambiguous meaning, for human language is not a system of coded signs or conventional meanings. “For language is in every case not only communication of the communicable but also, at the same time, a symbol of the non-communicable,” wrote Walter Benjamin in his essay “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen” (1916).⁸ It is this property of language that enables literature to speak through images, allusions, suggestions and comparisons.

In formulating a single interpretation or statement about a specific literary text, the interpreter will normally and unavoidably translate its meaning into a different language—often discursive and conceptual—and thus integrate it into a certain interpretive pattern. It is this translation that makes *every* interpretation problematic. The more dominant the interpretative pattern is, the more likely it is that the literary text will be lost in the interpretation. This happens not only in the early development of literary theory or the “Western” literary theories referred to by Zhang, nor even only in the examples he criticizes,

7 Cf. Sigrid Weigel, *Ingeborg Bachmann. Hinterlassenschaften unter Wahrung des Briefgeheimnisses*.

8 In Walter Benjamin, GS, vol. II, 1, p. 156. Cf. Sigrid Weigel, *Entstelle Ähnlichkeit. Walter Benjamins theoretische Schreibweise*. Eng. Trans., *Body- and Image-Space: Re-Reading Walter Benjamin*; Sigrid Weigel, *Walter Benjamin. Die Kreatur, das Heilige, the Bilder*. Eng. Trans., *Walter Benjamin: Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*.



in which the meanings obviously derive from concepts in social critiques, such as those of ecology or feminism. This is a common problem in interpretation: replacing the text with the interpretation.

In his study of “Goethes Wahlverwandschaften” (1924/25), Walter Benjamin discussed the ineluctable distance and difference between *criticism* and literary composition. He described literary representation as “virtual formulability.”⁹ What did he mean by this? His theory was based on the difference between criticism and literature, between criticism and philosophical discourse; he saw literary representation as something in between. When philosophy examines a problem, it sees the problem as exemplary or universal and tries to derive from it a concept or an abstraction based upon appearances. Literature, however, represents the problem in its appearances; each text deals an appearance, showing the multiplicity and diversity of human experience. A critic’s task is to work out the ideal of the problem without losing sight of the specific literary representation, to reveal what Benjamin termed “virtual formulability” and at the same time pay attention to specific formulability, as in images and non-conceptual representation.

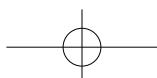
Obviously, the purpose of criticism is not to repeat or quote the text. What critics must be aware of is that when talking about a literary text, they must keep a distance from literature. They have to reflect upon and formulate their own positions and particular intellectual concerns so as to make their criticism or analysis of the text transparent. This is the precondition for the discussion of different interpretations.

To develop transparent criticism, it is helpful to distinguish between material content and meaning content,¹⁰ as defined by Walter Benjamin in the same essay. While material content also includes the subject, or rather, the theme of a literary text, based on writers’ experiences and perceptions and more or less closely linked with the time and environment in which they live, the truth or meaning content is concerned with the representation and development of the theme. Ideally, material content and meaning content form a unity; but due to the distance in time and culture since the formation of the text, the two become separated. The more distant a reader is in time from the material content of the text, the more striking it becomes and the more clearly it moves to the foreground.

The relationship between the two is determined by the basic law of literature, according to which the more significant the work, the more inconspicuously and intimately its truth content is bound up with its material content. If therefore precisely those works turn out to endure whose truth is most deeply embedded in their subject matter, the beholder who contemplates them long after their own time finds the realia all the more striking in the work as they have faded away in the world. This means that subject matter and truth content,

9 *Ibid.*, vol. I, 1, p. 173.

10 “Material contents” and “truth contents” were later replaced by Benjamin with “material contents” and “meaning contents,” after he ceased using the vocabulary of metaphysics.



united in the work's early period, come apart during its afterlife; the material content becomes more striking while the truth content retains its original concealment. To an ever-increasing extent, therefore, the interpretation of the striking and the odd, that is, of the material content, becomes a prerequisite for any later critic.¹¹

The discussion of the thematic subject matter of a text is another task before the critic. Benjamin referred to this preliminary work as commentary, which, he said, must precede criticism. Commentary examines the background to the theme of the text and requires historical research on the object. Thematically, literature deals with different aspects of human life, so literary studies involve a multiplicity of themes and inevitably extend into other fields. In his essay on Goethe's novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809), for example, Benjamin examined ideas about marriage in Goethe's time, and particularly Kant's definition of marriage in his *Metaphysik der Sitten*, so as to discuss the events portrayed in the novel against this background. Insofar as this is the case, the genuine work of literary studies always has a cross-disciplinary character.

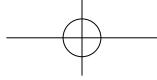
III. Literature and History

The comprehensive critique of a literary text requires the "interweaving of historical and critical observation."¹² Such interweaving results from the tension between the historical perspective and that of today, between the attempt at explaining literature from its own age and reading it from our own day. Different methods will bring to the fore different aspects of literature. Supporters of historicization do their best to understand and interpret a literary text entirely from the perspective of its own age. But they have to face a central problem: how to link knowledge of history with interpretation. Often such historicizing runs the risk of turning the literary text into a mere appendage to the representation of economic or social history, or, as recent trends show, into a means of illustrating socio-historical phenomena. The text thus becomes little more than a reflection of or evidence for a given "context." The reading of the literature of a past epoch from the perspective of today entails the possibility that when reading is done across a distance in time and in terms of current intellectual concerns, the text may assume aspects that were neglected at the time, in the way the self-evident is often not perceived. However, in actualizing a text, a tendency that is often hard to avoid is to apply the most recent paradigms to historical texts.

Between the Scylla and Charybdis of historicization versus the actualization of literary texts, Benjamin proposed in his "Literaturgeschichte und Literaturwissenschaft" (1931) a dialectical consideration of the past and the present. He was concerned not only with literary

11 Walter Benjamin, GS, vol. I. 1, p. 126.

12 Walter Benjamin, "Literaturgeschichte und Literaturwissenschaft," in GS, vol. II, pp. 283-290. Quotation from p. 289.



history, that is, the history of literature, but also with the role literature plays in and for history. In the essay *Mikroaeton*, he discussed primarily the role of literature in theories of history.

This is not to consider literary works in conjunction with their own age, but to consider them in the age they are produced in and the age they become known in—that is, our age. Literature thus becomes an organon of history. The task of literary history is to deal with it as such, not to make it a subject of history.¹³

Here Benjamin ascribed an active role not only to literature, but also to literary criticism, as an organon of history. A critic's position in the present is also the point of departure for his or her reading and interpretation. Here Benjamin stresses the cognitive theoretical possibility and added epistemological value embedded in such a position. Admittedly, when seen from the present, new, never-experienced aspects of old texts can often be revealed, but for Benjamin, the opposite was also true: texts from previous ages can also throw light on certain aspects of our own age.

To discuss the historicity of texts and other artistic and intellectual products, Benjamin formulated the concept “historical index.” The concept covers not only the age in which a literary text is produced, but also the age and the circumstances in which it is read. The “readability” of texts and pictures as well as their perception in general is determined by the particular situation, time and place in which the historical subject is located.

The historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to readability only at a particular time. And, indeed, the acceding to “readability” constitutes a specific critical point in the movement at their interior. Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: Each “now” is the now of a particular recognizability.”¹⁴

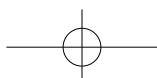
Thus the historical determinism of reading and criticism, which present indisputable facts, is no longer a defect or problem that must be minimized or removed. Benjamin turns this understanding around, transforming it into an epistemological critique of reading. Reflection on the conditions of readability and recognizability thus become part of reading and criticism. Each reading has its own specific historical index, which is not to be confused with relativism or arbitrariness.

IV. Literary Theory and Globalization

Literary theory is likewise dependent upon its age and the historical and cultural constellations

13 *Ibid.*, p. 290.

14 Walter Benjamin, “Passagen-Werk,” pp. 577-578 (Kapitel N, Erkenntnistheoretisches, N 3, 1).



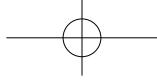
in which it is formulated. Zhang criticizes and laments the fact that literary theories from the United States and Europe have gained a good deal of influence in China, but this development is not so much a Chinese problem as a phenomenon of globalization, which has recently extended to the history of ideas and intellectual culture. As early as Erich Auerbach's famous essay "The Philology of World Literature" (1952), an essay born of his experience as an exile in Istanbul and Princeton, the dialectic of the internationalization of literature was examined. The impulse to transcend national and nationalistic literature and modes of thought, as formulated in the cosmopolitan program for world literature of Goethe and others, is bringing us closer to the realization of the goal, in an attempt at adjustment, or rather standardization, the effect of which, however, is that the ideal of a world literature is shattered the moment it is realized.

Our earth, the domain of world literature, is growing smaller and losing its diversity. But world literature refers not just to what is common and human as such, but rather to this as the mutual fertilization of the manifold. It is predicated upon the *felix culpa* [fortunate sin, i.e. man's fall from the Garden of Eden] of mankind's division into a wealth of cultures. And what prepared the way for today's events? For a thousand reasons, that everyone knows, life all over the planet is becoming homogenized... The European cultures or cultures developed by Europeans have long been used to fruitful communication with one another, and moreover, reinforced by the consciousness of their worth and their contemporaneity, they have best preserved their independence from one another, although here too the process of homogenization is becoming more rapid than before. Everything else, however, has been taken over by standardization.¹⁵

What this German-Jewish literary scholar, whose sensibility was sharpened by exile, suggested shortly after World War II, has since been carried through and reinforced, especially in the age of the worldwide web. What Auerbach described as standardization is actually the result of international circulation and globalization in the domain of culture and thought.

Considering the extent to which European and American modes of production and consumption have spread in China, it should come as no surprise, as China reacts to and contends with these post-industrial societies, that their cultural and intellectual development is gaining influence in China. It would be an illusion to believe that China, as a highly developed industrial nation, would hold on to its traditional forms of art, literature and criticism. Literature and criticism are in fact concerned with finding a way of expressing the tension between traditional ways of life and thought on the one hand and the new ways of living and working on the other, and with theoretical reflection on this tension.

15 Erich Auerbach, "Philologie der Weltliteratur," in *Philologie der Weltliteratur. Sechsversuche über Stil und Wahrnehmung*, pp. 83-96. Quotation from p. 83. Eng. Trans., *Philology and Weltliteratur*, in *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature*, pp. 125-138.



One particular issue in the global circulation of theory lies in the fact that standardization, as diagnosed by Auerbach, involves the role of English as a global language in international intellectual exchanges. The Anglo-American dialect has thus gained a hegemonic position in theoretical discussion. This is, however, due not only to the culture of immigration and the ensuing problem of cultural differences, but also to the specific practice of the highly competitive academic field. This brings pressure for originality and the introduction of ever new theory-products, accompanied by the alignment of theory with the laws of the market. As in other fields, this market-oriented development not only releases creativity but also promotes a mode of production which is geared not to use value but to market value. The hegemony of Anglo-American theory, however, is met not through renunciation, defense, or the preservation of tradition, but through debate. This involves, particularly, the assumptions and implications of these theories; for example, the position of Afro-American culture and the culture of immigrants, often from post-colonial countries, in the intellectual discourse of the USA, and the relationship of these conditions to the specific historical index of theory and criticism in their own countries.

Against this background, one finds in European debates in recent years an intensified reception and debate over the cultural theories resulting from the European modernist movement,¹⁶ which was interrupted by the national socialist movement and World War II. In this context, German authors like Walter Benjamin, Aby Warburg, Georg Simmel, Heinrich Plessner, Erich Auerbach and Hannah Arendt, to name just a few, appear at the moment as frequently in seminars and symposiums in the humanities as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. This development appears in conjunction with the opening of philology and other fields to criticism. Here the competencies of literary criticism and the methods used in the critique of texts and images apply not just to the conventional subjects of these fields, but to all the kinds of cultural phenomena in which meaning is produced.

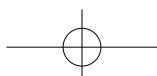
Notes on Contributor

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16 Cf. Sigrid Weigel, *Literatur als Voraussetzung der Kulturgeschichte. Schauplätze von Shakespeare bis Benjamin*.



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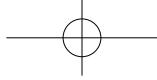
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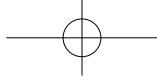
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