

On the Theory of Misreading

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Abstract: As a theory of literary criticism, misreading theory was first put forward by American post structuralist theorists. Misreading is not only a misunderstanding of the text, but also a creative act in reading and writing. From the characteristics of language, rhetoric, intertextuality, discourse analysis and the theory of reading and writing, we can see more clearly the inevitability of misreading and the strong vitality of this literary criticism.

Everyone has his own limitations in understanding and expressing the world. There is no ultimate meaning in anything. The so-called "meaning" is totally based on different understandings. In literature and literary criticism, who can say that his interpretation of the text is completely correct? Every critic uses their own methods to interpret the text and establish their own theories. At the same time, they oppose or even attack the interpretation of others to maintain their authority in specific fields. But do they realize that when they attack other people's theories, their own interpretation is not a complete misreading? Misreading is not the patent of critics, and it is difficult for authors and ordinary readers to escape. Harold Bloom once boldly declared that "all reading is misreading". In many literary theories, we can find the trace of misreading theory. Although critics have their own unique views on how to study the text, they are inevitably contributing to misreading.

1. The unique meaning of misreading in literary theory.

Misreading, according to the Oxford English dictionary, refers to errors in reading, understanding or judgment, but as a literary theory, it has a broader meaning. The concept of misreading theory was first proposed by some American post structuralist theorists, including Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom. Most of their works are based on the deconstruction theory of Derrida and Barthes. "Yale four sages" once claimed that reading is misunderstanding, misreading is writing, and writing is misreading. The sentiment of misreading can be analyzed from reading theory and writing theory. When referring to the origin of misreading theory, two theorists can not be ignored, one is Saussure, a Swiss linguist, and the other is Derrida, a French philosopher. Saussure has broken away from the tradition of synchronic linguistics, created a new situation of diachronic linguistics, and found a huge difference between speech and language. He pointed out that any sign consists of signifier and signified. The former refers to the phonetic and written traces of words, while the latter refers to the meaning of words. The relationship between them is arbitrary and not consistent. Meaning is produced in the sign's reciprocity, that is to say, the meaning of speech does not directly correspond to the objective reality. Language is an independent system, and meaning is not determined by the speaker, but the whole language system has the final say. The uncertainty of the relationship between the signifier and the signified makes us wonder whether the signifier can really convey the meaning of reality and whether we can master the real signified through the signifier. Perhaps such doubts directly lead to the misreading of the text composed of a series of signifiers.

Derrida, as a deconstructive theorist, put forward the concept of "deferring". The invention of the word "deferring" is to convey the essential difference between symbols, that is, the meaning of "difference" and "defer". "Difference" is a spatial concept: the sign emerges from a system of differences which are spatially out within the system. And "delay" is a concept of time: signifiers

enforce an endless posting element of "presence". Derrida believes that language is a system of differences with extreme forms. Any signifier bears the content of the signifier in the difference from all other signifiers. In other words, the symbol itself contains traces of all other symbols (the spread of the signified), and its meaning comes from the free combination of these traces, so it is difficult to determine them. At the same time, expression always contains the delayed silence, and some of the signified absence makes the meaning delayed. Derrida believes that in the process of writing and understanding, there is no complete signifier, and symbols are just a series of signified without signifier. Therefore, signifier forms uncertain meaning, which may only be called the process of interpretation. The absence of meaning makes us have a process of interpretation, not meaning itself.

Saussure and Derrida both deny the correspondence between signifier and signified. This arbitrary feature of language makes misreading inevitable. The limitation of language leads to the incomplete expression of ideas. Before putting it into practice, the author's intention has been alienated and distorted. While reading these texts, readers can only accept the author's fallacy.

At the same time, misreading is also produced by rhetoric. Reading is a specific revelation: it reveals not only the truth, but also the fallacy. The ancient meaning of rhetoric refers to the art of persuasion. De Man is very concerned about the theory of tropes in rhetoric. "Metaphor" can make the author refer to it; "metaphor" can replace one symbol with another; and "metonymy" can change the meaning of one symbol in the symbol chain into another. Metaphor is pervasive in language and has the power to shake logic. Therefore, metaphor denies the possibility of direct indicating function of language. De Man said that, just as the insight of criticism comes from the blindness of criticism, the explicit critical reflection paragraphs or the thematic statements in literary texts seem to rely on the inhibition of the use of metaphors in paragraphs. De Man also believes that the effects of language and metaphor prevent the direct expression of reality. The metaphor of language itself means that it has no direct indication and expression meaning, so there is no original non figurative language, that is to say, the indicative function of language is always polluted by metaphor. If we use this point of view to comment, we will find that reading cannot escape the fate of misreading, because metaphor will inevitably permeate into comments and literary texts. Writing and critical writing basically conform to the literary image we call "fable", which is a symbol sequence, trying to find its position far away from another symbol sequence.

Text is the product of rhetorical fiction. The language of the text has the characteristics of fiction and rhetoric, both of which are uncertain, untrue, and even deceptive. Therefore, the rhetoric of the text and language can not be a true display, but only a fallacy, and the characteristics of fiction and rhetoric will not weaken the literary function of the text. De Man also believes that if a text rejects or refuses to misread, it will inevitably lose its literary function, and a text should allow and encourage misreading.

Deconstruction theorists pay great attention to intertextuality. According to the theory of intertextuality, text is not a closed entity completed by a single author, but an absorption and a heavy hit. At Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* and *A Map of Misreading*, he thinks that every text is intertextual and based on other texts. The relationship between them lies in misunderstanding (misunderstanding should include misreading, misunderstanding and misinterpretation). Therefore, he also believes that all reading is misreading, and reading cannot show the internal objective meaning. Intertextuality leads to the overflowing of meaning in the text. When other texts are brought into a new text, their own meanings are brought into the new text at the same time. In the novel, we can often see the borrowed materials, such as ancient stories, diachronic documents, folk legends, and even current news. These texts or materials have their own meanings. When they are brought into the new text, they still play their own functions, so the new text is full of different meanings. Because of different meanings, readers can enter the text in different ways and form their own interpretation of the text. At the same time, we don't have enough evidence to show that one interpretation is better than the other. Readers cannot have all the readings at the same time, nor can they have enough ability to make wise choices. A large number of inconsistent interpretations in the text make the reader face a dilemma, which is caused by the overflow of meaning in the text.

Therefore, it is difficult for the reader to get a clear interpretation. And each interpretation always reveals and hides the lack of true and reasonable interpretation of the text.

Because of the uncertainty of language and rhetoric, as well as the characteristics of the text itself, it is in a contradictory situation. At the same time, in the continuous deconstruction, it eventually becomes a poor hybrid.

2. Analyzing the types of misreading from different perspectives.

Misreading can be divided into three types: the author misreads his own text, the critic misreads the author's text and the general reader misreads others' text. For general readers, when reading historical texts, it is more likely to produce misreading.

In the psychoanalytic review, scholars use the principle of psychoanalysis to confirm the driving force between the reading process and the literary response. Psychoanalysts believe that the pleasure of reading lies in the fact that literary texts transform readers' unconscious will and fear into acceptable cultural things. The text provides a suitable place for the reader and the author to practice collusion, and they are deeply trapped in the illusion that the text is hopeless. Norman N. Holland developed the theory of psychoanalysis. He paid a lot of attention to the reading process. He never thought that the text was a stable entity that could get protection from the readers. Holland put the reader's function in a prominent position, and proposed the transaction theory to explain the relationship between the reader and the text. According to its interpretation, the whole reading transaction can be divided into four steps, that is, the reader first encounters the text (full of expectation); selects a desire that can be brought into the text; obtains the response to the desire in the text (a typical illusion); interprets the desire as the main purpose of the text. Holland points out that there is a close relationship between readers' free association and their personal similar themes, including their personal life experiences. He also believes that when readers read, they tend to melt the personal psychological experience gained from life into the texts they read. In this way, they will unconsciously build up a world of their own in the text, and the world already exists in their minds. Readers' interpretation of the text is obviously the reflection of their own fears, needs and desires. So what the text says is not what they want to care about, what they care about is whether the text responds to their needs.

The theory of reader centered literary criticism points out that the meaning of text does not come from itself, but from the interaction between text and reader. Literary texts are full of gaps that need to be filled by readers. Readers are also impolite to fill in these gaps with their associations, so when they are reading a new text, they will inevitably bring the existing text in their minds into the new text. Previous texts may conflict with each other, but no matter how different they are, they constitute the personal knowledge of readers. The existing knowledge of readers usually comes from previous reading, personal life experience or the consensus of the whole society. Hans Robert Jauss borrows the concept of "normative form" in natural science to explain why readers of the same era have similar views on literature. According to Jauss, both readers' reading and writers' writing are restricted by consensus (or normative form) and contemporary literary norms, which include the views on literature itself and its own background. It is based on these consensus that readers form their own version of expectation, and the version of expectation makes them take the concept formed in advance when they read the new text, so broadly speaking, misreading is inevitable for readers. Martin Heidegger pointed out that there is no pure objective thing beyond history and times. The understanding of all things must go hand in hand and be deeply influenced by the idea, because any idea is the reflection of human thought. At the same time, people's thoughts are always restricted by historical conditions, so the understanding of any text must be historical. Hans Georg Gadamer developed Heidegger's theory, emphasizing the shaping effect of historical conditions on readers. As a historical existence, people are all engraved with the historical traces of the times, because they can't get rid of their subjective will and can't study the past from a fair and objective perspective, so people always look at history from a limited contemporary perspective. Presupposition and historical conditions make it impossible to understand the true meaning of the text.

When we study misreading theory, we have to consider Foucault's discourse theory. Foucault believes that discourse (especially powerful discourse) is constantly shaping and reshaping our thoughts. There is nothing to exist outside the discourse, and things outside the discourse have no meaning. Things are real and meaningful only in a specific historical context. In each period, discourse produces a series of subjective and objective cognitive models, which vary from time to time and have no inevitable relationship with each other. As people living in discourse, their thoughts are controlled by discourse, so when reading any text, they will inevitably be influenced by discourse. Because of this, only when the content and meaning of the text are consistent with the discourse of the times, it can be accepted by people. How to read the text of the ancients? They don't live in the same era, and there are different words and contexts. Can modern people use the current words to understand the text of the ancients? In terms of the understanding of the world and social phenomena, there must be a huge difference between the ancients and modern people. Therefore, for modern readers, it is inevitable to misread the text of the ancients. Foucault also pointed out that discourse means power, and strong discourse has great influence on the whole society.

In order to maintain its authority, some texts are often misread consciously, and different voices in the texts are distorted and misread to meet the needs of strong discourse, which is why there are different versions of the same news.

3. Misreading can also be considered as a creative act.

Misreading can also be considered as a creative act. If misreading not only refers to errors in reading, but also the behavior that readers and authors cannot avoid or recover the true meaning of the text, then misreading can also be considered as a creative behavior. Harold Bloom believes that since Milton, the first truly "independent" poet, poets have realized that they have suffered from the "late" dilemma: they fear that their godfather of poetry has used up all available inspiration. They experienced Oedipus's hatred and extreme desire to subvert patriarchy, and this inhibition of the spirit of resistance stimulated the rise of various defense strategies. No poem is isolated, it always exists in the connection with other poems. In order to continue this delayed writing, poets must go to the battlefield of soul to win a space of self-association, which means to create a new interpretation by "Misreading" masters. This "poetic neglect" creates the space for poets to convey their true inspiration. Without a rebellious distortion of the meaning of previous texts, tradition will surely kill all creativity. "Every poet is fighting for the creative misreading of their predecessors." (Harold Bloom) From Bloom's words, we can realize the creative power of misreading, which is not only for the poetry writers, but also for the writers of other texts. If an author wants to create new things, instead of following his predecessors, he should read their texts in a new way, find a breakthrough, and take this opportunity to create his own writing space. Perhaps, misreading is the best way for the author to minimize the influence of his predecessors. Literary creation is almost based on the misreading and distortion of previous texts. No matter how hard the attempt is, the author can't get out of the cage of history and tradition. Only by misreading and distorting the previous texts can he achieve the success of his creation. As a creative act, misreading can produce "inspiration", bring us creative thinking and creative criticism. The more misreading, the more creative; the deeper misreading, the more creative. Critical writing, like literary writing, has the nature of misreading. As a close inspection of the text, criticism shows us a map of misreading. Therefore, only based on misreading can critics expand the space for us to explore the text, provide us with a new perspective and reveal the different meanings of the text. For critics, misreading is not a bad thing, but a creative act. So in a way, criticism needs to be misread.

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