

On the Connotation of Reading Based on Critical Thinking

Shunyu Yao

Changzhou Senior High School of Jiangsu Province, Jiangsu Province, China.

Abstract

Reading based on critical thinking is a reading paradigm emerging in the late 20th century, which is inextricably related to the overall western context of modernity at that time. In particular, the new historicism criticism and reader response criticism, as the mode of literary criticism, directly affect and even determine the object, method and purpose of reading based on critical thinking. This paper, grounded in a comprehensive consideration of the constraints of the above two modes on critical reading, briefly expounds its connotation from the following three aspects: what to speculate, how to speculate, and why should we speculate.

Keywords

Critical thinking, Conotation.

1. What to speculate

To answer the question is to answer what objects and what elements of objects the reader should think about in critical reading. It should be based on text[1], but the new historicism emphasizes that literary text is not a purely formalized system of speech and rhetoric, but has an inseparable logical relationship with specific and changing historical context. Therefore, it requires readers' critical thinking behaviors to point not only to the interior of literary texts as a discourse system, but also to the exterior of texts connected with historical and cultural contexts.

1.1. The text itself

According to Monterus, literary text is not isolated from specific social existence and historical context, but an organic component of both. "Literature participates in history and forms a place of competition and confrontation with politics, ideology and power discourse." [2] That is to say, although literary text is a symbol system in terms of its objective form of existence, it implicitly reflects a broader historical and cultural content either through the author's narration of specific events and the portrayal of characters, or through the logic and psychological choice based on the narration and portrayal. On the basis of this three-dimensional and dynamic nature, the following three aspects should be included in the specific content of critical reading: the discourse representation, the ideas and logic and the purport of the text.

Reading based on critical thinking is rooted in the text and highlights that all inferences and judgments must be text-based, which requires, above all, empirical evidence and analysis grounded in objective facts about the text. The identification, collection, comprehension and interpretation of the text's discourse representation, especially its details, are the basis for empirical evidence and analysis.

Understanding and speculation about text details is the first step of critical reading. Predicated on digging text facts and grasping text details, readers also need to use relevant skills such as analysis and inference to determine and clarify the ideas and logic of the text. In other words, on the premise of positivism, by testing the viewpoint, confirming and analyzing the demonstration, identifying and evaluating the arguments, and drawing conclusions, we can explain how the author thought about the text, why he wrote this way, and what the surface

logic and deep logic he relied on are, so that we can grasp the text more comprehensively and rationally, and lay the foundation for subsequent thinking about its purport.

The author's ideas and logic have a intermediary role. On the one hand, they're embodied in the text details at the level of discourse representation, and on the other hand, as important mappings of the text form, they have a suggestive effect on the purport and the author's intentions (including the author's emotions, attitudes and values) hidden behind the words. Reading based on critical thinking, as a deep-seated interactive dialogue between readers and the text, needs to integrate the above two dimensions of thinking, and explain, demonstrate, construct and evaluate the text's purport, that is, to clarify, "what I think the text is really trying to express through the presentation and logic, the deeper cultural and historical content reflected in the author's intention, emotional orientation and value pursuit", and can make a reasonable evaluation on the basis of judgment.

1.2. The existing conclusions of the text

Literary texts exist in specific historical time and space. They are presented as an open space for interpretation due to the evolution of context. "The context of interpretation has at least three layers: the context of writing, the context of acceptance, and the context of criticism"[3], which makes it meaningful. Besides, readers in different times may have different interpretations of the same text, and their own specific historical context will inevitably lead to a mental set. The existing conclusions of the text composed of these two points should also be the object of speculation in critical reading. At the beginning, readers need to be cautious about them. However, with the continuous development and advancement of the reading process, the predecessors' interpretations and reader's own mental set need to be questioned and reflected. Through this kind of questioning and reflection, readers can restore the original historical and cultural content interwoven in the literary text as much as possible, comprehensively analyze the cultural habits, public interpretation strategies or historical limitations that readers of different eras have relied on when interpreting the same text, and at the same time correct one's own mental set and make a reasonable analysis and judgment on the hidden historical and cultural factors that the text really contains.

2. How to speculate

How to speculate, that is, in the process of critical reading, what specific actions readers should take to speculate on the text. It is important to note that the question of how to engage in critical thinking is not only a problem at the level of methods, but a collection of attitudes and methods. Reader's response criticism emphasizes the structural experience and mind flow in the reading process, and puts forward different requirements from traditional reading methods for the attitudes and methods of critical reading. At the attitudinal level, readers need to maintain an independent and autonomous reading posture; at the methodological level, critical reading requires the reasonable use of speculative skills and strategies.

2.1. Attitude: an independent and autonomous reading posture

Reading based on critical thinking takes the existing conclusions of the text and the text itself as the speculative object, and the reflection and questioning of the conclusions is an important guarantee to ensure that "speculation" can really take place. It is necessary to keep a cautious attitude, so as to assure that the speculation is really effective, which needs readers to have a consistent and independent reading posture.

Stanley Fish once described the "non-independent reading posture": "It was almost as if they were following a recipe--if it's a poem do this, if it's a poem, see it that way--and indeed definitions of poetry are recipes"[4]. In this situation, readers are subject to their own mental set (including not only the genre, but also the existing knowledge of writers, defects in their

own cognitive structure, etc.), which inhibits the possible continuous interactive dialogue between readers and the text, and prevents active speculative behavior. Iser emphasized this interactive relationship: "Readers always expect and reflect on the text in the process of reading"[5]. That is to say, in critical reading, readers should keep reflecting and adjusting their own mental set, so that they can constantly generate expectation, raise questions, draw conclusions and overturn conclusions with the advancement of reading, thus forming rational, speculative and text-based judgments. The basis for this interactive dialogue is the shift in the reader's reading posture from "constrained and passive" to "independent and autonomous".

From this, we can sum up two characteristics of independent and autonomous reading posture: First, it neither takes the previous interpretation of the text or a certain theory as the authority, nor takes the readers' own expectations and mental sets formed before reading as the presupposition, so as to keep the necessary distance from the existing conclusions; Secondly, the purpose of keeping the necessary distance is to ensure that the reading is really based on the text to carry out demonstration, analysis, refutation, evaluation, argumentation and construction in a self-centered manner.

Independent and autonomous reading posture is firstly characterized by keeping the necessary distance from the existing conclusions of the text, so that readers' speculation in reading can really take place. Secondly, it should be consistent in the process of critical reading, not just before reading. Grounded in careful treatment of the existing conclusions, readers always need to intervene in the reading of specific texts with an independent posture, including meticulously collecting, sorting out and explaining the details of the text, systematically and clearly analyzing, explaining, clarifying and evaluating the ideas and logic of the text, creatively and reasonably demonstrating and constructing the purport of the text, and always consciously self-regulating in the process, continuously monitoring, revising and adjusting the thinking. Finally, it does not mean arbitrary conjecture and interpretation. "Independence" means not only attaching to the components outside the specific text. Just as Stanley Fish said, although reader's response criticism emphasizes the constructive role of reader's experience in the meaning of the text, it must be restricted by the physical signs of the text itself and regulated by the "interpretative communities". The "independence and autonomous" here emphasizes readers' conscious, methodical and purposeful speculation based on the text itself.

2.2. Methods: Rational use of critical thinking skills and strategies

The essential behavior characteristic of critical reading is "speculative", so readers need to use critical thinking skills and strategies reasonably on the basis of "independent and autonomous reading posture". This is also the inherent requirement of reader response criticism: "In the category of response I include not only 'tears, prickles,' and 'other psychological symptoms,' but all the precise mental operations involved in reading, including the formulation of complete thoughts, the performing (and regretting) of acts of judgment, the following and making of logical sequences"[6].

The Delphi Report defines speculative and cognitive abilities as interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation and self-regulation, and points out that "analysis, inference and evaluation" are the core skills. Based on these three core skills, Wen Qiufang further studied and refined them, pointing out that analytical skills include "categorization, identification, comparison, clarification, distinction, interpretation, etc."; reasoning skills include "questioning, hypothesis, inference, elaboration, argumentation, etc."; and evaluation skills include "skills of evaluating assumptions, argumentative processes, conclusions, etc."[7].

Critical reading highlights deep thinking and discernment in the reading process and the appropriate use of speculation-relating skills and strategies according to the text. For example, categorizing, identifying and comparing details in a text requires analytical skills; clarifying, assessing and reconstructing the logic of a text asks for a combination of analytical and

reasoning skills to clarify, hypothesize, infer and elaborate; and constructing the meaning of a text demands an organic integration of the three skills.

There are two things to keep in mind when using critical thinking skills and strategies wisely in critical reading.

First, "questioning", as the inevitable result of readers' "independent and autonomous reading posture", should run through critical reading. "Questioning" does not mean pure suspicion and distrust." It "raises a question about the reason and basis of an idea, rather than makes a judgment of the idea, let only denying it"[8]. In critical reading, through questioning the text, readers can transform their fragmented and unsystematic reading experiences and questions into clear and specific questions with space for speculation, thus clarifying the direction for the speculative acts. Responding to and solving the questions is also the process of grasping the details, clarifying the logic and constructing the purport, which needs readers to use critical thinking skills in a reasonable and comprehensive manner. Therefore, from this perspective, questioning throughout provides both a pathway for transforming experience into questions and an opportunity to apply critical thinking strategies and skills. In addition, questioning in critical reading should be directed not only to the text but also to the reader's own thinking process. The thinking subject needs to continuously monitor and regulate his thinking through questioning, including scrutinizing and reflecting on his own thinking methods and reviewing and adjusting the results of his immediate and generated thinking.

Second, critical reading is distinguished from traditional reading of "holistic perception" by the organic involvement of thinking components and the reasonable use of critical thinking skills, which make the problem formation and solving in the reading concrete and clear. However, it is important to note that reading activities are not purely logical and deductive. It must be based on and directed to the text. Therefore, it's essential not to mechanically and rigidly apply critical thinking strategies and skills in reading activities. The word "reasonable" in "reasonable use of discursive skills and strategies" largely indicates that the use of critical thinking strategies and skills in critical reading should be adjusted and traded off according to the characteristics and features of the specific text itself.

3. Why should we speculate

This question is asking what's the purpose of critical reading and what's to be achieved.

In the process of critical reading, the reader intervenes in the text as an independent and autonomous reader, consistently questions the text in the process of reading, transforms the existing conclusions of the text and the original reading experience of the text itself into specific questions, and rationally uses critical thinking skills and strategies to respond to and solve these questions under self-monitoring and self-regulating. The mark of the completion of question response and resolution is that the reader forms clear conclusions and judgments through conscious speculation, which can also be regarded as the purpose and achievement of critical reading. The end point "should not be a jumble of thoughts, but a rational and clear judgment and conclusion"[9]. Certainly it does not mean closure. The conclusions generated through critical reading are also open to re-questioning and re-reflection, because "one text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential"[10].

In reading base on critical thinking, "clear conclusion and judgment" is first of all an "I think", but this "I think" is not a collection of the reader's subjective assumptions, but should be grounded in the text, close to the text and built on questioning, analyzing, demonstrating and evaluating the existing conclusions of the text and the text itself. Only when readers understand it can they construct it. Secondly, "clear conclusion and judgment" does not mean deliberately subverting and structuring the text. Speculation does not mean pure negation. In the

development of critical reading, sometimes readers may just agree with the text argumentation and the purport of the text through questioning, analysis, inferring and demonstrating, which is reasonable. Through questioning and solving, reading based on critical thinking provides the possibility to explore the hidden factors and new interpretations of the text. However, the novelty of the conclusion is not a necessary condition for critical reading, and "speculation" is not intended to be unique or unconventional. The formation of "clear conclusions and judgments" requires readers' keen awareness of questions and proper analysis and demonstration. Finally, for the reader, the process of forming "clear conclusions and judgments" asks for a conscious combination of critical thinking skills and strategies. At the same time, because of the non-closed nature of conclusions and judgments, the readers have to "rethink" the conclusions they construct and their course of speculation, thinking about whether there are alternative, better ones. In this process, critical thinking and meta-critical thinking skills are developed in a subtle way.

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