

Literary Signs: A Social Practice

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Abstract

This paper argues that literature is a social practical mode of production, as Marx argued. Besides, the paper continues to demonstrate that the tools of literary production, namely linguistic signs, are actually reflections of social life, which distinguish literature from other spiritual productions. Finally, the paper presents some further thoughts about the practice of literary signs, looking into the understandings of literature by Croce and Stolovich.

Keywords: social practical nature of literature, social practice, linguistic signs, literary signs, objectification

1. The Social-Practical Nature of Literature

Just as people have to show their passports before checkpoints when they are passing a custom house, different literary theorists are supposed to offer different answers to the eternal question of what literature is, to present their own foundational viewpoints. In this sense, literature has been declared to be imitations, emotional expressions, reflections of social life, daydreams, language itself, or meaningful forms, by various theorists from Aristotle to contemporary Yale critics.

However, these kinds of definitions are based on the same understanding that literature is a spiritual and non-practical activity consisting of thoughts and emotions. Obviously here a unique and significant idea of the literary essence has been denied, that literature, as a means of understanding and transforming the world, ought to be considered as a social practice and a mode of production, according to Marx. Although this, as a Marxist understanding of literary activities, has long been familiar to Marxist theorists in China, its theoretical starting point, the practical nature of literature, has been neglected.

As means of understanding the world, both literature and arts, since their beginnings, have possessed the attribute of social reality; in this sense, they are human practices,

instead of emotional or illusory expressions of individual life or feelings. By the term practice or human practice, we mean those human activities of understanding and transforming the physical or psychological world for the purpose of social life and historical progress. In *The Classic of Poetry* (《诗经》), a poem entitled “Plantains” (《采芣苢》) describes a scene of human labor,

[Collect plantains, and collect them. Collect plantains, and get them. / Collect plantains, and pick them one by one. Collect plantains, and scrape off them by hand.]

采采芣苢，薄言采之。采采芣苢，薄言有之。

采采芣苢，薄言掇之。采采芣苢，薄言捋之。

This poem expresses the feelings of its singers, “sounding pretty like an encouraging and cheering chant sung repeatedly in the course of labor” (“类似于劳动号子”) (Fan, 1986, p. 12). In this poem, the lively and exciting feelings of the plantain collectors are brought out in the form of musical language. Although here the poem is a reflection of social life, it is a practice, because it is an activity of uplifting human psychology in the course of their transforming the physical world.

Still, we have to point out that the very creation of the poem “Plantains”, just as the actions of collecting the wild fruit and the poem itself, is as well an activity of human practice, or rather a meaningful and meritorious one, whose final form is a lineal combination of linguistic signs instead of wild edible fruits. This human practice is not an operation of collecting wild fruits, but that of using linguistic signs.

This judgment is not only true for that poem of labor, but also for other literary products such as poems, dramas, and novels, which, long or short, are all outcomes of literary practices of authors. As is mentioned above, literary creation is a human practice. We believe that if people regard the poem “Plantains” merely as a byproduct of human labor of collecting wild fruits, then they have neglected a spiritual productive practice—literary creation, completely as significant as the physical human labor.

All definitions of literature that deny its creation has an attribute of human practice will contain such a contradiction, with consequences which are as follows:

Firstly, literary activities have been weeded out from the whole human social life, as if literary creation were the only necessary unsocial action; they are treated as no more than reflections, presentations, or representations of social reality. Thus, literary activities have had their nature of creativity and their necessity for human social productions overlooked, and literary authors are exposed to the danger of having their identities as producers of social wealth unrecognized, totally excluded from the ranks of human laborers. After 1949, many literary authors in China suffered such a destiny, criticized as members of exploiting class.

Secondly, the significant value of literary and spiritual products has been doubted and thus is gradually diminishing. This point is especially noteworthy in this current trend of globalizing commercialism, especially in China, where more and more people get

focused on materialistic pursuits, neglecting reading and spiritual uplift. The increasing social negligence of spiritual productions, including literature, necessarily results in the undesirable devaluation of literary products, as well as other spiritual and cultural products. “Value”, Marx argued, “as a general conception, grows out of the relationship between people and the objects that satisfy their needs” (“价值”, 这个普遍的概念是从人们对待满足他们需要的外界物的关系中产生的) (Marx & Engels, 1965, Vol. 19, p. 408). Marx further argued that this relationship includes not only the relation between human beings and objects, but also a social relation between people themselves. In short, value only lies in practical relations, without which the cognitive value, the moral value, and the aesthetic value are all woefully undermined. All the three values are closely related to human existence, and therefore closely related to human practice, for “Marx’s notion of practice, organically intermingled with the notion of existence, displays with the category of practice the basic means of human existence in the world” and “practice, in essence, denotes the fundamental mode of human existence” (“马克思的实践概念与存在概念是内在融通的, 是用实践范畴来揭示人在世界中存在的基本方式。实践的根本内涵就是指人的最基本的存在方式”) (Zhu, 2014, p. 28). Therefore, literary production, as a means of human practice and existence, needs to have its value, or rather its spiritual value, widely recognized and acknowledged.

Thirdly, without a proper recognition of its social-practical attribute, literature can’t achieve its ontological autonomy. Actually, any human activity has its own unique aim, characteristics, and innate regulations; no human activity can be subordinated to other human activities or the whole human community. Literary autonomy can’t be secured by being dependent on outer forces. Therefore, literary activities can’t operate by merely literarily reflecting other social practices in politics, economy, and the military; literature has its own operational motivation and mechanism, which are, of course, not far from, but instead are deep-rooted in, the entirety of human society, only working relatively autonomously within the framework of the human world.

Now it is time to talk about the conception of practice.

Practice, as it is popularly understood, is some utilitarian action or activity undertaken toward a certain aim. Different from spiritual and meditative activities, practice in this sense indicates a sensory, concrete, and skillful action.

Kant divided practice into two groups, one of which is “all those practical regulations in skills such as measuring, housekeeping, farming, politics, nutrition and even lessons for happiness” (“测量、家政、耕作、政事、营养等的实践技术, 甚至求得幸福的教训, 这一切只是技术上的实践规则”), and the other of which is the moral practice, for “only those regulations in line with the conception of freedom are morally practical” (“只有那些以自由的观念为依据的规则才在道德上是实践的”) (Kant, 1964, Vol. 1, pp. 8-10). Obviously, Kant believes that moral practice is superior to skillful practice.

The Marxist conception of practice doesn’t reference the occasional moral behaviors or utilitarian activities of individuals, but the general social activities of the human race, for “the social life is essentially practical” (“社会生活在本质上是实践的”)

(Marx & Engels, 1972, Vol. 1, p. 18). This understanding of practice includes not only material production, but also spiritual and ideological activities. Marx also emphasized that practice is mainly productive labor, which includes both material and spiritual productions, which highlights the essential nature of practice in literary creation, leading to an understanding of literature and arts as spiritual labors of production.

In his works, Marx used terms such as “spiritual labor” (“精神劳动”), “spiritual production” (“精神生产”), and especially “artistic production” (“艺术生产”), classifying Milton’s work on *Paradise Lost* into “productive labor” (“生产劳动”), and arguing further from the perspective of social history that artistic creation was declining under the predominance of the capitalistic stressing of money. He declared that, “a certain social structure” (“一定的社会结构”) and “a certain relation between the human race and the natural world” (“人对自然的一定关系”) determine “the nature of spiritual production of human kind” (“人们的精神生产性质”) (Marx & Engels, 1974, Vol. 26, p. 296).

The notion that literature is a social practice is indeed rather significant for us to be able to recognize the true nature of literature, for only when we come down to this recognition can we possibly redress those fallacies related to the value of literary products and the nature of literary labor, and finally realize the irreplaceable social functions of spiritual labor and artistic production.

The practical nature of literature has been acknowledged by many literary theorists. In ancient China, there was a long tradition of literary works deeply concerned with general human life. Confucius and Mencius highlighted the conceptions of “ren” and “yi”, which advocated caring about the general human life. Sima Qian and other literary authors in the Western Han and Eastern Han Dynasties managed to cling to the tenet. But poets and essaysists during the Nan Dynasty focused their attention on displaying their literary styles even though their works would seem far detached from the general human life, thus meaninglessly formal. Picking up the Confucian belief, Han Yu of the Tang Dynasty preached that literary works must carry on the burden of caring about the common human life. This notion has been put in practice by various literary authors in China from Fan Zhongyan in the Song Dynasty until Lu Xun and many of his contemporaries. Thus Qian Mu (1895 – 1990) once wrote that in Chinese history “arts and literature were deeply rooted in human life” (“人生化了艺术与文学”), and “human life was largely transformed into arts” (“人生艺术化”) (Qian, 2011, p. 69, p. 157). Here Qian brings out the essence of literature and arts in Chinese culture, that is, both of them ought to be implanted into the framework of human life. As we know, human life is, in a large part, human practice, so in this sense the practical nature of literature has been traditionally accepted in China. Moreover, Sartre once declared that “artistic works are values, for they are missionary beckoning” (“艺术品是价值, 因为它是召唤”) (Liu, 1981, p. 11). Here Sartre believed that literature ought to carry on the responsibility of changing the human world.

2. The Social-Practical Nature of Literary Signs

Almost all human practices are either spiritual or materialistic, both of which are means for the human race to transform the world and enrich themselves. In a sense, a length of Beethoven's symphony is actually equal to a lathe or a particular Paris clothing fashion in terms of human practice, for all the three are products of human labor meant to transform the physical or psychological world. The difference between spiritual practice and materialistic practice is that the former is by means of musical, painting, pattern, or linguistic signs, while the latter by physical instruments. Here the creation of Beethoven's symphony and the Paris fashion is obviously spiritual practice while the production of lathe by mechanical workers is materialistic practice. Beethoven's symphony and the particular Paris clothing fashion are in the form of musical signs or pattern signs but the production of lathe goes on by using mechanical instruments. Therefore, spiritual practice is a human production of signs.

Literature, as an activity of spiritual and social practice, has its own unique characteristics and regulations different from other spiritual modes of labor, and of course these characteristics exist in the particular nature that necessarily makes literature a spiritual production. What is more notable is that these characteristics feature as well in the worth of literary works, the objects and modes of literary production, and especially its tools—linguistic signs.

But looking into linguistic signs from the perspective of the practical production of literature is a probe into another mechanical structure. About literary signs, Fredric Jameson pointed out that “by being able to use the same language about each of these quite distinct objects or levels of an object, we can restore, at least methodologically, the lost unity of social life, and demonstrate that widely distant elements of the social totality are ultimately part of the same global historical process” (Jameson, 1983, p. 214). Here literary signs are more meaningful, more symbolic, and more related to the human practice of existence than other linguistic signs. Of course, by this statement we don't mean that other linguistic signs are simple or even simplistic, but that for the purpose of addressing and uplifting the human psychological world, literary signs are more soul-inspiring than others, expressing profound and complicated human feelings and thoughts, inspired by the very human practice of existence. About this point, Jameson moreover declared that “all literature, no matter how weakly, must be informed by what we have called a political unconscious” and “that all literature must be read as a symbolic meditation on the destiny of community” (Jameson, 1983, p. 56). So in this sense, literary signs, conveying a deep symbolic concern about human destiny, are more deeply related to human practice of existence than linguistic signs.

Besides by means of literary signs, authors are presenting to readers their own feelings, understandings and experiences of human life. Whether it is poetical lines by the tragic king of literary genius Li Yu (937 – 978) or the famous Chinese patriot Xin Qiji (1140 – 1207), poets are always opening up the recesses of their heart to readers, confiding their

secret feelings among their poetical signs, which mingle intuition, sensibility, thoughts, and images coherently and organically. The fashionable salon and the miscellaneous apartment described by Balzac and the realistic images of Camel Xiangzi (骆驼祥子) created by Lao She, based on the authors' particular experiences and understanding of human life, convey to readers the rich colors of a world, and cultivate their subtle sensibility, using literary signs to open their closed hearts.

Readers, meanwhile, have effects on authors, for only when authors have achieved a deep recognition of the readers' world, can they pen a real human world of their own. This recognition is by means of literary signs. It is through this very interaction of readers and authors that literary signs obtain their own independent nature, for signs serve as the intermediate instrument for literary practice. Authors and readers have mingled with the world and the others in the course of writing and reading by means of literary signs.

Formalists tend to believe that literary signs are directed toward themselves, only stressing their autonomous dimension. But actually literary signs are more social than individualistic, for they are between subjects and objects, belonging to neither of the two sides, and yet existing in the course of historical and productive practice. Here literary signs describe social life, and in return, the complicated social life condenses into systems of literary signs. In literary practice, literary signs, going beyond the function of instrument, have become objects of literary production in fact, since literary language is already the formal carrier of social content, containing abundant factors from social history and reality. A typical feature of literature is that literary signs serve as the only instrument and the particular object for literary production, which is the difference of literary creation from other spiritual productions. Jakobson, Eco, and Langer all believe that literary signs are the same as linguistic signs in general, or some linguistic signs labeled with "emotional forms". But we argue that literary signs are directed toward social life, thus conveying the message of the human world. And the conception of linguistic signs by these Western linguists is abstract and static, while we prefer to look into the nature of literary signs from the perspective of social production.

With an understanding of literary signs as being in the spirit of social understanding, it follows that social historical shifts will eventually determine the productive mode of signs, which is the essential nature of literary signs. In *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoyevsky, the same story is told in that they convey the message that the college student murderer and the patricide are not so guilty as their judges, and that their trials are actually farces. Moreover, with the same manipulation of literary signs, Tolstoy wrote a similar story in *Resurrection*, where Maislova is innocent while her judge Nekhlyudov is actually guilty for having pushed her to the course of degradation, and that judges and prosecutors are the real criminals. Here the legal trial, as a literary sign, is used in a similar manner by different authors of the same historical period. Actually, such a sign appeared as well in the drama *Measure for Measure* by Shakespeare, in which the judge Angelo and the accused Claudio are both guilty for the same crime. In this sense, the use of signs in literature is no more than a particular literary means of representing the

social reality, by which social injustice and hypocrisy can be literarily demonstrated in a particular form. That is to say, different historical periods have their own particular means of using literary signs.

Of course, different use of literary signs belongs to not only different historical periods, but also different literary trends such as classicism, realism, and modernism. For instance, the same literary sign of the trial is presented as not only unjust but also ridiculous in *The Trial* by Kafka.

The mode of literary production is usually determined by social life, but literary production has its own particular regulations, which are however an organic ingredient for general social production. Here we are opposed to two mutually contradictive trends, one of which tends to regard literature as simply a reflection of social life, neglecting the unique productive attribute of literary signs (the autonomous nature of the literary production of linguistic signs), and the other of which only stresses the ontological nature of literary signs, as the doctrines of Western structuralism and semiotics preach, rejecting completely the social and historical background of literature, and neglecting the social and practical nature of literature.

3. Some Further Thoughts About the Practice of Literary Signs

There are mainly two viewpoints different from ours in terms of the practical nature of literature: Croce's argument that literature and arts are no practice, and Stolovich's understanding of literary practice.

Croce preached that both language and beauty were expressions, highlighting expression and intuition and objecting to the tradition of putting idea before form, as was done by thinkers ranging from Plato to Hegel. Zhu Guangqian (1897 – 1986) argued that Croce was more close to Kant than to Hegel in terms of aesthetic ideas, for Hegel valued philosophy and idea more than arts and image throughout his *Lectures on Aesthetics*. Croce wrote, "...we must refute all the activities that subject aesthetic activities to practice, or those follies that apply mistakenly those practical regulations to aesthetic activities. ...But what they believe to be something practical is not aesthetic, nor inside the sphere of aesthetics, but barely outside" ("..... 我们就必须指斥一切把审美的活动附属于实践的活动, 或以实践活动的规律应用于审美活动之类学说的错误。..... 但是他们所指实践的东西并不是审美的, 也不在审美的范围之内; 它是在这范围的外面和附近的") (Croce, 2012, p. 59). Here Croce believes that aesthetic activity as something mental, whose objectification, such as the sculptor's action of expressing his feelings in the form of a sculpture, exists somewhere barely outside aesthetics. In short, Croce made two mistakes, one of which is that he equals expression to mental feelings, the other of which is that his understanding of practice is too narrow.

In fact, artistic intuition and feelings would be worthless if not put into a proper form, just as the image of Venus couldn't win our heart without that substantial sculpture. The course of expression itself is practice, so there would be no intuition or expression without

the actions of practice. As Marx argued, artistic practice produces not only its objects but also its subjects, for the artistic intuition and desire for expression grows out of practice, or rather, there is no expression or even desire for expression without artistic practice. In this sense, Croce's viewpoint has been left behind traditional expressionism, which still managed to hold mental feelings and action of practice united.

It is a bit easier for us to question Croce's understanding of practice, for expression and representation are both factors in the course of practice, which however doesn't take in the two in a simplistic manner. Practice is active as well as regulative, since subjective feelings are always enriched in the process of transforming the objective world, and subjects and objects in the aesthetic course are mutually interactive, much more complex than Croce's projection or productive activities. Without this interaction, there would be no aesthetic activities. Besides, practice is not only limited to material or economic activities, but also includes the mental activities of the human race. If Croce had extended practice to the sphere of mental activities, he wouldn't have so furiously opposed putting artistic activities into the category of practice, as in the perspective of Kant.

Stolovich believes that beauty is objective, writing "the course of social historical practice forms the mutual relationships between the natural world, man and the human society, which are all objects of aesthetic consciousness" ("在社会历史实践过程中, 形成自然现象同社会的人和人类社会之间的相互关系, 这些相互联系就是审美意识的客体") (Stolovich, 1984, p. 312). But what is the true characteristic of artistic activities and aesthetic practice? What is its true meaning? These questions would greatly undermine any practical theory if not adequately answered.

Human social practice is held between man and the natural world, and between man and the human world. The objectification between man and the natural world, namely the objectification of man himself and the humanizing of the natural world, is an important focus in Marx's works. Of course, Marx mainly looked into objectification in the human world, especially in capitalistic society, thus combining the relations between man and the natural world, and between man and the human society. In this sense, Marx regards spiritual production and material production as one. He also argued that Hegel had only confined objectification to the transformation of the human mind and thoughts, claiming that Hegel only had in view "the difference and contradiction between human objectification and abstract thoughts" ("而是人的本质对象化与抽象思维有别和对立的东西这一点") (Marx, 2000, p. 115). Marx's replacing of objectification with the two productions further confirms that the central conception of his practice is production.

Various theoretical discussion related to objectification mainly repeats the mistake of Hegel, resulting in two eccentric understandings, one of which believes that objectification is only theoretical projection, and the other being mainly Theodor Lipps' empathy, which "refers to not our corporal feeling, but 'feeling' ourselves into the aesthetic objects" ("所指的不是一种身体感觉, 而是把自己'感'到审美对象里面去") (Qtd in Wu, 1984, p. 409).

In this case, if defined simplistically as objectification, the Marxist conception of

practice would have been confused easily with subjective emotional projection and reflection, and more terribly become worthless, because only productive practice has its value, which in return explains deeply the essential nature of practice. Another default of objectification is that it hasn't achieved an insightful and substantial understanding and explanation.

It is its practical tools and objects that determine the essence of literature, distinguishing literary objectification from mathematical, physical, musical, and dance activities. Different manipulation of signs makes *Dream of the Red Chamber* completely distinct from Einstein's theory of relativity and Euclid's *Elements*. Only when we have discovered the characteristics of artistic and literary signs and their modes of operation, can we explain the true nature of literature and arts.

The crucial difference between the practical nature of literary signs and the conception of objectification is that the former pushes the latter further into the social sphere of spiritual production. By means of explaining the medium of signs and their particular mode of production, the practical conception of literary signs specifies the differences of literature from other arts and other productions of signs, clarifying the true nature of literature.

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