

Reading Western Visual Poetry from the Perspective of Reader-Response Criticism

-- A Study of Peter Barry's Concrete Canticles

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Abstract: The Reader-Response Criticism theory holds that the major objective of literary criticism is to study readers' reading experience and attach importance to readers' subjective initiative in the reading process. When interpreting Western visual poetry, Peter Barry gives full play to his subjective initiative, divides visual poetry into three types, and expounds the connotation of visual poetry and the generating of poetic text meaning. This paper aims to comment on Peter Barry's interpretation and comments on visual poetry in "Concrete Canticles", and to reveal the connotation of poetic criticism combined with reader-response criticism theory.

Keywords: Literary Criticism; Reader-Response Criticism; Western Visual Poetry.

1. Introduction

Visual Poetry refers to the poems that are arranged and combined in a linear-progressive way to form some pictographic figures. It is a special literary phenomenon of the combination of words and theme-related figures [1]133. In a broad sense, visual poetry includes all kinds of written poetry. However, the visual poetry to be interpreted in this paper is based on the narrow sense of it, that is, through the arrangement and combination of words and symbols (including punctuation), to attract the eyes of the readers by the layout to create visual effects [2]. In the fourteenth chapter of Reading Poetry, Concrete Canticles, Peter Barry proposes three kinds of visual poetry as a way of showing that the aspects of overall shape about the poem are in some way representative or pictorial. This chapter is not so much Barry's comment of visual poetry as Barry's introduction to the book's readers of visual poetry in his mind. Barry introduces three types of visual poetry in this chapter: verbal/visual type, visual/verbal type and visual /verbalist type [3]. The author argues that when talking about these three types of visual poetry, Barry adopts reader-response criticism theory, interprets the text with the idea of 'reader as the center', and reads from the experience of the readers. He not only explains the meaning of the text, but also puts forward the methodology of poetry reading. The combination of the two makes visual poetry evolve from a linear-progressive text into a "poetic text". This paper aims to comment on Peter Barry's poetic criticism of visual poetry, reveal the inherent literary theory in his poetry criticism, and sum up the enlightenment of poetry criticism.

2. The Rationale of the Paper

This section aims to explain the theoretical basis contained in this chapter, that is, and to obtain the relevant knowledge background by tracing the research from domestic and foreign scholars on the reader-response criticism theory and western visual poetry, so as to lay the knowledge foundation for the next section of Peter Barry's poetry criticism.

2.1. Reader-Response Criticism

The development of literary criticism theory in the 20th century generally presents a trend from "focusing on the work itself" to "focusing on the readers themselves". In the early 1900s, Russian formalist critics focused their literary criticism on the structure of the works. They believed that the meaning of the works was fully reflected through the form and structure of the works, without any consideration of the social and historical background. However, in the 1960s, a wave of Reader-Response Criticism emerged in Europe and the United States. This theory aims to put the emphasis of reading and literary criticism on readers and emphasize reader-centered philosophy. The central point of the reader-response criticism theory is that the text itself will not construct any meaning, but only through the reader's reaction to the text. [4]103.

The philosophical basis of reader-response criticism theory is phenomenology (later developed into phenomenological literary criticism) represented by a German philosopher Edmund Husserl. This literary criticism draws on Einstein's theory of relativity that "things can show different images from different angles". It focuses on the "inner" interpretation of the work, ignoring the social, historical and cultural factors, and focusing on the consciousness of the author reflected in the work. In the reader-response criticism theory, there are two representative figures: Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish. Iser divides readers into two types: Intended readers and Actual readers. The "intended reader" refers to "the reader for whom the text presupposes a set of devices for eliciting a response". The "actual reader" usually refers to the reader interpreting the text according to his or her own experiences. He maintains that readers cannot interpret the text at will, and must be limited by the text itself to prove that the relevant interpretation is related to the text. Fish, on the contrary, argues that "reading is an activity of the reader and something the reader does." [5] The focus of literary criticism should fall on the process of readers' continuous reaction to the text. The text itself is meaningless, but only the readers' reading process matters.

It can be seen from the research of foreign scholars on

reader-response criticism that different scholars analyze the theory from different research perspectives. However, the domestic research on reader-response criticism mainly takes the theoretical school under Stanley Fish as the research perspective, which shows two trends: (1) pure theoretical discussion; (2) Interpret and analyze literary works, translated texts and English poetry teaching with reader-response criticism as the theoretical framework. In the aspect of pure theoretical research, Gao Zhen and Liu Lu [6] made comments on various schools of reader-response criticism. They believe that all schools are consistent in attaching importance to the reading of words and movements, but they are not consistent in their choice of text reading methods and identification of meaning. Ren Hujun [7] discusses through Fisher's theory of reader-response criticism from the perspectives of text reading, text meaning and literary criticism, recognizing its advantages and pointing out its disadvantages of overemphasizing the reader and completely excluding the role of the author. Starting from the "blank" and "negative" theories of reader-response criticism, Xie Yuefang[8] interprets Toni Morrison's novel *sula* and analyzes the aesthetic value of the novel and the role of the reader in the construction of meaning. It can be seen that the research by domestic scholars have shown a trend of more in-depth research, and constantly pay attention to readers' thinking and meaning reconstruction in the process of repeated reading.

2.2. The Review of Western Visual Poetry's Development

Visual poetry is a kind of art that creates visual images with words and a special literary phenomenon that poetry and painting become one. As mentioned above, in a broad sense, all poetry in the form of words belongs to visual poetry, because we are inevitably influenced by the form when we read poetry. The visual poetry to be discussed in this paper is visual poetry in a narrow sense, that is, the reading object of poetry is not the text content itself but the visual form of the text. In this chapter, Barry divides visual poetry into three kinds according to their characteristics: verbal/visual, visual/verbal and visual/verbalist (interpretive text) (P170).

According to its creation characteristics, western visual poetry can be divided into two periods: traditional visual poetry and modern visual poetry [1]134. Traditional visual poetry is characterized by the combination of words or letters to form a figure or structure related to the content and theme of the text. Pattern poetry was predominant in the visual poetry of this period. Among them, the poems of George Herbert are classic in the 17th century, and his pattern poem "Easter Wings" is a representative of this period. This poem is also Barry's first choice in the introduction of verbal/visual poetry, with its text layout and great symbolic similarity.

Modern visual poetry has been influenced by the stylistic change and visual literature revolution in the early 20th century, resulting in a variety of trends of thought and a variety of modern means (such as splicing, typing, etc.) involved in poetry writing. Modern visual poetry can also be roughly divided into two stages: the first stage is from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, and the second stage is from the middle of the 20th century to the present. In the first stage, visual poetry was impacted by the modernist trend of thought. Among them, Guillaume Apollinaire's futuristic visual poems are the classic works of this period. "II Pleut" (tears) is one of Apollinaire's graphic poems (Calligrammes). His poems have a characteristic that most poems do not have,

that is, the clues of meaning hidden in the visual form. His poems make good use of the words and space presented on the page, and express ideas with simple literal meaning. The second stage is Concrete Poetry period. The visual poetry of this stage is influenced by the trend of postmodernism. Some poets express both sound text and visual text in their creation, such as Bob Cobbing's poetry, which combines both abstractness and language strangeness.

3. Verbal/Visual Poetry -- the Integration of Textuality and Iconicity

In the chapter "Concrete Canticles", Peter Barry divides visual poetry into three categories: first, verbal/visual poetry, in which verbal element is dominant, followed by visual elements, such as George Herbert's "Easter Wings" and the calligraphic poem "II Pleut" by Apollinaire; The second type of poetry is visual/verbal poetry, that is, the visual is dominant and the verbal secondary, such as Bob Corbin's *Beethoven Today*; The third type is visual/verbalist, in which there is no words in the poem, but the pattern arrangement and other forms reflect the reader's reading traces. This section will comment on Peter Barry's interpretation of verbal/visual poetry.

Verbal/visual poetry has a long history, which is usually linked to religious culture, and has the symbolic iconicity to enhance the meaning of the text. Barry began by interpreting Herbert's poem "Easter Wings", in which the poet talks about his faith being redeemed by Jesus. The poem is shaped like the "wings" according to the title, which can be likened to "angel wings". Barry interprets it in a way of sum before division. Starting from the visual theme, he believes that the title of the poem and the two-stanza set by the poet as the "wings" and shape of "wings" are derived from the Christian Canon that a woman came to Christ's tomb on Easter morning and was met by an angel who told her that the tomb was empty. When the poem is printed horizontally on the page, the symbolic iconicity -- the "wings" will disappear, and the poem is more like a funnel. The poem was originally printed vertically, which made the wing's shape more prominent. Before the actual reading begins, the iconicity reflected in the shape of the text of the poem brings readers a visual effect that the normal format of the poem cannot reach, which not only attract readers' attention and deepen their impression, but also expresses the theme of the poem well, paving the way for the understanding of the whole poem.

Barry found, as he read and re-read the poem, that the symbols attached to the poem became more closely intertwined with the text, creating a literal and visual fusion. As Iser said, only by stimulating the imagination of the reader can we attract readers' eyes and achieve the purpose of the text. There are two stanzas in this poem. The first stanza describes the process from people falling without help from God to the penitent being helped by God and living a better life. Formally, the first five lines gradually shorten in length and the last five gradually lengthen, a feature that is also repeated in the second stanza. This progressive linear contraction process reflects the waning and waxing of text meaning. This feature requires the reader to learn through repeated reading and repeated comparisons. In the process of interpreting this poem, Barry explains the process before and after reading, uses the relationship between the poem and religion, interprets its textuality and iconicity, and concludes

that "Textuality and iconicity are more closely integrated in these auxiliary symbolic effects".

The second verbal/visual poem is Apollinaire's "II Pleut". Apollinaire is famous for his calligraphic poetry (also known as "graphic poetry"). As a French avant-garde poet, his poetry is famous for its uniqueness, especially the graphic poetry, which is very distinctive. The poem's title serves as a symbol to reflect the theme, and the arrangement of the poems is designed to look like raindrops. Deviating from the traditional spelling rules, the word letters are disassembled, and in this poem, Apollinaire splits the words one by one and arranges them lengthwise into a rain filament. The image of this poem is also very strong. The textual symbols and visual symbols complement each other. As described by Barry, the text of the poem constitutes a vague recessive image, while the visual effect of the poem adds another expression dimension to the representation of the image, thus transcending the readers' stylized expectations and giving readers a novel reading experience. In this poem, the words are taken apart and arranged lengthwise in the shape of raindrops, making the static words become three-dimensional art through the flowing picture, making the image rich and full.

When interpreting verbal/visual poetry, Peter Barry mainly starts from the textual nature and iconicity of the poem. Through the cultural background of the poem, he repeatedly reads and figures out the text, so as to obtain the meaning of the poem text and discover the relationship between the textual nature and iconicity of the poem. The connection between the interpretation here and the theory of reader response criticism is mainly reflected in the process of reading analysis. When Barry interprets the third type of visual/verbalist poetry, the combination of the two becomes more obvious.

4. Visual/Verbalist Poetry -- The "vacuity" of Textual Meaning

Reading is the life source of literary works and the organic combination of readers and texts. The act of reading can be summarized as a kaleidoscope of different perspectives, expectations and reflections [4]104. Visual/verbalist poetry refers to a text that is entirely visual but involves aspects of the reading process. The first poem was Mary Ellen Solt's "Moon Shot Sonnet," which Solt annotated on the illustrated page, in which she explained the context, symbolism and place of the poem in the literary world. Here Barry raises the question: Which aspect of reading process does this wordless poem require us to use to ? The present author thinks what Barry is really saying here is, now that the poet has provided the meaning of the poem by means of gloss, but how we as readers should interpret the poem from other perspectives? Here, Barry interprets the poem in terms of its visual effects and the methodology of poetry reading.

First, the grid of the visual poem uses only three different "symbols," one of which has only one direction, while the other two have four. Barry believes Solt's use of these symbols on the moon landing photos was intended to alert people to the process of word recognition. It can make reading confusing. The author believes that Barry's views are subjective, but they are too full of readers' subjective initiative in the reading process and tend to be "over-interpreted". In addition, through Solt's glosses on the illustrated page, Barry addresses the problem of how to read the text. Since most poetic texts are full of historical, mythological and ceremonial

allusions, many poets have to write notes below the text in order for the reader to understand the text. But take care in the process of gloss to merge with the text content, and at this point, T.S. Eliot's work is far less annotated. He usually inserts the glosses at the end of the poem at the request of the publisher, which makes it clear to the reader that the glosses are meant to illustrate the poem, not part of it.

The last visual/verbalist poem Barry interprets is Alvaro de sa's Thaloc, No.21. This visual poem is rich in linear-progressive elements, with "squares" and "speech bubbles" representing a linear sequence from left to right and top to bottom, even though the work contains no words and only visual elements, but it can still be interpreted by the reader. "Thaloc" refers to a deformed figure in Egyptian mythology, so graphically such texts may be called asemic texts, where the text has no specific semantic content, creating a "vacuum" meaning that leaves room for interpretation by the reader. According to Iser, when creating a work, the author gives the meaning of the work a certain uncertainty and blank; In the process of reading, these uncertainties and blanks will issue a call and invitation for readers to imagine, which is exactly the connotation of this work [9]. The meaning that the author should provide in advance is lacking, and the meaning must be provided by the reader in the reading process. However, the reader cannot interpret the text at will, and the content provided by the reader must be systematic and limited by the text. Based on this, Barry interprets this visual poem. He interprets the logic of the shape layout in the 9 squares. Among the 9 squares, the first 7 groups are logical responses to the previous one, while the eighth square is not a response to the previous arrangement and combination. Likening the work to a pared-down version of "Lost Paradise," it rushes through the "creation" period and the "fall."

The author believes that the reading process of Barry's last work is essentially a process of repeated thinking. He reconstructs his thinking through repeated observations and has a new understanding of the text, which is also the pleasure of reading and visual aesthetics. However, it should be noted that in this process of interpretation, it is easy to magnify individual subjective initiative, resulting in "over-interpretation".

5. Conclusion

It is not difficult to see from Peter Barry's comments on text/visual poetry and visual/verbalist poetry that the integration of textuality and iconicity is vividly reflected in visual poetry. The "vacuum" of text meaning also requires readers to keep a flexible and open mind in the reading process, constantly update their cognition of the text through repeated reading, and endow the text with meaning. The reader response criticism argues that the main task of literary criticism is to study readers' reading experience. The process of reading is like "crossing the river by feeling the stones", in which readers move slowly between different perspectives and levels of meaning. However, in the process of interpreting the text, we should avoid "over-interpretation" of the text.

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