Imposed Interpretation: Querying Contemporary Literary Criticism

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Imposed interpretation is one of the basic characteristics and fallacies of the contemporary Western literary criticism. It happens throughout the process when diversified theories of extra-literary origins and even scientific rules penetrate into the interpretative discourse of literature. Its symptoms include making biased judgments about a text's value or meanings with a pre-taken stance, forcing new but absurd interpretation upon old classical works through reversed routes of cognition, re-locating a text by distorting its language or transplanting alien concepts. Imposed interpretation leads criticism far away from the ontological existence of literature, and now its methodological imperfections are getting more and more apparent, like the reversion between practice and theory, misplaced relationship between the concrete and the abstract, and the split between the part and the whole. For the discursive construction of contemporary literary criticism, it is necessary and essential to strive for systematical and balanced development. Criticism should on the basis of absorbing progressive elements of the times be conscious of its multi-dimensional growth and the integration of theories and practice. The future of literary theories lies in their practicality to literary creation.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, for more than 100 years, the modern Western literary criticism has fundamentally questioned and deconstructed people's old understanding about "literature". Important thoughts and schools, many theorists and critics, have undoubtedly constituted the driving force to steadily push forward contemporary literary criticism. However, looking back at the 100 years' development of the Western literary criticism, we can equally find many imperfections, faults and fallacies in addition to its glorious achievements. Some problems are so closely related to the foundations and essence of literature that if not dealt with cares they might harm or even uproot the legitimacy of literary criticism. It is far from rare to see in contemporary literary criticism deeds like cutting the present from the past—history and tradition, conceitedly negating other critical groups' merits, swaying from one theoretical extremity to another, ignoring the value of actual literary experience and separating critiques from the real life, exhausting meanings of literary texts with paranoid methods and languages, struggling for discursive dominance and blindly defending the dogmas of one particular school. To learners and practitioners of literary criticism in China, they are easily led astray by their biased understanding about the Western theories during the past three decades. And what's more, their too ready and too stiff borrowing and copying of the Western theories have turned the spreading of the Western theories and thoughts into a "vicious circle" in which one misunderstanding of the original is followed by another and one abusive usage leads to the next, so finally the lack of ontological recognition of the word "literature", a fallacy already there lying under the building of the contemporary Western criticism, is

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exaggerated again in China and apparently reflected in our critical practice in these years. In fact, this "vicious circle" has long been realized by the Chinese academia and many critics have made introspection about it. However, what is the fundamental defect of the contemporary Western criticism? How to logically identify the fundamental defect, or the Achilles' Heel of the whole system, and find an exact term to fix it? The finding out of the fundamental defect, as well as the naming of the defect in words, can be said the biggest theoretical challenge to Chinese literary academia today, a challenge demanding the critics' research in depth and arguments in a comprehensive framework. This paper tries to do some experimental works in this direction. For this purpose a core concept—*imposed interpretation* is proposed. The following illustration is developed around this core concept, using this term as a clue to understand the development of modern literary criticism. Methodologically speaking this paper will try to find some consensuses about criticism by combining empirical observations with rational induction and deduction, and in doing this a new perspective is expected to be found for the systematical construction of contemporary literary criticism.

The term "imposed interpretation" refers to the critic's practice of deviating from the discourse of the text under scrutiny, dispelling the signification system of literature, taking his theoretical stance and mode of interpretation before his close reading and interpretation and fitting the text stiffly to his own theoretical assumption and conclusion. Let me first of all explain roughly about this definition. "Deviating from the discourse of the text" means that the critic does not focus on the content of the text, but turns his critical attention to the employment of certain theoretical languages not so related to the text. The discourse and the text are so independent of each other that we might say the text is used by the critic as a tool—like an excuse to spread his doctrine or a footnote to serve his theory. "Dispelling the signification system of literature" means that the critic interprets literary texts or literary phenomena not with the language of literature, but with languages of philosophy, history, sociology or that part of cultural studies irrelevant to literature. His research is almost empty of literary reference, let alone theories of literary quality. To him, a literary text is not a literary text, but a political, historical or social text instead. "Taking his theoretical stance and mode of interpretation before his close reading and interpretation" means that before the real process of reading and interpreting a text, the critic has decided a stance to prove in his mind, and then examine, choose and judge texts from this stance and for the sake of this stance. The textual material he uses is inferior to his stance, working around it as the stance's testimony. It is purely his stance not the text that gives rise to his criticism. Theoretical stance is the core of his interpretation. Besides stance, interpretative mode can also be a hidden priority set before the real process of interpretation. A pre-set interpretative mode is like a template for the text to be embedded in. Factors of the text not fitting to it, however important, are cut out. Imposing interpretation with a pre-set mode is a faulty skill more frequently seen in the application of scientific theories in literary studies, like linguistic, mathematical and physical theories. "Fitting the text stiffly to his own theoretical assumption and conclusion" refers to a critical attitude of teleology in essence. Texts are interpreted not for the purpose of digging out their deep meanings, but for going back to certain theoretical intention and conclusion designed by the critic in advance. Conclusion exists before interpretation happens, and critical reading turns out to be a process of finding proofs for the conclusion and then realizing the critic's subjective intention. "Intention" and "conclusion" are two different yet linked steps of this sequence: a critic holds an "intention" first; then he draws a "conclusion" from this intention; then he looks for texts that can lead to his conclusion and prove his theoretical intention. Intention decides conclusion and conclusion demands textual analysis in consistent to it.

Here we can see the main difference between my concept of "imposed interpretation" and Umberto Eco's "over interpretation": imposed interpretation is reflected not only in an excess of interpretation, but also in the interpreter's motive and interpretative mode. These two concepts indicate different motives: overinterpretation still focuses on the "sacred" text itself, while imposed interpretation is more for proving theories than for exhausting the meanings of the text. And they have different interpretative modes: overinterpretation, poor or not, does not take a theory as its standpoint, neither will trim text to fit the theory; but imposed interpretation starts from a theory, treating it as a given condition to select and interpret texts. With final conclusion preceding textual reading, imposed interpretation follows a reversed sequence of criticism making, which naturally deprives the criticism of its ground.

Imposed interpretation has three characteristics. They are:

(1) *forced inclusion of the extra-literary*, which means transplanting theories or interpretative modes from other disciplines in force, thus wiping out the ontological qualities of the category named as "literature" and finally leading literary criticism away from the discursive scope of literature;

(2) *subjective assumption prior to interpretation*, which means a critic has already in his mind some subjective assumptions or theoretical stance to prove, so he ignores the original intention of the text and forcibly attaches certain meanings and value to the text;

(3) *reversed route of cognition*, which refers to the frequently reversed sequence of criticism, when interpreter sets out his criticism from some presupposed theories or arbitrary conclusions, not from the text itself, and thus his interpretation turns out to be self-referential.

Forced Inclusion of the Extra-literary

In contemporary literary criticism, forced inclusion of extra-literary theories is a common phenomenon. Northrop Frye once says that in his eyes, whether Marxist, Thomist, liberal-humanist, neo-classical, Freudian, Jungian, or existentialist, they are all proposing, not to find a conceptual framework for criticism within literature, but to attach criticism to one of a miscellany of frameworks outside it.[1] Generally speaking, among the important critical trends of the last century, except formalism and new criticism, basically all the other theoretical schools have more or less transplanted elements from other disciplines and proposed many terms, jargons, concepts and cognitive models so alien to the traditional literary studies. When theories and cognitive models originally not the least of literary reference are borrowed or directly copied by critics as material to develop their unconventional criticism, the meanings of literary criticism in the ontological sense is at the risk of being undermined. Not only so, the long acceptance of the alien fields' intrusion has changed the configuration of contemporary literary criticism. It is noticeable that in these years, when profound changes are occurring all the time to the world's geopolitical, economic and cultural lives, when many issues are emerging as controversies involving conflicting interests of different communities, the criticism offered by the discipline named as "literature" is more and more relying on the input of the other disciplines to update its discursive power. The input of the other disciplines, realized by discursive imitation, transplantation, direct diversion and so on, constitutes the most basic driving force to generate our contemporary criticism of literature.

Considering the extra-literary origins of contemporary literary criticism, three kinds of origins can be roughly generalized here. The first kind are disciplines also belonging to a broader category of human sciences

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[1] Frye, Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957, p. 6.

and historically more closely related to the studies of literature, like philosophy, history, linguistics and etc. Philosophy is especially the reservoir of thoughts continuously stimulating the expansion of literary criticism. Some prominent trends and schools in philosophy avail themselves of literary materials to fulfill their theoretical construction and manifest their instructive power. Jacques Derrida admits in his *Writing and Difference* that he often makes use of literary texts to develop his thoughts of deconstruction.[2] Conversely, literature also makes use of the other disciplines. As Richard Rorty pointed out, it was the department of English, not the department of philosophy, which was opening more and more courses of philosophy. So Rotty proposes that the so-called "literary theories" are actually intentional and systematical attempts to politicize the functions of literature.[3]

The second origin is theories springing up in political, social and cultural movements and affairs. Theories for the purpose of serving movements usually take on the color of avant garde and advocate actions. Once introduced into the territory of literature, they open a new and inspiring horizon for literary critics to run for. Feminist criticism initiated by feminist movements, postcolonial criticism and theories based on the worldwide anti-colonial struggles and liberation, Roland Barthes' change from structuralism to post-structuralism triggered by the May 1968 Events in France, queer studies rising from people's gradual attention to gender identity and sexuality, ecocriticism nowadays popularly used as a kind of correction to the worsening environmental situation, all these provide sufficient examples to show the continuous interplay between literary criticism and the outside agendas.

The third origin is the multitudinous observations, explanations, principles and methods in the world of natural sciences. The findings of the natural sciences are believed to be objective, reliable and probably universally true, so they are borrowed by literary critics who intend to sharpen their critical weapons and interpret texts in a more accurate, reliable and rational manner. This "scientific turn" can be seen in the semiotics' usage of the mathematical matrix to analyze literary texts, the ecocriticism's transplantation of the Chaos Theory and the geocriticism's incorporating the study of geographical space and time into its critical practice.

The routes for extra-literary influence entering into the world of literary criticism can also be divided into three kinds. The first kind is by formula shift, which is conspicuously seen in the semiotic criticism. Algirdas Julien Greimas, one of the most important semioticians and the leading figure of French structuralism, introduces a structuralist analyzing method called Greimas Semiotic Square for the study of narratology. His semiotic square extracts four key elements from any narrative text. These four elements are paired concepts constituting four corners of a square which is to map the logical conjunctions and disjunctions relating to the plot. This method relies on a belief that it is the interrelations among these four elements—contrary, complementarity and contradiction—that push the story going forward.

The second kind of route is by inter-disciplinary transference. Hermeneutic criticism developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer from the hands of Heidegger is in essence an expansion of the philosophical hermeneutics. In order to set up an ontological hermeneutics different from the conventional methodological

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[2] Derrida, Jacque, *Writing and Difference, Book I, "Preface: An Interview with Derrida"*, trans. Zhang Ning, Shanghai: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2001, p. 20 (德里达：《书写与差异》上册，"访谈代序"，张宁译，第 20 页，三联书店 2001 年版。).

[3] Rotty, Richard, *Post-philosophical Culture*, trans. and ed. Huang Yong, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 1992, p. 98 (理查德•罗蒂：《后哲学文化》，黄勇编译，第 98 页，上海译文出版社 1992 年版。).

hermeneutics before the 20th century, Gadamer turns his eyes to literature and arts. He has clearly explained the reasons for his trying every means to explore people's experience of arts: the experience of arts playing a decisive role in his philosophical hermeneutics; the experience of arts providing an appropriate measurement to understand the essence of understanding; the experience of arts also saving us from a misunderstanding that understanding is a dominant tyrant.[4] "Gadamer's study of arts is not from an arts critic's research needs and interest. Instead, it is part of his hermeneutics building."[5] Obviously, it is for the better development of philosophical hermeneutics that Gadamer turns his attention to literary studies. His aim is to enrich hermeneutics by referring to literature and to prove the meanings of philosophical interpretation by literary interpretation.

The third route is trans-disciplinary borrowing. This borrowing route is most distinctly reflected in the criticism of space theory. Being a professor of geography himself, Mike Crang uses geographical terms, concepts and methods to study literary texts and opens a new dimension of interpretation. In his Cultural geography, he proposes, "What is perhaps more interesting is seeing how certain places and spatial divisions, are established within the literary text. This comes through both in the plot, character and autobiography of the authors. … The creation of a sense of home—and homeland—is a profoundly geographical construction in a text. Such a 'base' is vital to geographical knowledge about the imperial and modern worlds."[6] Using his cultural geography to decode the meanings of space in literary works, he re-interprets *Odyssey*, the ancient Greek epic, and *Les Miserables* of Victor Hugo. To *Les Miserables*, he comments, "The novel can thus be read as using the landscape to suggest a geography of knowledge, by the state about the potentially rebellious poor, and thus also a geography of state power."[7]

Many textual techniques are involved if we want the trans-disciplinary crossings natural, smooth, traceless and fitting specific contexts well. Either using extra-literary theories to create literary signifiers or using literary material to serve theories of other disciplines demands superior theoretical manipulative capability and keen interest in literature and arts.

One frequently used technique is "discursive replacement". By replacing the most primary language of a text with another kind of language—language from certain extra-literary origin, this technique leads critique to an elaboration of some extra-literary theory. This technique might be labeled as "discursive regeneration" as well. It is particularly noteworthy that this regenerated discourse is usually not of the most primary intention of the text, or not of the most possible intention of the author. First the background of understanding is changed, then the analytic language gets changed, and finally the target text is situated into a new framework of meaning-making.

The second technique can be labeled as "rigid embedding", which mainly refers to a kind of straight and stiff copying of extra-literary theories. This technique usually first breaks the text's structure into pieces to change the original reference of the text. Then it pushes the whole interpretative work into the formulas or logical chains of extra-literary theories. It seems like that the validity of a theory is proved through text reading,

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[4] Gadamer, Hans-Georg, "the Preface to the Chinese Translation of the Truth of Beauty" in *the Foreign Aesthetics, Book 7*, trans. Zheng Yong, Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1989, p. 357 (伽达默尔：《<美的现实性>中译本前言》，郑涌译，《外国美学》第七辑，第 357 页，商务印书馆 1989 年版。).
[5] Zhu Liyuan (Ed.), *Contemporary Western Literary Theory*, Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2005, p. 277 (朱立元主编：《当代西方文艺理论》，第 277 页，华东师范大学出版社 2005 年版。).
[6] Crang, Mike, *Cultural Geography*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 47.
[7] Crang, Mike, *Cultural Geography*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 50.

but in fact the validity has been set there before the critique's textual reading. It is quite like embedding a text forcibly into an already existed theoretical ground. We say that it is "forcibly" because those of the constitutive elements of the text, not in conformity with the a priori theory, are wiped out, and the decoding process is handled with the interpreter's arbitrary will.

Another technique which is very similar to "discursive replacement", but still a little different, is "word attachment". Discursive replacement happens on the level of interpretation as a whole, while word attachment happens on an inferior word level and in rhetorical details. Word attachment refers to the input of words from other disciplines into literary criticism—words of concepts, notions, terms, jargons and so on. Despite of the denotation and connotation gaps between these words and the object texts, they are borrowed in order to create a new dimension of interpretation. There are two kinds of attaching methods here. One is "paste", like the cut-and-paste method in electronic writing. By directly pasting a word from some other discipline, a formal similarity is established. Then this formal similarity might lead to equivalence in meaning. The other kind is "analogy". By finding an analogy between a borrowed term and the hidden but innate meaning of the text, the critic gradually plants the text in the field of some extra-literary theories.

One more textual technique worth mentioning here is "history relocation", that is anachronistically applying today's theories to the past literary texts or events, using the present as criteria to judge the past. Whenever the text is born and whatever the core content of the text is, it must be interpreted in the light of some later generation's perspectives and theories. It should be admitted that relocating history might add certain color of avant garde to old texts and even enhance old texts to a new and higher level of significance, but still such a technique should be handled with great care for its tendency of neglecting historically determined elements.

We can take an example of ecocriticism here to think about the functions of the above-mentioned textual techniques. *The Fall of the House of Usher* is Edga Allan Poe's well-known tale. This short and horrible story has drawn many critics' attention since it was published more than 100 years ago. Interpretations about it vary, but it is commonly agreed that the story is about people's rationality and subconsciousness, the inscrutable *inside* of our being. However, the ecocentred reading of our time, by contrast, focuses on the *outside*, on house and its environment, and finally reaches conclusions about eco-system damaged beyond repair.[8] Here is how this critical approach proceeds. The first step is "discursive replacement". Although the story itself is a narrative about people—their relationship, behaviors and souls, the ecocritical reading treats it as an ecological text about environment, by interpreting the story's backgrounds descriptions (like the environmental and climate descriptions) as the most crucial content of the story, thus change its motif and interpretative system. The second step is "word attachment". All the scattered descriptions about the environment in the story are collected together by ecocritical reading, and then specific items are singled out and given emblematic correlatives of ecology. For example, the ancient house is no more a house, but the emblem of entropy (a kind of negative energy within systems which tends towards breakdown). The falling down of the Usher house is not the final disaster of a building and a family, but a symbol of the Black Hole of universe. The mind of young man Usher is also an entropy, radiating negative energy. Usher's morbid sensitiveness to light and sound represents a system against the Nature, and so on and so forth. "Rigid embedding"is also used in this critique.

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[8] Barry, Peter, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, trans. Yang Jianguo, Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2014, pp. 250-251 (彼得•巴里：《理论入门：文学与文化理论导论》，杨建国译，第 250-251 页，南京大学出版社 2014 年版。).

After naming the emblems and images from an ecocritical point of view, all these elements and attached names should be organized into an ecological narrative. Otherwise, the reconstructing work by an influential theory cannot be said finished. Finally, if such an ecocritical reading is rendered as if it were historical truth, it is anachronistically fitting a literary work of previous age to a theory of subsequent age. After all, ecology ideas like entropy and Black Hole had not come into being when Poe wrote this story.

The practice of forced inclusion of the extra-literary has three characteristics. The first characteristic is its *forcefulness*. Forcefulness is shown in its borrowing discourses from other disciplines and planting them in the soil of literature. Forcefulness is also shown in its textual analysis, when the interpreter tries to match the intention of the text to his own theoretical intention, no matter what is the possible intention of the text and what responses the text might arouse. Yet, even with great forcefulness, this matching-up work still might fail, and then it is the turn of the second characteristic—*deconstruction*, deconstructing text to leave space for new arrangements of meanings. Here the logic goes like this. If a critic's emphasis is to use an extra-literary theory to interpret a text, then his starting point is the theory and the text is subordinate to it. But the truth is that more often than not, texts, especially classical works, come into being earlier than our days' popular theories. It is no exaggeration to say that no text can fit all kinds of theories well. However, in order to achieve his theoretical purpose, the interpreter must find means to force the text into the framework of the theory of his choice. How to interpret the text at his own free will? Here comes the third characteristic—*replacement*, replacing the normal understanding of the text with new sayings. There are replacements of the text's theme—replacing it with a new one, as well as replacement of the text's original character design—inviting a marginal character to the center of the stage, as if he is the text's hero. Replacement turns text into theory's servant. Forcefulness, deconstruction and replacements, these three characteristics are of linear proceeding sequence: because the interpretation is interpretation in force, deconstruction is a need to mend the gap; following deconstruction, it is naturally discoursive replacement.

Obviously, forced inclusion of the extra-literary theories always leads to the practice of turning a blind eye to the constitutive elements of the text under scrutiny and bending the text's themes or reference to suit the needs of theories originated from other disciplines than literature. Often the result is double failures: literary criticism fails to explain target texts, while target texts fail to prove theories and criticism. Gradually literary criticism is losing its "literary" quality. Thinking about the ill effects of forced theoretical application, two questions still need further clarifying here.

The first question is, should the inclusion of extra-literary theories be taken as illegal, when the tendency of cross-disciplinary clashes and trans-disciplinary integration are so evident today and researches breaking the traditional disciplinary limitations are providing the main driving force for social progress? We must admit that from a constructive point of view, trans-disciplinary tendency and practice have definitely broaden the vision of contemporary literary criticism and paved new ways to a multi-dimensional critical space. This is good for contemporary literary criticism to go beyond its circular arguments on literariness in the narrow sense and bring more layers of meanings to its social value. However, we shall at the same time not forget that compared with the external theoretical facilities, the intrinsic motivation is much more important for the sustainable development of literary criticism, and this intrinsic motivation is nothing but literary practice by writers. So, literary criticism should first of all come from literary practice. Also, expansion by unbalanced dependence upon the extra-literary theories is also a self-evident proof of the weakness of contemporary literary criticism.

Its weakness lies in its lack of creative mind to find new discourse, to name new things, and to condense new theories in literary works and practice. To put it shortly, contemporary literary criticism fails to use the language of literature to enhance people's feelings about their being. Once again it is emphasized here that the admission of the negative aspect of trans-disciplinary theoretical borrowing is not equal to cutting off literary criticism from the other disciplines and being contended with its own discursive echoing. Trans-disciplinary researches can be vigorous platforms for new theories come into being, and the whole development of literary criticism throughout the 20th century is exactly guaranteed by this trans-disciplinary tendency. The main reason against forced inclusion of extra-literary theories and research models is that we must respect the principal characteristic of literature. Different from philosophy, history, mathematics and many other disciplines, literature is the expression by words of people's ideas, emotions and consciousness in literary ways. Literary ways feature *individuality*, the individual's mind power. How can we measure individuality with something uniform? When we try to get the core of a literary work via some extra-literary methods and theories, the basic facts of its literariness shall not be violated. To literary criticism as a whole, its borrowing from other disciplines to generate new critical theories will not succeed in the true sense unless the borrowing practice is based on and judged by the critics' knowledge about the uniqueness of literary creation. Without the knowledge about and respect to literature itself, any literary theory will sooner or later be lifeless. If the theories literary criticism has fully equipped with fail to interpret literary texts, the existence of theories will be questioned and mocked and the very discipline of literature will meet its serious crisis. Blind transportation of theories is harmful. The Sokal Affair, an impressive anecdote in the 20th century literary critical history, is a thought-provoking case of this harm.[9] In 1996, Allan Sokal, an American physics professor submitted an article to *Social Text*, an academic journal of postmodern cultural studies. This article was a hoax article, aiming to test the journal's academic vigor. The journal did not identify the mistakes about common science in the article or the nonsense connections Sokal established between science and postmodernism. Sokal's hoax article was published, and on the day of its publication, Sokal revealed the truth to another magazine. The whole world was shocked at this news. According to Sokal's words, part of his purpose was to show his dissatisfaction with literary criticism's abusive usage of new terms of mathematics, physics and other scientific fields. The irony of Sokal Affair shall be taken as an alert that literary criticism must be careful in its borrowing of extra-literary theories. Trans-disciplinary borrowing might be more suitable and safer if it happens on the research method level, instead of direct usage or repetition of the others' discourse.

The second question is, once a new interpretation to a target text has taken shape, to what extent can we use this new interpretation to re-understand and re-write history? This question is very similar to an everlasting concern of hermeneutics. If we take a long enough time span into our consideration, any understanding to a text is tentative. Nietzsche, Heidegger and Gadamer all share this view, especially Gadamer who thinks every kind of interpretation is just adding more meanings to a text instead of finding the meaning.[10] So it is reasonable that the meaning of a text is drifting, changing, refusing to be fixed. A methodology called "critical presenticism" rising at the threshold of the 21st century tries to read the past with the present, emphasizing the present reading and meaning of a historical text. This is a response against various modes of historicist literary studies,

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[9] Ibid., p. 281.

[10] Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method*, trans. Hong Handing, Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2010, p. 426 (伽达默尔:《真理与方法》，洪汉鼎译，第 426 页，商务印书馆 2010 年版。).

including the relatively late schools of new historicism and cultural materialism.[11] The critical method of reading history through the lens of the present is not necessarily problematic, for it provides more space for literature to play its present-day social roles. But, presenticism and historicism are two bifurcate roads after all. The dimension of concrete history shall not be totally ignored even in our teleological reading of an old text. To understand a text historically is in essence to understand the text's original discursive scope, and this scope is a given condition for our analysis into the text. Should a presenticist revision of the past violate this given condition, the critique will turn out to be a groundless fallacy. Critical presenticism, if manipulated well, can add new meanings to an old text, but it cannot go too far to evidently distort the writer's original reference or to judge the meanings of a text with modern notions forcibly and awkwardly.

So, when we look back at old texts in the light of new theories, we must be alert of theoretical abuse. New readings can be taken as a kind of compensation to, not a replacement of, the primary text itself. Maybe there is indeed something in accordance to a critic's theoretical presupposition. But if this "something" is just an accidental coincidence or vague fragments of the writer's thoughts, how can we take it as the writer's serious concerns expressed on purpose and then to redefine the most fundamental motif of the text? New theories give critics new light to read old texts, but if a critic wants to re-evaluate everything and finally adapt the text, he is quite beyond his critical authority. A primary text is a primary text. Interpretations are interpretations. They are not identical. The primary text cannot speak for itself. It cannot declare its own interpretation as the most authoritative understanding. Interpretations are always from the critics' individual points of view. So the smoothest logic should go like this: text first, understanding second; text determining understanding, understanding depending on text; the absence of text naturally leading to the absence of sensible understanding.

It is undeniable that in certain contexts, theoretical borrowing from extra-literary disciplines has played positive and important roles. Yet, proper and effective employment of extra-literary theories is not possible without a necessary condition that is the theory should be able to arrive at the nature of literature. There are three layers of meanings in this "arrival at the nature of literature".

The first meaning is that the theory refers directly to literary works and it belongs to the tradition of literature. Traditional literary theories and criticism focus on texts and comment on the texts' literary styles and aesthetic values. They refer directly to commonly agreed works of literature and they should be consequently regarded as literary theories and criticism. However, this tradition is interrupted by the concept of "critical theory" which emerges in the 1960s western society and has gained great popularity since. This concept is not, or mainly not, for exploring the meanings of literature. It is not interested in texts, especially literary texts in a narrow sense. It cares about theories. The "theory" of "critical theory" is not confined to literary studies. Actually it is much more intended for interpreting things beyond literature. It outlines a trans-disciplinary area. Even if this area starts from literature, it now has gone beyond the world of literature and targets at issues and theories of philosophy, history, anthropology, sociology, political science and so on. But on second thought, it might be more exactly to say critical criticism does not target at theories either. Its exclusive interest is in the "society"—the material world that is not constituted by abstract theories. Since literature is not the main interest of today's "critical theory", it is obviously a fallacy to replace traditional literary criticism with it. In order to see this fallacy more clearly, let's once again look into the influencing relationship between the field of

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[11] Barry, Peter, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, trans. Yang Jianguo, Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2014, p. 288 (彼得•巴里：《理论入门：文学与文化理论导论》，杨建国译，第 288 页，南京大学出版社 2014 年版。).

literature and the external theories. We can roughly divide their mutual relationship into two kinds: using literature to interpret external theories and using external theories to interpret literature. Using literature to interpret theories not of literature is the most commonly seen practice of "critical theory". Freud's using Greek tragedy *Oedipus The King* to support his psychological theory is a far evidence. Fredric Jameson bases his book *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* on his meditation about classical works by Gustave Flaubert, Joseph Conrad, George Gissing and etc. Although he makes excellent analysis into some literary text, and his unique ideas are indeed a special and instructive contribution to the enrichment of literary theories, his *The Political Unconscious*, in essence, should not be taken as a book of literary theory or criticism. It would be more accurate to call it a critical book about modernist theories. Both his starting point and ending point are not in literary things. He is a theorist using literary material to serve his theoretical purpose. As to using external theories to interpret literature, whether it belongs to literary criticism depends on whether the theories really point at and belong to literature. The direction a theory pointing at is where it belongs to. Difference of emphasis exists between pointing at literature or at another research field. Take feminist criticism for example. If its emphasis is on specific literary texts defined as feminist writing, it is feminist literary criticism. If it is using literary texts to advocate feminist theories, it is feminism, which expands into the field of literature but should not be treated as literary criticism without differentiation. In short, if an interpretation is made in the light of some extra-literary theory and finally it goes too far in the theory that it loses its focus on literature at all, then this interpretation is an imposed interpretation if it still insists on its being literary criticism.

The second consideration for a theory's arriving at the nature of literature or not is whether the theory can be settled down in the study of literature for long and serve the needs of literature. The result of settling down is an effect, a judgment, a sign. Viewed as a whole, the Western literary criticism of the 20th century has introduced many theories from the other disciplines, but those adopted and used as long established theories of literature are few, and those developed into fine theoretical systems are even fewer. Terry Eagleton says that there are two familiar ways in which any theory can provide itself with a distinct purpose and identity: either it can define itself in terms of its particular methods of enquiry; or it can define itself in terms of the particular object that is being enquired into.[12] With a reference to his criteria, what theories borrowed from extra-literary origins can be said of literary purpose and identity? What methods become effective common methods of reading literary texts? We are kept being provided with concepts and categoriess by certain great "-isms", but how many trends have proven sustainable and systematic? New Criticism might be an exception. But how about the other borrowed theories? Are they all suitable for the studies of literature?

Third, literary theory exists in a literary way. What is a theory's literary way of existence? The point is literary theory should be concrete theory that can be put into specific interpretation of text. Compared with theories of the other branches of social sciences, especially with philosophy, literary theory deals with literature, which concerns neither everyday social phenomena nor abstract conception and cognition. Literary theory focuses on the rules and history of literature, specific methods of creating and analyzing literary texts. If a literary theory does not care about textual or aesthetic things, but show great zeal to criticizing the society, constructing ideas about issues not of literary concern and participating in Hegel's purely spiritual activities, can it be still labeled as "literary" theory? Needless to say, theories need evolution, evolution based on practice and in accordance with practice. Literary criticism is a form of practicing literary theories, as literary creations

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[12] Eagleton, Terry, *Literary Theory: An Introduction (Second Edition)*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1983, pp. 171-172.

and phenomena are. Theory and criticism are two interwoven entities. Theory is always reflected as theory for criticism, and criticism is always reflected as criticism by theory. Without theory, criticism would have extincted long long ago. Incapable of penetrating into criticism, theory would be too far away from literature. This is dialectic of the triangular relationship among criticism, theory and literature.

Subjective Assumption Prior to Interpretation

The phrase "subjective assumption" is the key to understanding how an imposed interpretation takes its shape. It refers to the practice that a critic interprets a text's meanings or evaluates its significance not by strict logic deduction, but by certain preconceptions and a priori arguments in their mind. A critique made out of subjective assumption usually has its political stance, mode of interpretation or theoretical conclusion first, therefore the whole critical text is nothing but a textual design to prove his assumption. Subjective assumption damages criticism by lowering it to the level of footnote making to theories or social agendas. Subjective assumption is very likely to bring three logic "traps" into critical texts.

The first trap is pre-taken stance before interpretation, which means that a critic has already taken his stance of argument or political gesture before his seemingly objective reading into a literary text. In fact, his main purpose is not to tell the main idea of the literary text but to declare his idea, to express his attitude, to show his concerns about something quite possibly not literary at all. Especially when affairs and theories not of literature are directly used by the critic, his stance and intention will be more self-evident. Contrary to the common understanding that a critic should find his ideas or draw his conclusions from literary texts, critic with political stance ready in his mind tries to find literary texts to satisfy his stance. He has a stance first, then critical standards fitting his stance well, and then literary texts fitting his standards well. Both the literary texts he chooses and the interpretative process he takes serve his initial standpoint. The reason for using literary texts to fulfill an extra-literary agenda lies in the value of literature. As literary creations can reach the broadest readers and the deepest feelings, the use of literary elements can greatly enhance a pre-taken stance's influencing and convincing power.

The second trap is pre-set mode of interpretation, reflected as a critic fitting a literary text into an analyzing formula and then abstracting out meanings rather stiffly. Usually in this kind of critical trap, the critic seems to be very confident about the analyzing formula he chooses, holding it universally true and capable of covering any literary text. Among the diversified schools of contemporary literary criticism, literary semiotics is the one that most features using analytical formula to draw meanings from texts, especially when it borrows formulas from physics or mathematics. Overwhelmed by formula methods, literary theories and criticism will no more work as the artistic expression of human thoughts and emotions. When criticism is simplified into applying formulas to literary texts and literary texts are thus solidified into dry relationship factors, the happiness and inspiration derived from reading experience will be driven out and the critique turns into a boring labor of solving mathematical problems.

The third trap is predetermined conclusion, which refers to the situation of conclusion preceding textual analysis. Obviously such a conclusion is not out of a critic's close reading into a target text and logical deduction. Not for explaining texts, but for proving certain arranged conclusions, it is a reversed order to normal interpretative process. It starts from the ending point—the conclusion, and goes all the way back to the initial point—the primary texts. The predetermined conclusion works like a deliberate tour guide, leading a critique involuntarily moving to a designed place.

Elaine Showalter, as one of the most famous feminist critic, occasionally shows the problem of subjective assumption in her feminist criticism. She likes re-interpreting literary texts in history and her feminist perspective often works as a pre-taken stance in her re-interpretation. Her critical essay written in the 1980s, *Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism*, makes an anti-conventional reading to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. She rejects the traditional criticism of taking Hamlet, the hero, as the focus of textual analysis, and puts Ophelia, Hamlet's fiancee, a supporting character in the drama, into the center of her understanding of *Hamlet.* In this article Showalter proposes that Ophelia's being neglected in criticism is not an accidental phenomenon but the outcome of patriarchal order. "The alteration of strong and weak Ophelias on the stage, virginal and seductive Ophelias in art, inadequate or oppressed Ophelias in criticism, tells us how these representations have overflowed the text, and how they have reflected the ideological character of their times."[13] Showalter believes a feminist view to interpret Ophelia iconography is very important. After surveying a variety of art forms of representing Ophelia, Showalter asks, "how should feminist criticism represent Ophelia in its own discourse? What is our responsibility towards her as character and as woman?"[14] "To liberate Ophelia from the text, or to make her its tragic center, is to re-appropriate her for our own ends."[15]

The purpose of Showalter's tracing into Ophelia's historical discourse is definite. First, to change previous standards and re-evaluate this drama from a feminist point of view. In the view of feminists, any literary text can be read as a text about woman and femininity, no matter what the author's original idea is and what the discourse he lives in is. In fact, not just in individual literary works, but literary history as a whole need to be re-read and re-written. To feminist critics, women experience is the most important standard of assessing literary value. Feminist position is their pre-taken stance and the beginning of their critique making. This clear-cut frontier is extremely necessary to shape the ground of feminist criticism.

The second purpose of Showalter's feminist reading is to re-evaluate characters, "to re-appropriate her for our own ends". By inviting the previously marginalized and distorted female characters to the center of stage, standing there in spotlight as representatives of women, feminist criticism finds a proper channel to express its revolting thoughts against the patriarchal order and male dominating system.

The third purpose is to re-interpret the theme of *Hamlet*. It is no more a story of a prince's difficult revenge. It is actually a story of an invisible girl named Ophelia, and this story is in essence a piece of hidden history. Maybe, Shakespeare produces this hidden history on purpose, which is a good proof that Shakespeare is conscious of patriarchy and a good proof of long existed feminist thoughts in literary history as well. To Showalter, her criticism is her duty for the struggle for women.

However, under her subjective critical design, Shakespeare's classical work is subverted. Though Shakespeare just gives a few touches to Ophelia: her turning up in only 5 of the total 20 scenes and the love between Hamlet and her is ambiguously mentioned by several lines for flashback, she must be examined again with a new light. So some details, details neglected by the previous *Hamlet* criticism, are picked out and their specific implications are uncovered. For example, the flowers Ophelia wears when she goes mad suggests double images: one is innocent blooming, indicated by the virginal rose of may; the other is whorish

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[13] Showalter, Elaine, "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism," in Geoffrey H. Hartman & Patricia Parker (Eds.), *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, New York and London: Methuen, 1985, p. 91.
[14] Ibid., p. 78.
[15] Ibid., p. 79.

contamination indicated by wild flowers and herbs. The "weedy trophies" and phallic "long purples" which she wears to her death and her disordered hair all images associated with femininity and sexuality. Her death in water is especially a reference to female elements. "Drowning … becomes the truly feminine death in the dramas of literature and life, one which is a beautiful immersion and submersion in the female element. Water is the profound and organic symbol of the liquid woman whose eyes are so easily drowned in tears, as her body is the repository of blood, amniotic fluid and milk."[16] Showalter's defense for women is also made by creating a textual coalition with other feminist critiques. She borrows deconstructive words and symbols from the French psychoanalytic criticism, saying that when Hamlet is joking with Ophelia that there is nothing between maids' legs, this "nothing" is actually a symbol of Ophelia's, as well as women-in-general's state of being. "Deprived of thoughts, sexuality, language, Ophelia's story becomes the story of O—the zero, the empty circle or mystery of feminine difference, the cipher of female sexuality to be deciphered by feminist interpretation."[17] Be it textual analysis or theoretical reference, the purpose of Showalter is quite clear. It is to prove that in the long history of literature and arts, women are systematically contemned, insulted and tortured. They are the object of contempt and misreading. So far as feminism has illuminated, the images of women need to be reconstructed, either by disclosing the male's violence or by enhancing the female's fighting spirit. Not only so, feminism should also be widely used as a criterion to judge literary practice and effects. However, the problem, or the "trap" of a pre-taken stance arises here. Can the feminist judgment about Shakespeare's gender position fit his actual mind well? When feminist criticism is applied to Shakespeare, shouldn't there be more legitimate proofs to guarantee its interpretative correctness? Compared with Showalter's paper about *Hamlet*, one of the most representative feminist critical works, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, written by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, makes a much more general and far-reaching critical attack to the dominant male's voice in literary history. These two female literary critics scrutinize how the nineteenth-century male writers have created female characters and two categories of woman image are identified by them: the angel and the monster. Both kinds are distortion and depression made by man's society to women. Both are the reflection of the deep-rooted prejudice against women in patriarchal ideology. To Gilbert and Gubar, text abuse and text harassment to women are all-pervasive in the literary history, and they provide abundant examples to their feminist criticism.[18] The influence of this book is powerful, especially its efforts to totalize individual cases into the historical phenomenon of male centrism and uplift feminist criticism to the status of being universally effective. But, in spite of welcoming it, we still need to think hard how much convincing power the practice of categorizing writers by genders can possess?

Where shall we start our critiques? From which shall we draw conclusions: from close reading to text or from the so-called theoretical consciousness?

One proposal is that theory is just a perspective to contemplate text. That is true. When we are making criticism, we need a cutting angle to enter into the text, a perspective. Criticism without perspective is not

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[16] Ibid., p. 81.
[17] Ibid., p. 79.
[18] Gilbert, Sandra M. & Gubar, Susan, "the Mirror and the Vamp: Reflections on Feminist Criticism", in Zhang Jingyuan (Ed.), *Contemporary Feminist Criticism*, trans., Dong Zhilin, Beijing: Peking University Press, 1992, p. 271-297 (桑德拉•吉尔伯特、苏姗•格巴：《镜与妖女：对女性主义批评的反思》，董之林译，张京媛主编：《当代女性主义文学批评》，第 271-297 页，北京大学出版社 1992 年版。).

possible or serious. But, how do we choose or decide a perspective? The most reliable method is from text, from literary works. Imagine a text as a mountain, and now you are looking at this mountain. Theory is the angle of your eyes watching the mountain, which is your perspective. If you want to have a good view of the mountain, you have to find a good position. When you are looking for a good position, you naturally take the whole mountain—its height, form and structure into your consideration. Subjective assumption in interpretation is faulty, because it is like turning a blind eye to the mountain's specific features and stubbornly staying in an inappropriate observation spot. No wonder the true face of the mountain is revealed. Though some angles are faulty (too far away from a good and true view), we must admit effective angles are by no means singular. There should be multiple perspectives to observe the mountain to enrich our knowledge about its "true face". Similarly, there should be multiple cutting angles to make criticism. Different theories bring new lights to a text and find new meanings. I am not proposing a self-contradictory argument here. Admitting multiple perspectives is not equal to admitting every perspective is of no problem. Ancient Chinese poet Su Shi (苏轼, 1037-1101) leaves us a famous poem about seeing different sides of a mountain from different perspectives: Looking from the side it forms a range, from the end it forms a peak; From everywhere looking at the mountain, it's never the same (横看成岭侧成峰，远近高低各不同). But what if it is a perspective from which you can only vaguely see the mountain, or even worse that you cannot see it at all? Such a perspective is my metaphor for inappropriate theory which ignores or distorts text. Here comes the matching problem between theory and text. But, how to judge whether they are matching or not? The core standard for judging a theory matching or not is not how influential or popular the theory is, but to what extent the texture of the text can be explained by it. In order to tell the texture of the text, it is necessary to study the text thoroughly and comprehensively, viewing it as a whole.

Certainly theory can shed guiding light on criticism. But, if theory becomes critic's pre-taken stance and in order to advocate the stance critics add something neither can be found or justified in text, then theory will stop playing its enlightening role and even lose its objectivity and legitimacy. We might well imagine that if we extend the practice of pre-taken stance to our understanding of literary history, then we might try to re-interpret or re-write the whole history with just one kind of theory and its discourse, as if this theory were the only language that can decode history. Should we interpret literature in this way, where will the truthfulness lie—the truthfulness of either history as a text or a text as history? Theoretical assumption, if handled rather stiffly as a screening tool in our selection of literary material, will cause the problem of imposed interpretation, interpretation that goes beyond the boundary of literary criticism. It is true that criticism involves multiple perspectives and interpretations, but it should avoid pre-taken stance, for critics holding them will be too easily to draw conclusions detached from texts' real content and backgrounds. Or let me put it in another way, critics can take stance and have attitudes, but their stance should be reasonable, resulting from objective analysis. In order to explain the problem of "pre-taken stance" more accurately, four questionable points should be clarified here.

The first question is what is the difference between "knowledge background" and "pre-taken stance". There should be no argument that a critic's mind is not "tabula rasa" in John Locke's words. Both Gadamer's "prejudice theory" and Jauss' concept of "horizon of expectation" are telling us that reading is not a 100 percent innocent thing. Can a critic give up his prejudice ultimately and set out his critical journey with a transparent mind? A subject's knowledge background is how much he is equipped with relevant knowledge. To human beings, knowledge is the necessary condition of their cognition practice, including reading. For example,

he must know certain words if he wants to read and he must follow common logic if he wants to express himself. Such knowledge is not the "pre-taken stance" I am against.

Gadamer's words of "prejudice" and "fore-conception" point at an individual's knowledge model, firmly held yet constantly revised by him. His knowledge model is influenced and determined by both collective and personal factors, like the historical phase he is in, his national, ethnical and cultural identities, his educational and social backgrounds and his past experience. Though he is not conscious of his knowledge model, this model is where his cognition starts. His fore-conception cannot change his cognition object, so fore-conception alone cannot decide cognition result. Gadamer is quite aware of this limitation. He says that in order to realized understanding, one should remain "open to the meaning of the other person or text" and hold an as-a-matter-of-fact attitude, because, using Gadamer's words, "a person trying to understand something will not resign himself from the start to relying on his own accidental fore-meanings, ignoring as consistently and stubbornly as possible the actual meaning of the text …" Gadamer believes that interpretation (hermenutics) should not be controlled by one's accidental fore-meaning, not to mention his consistently and stubbornly sticking to it and ignoring facts and truth of his object. As to the dialectic relationship between "prejudice" and meanings, Gadamer's attitude is like this, "The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert is own truth against one's own fore-meanings."[19]

Jauss' concept of horizon of expectation is very similar to Gadamer's fore-conception. Both refer to a projected cognition model before reading practice; both possessed by us subconsciously; both cannot change the hard facts about their objects at their free will. However, they are also different. Fore-conception is one's psychological readiness for cognition, while horizon of expectation is one's expectation about certain results, which is more specific and purposeful. When it occurs that reality does not fit fore-conception or expectation, the former will revise its conceptions and add this revision to its knowledge model, while the latter will adjust its vision to adapt to reality and open a new horizon.

Neither prejudice theory nor horizon of expectation is identical to my "pre-taken stance", which indicates the critic's subjective and deliberate choice of meanings. Before studying specific literary text, a critic has already chosen his argument and taken his critical stance; then he tailors his argument with supportive details from the literary text, even though these details might be distortions to the primary text. Stance leads to actions. A critic might adapt primary text and revise reality just because of his stance. These aggressive gestures are his sensible choice. Stance refuses changes. It intervenes text and manipulates interpretation. Because pre-taken stance is always a strong theoretical conscious leading to actions, it is more powerful than fore-conception in critical practice.

In short, different from Gadamer's fore-conception which is always ambiguously revealed, imposed interpretation has its clear stand and definitive goal to achieve. Gadamer's prejudice might extend aimlessly to any directions, while a pre-taken stance focuses on specific direction or directions. Besides, Gadamer's prejudice occurs accidentally and naturally in a critical text, not so much on purpose. But a pre-taken stance has purpose. The difference between Jauss' "horizon of expectation" and pre-taken stance is also apparent: the former refers to the readers' aesthetic expectation, while the latter refers to the critics' theoretical evaluation;

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[19] Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method*, trans. Hong Handing, Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2010, pp. 381-382 (伽达默尔：《真理与方法》，洪汉鼎译，第 381-382 页，商务印书馆 2010 年版。). The English translation of Gadamer's direct quotation also refers to an English version of *Truth and Method* translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. (Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, London: Sheed and Ward, 1975.)

the former prefers to see "what a piece of literary work should be", while the latter prefers to talk about "what a piece of literary work must be". Obviously, critique with pre-taken stance is critique developed from certain designed theory instead of literary text. Thus they easily fall into the state of imposing meanings or values to literary works in force and turns literary works into theories' witnesses. A critic's pre-taken stance can draw literary works and practice over to their sides and be their partners, while his knowledge background will not function in this way. That is where the main difference of the two concepts lies.

The second is the difference between "theoretical guidance" and "pre-taken stance". It is good to have appropriate theories to guide one's research. Could it be that theoretical guidance is a kind of pre-taken stance? Where can we draw a line between well-suited theoretical guidance and ill-fitting stance? This is perhaps where their biggest difference lies: the former, referring to the guiding light offered by theory for a critic's outlook and methodology, only serves as an apparatus for orientation, not like the latter, which are specific arguments and conclusions taken for granted before objective analysis. In actual critical practice, theories providing "theoretical guidance" should observe facts and facts are in turn in the position of correcting theories. But pre-taken stance is not so factual and objective. They perform as established criteria of reading and interpreting, with innate formulas and conclusions. Researches led by pre-taken stance even bend facts to observe theories. They set criteria for selecting facts and tailoring facts to suit their formulas and conclusions.

Friedrich Engels has a clear yet profound view about such formula like theories. At the end of the 19th century, a school of young critics and writers participate actively in the German Socialist Movement and they made copious critical attacks from a rigid perspective of materialism to social movements happening in Germany then and in history. However, many of their judgments and conclusions prove wrong. To their incorrectness, Engels comments that if materialist philosophy is used not as an enlightening method to study history but as a fixed formula, and historical facts are tailored in order to fit in this formula, then the so-called materialism will change to its own opposite.[20] Engels further emphasizes that theories should not be used as providing "stereotypes" or "labels" to various things, for such usages prevent researches in depth. Back to the understanding of historical development through materialism, Engels says that it is necessary for researchers to make a thorough study into history again, to study in details the conditions for various social situations, and then basing on these condition find corresponding political, juridical, aesthetic, philosophical and religious views about societies.[21] This is the way to attain the correctness of historical materialism. Engels' words are a three-fold reminder for us: first, theories are not formulas or labels that can be so easily stuck to things; second, any research with theoretical guidance shall never or ever ignore the importance of studying the research target's whole existing conditions and situations; third, a critic should naturally get his findings from facts, not forcibly using theories upon things or tailoring facts to satisfy his theories' needs. Otherwise, theories will go to the opposite of their initial meanings of existence. The dividing line is rather clear here: theoretical guidance taking theories as methods of understanding things and respecting and allowing facts to correct theories; while pre-taken stance using theories as formulas and tailoring and distorting facts to prove theories. One is scientific, while the other is formula like.

Engels' comments reflect the main points differentiating theoretical guidance of historical materialism from forced inclusion of extra-literary theories: the former used as a theoretical orientation, the latter a fixed

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[20] Marx, Karl & Engels, Friedrich, *Selective Readings of Marx and Engels* (Vol. 4), Beijing: Renmin Publishing House, 1995, p. 688 (《马克思恩格斯选集》第四卷，第 688 页，人民出版社 1995 年版。).

[21] Ibid., p. 692.

mode; the former based on facts and adjusting itself to facts, the latter on its mode and tailoring facts to fit its mode; the former for seeking historical rules, the latter for proving theoretical correctness. Yes, obviously Marx and Engels are analyzing texts from the stance and in the method of historical materialism. But they are not labeling texts with theoretical terms and making imposed interpretation, as reflected in their employment of historical and aesthetic methods always mingled with their close reading into the texts, and their drawing of conclusions always from textual contents.

The third questionable point is the possibility of a uniform mode of criticism. The "scientific turn" of contemporary Western literary criticism has taken great efforts to search for theories or critical modes capable of transcending their time and space and being equally effective to all texts and phenomena. Semiotics and narratology are two research directions typical of this turn. What they are striving to find are the dominant factors and uniform forms in the world of literature as well as of human beings in order to organize a pattern universally true to explain multitudinous phenomena. According to Fredric Jameson, structuralist seeking of superior "uniformity" is only an illusion as he says mockingly that structuralism is essentially a replay of the Kantian dilemma of the unknowability of the thing-in-itself.[22] Science of human arts, especially the study of literature, is fundamentally different from science of natural world on the aspects of research object and research route. Natural science targets at the objective material world, whose existence and operating rules are almost wholly independent of people's wills. Scientific workers' personal preference and emotions cannot change their research objects' beings. Even research methods must be the same as they should be. Literary creations are subjective things as they are the results of writers' individual spiritual activities. Since literary texts are controlled by writers' thinking and feelings, and thinking and feelings are free and abstract things that cannot be regulated once and for all; the structures, language and narrative forms of literary creations are naturally should not be interpreted or distorted by constantly identical formulas and theoretical molds. Besides, life is full of vicissitudes, and writers' feelings and understanding to life are indeed vulnerable to sudden changes and backward development. Critical formulas or molds cannot accommodate literary texts as reflections of their creators' big inner changes.

The forth questionable point is the fairness of criticism. Speaking from the sense of epistemology, the most primary condition of criticism making is an ontological awareness of the text's existence. This awareness includes three aspects or levels: (1) what is written in the text, which is the most objective part of the text; (2) what the author intends to represent and whether his representation is in agreement with his intention; (3) what are the actual effects of the text, such as readers' understandings or response, and whether the effects are in agreement with the author's intention. These three aspects are the most basic elements of fair evaluations. The fairness of criticism centers on the fairness of his attitude to the texts. If imposed interpretation is made for the sake of certain theories, the fairness of criticism will be harmed or even lost. There is a concept of critical ethics involved here. A fair textual analysis should be in accordance with the text's content and the author's original intention. We take those written in the text as the text's content; while to those not written or represented in the text, we cannot take them as content for granted. Critical ethics is even more desired in our attitude to the author. When a critic is trying to force his own wills upon a text by deciphering out meanings neither obviously intended by the author nor definitely proved by any trace in the text, he is actually violating critical ethics. Of

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[22] Jameson, Fredric, *The Prison-House of Language / Marxism and Form*, trans., Qian Jianru, NanChang: Bai Hua Zhou Literature and Arts Press, 1997, p. 89 (詹姆逊：《语言的牢笼 马克思主义与形式》，钱佼汝译，第 89 页，百花洲文艺出版社 1997 年版。).

course on the other hand, the complexity of a text demands the complexity of its critiques, and the ambiguity of literariness eludes the capture of correct meanings. There might be a great gap between the author's original intention and his actual textual representation, which asks for debates and identifying works in depth. Possibly, a critic knows a text better than the author himself, for he can identify something already existing in the text but not realized by the author yet. Between epistemology and ethics, there is a space big enough to hold all these debates and explorations. Imposed interpretation is not operated in this space. It sets a pre-determined conclusion as the goal of its elucidation, then press what is not written in the text into the text and what is not intended by the author onto the author. Such a critic is so strong-willed that he offends both the logic procedures of epistemology and the rational principles of critical ethics. In conclusion, the fairness of criticism is guaranteed by correct method of epistemology and basic respect to critical ethics.

Reversed Route of Cognition

Reversed route of cognition refers to the inverted order happening in the process of theoretical construction and critical analysis, which starts from the concepts and categories of certain theory and goes all the way back to the theory itself. It is circular reasoning, proving a theory by the theory itself. To put it more precisely, this kind of criticism first takes a theory as its cutting angle to go into text. Then following the theory, it cuts text into pieces. Certainly these pieces are in line with its theoretical purpose, so these pieces are collected together to prove the theory's legitimacy in turn. From another perspective, we might say that reversed route of cognition is also an upside-down mistake in its handling of part-whole relationship. It uses its limited view and partial knowledge to replace the grand whole picture, and replaces thorough textual analysis with inaccurate imagination. Reversed route of cognition is definitely a wrong route of epistemology. It moves from theory to practice though logically speaking it should move from practice to theory. Contrary to the normal rule of drawing out conclusions from practice, it is using conclusions to fragmentize and emasculate texts. Reversed route of cognition is the episemological cause of imposed interpretation.

Reversed route of cognition leads to many problems of logical disorder, of which the following three are especially noticeable.

First, it reverses the relationship between practice and theory. Theory comes from practice, and literary theory should grow up in its learning from literary practice. To this, J. Hillis Miller writes in his essay that great works of literature are likely to be ahead of their critics. "They are there already. They have anticipated explicitly any deconstruction the critic can achieve. A critic may hope, with great effort, and with the indispensable help of the writer themselves, to raise himself to the linguistic sophistication where Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, George Elliot, Stevens, or even Williams are already. They are there already, however, necessarily in such a way that their works are open to mystified readings".[23] It should be an unquestionable statement that theories of literature spring from literary practice (i.e. works of literature). However, in the development of contemporary Western literary criticism, this statement is a question, a big question.

There are some phenomena confusing and misleading our judgment.

The first phenomenon is that some literary theories are transplanted directly from extra-literary disciplines, and these theories have spread widely, seemingly of great influence. This phenomenon leaves us a false

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[23] Miller, J. Hillis, "Deconstructing the Deconstructers", quote from Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, Cornell University Press, 2008, p. 269.

impression that theories can come from theories. Eagleton says in the Preface to his *Literary Theory*, "As the book itself tries to demonstrate there is no 'literary theory', in the sense of a body of theory which springs from, or is applicable to, literature alone. None of the approaches outlined in this book, from phenomenology and semiotics to structuralism and psycho-analysis, is simply concerned with 'literary' writing".[24] But I won't so easily take Eagleton's words as truth. He is just describing a phenomenon. We can easily find converse examples. On one hand, there indeed exist theories springing from literature alone. For example, many remarks and theories in the ancient Chinese poetics are purely from literature and for the literature, though they can also refer to and interplay with the outside world. On the other hand, there indeed exist theories whose coverage is so limited that they should not be used beyond their proper sphere. Of course, limited or not is hard to tell and we cannot exclude a theory's possibility of influencing other fields. But normally we shall not exaggerate a theory's radiation into other disciplines. Nor shall we go too far to make an ironic scene that the main force of the practitioners of a discipline is not experts of this disciplines, but of some other ones. Theories not of literary origin but captured by the contemporary Western literary criticism are doomed to be washed out by the new tides, if they cannot get proper transformation in its qualities to fit literary practice in depth. The changing of literary theories in our times has constantly proven this.

The second phenomenon is that some important schools of thoughts set out criticism from theories and they use theories to operate anatomy on texts, forcing texts to prove theories. This leaves a false impression as well, as if theory can precede practice and higher than life. Theory and practice, the reciprocal relation between them can be viewed from two perspectives. One perspective is reality. Speaking from reality, practice is obviously higher than theory because it has more special and direct effect on changing the objective world. The other perspective is universality, or uniformity, or totality. From this perspective, some people believe that theory possesses more universality and thus is higher than practice. To them, theory is revealed as a guide to practice. But, in fact, practice has universality, too. Practice tells us principles true or not true. If the external conditions are similar, same practice can quite possibly reproduce same results, and this sameness is where universality lies. The universality of theory comes from the universality of practice.[25] According to the virtues of epistemology, the order between practice and theory should never be reversed.

The third disturbing but common phenomenon is that negation from one theory to another theory is not based on literary practice and reality, but purely on intellectual deconstruction. This kind of negation leads to a misunderstanding that theories can get their growth and strength simply by speaking and playing within themselves. In fact, even if we are talking about a true case of a theory negating another theory, it still needs to find its foundation in practice. Marx and Engels have said the same thing, "The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question."[26] Out of his insistence upon practice's priority, Engels criticizes Feuerbach of isolating from historial practice. Feuerbach tries to negate Hegel's theory of morals by advocating an abstract ideal human "love". To this, Engels points out, "In short, the Feuerbachian theory of morals fares like all its predecessors. It is designed to suit all periods, all people and all conditions, and precisely for that reason it is never and nowhere

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[24] Eagleton, Terry, *Literary Theory: An Introduction (Second Edition)*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1983, p. vii.
[25] Lenin, Vladimir, *Philosophical Notebook*, Beijing: Renmin Publishing House, 1974, p. 230 (列宁：《哲学笔记》，第 230 页，人民出版社 1974 年版。).
[26] Marx, Karl & Engels, Friedrich, *Marx / Engels Collected Works (Vol. 1)*, Beijing: Renmin Publishing House, 2009, p. 500 (《马克思恩格斯文集》第一卷，第 500 页，人民出版社 2009 年版。).

applicable."[27] Even when Derrida has succeeded in using deconstruction methods to undermine the concept of logocentrism and accelerated the replacement of structuralism by post-structuralism, his achievements should not be taken as an evidence to the legendary power of destruction a theory can obtain. Hayden White has a sarcastic comment on Derrida, "He regards his own philosophy as a transcendence of the structuralist problematic, but he is wrong; it is its fetishization."[28]

The entire focus of attention of theory must be practice. If not founded in practice, if based on theoretical construction alone, if produced from theories chasing theories, a theory would be a rootless existence. A theory can realized its growth by logical induction and deduction, but its coming into being, its birth, is sheer out of practice, practice against which a theory must be tested. Theory originates from practice. The growth of any theory must depend on literary practice and experiences.

Second, it leads to misplaced relationship between the concrete and the abstract. This misplacement is reflected in two opposite ways of handling concrete-abstract relationship in criticism. One way is setting out from abstract theories and then dismantling or transforming specific texts to find material to justify the presupposed theories, instead of moving from concrete literary practice and gradually rising to abstract theories. The other way is refusing and resisting the abstract intellectual work, using fragmentized reading to replace abstract theoretical construction. Virtues of theory, like universality, integrity and stability are thus impaired. The right concrete-abstract relationship should go like this: criticism starts from the concrete things and attends to them all the way, rising from specific analyses to the abstract and general level; then the abstract, though originating from the concrete, provides guidance to the concrete in turn. Specific analyses and case studies should be enhanced to the abstract and general level, Otherwise, they would stop at being fragments of limited significance. Semiotic literary criticism is one example of the abstract kind. It starts from turning literary expressions into emotionless and senseless "signs", and then using methods resembling mathematics to do formal analyses into the texts. The basic focus of literary semiotics is not of literary concern. In Greimas' study of narratology with semiotic methods, we can see his abstract inference overwhelms his objective textual analysis. Roland Barthes goes even far in abstract semiotics. Dispelling traditional concerns about authorship and signification system in criticism, he argues that signs are signs and they do not represent anything other than themselves. He even proposes that interpretation should be made only from specific literature context and any reference to the world out of the text is not trustworthy.[29] To literary semiotics, abstractness is both the beginning and the end. All the textual details are at the service of something abstract—abstract idea or abstract signification, working as evidence demonstrating it.

Interpretations moving from the abstract to the concrete have apparent imperfections.

The first imperfection is the emptiness of content, which happens when concrete details of a text are silenced and enveloped in the criticism's seeking for abstract things. This problem is especially serious in the case of deconstructive reading through abstract signs. This kind of reading distills complicated messages about thoughts and feelings in the text and renders the text as a pile of boring signs. With piles of signs as its critical

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[27] Marx, Karl & Engels, Friedrich, *Selective Readings of Marx and Engels (Vol. 4)*, Beijing: Renmin Publishing House, 1995, p. 240 (《马克思恩格斯选集》第四卷，第 240 页，人民出版社 1995 年版。).

[28] White, Hayden, "The Absurdist Moment in Contemporary Literary Theory," in Murray Krieger & L. S. Dembo (Eds.), *Directions for Criticism, Structuralism and Its Ternatives*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1977, p. 85.

[29] Liu Fangtong, (Ed.), *Modern West Philosophy (Volume 2)*, Beijing: Renmin Publishing House, 1990, p. 738 (刘放桐等编著：《现代西方哲学》下册，第 738 页，人民出版社 1990 年版。).

results, the text breaks into pieces, into unavoidable fragments of content and thoughts. Michel Foucault criticizes Derrida of always "remaining exclusively textual". He says, "As an interpreter and critic, he leads us into the text from which, in turn, we never emerge. Themes and concerns that transcend the parameters of textuality—above all, those that are related to questions of social reality, institutions, and power—remain fully imperceptible from the standpoint of this rarefied, hyperlinguistic framework."[30]

Second, if we admit literature is in its essence aesthetic and it is a unique creative world of human expression, we should then agree to the statement that the concrete is more important than the abstract to literature. In other words, in the strictest sense, literature is not an abstract existence. Literature is concrete texts. Without concrete texts, without specific analyses into specific literary texts, there would be no tangible existence of literature. Interpreted by senseless and emotionless signs, the quality of literature would definitely melt away and understanding would be a mystified thing. Once again I would like to refer to Hayden White's comments on Derrida here. White criticized Derrida of attacking the whole critical enterprise and bewitching understanding by an infinite play of signs. White says that reading is traditionally regarded as a talent which all men in principle possessed, and reading is therefore as an ordinary human activity. But now, he says, under the imperative to mystify reading, reading takes on the magical qualities and is seen as a privilege of a few exceptional intelligence.[31]

The third imperfection is the extremities it might cause. Sometimes this kind of reading sticks to one simple abstract method and uses this method to rather rigidly interpret diversified texts. Another practice contrary to it—too much indulgence in specific text analysis—is also narrow-minded. Miller is a skillful critic who has made disintegrated readings into a huge amount of books and endowed abundant analyses of images to these books. However, Miller's deconstructive criticism is also problematic, which tends to disintegrate an originally organized text into small parts and pieces, like a boy disassembling his father's watch but unable to restore it.[32] Such kind of deconstructive reading cancels out the wholeness of a text as well as the abstract messages that we can reasonably draw from the text. To understand and interpret literature in this way is to dismantle meaningful texts into broken pieces and lay them there in disorder. After all, only in an organic wholeness can the parts play their roles. For the same logic, interpretation, however subtle and clever, is not faithful and cannot justify itself if it drifts away from the text. Scientific criticism is pretty aware that there should be an overall framework governing the understanding of the text's specific elements. With a general knowledge of the text in his mind, a critic goes into the text's texture and details and tries to find out the interplay taking place among them. Furthermore, "the abstract" under discussion now must be abstraction to a sensible level, based on the empirical knowledge about factual and concrete particulars. Deconstruction is necessary, but we should not just stop at it. The purpose of deconstruction is still for meaning seeking, meanings abstracted from dismantled pieces and bringing about spiral evolution. If there is no integration and reconstruction of meanings following on, the value of the deconstruction is confined to merely a technical one—deconstruction for the sake of deconstruction, not a *literary* one. When the focus of criticism moves away from literary deconstruction to technical deconstruction, imposed interpretation can be expected to happen.

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[30] Wolin, Richard, *The Terms of Cultural Criticism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, p. 200.

[31] White, Hayden, "The Absurdist Moment in Contemporary Literary Theory," in Murray Krieger & L. S. Dembo (Eds.), *Directions for Criticism, Structuralism and Its Ternatives*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1977, pp. 107-108.

[32] Miller, Hillis J., *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels*, trans. Wang Hongtu, Tianjin: Renmin Publishing House, 2008, "Preface" (J.希利斯•米勒：《小说与重复：七部英国小说》，王宏图译，"前言"，天津人民出版社 2008 年版。).

Third, it leads to the split between the part and the whole. In the construction of theoretical system, many theories and schools of literary criticism cannot provide an organic part-whole relationship in their interpretative methods, thus fail to create a relatively integrated and self-contended system for themselves. Some theories and schools start from their focus on textual parts and they do not go beyond their initial concerns for texuality in the later development. They confine themselves stubbornly to the close reading of the text's atomic elements. Their practice is seeing the parts but not the whole. On the contrary, some theories and critical schools starts from the whole, the general grasp of the text, and their interpretation tends to be rather vague and inexact, for their general and macro approaches to reading texts always ignore researches into textual details and are fond of groundless imagination and association. Take the New Criticism for example. It absolutely emphasizes on the pure "inside study" of literary texts, cutting out any linkage with the thoughts and theories of the outside world, especially theories of social and historical criticism. This is where the narrowness of the New Criticism lies. Hans Robert Jauss argues in his aesthetics of reception that literary history is composed of nothing but how literary works are received by the readers. His emphasis on the reception side of literature is also a rejection of other literary elements and relevant studies. Such a refusal is not only negligence to the value of other theories, but also self-imposed isolation, limiting itself to a disadvantageous position to play more roles in literary history. Moreover, critical schools should be conscious of the part-whole relationship existing in their attitudes toward tradition and history. If the whole past history is regarded as a broad background picture, then certain historical times, including the time we are now in, are parts of the wholeness of the picture. When one important kind of theory claims itself to be a totally new one, emerging like a sudden fracture zone in the history of literary study and not belonging to the chain of tradition, it is a misconstruction about its value and a wrong self-cognition. Ever since the Formalism in literary criticism, the main trends of the Western critical theories are turning their attention from the author to the work. Researches about the author are decreasing, until in the end sayings like "the author is dead" are so popular. In the popularity of such sayings, the necessities and benefits of social and historical researches are forgotten. Structuralism is deconstructed by post-structuralism. Looking back at the fracture-like clash brought by deconstruction, Derrida comments, "Deconstruction was not primarily a matter of philosophical contents, themes or theses, philosophemes, poems, theologemes or ideologemes, but especially and inseparably meaningful frames, institutional structures, pedagogical or rhetorical norms, the possibilities of law, of authority, of evaluation, and of representation in terms of its very market."[33] Deconstruction is a sheer subversion not only to literature, but also to the past value system as a whole. Sometimes, even on individual theorist we can see the symptom of such a fracture-like negation to one's past self. J. Hillis Miller is a typical example. His personal critical experience has gone through different stages and styles: from the New Criticism to ideological criticism, then to deconstructionist criticism. His continuous self-denials are the embodiment of his perspiration and uplifting pursuits, of course. But meanwhile his changes are also the reflection of endless changes happening all the time in the Western literary criticism, like tides of the sea forever chasing or being chased by the other tides.

Still there are two questions needing more clarification here. The first question involves the construction model of the Western literary criticism. Contemporary Western literary criticism features rapid changes and diversities, among which many theoretical schools aiming at resisting the traditional and the popular. In order to achieve their aims, they often first set up an orientation, then cut into the academic frontier of that orientation

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[33] Derrida, Jacques, "The time of a thesis: punctuations," In Alan Montefiore (Ed.), *Philosophy in France Today*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 44-45.

from a specific angle, and then focus all their critical attention on a core issue of this frontier. This model of theoretical construction is a common practice, whose emphasis is on bombarding at the focal point only, neglecting the work of wholeness seeking, system building and other points covering. It is a model developed from a negative attitude, brave in negating something before it. Its merits are obvious—fostering the fighting spirit of criticism and stimulating revolutionary thoughts. However, the disadvantages of this construction model are also obvious, and they are destructive, too. This aggressive model favours theories heading for essentialization and fragmentization, and essentialization and fragmentization will finally result in deconstruction. Too much deconstruction consequently brings doubts to the meanings of literary criticism and the whole discipline of literature. Since forced inclusion and transplantation of theories from other disciplines is the main route of producing theories in contemporary criticism, some theories are so alien to the study of literature that we can barely find any connections and resonance among these theories. The gaps between different theories, the conflicts among diversified schools of thoughts, the paradoxes within a theoretical system and the self-contradictions of an individual theorist, all these add much uncertainties and vagueness to the future of criticism. Currently, any intention to grasp the world of theories from a one-dimensional perspective is illusory. Since so, here comes the second question: can we say from the construction model of contemporary criticism that literary theories and criticism should not expect the wholeness of system at all?

What is the relationship between individual theories and the whole theoretical system? What should the part-whole relationship be in the world of critical theories? As it has been proved by facts that if it is a mature discipline, theories circulating in it should be capable of combining with each other to form into a more or less organic system. Within this system, there are different academic directions, distinguishing from each other yet compensating with each other. During the developments of theories in this system, theories of one direction might go faster than theories of the other directions, and this direction, as well as the theories belonging to it, will be the avant garde and can even play a leading role in this discipline. But, right behind the pioneering job of this direction, theories of other directions should follow up from their perspectives in order to get a balanced development and gradually establish a comprehensive system mature enough to cover all the fundamental and crucial questions of the discipline. So researches of different directions of this discipline should keep proportional development, basically to the same level and depth. If one direction breaks the balance, taking sudden and radical steps forward, or if different directions separate from each other, seeking no common discourse, the whole system would be under unhealthy, unstable and incomplete growth. It is always such problems that cause a discipline to be in eternal crisis: contradictions which have no ultimate "right" or "wrong" solutions; debates which last forever for the lack of common criteria, pointless negations which are made to each other. When finally the legitimacy of theory is under question, the development of theory will be deteriorated to empty talk. The part-whole relationship in a theoretical system is somewhat like what Roman Ingarden has observed from aesthetic experience. He says that the true work of art exists as a complex constructed entity, a synthetic of aesthetic values, and any treatment of one aspect of the aesthetic values alone is not to the point. To him, aesthetically significant qualities are qualities existing in the aesthetic object itself, and appear only at the moments when the object as a whole is regarded as an aesthetic piece.[34] Applying his aesthetic vision to the study of literary theories, wouldn't we find the same principle? Judging from the

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[34] Ingarden, Roman, "the Artistic and Aesthetic Values," in Jiang Kongyang (Ed.), *Seletive Reading into the 20th Century West Aesthtics (Volume 2)*, Shanghai: Fudan University Press, p. 278 (英伽登：《艺术的和审美的价值》，蒋孔阳主编：《二十世纪西方美学名著选》下册，第 278 页，复旦大学出版社 1988 年版。).

theoretical development of the 20th century, the conspicuous emerging of some theories and critical schools does not necessarily mean that their founders are determined to deny or abandon the work of systematic construction. They are also pursuing the wholeness of theories, only that the wholeness they want is of duality. On one side, they strive for the wholeness of their own theories, hoping to have an organic system. On the other side, they want their theories to be able to replace the other theories and gain absolute ideological dominance. Deconstructionism deconstructs the central and all the past theories of rational tradition. If the past others should be deconstructed for their centrism, how about deconstructionism itself, which has taken the central position in its dispelling of the others? Looking back at the changes of theories: formalism, the New Criticism, structuralism, postmodernism, cultural studies and the New Aestheticism, we can ask such a question: is there any a critical school who chooses not to present itself by negating history, not to achieve its own wholeness and dominance by opposing the others? A grown-up discipline should be a systematically developed one. How can we judge whether it is systematically developed or not? Well, from two dimensions. Diachronically speaking, it is capable of absorbing all relevantly valuable fruits in history and consciously availing itself of the fruits in its theoretical construction. Synchronically speaking, it is capable of absorbing progressive elements from multiple sources of its time, melting itself with those elements together to wrought out a new and better system. "Being systematically developed" does not merely refer to the development in quantities or scales, it refers much more to a balanced development, with theories of different directions equally growing, strengthening and interplaying. For systematical development is a kind of inner driving force for theories as well as an important sign of a discipline's maturity. Any intention of using one-dimensional and partial theories to replace the whole organic system will finally go into a hopeless failure.