

## A Review of Close Reading in Britain and America

### -- From Richards, Empson to Ransom

Jingrang Wang

College of Humanities and Communication, Zhejiang Gongshang University, Hangzhou, China

#### Abstract

Close Reading is an important method of appreciating and studying literary works pioneered by the British and American New Criticism, which originated from I·A·Richards' practical criticism. I·A·Richards' practical criticism is based on semantics, incorporating psychological factors, and forming a close reading method aimed at educating readers on aesthetics. William Empson reformed I·A·Richards' critical method and established a close reading method centered on "ambiguity", which had an extremely wide impact. However, the American New Criticism school eliminated psychological factors and completely excluded the subjective intentions of the author and readers, forming an American style "Close Reading" method. When discussing Close Reading methods, the academic community of literary theory should pay attention to the significant differences between them.

#### Keywords

Close Reading ; New criticism; I·A·Richards; William Empson; John Crowe Ransom.

#### 1. Introduction

For a long time, Close Reading has been regarded as an important method of appreciating and studying literary works pioneered by the New Criticism of Britain and America. The academic community generally confuses the Close Reading methods of Britain and the United States, and few scholars pay attention to the similarities and differences between them when using Close Reading methods. In fact, just as there are significant similarities and differences between British and American new criticisms, there are also significant similarities and differences in the method of Close Reading in British and American New Criticisms. In terms of commonality, both British and American New Criticisms adopt semantic criticism. In terms of differences, there are significant differences in the attitude towards psychology and the purpose of Close Reading in British and American new criticisms, resulting in a rich and complex form of Close Reading. This article starts from analyzing the detailed reading methods of several representative figures in the New Criticism of Britain and America, aiming to reveal the similarities and differences between them, in order to attract the attention and understanding of the academic community to this issue.

#### 2. The Practical Reading of I·A·Richards

As John Crowe Ransom said, "The discussion of new criticism should start with I·A·Richards. New criticism almost starts with him, and compared to all other critics, he attempts to build new criticism on a broader foundation." [1] I·A·Richards is thus regarded as the pioneer of British and American New Criticism, and the most important textual criticism method of British and American New Criticism is Richards' "Close Reading". Since the 1920s, Richards has conducted a series of classroom teaching experiments at the University of Cambridge, aiming to explore how to study, appreciate, and evaluate poetry. His theory of Close Reading was

formed through a series of teaching experiments. In 1929, he published his book "*Practical Criticism*", which was not only the result of these teaching experiments, but also the first systematic work on the interpretation of the concrete Close Reading method of literary theory. Its main content is to advocate for scientific and accurate criticism of specific text details, rather than traditional subjective impression criticism methods.

The core of the Richards' Close Reading method is a tool rationality, aimed at providing practical aesthetic education to readers. In his book "*Practical Criticism*", Richards said, "It's irrelevant to like 'good' poetry but dislike 'bad' poetry. What matters is that both good and bad are used by me to clarify my mind." [2] In Richards's view, reading literary works is ultimately to cultivate readers' practical thinking skills, rather than just focusing on the beauty of the form of the work. From this standpoint, Richards opposes the aesthetic realm that is detached from reality pursued by aestheticism and formalism, which is influenced by Immanuel Kant's aesthetic system, as well as the emphasis on isolating aesthetics from life as a self-sufficient category. Richards believes that the essence of Kant's aesthetics is to attach aesthetics to the framework of idealistic philosophy, and the problems arising from this aesthetic approach or aesthetic realm are essentially illusory. He advocates for restoring the connection between aesthetics and material issues in people's lives, striving to emphasize the continuity between aesthetic experience and normal practical experience, and examining aesthetic experience from the perspective of human practice. The Close Reading method proposed by Richards is first based on the materialist aesthetic empiricism created by Richards.

Semantic analysis is the foundation of I·A·Richards' method of Close Reading of literary texts. Unlike the prevalent structuralist language theory on the European continent, which was found by Ferdinand de Saussure, Richards opposes the separation of language from the external world, and resists abstract symbolic research on language structures and systems. The aim of these rebellious academic viewpoints, is to emphasize the empirical significance of language. His co-authored work "*The Meaning of Meaning*" with Ogden highlights their attention to the issue of meaning. American scholar Fredric R. Jameson later pointed out when analyzing the difference between Richards and Saussure: "The former (referring to Richards and Ogden) are semanticists who study words as symbols, while the latter (referring to Saussure) insists on defining language as a symbolic system." [3] Obviously, Richards' semantics holds that the purpose of language is to symbolize or represent external facts.

Richards' Close Reading method also aims to establish a productive correlation between literary works and their receiving context. He believes that during the reading process, the author's intended meaning and the reader's reading interest are not consistent, which affects the reader's "judgment". Judgment, which refers to the reader's response to a poem, is the primary focus of practical criticism. It can be said that the object of "close reading" is not the text, but the reader's reaction process. In order to more effectively examine the reader's reaction process, Richards added psychological analysis on the basis of semantic analysis. In Richards' view, the evaluation of aesthetic value is closely related to psychological "communication activities". Richards believes that the process of appreciating literary works is the process of spiritual communication between readers and writers. Art is actually the highest form of communication, and through works of art, we can grasp the most important aesthetic experience and make value judgments. Aesthetic experience is formed in the process of communication, therefore it requires a psychological approach to fully understand aesthetic experience. He introduced the concept of "impulse" in psychology and interpreted aesthetic experience. Believing that impulse is the most essential thing in any experience, everything that occurs in experience is the result of impulse.

There is a lot of psychological analysis in Richards' Close Reading method, which focuses on the psychology of writers and readers from the perspective of practical aesthetic practice. However, due to the subtle psychological activities of artists and readers, it is difficult to shape and

express them in language, and Richards' Close Reading psychoanalysis sometimes appears very obscure and mysterious. Although this psychological analysis is dedicated to "practical criticism," it is difficult to be effective in reality.

### 3. From William Empson to American New Criticism

In 1930, under the guidance of his mentor, I·A·Richards, William Empson wrote the book *"The Seven Types of Ambiguity"*. The central issue of this book is the exploration of "ambiguity" in poetic language. Unlike scientific language whose essence lies in "empirical evidence," William Empson believed that literary language is mainly used to express emotions. Compared to accurate and unambiguous scientific language, literary language is a "false statement" that relies on rich and subtle meanings such as suggestion, association, and imagination to express an artistic reality. This is the issue of polysemy and ambiguity in language, also known as "ambiguity".

On the basis of Richards' semantic analysis method, William Empson pioneered a poetry reading practice that focuses on "ambiguity" as the criticism object and uses semantic criticism as the operating method. Chinese scholar Wu Xuexian summarized its characteristics into five points: First, the reader's life experience is an important condition for understanding poetry. Second, the "intention" of the author's creation is not the focus of literary criticism. Third, intonation is an external form of meaning, not an independent entity. Fourth, emotion is a subsidiary factor that carries the meaning of poetry. Fifth, the standard for evaluating the quality of a poem is to see if it has rich meaning. From these viewpoints, it can be seen that while inheriting Richards' semantic criticism, William Empson exhibits differences. He eliminated all of Richards' psychological criticism, thereby limiting the analysis to the meaning of words.

Empson's rejection of Richards' psychological criticism directly influenced the New Criticism movement in the United States. The New Criticism School in the United States, represented by John Crowe Ransom, accepted William Empson's literary criticism method and regarded Richards' psychology as the object of criticism. The American New Criticism School also abandoned the materialist aesthetic empiricism advocated by Richards and returned the philosophical core of its literary criticism method to the traditional Kantian aesthetic system that Richards criticized as the "illusory aesthetic realm" of idealism.

John Ransom is committed to the construction of literary ontology, believing that there is an "ontological difference" between poetic language and everyday language, which "aims to restore the complex and difficult original world that we have come to understand through our own feelings and memories. This primitive world reflects a unique aesthetic experience that is different from daily life. This is vastly different from Richards' view that there is no essential difference between aesthetic experience and human daily life experience. In René Wellek's view, this is actually a modern replica of traditional mimesis theory. On the basis of Empson's semantic criticism, Ransom added his literary ontology and created a Ransom style Close Reading method that later generations referred to as "ontological criticism". He believes that literary works are an independent and self-sufficient entity. In the book "New Criticism", Ransom advocates isolating the text from its context and placing the object of Close Reading on the literary language itself.

On the basis of Empson's "ambiguity", Ransom proposed the critical theory of "structure" and "texture". The "structure" refers to the universal and regular parts of human life that can be expressed in logical language and understood with scientific rationality, while the "texture" refers to the special and heterogeneous parts of human life that contain emotional and memory content. Ransom believed that texture is the truly important part of poetry. Literary critics should focus on discovering the texture in poetry. As he said, critics should always face the rich

heterogeneity of poetry, and also should face its ambiguity when necessary. He points out that heterogeneity is the unique and typical way of poetry. It can be seen that Ransom's concept of "texture" is to some extent similar to the concept of "ambiguity" by Empson.

#### 4. Conclusion

Based on the above discussion, it is not difficult to find a clear clue that runs through the development history of British and American New Criticism: Close Reading. From Britain to the United States, and from I·A·Richards and William Empson, to John Crowe Ransom, we can see that although their literary ontologies are different, they all unanimously adopt semantic text reading as a practical method of literary criticism. Nowadays, the wave of New Criticism in Britain and America has passed, but as an important heritage of this school, the method of Close Reading still remains the fundamental method of teaching and academic research in colleges. From this view, it can be seen that the review of development path of Close Reading in the Britain and United States, still has strong enlightening significance in contemporary times.

#### References

- [1] John Crowe Ransom: "New Criticism" [M]. Translated by Wang Labao and Zhang Zhe, Culture and Art Publishing House, August 2010, 1st edition, page 1.
- [2] T·S·Eliot: "The Utility of Poetry and the Utility of Criticism: A Study of British Poetry and Criticism" [M]. Translated by Du Guoqing, Pure Literature Press, 1972 edition, p. 145.
- [3] Joseph North: "Literary Criticism" [M]. Translated by Zhang Dexu, Nanjing University Press, 1st edition, October 2021, p. 40.