CHAPTER 8

Between History and Modernity: Thoughts on the State of Modern Literary Studies and Criticism

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For many years, the critique of modern literary criticism has been relentless; the progress achieved by some modern literary research in recent years has received the accolades of many people in the field. It has gotten to the point that in many private discussion there is often a comparison with the prominent modern literary research in previous years, and it is generally argued that, overall, the quality and passion in recent years has “surpassed” research in the past. Of course, to the delight of many, this shows that the misgivings about modern literary long held by many have clearly been addressed. Originally, many considered modern literary research an “excuse for research” just to talk about something and present their own ideas and theories but never considered its own “ontological” position. Now, literature finally has a condition and a reason for its own establishment.

The reality, however, is much more complicated than is generally claimed. What is the state of modern literary research and criticism? In what ways have they succeeded or failed? What is the relationship between research and criticism? To answer these questions through careful study, we must start from a realistic perspective that links us to history.

Standpoint and Perspective: How to Evaluate Modern Literary Criticism and Research

There are, of course, many perspectives for investigating the state of modern Chinese literary research and criticism. First and foremost is the perspective of logic. Four problems have borne the brunt of criticism that cannot be neglected. These four problems are actually four different perspectives: scientific, modernity, humanities, and literary. Clearly, three of these perspectives—the scientific, humanities, and literary perspectives—are necessary measures to consider in any literary research. The perspective of modernity is something that should be maintained in any investigation of modern literary research and criticism and is the locus of essential traits in “modern literature,” “modern
literary research,” and “modern literary criticism.” At the same time, these four issues, however, evidently are intricately linked. “Scientific” properties, for example, as far as modern literature is concerned, have in recent years expressed themselves a stalwartly “historicized” trend and impulse. One could describe the “historicization” of literature as an expression of the scientific perspective and will of modern literature. Furthermore, in certain circumstances, “modernity” is also a characteristic of the “humanities,” and the “scientific,” as far as literary research is concerned, ought to be included in the “literary.”

The truth, however, is often unsatisfactory. These elements can also reject and exclude one another. The scientific, for example, could also exclude modernity and humanities. The recently popular “cultural studies” and “historical criticism,” to varying degrees, have inclined toward weakening literary evaluations. Conversely, an overemphasis on the humanities and literary could also come at the cost of excluding the scientific. There have been many examples of this over the past years.

Another perspective of investigation is the historical. If we reflect back on the modern literary research and criticism of the past thirty years, we find a dramatic shift in the historical. Of course, we find a variety of disagreements in historical understanding due to different standpoints. For many of those who personally experience the critical practices of the 1980s, for example, the state of critique in this generation seems almost idealized and mythicized. For many younger critics, it is quite the opposite. This was merely a restoration of the basic function of critique within the bounds of “experience” and “common sense.” If we wish to remain impartial in this, however, we find another aspect to the problem; that is because of critique itself and the relative weakness of methodology, it has come to respect and highlight the ontological position of objects and, moreover, maintained a closely responsive relationship with modern social change. This has been the unique advantage of 1980s literary criticism. In the 1990s, literary research and criticism headed toward professionalization and institutionalization. Many people have been critical of this, arguing that methodology had overwhelmed the object, theory had transgressed the text, and criticism had gradually lost its concern for the literary and aesthetical. Objectively speaking, it was in this period that the quality and cultural content of research and criticism truly improved. Although the position of “literary ontology” fell, the apex of “theoretical ontology” was truthfully a sight to behold. Those in the field of modern literary research and criticism, in a theoretical sense, were seemingly “armed to the teeth.” These are things that cannot be neglected by anyone with any historical sense or knowledgeable insight. Hence, in some ways, the literary criticisms of the 1990s were a practical boot camp for literature in the 1990s. It was also something that was