

# The inner basis for the transition from literary epistemology to literary value theory

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**Abstract:** Western modern philosophy has undergone an epistemological shift, correspondingly, Western modern literary theory has undergone a creative turn. Neoclassicism, realism, romanticism, aestheticism, and symbolism are all mainly literary creation theories, which are determined by the corresponding epistemological philosophies such as rationalism, empiricism, and German classical philosophy represented by Kant.

**Keywords:** Philosophical Epistemology, Literary Creation Theory, Kantian Philosophy

## 1. Introduction

Western modern philosophy no longer focuses on the origin of the object, but on whether the subject can recognize the object and how to recognize it, which leads to the shift from ontology to epistemology. This shift in research focus is no longer on the object, but on the subject, so this shift can also be said to be a transition from object theory to subject theory. The main characteristic of Western modern philosophy is subjectivity.

## 2. The turn of literary creation theory

Western modern literary theory inherits the ancient traditional literary theory on one hand, and on the other hand, it follows the path of innovation closely related to modern philosophy. Corresponding to the "epistemological turn" in philosophy, there has also been a "creative turn" in literary theory, which means that it no longer focuses on the essence of literature as in ancient times, but focuses on the theory of literary creation. An important reason for this turn is the significant impact of the subjectivity characteristic of modern philosophical epistemology on literary theory. Because the theory of creation is mainly related to the subjectivity of the writer, unlike the ancient theory of essence which is mainly related to the objectivity imitated by literature.

The founder of Western modern philosophy is Descartes. He is mainly a rationalist, but he also has an impact on empiricism and 18th-century materialism. In addition to Descartes, the main rationalist philosophers are Spinoza and Leibniz. Although the two have different views on ontology, they all adhere to rationalist epistemology and share a common basic viewpoint, that is, they belittle sensory experience, consider it unreliable, and believe that reliable knowledge comes from rational intuition and logical reasoning. The founder of empiricist philosophy is considered to be Locke, followed by Berkeley and Hume as representatives. Their views on ontology are also different, but their epistemology is all empiricist, and they share a common basic viewpoint, that is, they all believe that the source of ideas and knowledge comes from sensory experience, and they all ignore or deny rational cognition, opposing innate ideas.

## 3. Kantian philosophy and literary creation theory

### 3.1. Kant's transcendental epistemology

Kant's Strategy Involves the Use of A Priori (Innate, Universal, and Necessary) Forms of Sensory Intuition and Categories of Reason to Organize the Sensory Material Arising from the Stimulation of the Senses by Things in Themselves as Ontology, Thus Constituting the Phenomenal World and the

Corresponding Knowledge of Reason. This Means That Although the Phenomenal World and Related Knowledge Have an External Source, They Are Fundamentally Constituted by the Subject's Innate Intuitive and Rational Abilities, Which Is the "Copernican Revolution" in Philosophical Epistemology. This Thought of Kant Has Had the Deepest and Broadest Influence on Future Generations: The Subsequent German Classical Philosophy and Most of the Modern Diverse Schools of Philosophy Have Repeated Kant's Epistemological Thought to Different Degrees in Different Forms

### **3.2. The impact of kantian aesthetics on literary theory**

In Kant's transcendental epistemology, the subject plays an active constructive role in both sensibility and rationality. Compared to previous epistemologies of rationalism and empiricism, the subjectivity in Kant's epistemology is enriched and significantly strengthened. In this sense, subjectivity is a major characteristic of Kant's epistemology. Another major characteristic of Kant's epistemology is its formalism. The subject's innate intuitive forms (forms of time and space) and the twelve categories of reason are merely forms that require empirical material from the outside to be fulfilled, thus constituting the phenomenal world and knowledge of truth. Without the fulfillment of empirical material, the innate forms are empty. The transcendental subjectivity and formality of Kant's epistemology determine the transcendental subjectivity and formality of his aesthetics, and it is through aesthetics that Kant's philosophy has had a significant impact on modern and contemporary literary theory.

## **4. The development of western modern literary creation theory**

### **4.1. Neoclassicism and Realism**

Neoclassical literary theory inherits the ancient "imitation" literary essence theory, so the literary essence theory it contains is also an imitation theory. However, it has already shifted from being primarily a literary essence theory to a literary creation theory. The representative work of Neoclassicism is Boileau's "Art of Poetry," which is both an inheritance of Aristotle's "Poetics" and, to a large extent, an imitation and elaboration of the Roman classicist Horace's "Art of Poetry." The most famous points in "Art of Poetry" are about creation theory, such as the "unity of time, place, and action" and the "archetype" theory. In addition, there are discussions about the language, meter, structure, and author's cultivation in "Art of Poetry," which are summaries of the creative experience of Neoclassical writers and are obviously mainly literary creation theory.

The development of Western modern literary creation theory can be divided into two paths. One path is the development based on the inheritance of traditional literary essence theories; the other path is the new literary creation theory, from which a corresponding new literary essence theory can also be derived. The former path includes Neoclassicism and Realism, while the latter includes Romanticism and Aestheticism.

### **4.2. Romanticism and aestheticism**

#### *4.2.1. Romanticism*

Romanticism is a literary creation theory that emphasizes the emotions, imagination, and genius of literature. It is most notably represented by Wordsworth's assertion that "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," which reaches the height of literary essence and can be considered a representative proposition on the nature of poetry in Romanticism. However, this literary essence is actually defined from the perspective of literary creation theory, derived from it (as can be seen if the whole passage of Wordsworth is quoted). Romanticism also talks a lot about imagination. Imagination is the basic creative activity of writers, which, under the influence of certain thoughts and emotions, combines, transforms, or deforms sensory materials into artistic images. Therefore, the discussion on imagination obviously belongs to literary creation theory. From the perspective of artistic imagination, a corresponding literary essence can also be given to literature, especially poetry, such as Shelley's statement that "poetry can be interpreted as the expression of imagination." Romanticism also advocates the originality of genius and the role of inspiration, which obviously belongs to creation theory. Romanticism also has unique creative techniques,

such as Hugo's principle of contrast proposed in the preface to "Cromwell" against the creative principles of neoclassicism.

#### 4.2.2. *Aestheticism*

Aestheticism posits that literature and art are pure beauty, unrelated to truth and morality. Therefore, literature and art are also purely formal. This is a new literary essence theory, which is different from the imitation theory since ancient Greece, as well as from the expressionism of Romanticism. This literary essence theory can be called "aestheticism" or "formalism." However, Aestheticism is mainly not a literary essence theory, but a literary creation theory. Most aestheticists are literary artists, and their purpose is not to propose an aesthetic view of literature, but to implement it into creative practice. Gautier's proposition of "art for art's sake" and Poe's "poetry for poetry's sake" can be regarded as creative principles, that is, literary creation should exclude truth and moral utility, thus creating pure and beautiful works. They pay great attention to the structure, skills, and rhythm of the work, among which Poe particularly focuses on the pursuit of the musicality of poetry language, a pure and beautiful form, and he has become a "teacher" and role model for later symbolists such as Baudelaire and Mallarmé. The discourse of aestheticists also combines their own creative experience, such as Poe's paper "The Philosophy of Composition" is a summary and exposition of his own creative experience.

### 5. The philosophical foundations of romanticism and aestheticism

Aestheticism posits that literature and art constitute pure beauty, unrelated to truth and morality. Consequently, literature and art are considered purely formal. This view is clearly a new theory of literary essence, distinct from the mimetic theories since ancient Greece and also from the expressivist views of Romanticism. This theory of literary essence can be referred to as "aestheticism" or "formalism." However, Aestheticism is primarily not a theory of literary essence but rather a theory of literary creation. Most aestheticists are literary and artistic practitioners; their main goal is not to propose an aesthetic view of literature but to implement it in their creative practice. Gautier's "art for art's sake" and Poe's "poetry for poetry's sake" can be seen as creative principles, suggesting that literary and artistic creation should exclude truth and moral utility to produce works of pure beauty. They place great emphasis on the structure, technique, and rhythm of a work, with Poe particularly focusing on the musicality of poetic language as a form of pure beauty, thus becoming a "mentor" and role model for later Symbolists such as Baudelaire and Mallarmé. The discourse of aestheticists also integrates their own creative experiences; for example, Poe's essay "The Philosophy of Composition" is a summary and exposition of his own creative experience.

#### 5.1. The influence of Kantian philosophy

As previously mentioned, Kant's philosophy of epistemology is transcendental, with innate forms of sensibility and the categories of reason being its transcendental principles. This transcendental principle is characterized by subjectivity: the subject constructs the phenomenal world and related knowledge through the forms of sensibility and the categories of reason, which Kant himself claimed was a Copernican revolution in philosophy. This transcendental principle also has a formal characteristic: sensibility and the categories of reason themselves are merely empty forms that require empirical material to fulfill. Kant's epistemology is the foundational part of his entire philosophy. Kant's ethics is also transcendental, with its transcendental principle being: act according to the maxim that you can at the same time will to be a universal law, treat people as ends rather than means, and every rational being is the will to give universal laws, these three "moral laws" or "absolute commands." This transcendental principle is also subjective because it declares that moral actions are determined solely by the subject's practical reason (free will) and are not limited by objective conditions of the empirical world. This also has the significance of a Copernican revolution. It is also formal because it is only an abstract representation of free will, without the usual behavioral motives, interests, and other empirical real content, appearing quite empty, and requiring specific actions to reflect. Thus, the transcendental principle of ethics also has the characteristics of subjectivity and formality.

The aesthetics that connects Kant's epistemology and ethics is also transcendental and has its transcendental principles. Kant said in the "Critique of Judgment" "Introduction": "Judgment also contains a

transcendental principle in itself." What is that transcendental principle? Kant calls it "subjective purposiveness" (as opposed to "objective purposiveness" about the practicality and self-perfection of the object), which is specifically manifested as the free activity of the subject's imagination and reason. This transcendental principle also has the characteristics of subjectivity: the object is beautiful because it conforms to the subject's subjective purpose, that is, it causes the free activity of the subject's imagination and reason, and is unrelated to the object's own objective nature and practical value. This means that the object is beautiful because it is determined by the subject, not because it is beautiful in itself. This has a Copernican revolutionary significance for the traditional concept of beauty in the object itself (such as Plato's view that beauty is an idea, Aristotle's view that beauty is in the size and order of the object).

This aesthetic transcendental principle also has a formal characteristic: subjective purposiveness is also called "formal purposiveness." What it means is that, from the subject's point of view, the free activity of imagination and reason is an activity without rational concepts and unrelated to good and evil, so aesthetic judgment is a "formal judgment"; from the object's point of view, it is only the form of the object that causes the free activity of the subject's imagination and reason, so the object as beauty does not have the usual meaning of conceptual knowledge and practical utility, but is only form (but it contains a "universally communicated state of mind" or "mood"). Therefore, Kant said that "beauty is actually only about form" (Critique of Judgment, Volume I, Section 13. The following references are only marked with section numbers).

## 5.2. Romanticism's emotions and imagination

The influence of Kantian aesthetics on romantic literary theory is quite evident. Romantic literary theory is primarily manifested in its discussions of emotion, imagination, and genius, with Kant's philosophy and aesthetics providing a solid foundation for these discourses.

For the first time in philosophy, Kant delineated emotion as an independent realm, the aesthetic realm, corresponding to the rational domain of epistemology and the volitional domain of ethics. Accordingly, he clearly stated that "it is the subject's emotions, rather than the concept of the object, that become the basis of its determination (i.e., aesthetic judgment)" (Section 17), "for beauty would be nothing in itself without relation to the emotions of the subject" (Section 9). Romanticists emphasize that emotion is the driving force and purpose of creation, elevating it to the essence of poetry, a notion for which Kant clearly provides an aesthetic basis.

## 5.3. Aestheticism's form and creative principles

The emotions discussed in Romantic literary theory can be categorized into two types. One is the strictly aesthetic emotion mentioned above, such as the emotional state described by Keats in his "Negative Capability" theory, where one exists in a state of "uncertainty, mystery, and doubt without any need to pursue facts and reasoning" (Wu, 2012). This type of emotion ensures the aesthetic quality of Romantic poetry. The other type of emotion is not limited to this narrow sense of aesthetic emotion but includes sensory pleasure and emotions associated with good and evil, often directly expressed and vented by the poet, representing a form of emotion with a prominent "self-awareness" (Poe, 1845).

It is crucial to remember the difference between the aesthetic emotions discussed by Kant and those of the Romantics. Although Romanticism inherited the creative subjectivity of Kantian aesthetics, it also transformed the universal consciousness of aesthetic subjects into the personal self-awareness of poets and writers. This transformation, to some extent, violated the laws of aesthetics. The extreme self-expression in Romanticism showed its drawbacks, which was recognized by some Romantics such as Goethe and Keats. This shift was influenced not only by Kant but also by the "self" theory of the German classical philosopher Fichte after Kant (through Schelling). The characteristic of Romantic self-expression was resisted and criticized by many formalist literary theorists from Aestheticism to modernity who followed Kant's formalism (Coste, Dely fer, & Reynier, 2021).

## 6. The emergence and philosophical foundations of symbolism

Symbolism emerged in the 1880s and reached its peak at the beginning of the 20th century. It is generally believed that Symbolism has its roots in Romanticism, but it is more closely related to Aestheticism and can

be considered a direct transformation from the latter. Therefore, Symbolism embodies the subjectivity of Romanticism and the formalism of Aestheticism to varying degrees. In general, it is close to Romanticism in its expression theory of literature and close to Aestheticism in its formal theory of literature. In this sense, Symbolism indirectly has the foundation of Kantian aesthetics through Romanticism and Aestheticism. To a certain extent, Kantian aesthetics has also influenced the literary theory of this century, especially its creation theory, through its inheritance.

### **6.1. The relationship between symbolism and preceding literary theories**

Symbolism is distinguished by its unique characteristic of mysticism. The founder of Symbolism, Charles Baudelaire, held a mysterious "correspondence theory," suggesting that behind all things in the world lies a hidden, mysterious meaning, an "other world," where the former serves as symbolic signs of the latter, creating what he called the "forest of symbols" that correspond with each other. Baudelaire believed that poets could glimpse this mysterious other world, thus establishing a mutual resonance between the external world and the poet's soul.

His successors, such as Rimbaud, Verlaine, and Mallarmé, accepted and developed this mystic theory, emphasizing the use of fleeting intuition, inner dreams, ambiguous images, and the pure musicality of poetry to suggest and symbolize the "supreme truth" of the inner world that resonates with the external world. This mystic thought also existed to varying degrees in later Symbolist poets like Valéry, Rilke, Yeats, and Eliot, but it was infused with more philosophical content.

### **6.2. The mysticism and intuition of symbolism**

Symbolism's fascination and exploration of the transcendent otherworldly realm can be philosophically traced back to Plato's theory of Forms. This theory, after being expounded upon by Neoplatonism in combination with medieval Christian theology, became more imbued with mystical qualities and widespread. Another direct source is the "correspondence theory" of the Swedish mystic philosopher Swedenborg, which posits that there are mysterious "mutual correspondence" between all things in nature, and a fitting together of the visible and the invisible spiritual realms. The intuitionism of Symbolism can also be remotely traced back to Plato's notion of "mania." Its more immediate kinship lies in the intuitionism found in the irrationalist philosophies of Nietzsche and Bergson, which are collectively characterized by an opposition to rational thought, arguing that the mysterious essence of the world can only be grasped through irrational intuition, that is, inner experience and insight. The intuitionism and mystical tendencies of Symbolism are in line with these philosophies.

## **7. Conclusion**

Romanticism and Aestheticism, inspired by Kantian philosophy, have elevated literary creation to new heights of individuality and self-awareness, while Symbolism, building on this foundation, has integrated elements of irrationalism, bringing a more profound and multifaceted depth to literary creation. The interplay between these philosophies and literary theories has not only enriched the forms of literary expression but also expanded our understanding of beauty, truth, and human cognition.

As times change, theories of literary creation continue to evolve and transform. However, the dynamic relationship between modern Western philosophy and literary theory remains a crucial perspective for understanding the development of literature and the progress of human thought. In future explorations, we look forward to philosophy and literature continuing to inspire each other, jointly creating a more diverse and vibrant spiritual world.