

Pushing Open Another Door: A Preliminary Exploration of the Modernist View of Truth

Hao Dong*

Aviation University of Air Force, Changchun 130022, Jilin, China

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Abstract: The view of reality has always been a controversial topic, whether it is the classicist school or the realist school, there is a relatively complete definition of the view of reality. However, the modernist view of truth is different, it pursues not only the truth in real life, but also requires a more nuanced description of the truth in the depths of the soul, so it may be closer to the essence of truth. Through the discussion of the modernist view of truth, this paper aims to reveal that the definition of truth itself is actually a long process of continuous development and change.

Keywords: Modernism; View of reality; Realism

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1. Introduction

In the 20th century, various literary genres rose and fell, separated and merged, and merged to form a literary tide. In this wave, modernist literature undoubtedly plays a pivotal role. It stands out for its many genres, wide influence, and opposition to traditional literature. The modernist view of reality also provides people with a new perspective and opens a door to the cognitive world.

2. Concept of Modernism and its view of Reality

Since we want to explore the true view of modernism, we might as well clarify such a concept, what is modernism? There are different opinions about the definition of modernism. Modernist literature refers to the general term for various literary trends that have emerged in the West since the 20th century and have rejected traditional literature and innovated in terms of literary and artistic content and form. Its main trends and genres are: late symbolism, futurism, expressionism, stream of consciousness, existentialism, surrealism, absurdist drama, new fiction, black humor, etc. The common characteristics of modernist literature are that it emphasizes writing about the subjective world, attaches importance to psychological truth, and believes that art is expression and creation, not imitation and reflection. Pay attention to form, believing that content is form, and form is content. In terms of creative content, it focuses on expressing crisis awareness, self-pursuit and alienation. Commonly used artistic

techniques are symbolism, grotesqueness, free association, inner monologue, etc. Modernist literature occupies an important position in Western literature in the 20th century, exposing and expressing various shortcomings and insurmountable contradictions in modern society, opening up new themes for literary creation, expanding the scope of literary expression, and creating some new writing techniques.

Through the above understanding of modernism, it is not difficult to find that the modernist view of truth is actually a subversion of the traditional literary view of reality, and the modernist school opens the way for its own creation by criticizing and crusading the realism that preceded it. In realism, reality exists in various phenomena of reality; Modernists believe that reality exists in the inner consciousness of individuals. Modernist writers oppose the imitation and reproduction of reality by realism, believing that this creative method can only lead to simply copying life and listing life phenomena, and it is difficult to achieve "higher reality". The surrealist writer Breton said in the Surrealist Manifesto: "From St. Thomas to Anatole Francis, borrowing from positivist realism, is in my opinion completely opposed to any spiritual and ethical development, and I hate it because it is made up of mediocrity, hatred and vulgar complacency." Russian futurist writers also declared in their manifesto that they would "throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc., out of the steamer of modern life." And "we look from the towering skyscrapers to see how small they are!" ..."

Looking back at history, we can clearly see that realist writers advocate truth and never doubt that they may obtain truth to the greatest extent. However, this truth can only be the truth in the consciousness of the literary subject, and therefore it can only be the individual truth and the imaginary truth. Truth is just the wishful thinking of writers, even if a writer like Balzac who can grasp the truth of social history as a whole is still an individual, he can only observe history and society from an individual perspective. Maupassant has long pointed out that everyone has their own reality in their body and mind, and human senses are very different, so there are as many people as there are realities. The definition of truth in various schools of modernism in the 20th century is far from realism. In Proust's "Remembrance of the Passing Years", reality is a certain connection between the feeling and memory surrounding the subject; Virginia Woolf regarded the atomic facts in people's hearts as real; The French New Novel School directly subverted the principle of the wholeness of truth, believing that truth is a concept that has never been completed and is always in change, and every innovation of the artist is to recreate a kind of reality; Surrealists believe that the subconscious, dreams, hallucinations, and instincts are the source of artistic creation, and in order to pursue psychological truth, they advocate unconscious writing, believing that there can be no artistic considerations and the pursuit of beauty when writing, and that any rational factor must be rejected, and everything presented or experienced in the original recorded illusions or dreams is regarded as real. They even advocated hypnosis, allowing writers to be hypnotized in a dark room, making them dream and record them by others, and thinking that this was the best creation. In this way, the undoubted objectivity and authenticity of classical realism are disintegrated by complex and even conflicting subjective realities, and become chaotic psychological fragments.

In fact, almost all literary changes, as far as the inside is concerned, are changes related to the concept of truth. After the old picture of reality collapses and is shattered, the new generation faces a new real situation, which requires a new artistic way to convey this new reality, and change occurs. The reality of Kafka's beetle, the reality of Proust's memory in his new view of time and space, the reality of Borges' labyrinth, and the reality of Rober-Grier's objects, etc., are all mutated or broken truths. The real pictures that arise from them just appropriately express the different spiritual situations of modern people. In this way, the changes brought about by modernism are nothing more than changes in reality and the means of conveying this truth. The basic

characteristics of modernism are more fully displayed, that is, it no longer emphasizes the true reproduction of objects, but emphasizes the expression of subjectivity, the expression of subjective instincts and subconscious, and the pursuit of psychological truth. It focuses on the writer's self-feeling, insists on exploring the inner heart of people, and expresses mental images and touch feelings. Modernist writers believe that objective reality is nothing more than the appearance of people, and subjective reality is the essence; Only by breaking through objective reality to express subjective reality is the "highest truth". Therefore, we should start from the subject's feelings and feelings to describe reality, so that art can depict the spirit and express the truth of the soul. The truth of art does not lie in its similarity to the objective world, but in the degree of individual awareness of the unique feelings of the world that it expresses. The reality of things is replaced by the reality of people, which is where the modernist view of reality lies.

3. Discussion on the Reality and its modern explanation

This leads to two levels of truth: one is the truth seen by the writer, that is, the material truth; One is the reality experienced by the writer, that is, the psychological truth. Those works that describe material reality are full of materialism, and the basis behind them is positivism. For a person who has lived through the great journey of twentieth-century literature, eye-centered positivism certainly does not excite him anymore, because there are studies that show that the human eye cannot accept the information it sees without prejudice, it always selectively selects the material. The main feature of twentieth-century literature is the extreme development of imagination, which brings the writer the freedom of mind that greatly compensates for the limitations of the eyes. The transcendent imagination allows the writer's experience to go deep into the interior of the era. What the realist writer sees is only a phenomenon (and only a small part of it), it is only responsible for the writer's own experience, memory, traditional artistic habits, but most likely not for the zeitgeist that has moved forward. This is why we admire Balzac's greatness on the one hand, but on the other hand, we can no longer observe the current era in Balzac's way. Each era has its own different way of presenting the truth, and there are also different essences about the truth, and if a writer wants to get close to this truth, he must use his mind obviously greater than his eyes. Most of the modernist writers of the twentieth century did not hesitate to betray tradition and carry out very novel or even exaggerated practices in form or thought, in fact, in order to better get closer to the changed reality. Therefore, there is no truth that the writer sees, only the truth that the writer experiences. Further, why is reality still shocked when reality has been deformed, distorted, and even unrecognizable in the writer's pen? This shows that the standard of truth in art is not to refer to the external logic of daily life, but to what extent it reveals the essence of the human spirit. We can't read much about the characteristics of reality from the appearance of Kafka's novels, but the reality he expresses is profound and representative, so we still feel shocked when we read it now, which once again shows that psychological reality is more insightful, more infectious, and better able to reflect and grasp the essence of society and people than material reality.

4. The Philosophical Foundations of the Modernist Concept of Reality

4.1. The Subversion of the Myth of Rationality by Irrationalism

Nietzsche's proclamation that "God is dead" fundamentally shook the foundations of Western rationalism, providing the philosophical premise for the birth of the modernist concept of reality. Schopenhauer's philosophy of the will and Bergson's theory of life impulse further shifted the literary focus from the rational world to irrational life instincts. Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* begins with the irrational event of "Gregor Samsa turning

into a giant insect,” profoundly revealing the fragile nature of modern rational order. Once the protagonist loses his instrumental value as a “breadwinner,” the seemingly strong emotional bonds in family relationships quickly disintegrate, with familial warmth replaced by naked disgust and abandonment. This plot development directly addresses Nietzsche’s critique of “rational alienation”—in highly industrialized societies, human relationships are reduced to purely instrumental connections, and the illusory facade of civilization constructed by rationality collapses when individuals lose their utility.

T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* opens with the declaration that “April is the cruellest month,” a complete reversal of traditional aesthetic values that embodies the deep deconstruction of existing value systems by irrationalism. On the “wasteland” where “God is dead,” spring, a symbol of vitality and hope, no longer brings comfort but becomes a source of pain “mixing memory and desire.” This reinterpretation of natural imagery marks the establishment of a radically different standard of truth in modernist literature.

4.2. Psychoanalysis and the Exploration of the Unconscious

Freud’s psychoanalytic theory opened a new path for modernist literature to explore the psychological reality of the human mind. The discovery of the unconscious greatly expanded the domain of literary representation, making the complexity and contradictions of the inner world the core concern of modernist writers. In *In Search of Lost Time*, Proust vividly demonstrates how the taste memory triggered by the “madeleine” breaks the boundaries of time and space, freely moving between past and present. The use of this “stream of consciousness” technique is essentially a literary practice of Freud’s “determinism of the unconscious,” showing that beneath the surface of rational consciousness, the undercurrents of desire, trauma, and memory dominate human mental activity.

Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury* takes the depiction of the unconscious to an even more extreme level. Through the chaotic monologue of the idiot Benjy, Quentin’s pre-suicidal hallucinations, and Jason’s paranoid delusions, the novel constructs a fragmented and complex psychological landscape, directly confirming Freud’s theory of the “id, ego, and superego.” This multi-layered portrayal of the inner world allows modernist literature to achieve unprecedented depth in exploring psychological reality.

4.3. Existentialism and the Perception of the Absurd

Existentialist philosophy provided modernist literature with a new perspective to examine the human condition. Camus’ philosophy of the absurd and Sartre’s theory of radical freedom prompted writers to shift their focus from the external world to the essence of individual existence. Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* portrays the absurdity of modern existence through the hopeless waiting of two tramps. The characters’ waiting for “Godot” has no clear object or purpose, and the cyclical promise that “Godot will come tomorrow” mirrors the futile search for ultimate meaning in modern life. When traditional meaning-givers—religion, reason, and science—have all failed, the act of waiting itself becomes the most powerful proof of the absurd.

This sense of absurdity does not lead to complete nihilism. As Camus pointed out, the clear awareness of the absurd becomes the starting point for human resistance. By directly confronting and representing the absurd, modernist literature seeks to rediscover the value and possibilities of existence in the ruins of collapsed meaning.

5. Theoretical Criticism of the Modernist Conception of Reality

The academic community has offered diverse interpretations and critiques of modernist views on reality:

Epistemological Perspective: Some scholars have explored the concept of truth in modernist painting from an epistemological standpoint, arguing that modernist painting broadly refers to all works created in ways distinct from traditional methods, holding an exceptionally significant position in the development of Western 20th-century art.

Philosophy of Authenticity: Jin Guantao proposed the concept of “philosophy of authenticity” in *The Vanishing Real: Intellectual Dilemmas of Modern Society*. He argued that authenticity originally served as three interconnected bridges spanning the empirical world and the symbolic world, but today our inner world lacks the keystone to support these bridges.

The Diversity of Aesthetic Realism: In discussions surrounding Western modernist literature and art, the issue of the authenticity of artistic works arises. Indeed, no Western modernist artist considers their work to be unreal, nor is there any Western modernist literary or artistic movement that does not claim to embody truth.

Cross-disciplinary Comparative Study: Scholars have compared the history of cinema and art history from the 1980s, revealing that the concept of truth exhibits both commonality and variability. Commonality manifests as the pursuit of truth “from technique to concept,” while variability is demonstrated by the often cross-cultural validation of the notion of truth.

6. The Influence and Significance of Modernist Realism

The modernist view of reality has exerted a profound influence on literary and artistic creation as well as theoretical criticism since the 20th century. **Expanding the Boundaries of Reality:** The modernist conception of reality breaks away from the traditional realist pursuit of objective truth, extending the notion of reality to include subjective experiences, psychological states, and formal innovations, thereby vastly enriching the possibilities of artistic expression. It reflects the dilemmas of modernity: by portraying alienation, absurdity, and irrationality, the modernist view of truth profoundly reveals the spiritual predicaments of modern society and human existence, serving as a crucial perspective for understanding the crisis of modernity. It fostered the innovation of artistic forms: the modernist view of reality gave rise to various artistic movements and creative techniques such as stream of consciousness, surrealism, and expressionism, driving the comprehensive innovation of literature and art in the 20th century. **Inspired postmodern thought:** The modernist perspective on truth, which questioned and deconstructed the traditional concept of truth, laid the foundation for postmodernism’s critique of “grand narratives,” serving as a crucial precursor to postmodern intellectual trends.

However, one thing worth noting is that the concept of truth is becoming more and more blurred now, and many modern writers are actually analyzing the truth while expressing the truth. For classical writers, it is to tell the truth, but for modern writers, truth is no longer a clear fact that is easy to explain. Especially because modern people are increasingly losing confidence in understanding the world and themselves, real karma has become one of the problems that plague writers. Careful people may notice that the literature of the twentieth century strengthened the element of fantasy, and sometimes writers deliberately blurred the line between truth and illusion, because modern people have lost the courage and ability to affirm the truth, because the result of the lack of rationality, morality, and value is to make people lose their trust, aphasia, and loss, and then make people live in a situation of psychedelic chaos.

Rollo May, a contemporary American thinker, once said: “My personal belief has always been to seek inner truth. This may also express the voice of modernist writers. It is precisely because they are not satisfied with the

real experience they have that they begin to search for inner truth in this increasingly shallow age, with the aim of getting closer to the spiritual core of this era. We might as well say that modernism opened the door to the world of psychic cognition, and on the way to explore, it seemed that a voice came from afar: “Come in!” Give you the truth!

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