

On William Wordsworth's Ideas about the Language for Poetry——from the Perspective of Esthetic Paradigm Shift

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Abstract: As one of the leading figures in British Romantic Literary Movement, William Wordsworth has not only created abundant famous poems, but also comprehensively expounded his Romantic poetic ideas, which has caused hot debates among his contemporary and later critics. By putting Wordsworth's poems, his poetic ideas, his contemporary and later critics' studies into the background of esthetic paradigm shift to observe, it can be concluded that his poems belong to the artefact esthetic paradigm shift, his opinions about the language for poetry belong to the sociological esthetic paradigm shift, the Romantic critics' philosophical studies on his opinions about the language for poetry belong to the metaphysical esthetic paradigm shift, and the philosophical studies on his opinions about the language for poetry by later non-Romantic critics belong to the later formed theories. It has multiple meanings to apply the theories of esthetic paradigm shift to study Wordsworth's opinions about the language for poetry: Firstly, it can enrich the studies about his relationship with language; Secondly, it can clear up the features of Classism and Romanticism; Thirdly, it can set up a fourfold model and find out some useful research methods for the study of esthetic paradigm shift; Fourthly, some rules of esthetic paradigm shift can be summed up, which could contribute to the further study on the rules of universal esthetic paradigm shift.

Keywords: Wordsworth; The Language for Poetry; Esthetic Paradigm Shift

As one of the most famous romantic poets in British literary history, William Wordsworth's ideas about poetry are mainly represented in his two essays "Preface to Lyrical Ballads (1802)" and "Appendix of 1802, On Poetic Diction". Yet his ideas about the language for poetry have caused hot debates and a lot of confusions among literary critics. Although previous critics have discussed a lot about Wordsworth's ideas about the language for poetry, yet few of them have put it into the grand social and cultural transition background in early 19th century to study, which often results in superficial and shortsighted conclusions. This paper first uses Kuhn's opinions about paradigm shift and the Prague School's achievements in language to discuss Wordsworth's opinions about the language for poetry in the background of cultural transition from Classism to Romanticism, then selects Wordsworth and other Romantic poets' works to study the poetry's language features in Romantic period. Under the perspective of esthetic paradigm shift, this study not only can enrich Wordsworth and Romanticism studies, but also can contribute to the esthetic paradigm shift theories

1. A Study on artefact esthetic paradigm shift

Esthetic paradigm shift usually begins while an old esthetic paradigm is still at its prime. Some newly appeared esthetic phenomena cannot be explained within the old esthetic paradigm, so it is unavoidable to explore a new esthetic

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doi:10.18686/ahc.v5i7.3829

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paradigm. Usually the esthetic paradigm shift starts with some writers and artists' personal deviation from the old paradigm and is manifested by the appearance of many great literary and artistic works. These two aspects form the major features of artefact esthetic paradigm shift, which is suitable for the study of the esthetic paradigm shift happened from Neo-Classism to Romanticism.

1.1 Features of artefact esthetic paradigm shift

In order to have a better understanding of the esthetic paradigm that Wordsworth and other Romantic writers try to establish, it is a necessary to have a brief overview on the previous esthetic paradigm, i.e., Neo-Classism. Neo-classism has the following prominent features:

(a). These authors exhibited a strong traditionalism... (b). Literature was conceived to be primarily an 'art'... (c). Human beings... were regarded as the primary subject matter of literature... (d). Both in the subject matter and the appeal of art, emphasis was placed on what human beings possess in common... (e). Neoclassic writers, like the major philosophers of the time, viewed human beings as limited agents who ought to set themselves only accessible goals. (Abrams, 2004: 175-177)

In the second half of 19th century, some writers, such as Young, Gray, Sterne, Richardson, etc., began deviate the classical norms personally in their writings, stressing the expression of the writers' internal subjective feelings, focusing on the common people's fate, etc. Because the major aspect of their writings is the exploration into the sensitive heart of human beings, their writings are called literature of sensibility by later critics. Following these writers' steps, Burns has created poems expressing the healthy man's natural feelings and Blake has stressed on visual impressions in his most poems. Because their poems have shown some features of Romanticism, they are called Pre-Romantic poets. With the publication of Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballad* (1798), the major writers following, such as Byron, Shelley, Keats, Scott, etc., begin consciously and overtly to break up with the norms of Classism. From personal and unconscious actions of deviating from classical norms to consciously and overtly rebelling against them, these writers actually are setting up a new esthetic paradigm.

1.2 Wordsworth and his language within the sphere of artefact esthetic paradigm shift

As to Williams Wordsworth, during his writings of most poems in *Lyrical Ballad*, he not only consciously deviates from the classical norms, but also produces many great works. His many great poems, such as "The Daffodils", "The Solitary Reaper", "Tintern Abbey", etc., have become the model for his contemporary and later Romantic poets; Correspondingly the language he uses in these poems has also become the model for them. By applying the standard of artefact esthetic paradigm shift to Wordsworth's works and his language in these poems, it can be concluded that both of them belong to the artefact esthetic paradigm shift.

2. A study on sociological esthetic paradigm shift

As have already discussed, sociological esthetic paradigm shift usually happens later than artefact esthetic paradigm shift and mainly consists of the writers' consensuses on new literary principles and some essays and declarations about commonly accepted new standard. During the sociological esthetic paradigm shift from Neo-Classism to Romanticism, the writers' covert consensuses on new literary principles and their overt declaration and essays about the romantic poetics should be included into the sphere of sociological esthetic paradigm shift.

2.1 Features of sociological esthetic paradigm shift

During sociological esthetic paradigm shift from Neo-Classism to Romanticism, some Romantic writers often obey some common principles in their writings, although these principles are not overtly discussed. One of the examples is "The Lake Poets", i.e., Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, who share some common poetic ideas and whose poems have some common features, such as the worship of nature, the selection of poetic materials from the common life, etc. Another example is some consensuses between Byron and Shelley, who often share some common creative ideas, such as at one time both of them don't like Wordsworth's conservatism and passionately praise French Revolution.

Except for the covert consensus on creative principles among writers, some Romantic writers also overtly make declarations or write some essays to express their Romantic poetic ideas. The influential examples are Wordsworth's "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" and "Appendix, of 1802, on Poetic Diction", Shelley's "A Defense of Poetry", Keats' idea on negative capacity, etc.

2.2 Wordsworth's expression of the language for poetry

Wordsworth's ideas about poetry are included into the sphere of sociological esthetic paradigm shift in this thesis. In

“Preface to Lyrical Ballads” he expresses his poetic ideas from eight aspects: The reasons to write the preface, the reasons to write in verse, the materials for poetry, the distinctive feature of his poetry, the style of his poetry, the definition of poet, the ways to distinguish good poems from the bad ones and the language for poetry. According to the analysis of esthetic paradigm shift, his poetic ideas belong neither to personal literary creation nor to metaphysical thinking about the essence of Romanticism: on the one hand. Wordsworth writes this preface with a precondition that “Several of my Friends are anxious for the success of these Poems from a belief, that... a class of Poetry would be produced”. (2005: 287) his own expression shows that his poems in this preface have already been recognized and his creating principles have already been followed as a consensus among contemporary poets. On the other hand, by using the preface he only expresses some experiences and attitudes about Romantic poetry, which has not yet reached the metaphysical level. So his “Preface to Lyrical Ballads” is posited within the sphere of sociological esthetic paradigm shift.

In Wordsworth’s opinion, this kind of language has a close tie with the world it describes, it can truly express people’s feelings, and is more permanent and philosophical than the so-called poetic language, which is often detached from people’s true feelings and has lost its function of truthfully describing the world.

Wordsworth’s poetic ideas have contributed a great deal for the establishment of Romantic esthetic paradigm, because it has broken down the shackles of Classical demands on poetic language. In the Classical esthetic paradigm, decorum is one of the most important rules for writers’ creation. When used in literary criticism, decorum “designates the view that there should be propriety, or fitness, in the way that a literary genre, its subject matter, its characters and actions, and the style of its narration and dialogue are matched to one another” (Abrams: 2004: 61). Swift’s famous saying “proper words in proper places” is a penetrating summary for Classical ideas for language. As a high genre, epic should write about heroes’ deed by using the poetic language; Lyrical poems, as a middle genre, its language also should be poetic and be distinguished from the common language. Wordsworth’s declaration to use “a selection of language really used by (common) men” (2005: 289) to write poems is a bold disobedience of the Classical rules for language, yet it is not a metaphysical study on the essence of Romantic poetry language. The same is with his opinions about the deterioration of poetic language in British literary history.

In “Appendix of 1802, on Poetic Diction”, he traces the history of the deterioration of language in poetry. Wordsworth believes that in the earliest poets’ time, language is the expression of passion. The earliest poets “wrote from passion excited by real events. They wrote naturally, and as men: Feeling powerfully as they did, their language was daring and figurative” (365). The poets succeeding the earliest ones wrote differently from their predecessors: In their works, language and passion are detached, so “Poets, and men ambitious of the fame of Poets, without having the same animating passion, set themselves to a mechanical adoption of those figures of speech... ” (365-366). And later, most probably Wordsworth refers to his own time, all the corruptions have followed. The Poets tend to use language that “was not heard in ordinary conversation” (367), and that “was unusual”. Step by step, Wordsworth explores the history of the corruption of language in poetic creation. Generally speaking, in Wordsworth’s opinion, the language used in poetic creation has gone a course from simple to complex and from a combination of passion and language to a detachment of them.

Both Wordsworth’s opinions about the language for poetry and the deterioration of poetic language in British literary history come from his experiences in poetry creation, which is not the philosophical thinking about the essence of Romantic poetic language. Thus his poetic ideas, including his opinions about the language for poetry and his criticism on the deterioration of poetic language in British literary history should be include into the sphere of sociological esthetic paradigm shift.

3. A study on metaphysical esthetic paradigm shift

Esthetic paradigm shift at the metaphysical level is different from the artefact and sociological ones, since it can be seen as the highest achievements within the sphere of esthetic paradigm shift. For fear that it may be mingled with sociological esthetic paradigm shift and the later formed theories, there is a need to clear up its distinctive features.

3.1 Features of metaphysical esthetic paradigm shift

Esthetic paradigm shift at the metaphysical level refers not only to those explorations into the essence of literature and art but also the philosophical criticism on the poetic ideas at the level of sociological esthetic paradigm shift. It includes two important aspects: Firstly, it must be the achievements reached by the critics living at that esthetic paradigm

shift period; Secondly, it must reach the metaphysical level, i.e., it must be the critical thoughts about the poetic ideas at sociological level. By applying the two criteria to study the metaphysical esthetic paradigm shift from Neo-Classism to Romanticism, it can be discerned out that Samuel Coleridge's some comments on Wordsworth, Hegel's philosophical thoughts on art and human spirit in Romantic period can be included into the sphere of metaphysical esthetic paradigm shift from Neo-Classism to Romanticism.

3.2 Coleridge's opinions about the language for poetry

According to the distinctions among artefact, sociological and metaphysical esthetic paradigm shifts, it should accord with two criteria to judge whether some ideas can be included into the sphere of metaphysical esthetic paradigm shift: Firstly, the ideas must be produced within that esthetic paradigm shift; secondly, it must reach the metaphysical level. Judging from the two criteria, Wordsworth's poetic ideas and Samuel Coleridge's some comments on Wordsworth's poetry, such as the praise of Wordsworth's pure language in his poems, deep and subtle thoughts, perfectly true to nature, his imaginative power, etc., should be included into the sphere of sociological esthetic paradigm shift, but Coleridge's critical judgments on Wordsworth's poetic ideas, such as the comments on Wordsworth's opinions about the language for poetry, should be included into the sphere of metaphysical esthetic paradigm shift.

Coleridge rejects the "extra-colloquial style of poems" and "the language of ordinary life"; Instead he prefers the "impassioned, lofty, and sustained diction". In Coleridge's eyes, the language for poetry is different from that spoken by common men, so many critics think that the two friends have some disagreements in choosing the language for poetry. Actually Wordsworth and Coleridge's opinions about the language of poetry are not in contradiction, which will be explained later in this thesis. Here one important conclusion is that Coleridge's comments on Wordsworth's opinions about the language for poetry belong to the metaphysical esthetic paradigm shift from Neo-Classism to Romanticism.

Regarding the relationships between poetry and prose, Coleridge agrees with Wordsworth's statement about the similarities between poetry and prose, but he furtherly distinguishes the differences between them. In Coleridge's eyes, poetry and prose differ from each other Coleridge affirms Wordsworth's statement that poetry and prose possess the same elements or substances, but he believes that it is the different combination of these elements or the different sequences of these elements in a literary work that determines a work to be categorized into the fields of prose or poetry. In addition to this, Coleridge believes that the immediate aims of poetry and prose are different. The immediate purpose of poetry is to give readers pleasure, while that of prose tends to tell readers truth.

Here Coleridge's comments on Wordsworth's opinions about the language for poetry and the relationships between poetry and prose belong to the sphere of metaphysical esthetic paradigm shift from Neo-Classism to Romanticism: firstly, it is the philosophical thoughts about some ideas at the level of sociological esthetic paradigm shift, that is to say, it is the criticism on the critical ideas about Romantic literature; secondly, it is the comments made by critics belonging to the Romantic period, i.e., the commenter lives within the period of esthetic paradigm shift from Neo-Classism to Romanticism.

4. A study on later formed theories

It is a very common phenomenon that the most objective, comprehensive and insightful theories about an esthetic paradigm and paradigm shift are often obtained after this paradigm and this paradigm shift are totally replaced by new ones. This is because the critics can not only hold an objective attitude towards the old paradigm, but also possess sufficient materials. In this thesis, the metaphysical theories achieved by critics not belonging to the paradigm and paradigm shift are called later formed theories. Generally speaking, according to the focusing sphere of the theories, the later formed theories can be divided into three kinds: comprehensive theories, local theories and concrete theories, which can be applied to the study of esthetic paradigm shift from Neo-Classism to Romanticism.

4.1 Later formed comprehensive theories

When the esthetic paradigm shift from Neo-Classism to Romanticism finished, some literary critics often reflect philosophically on it, such as Abrams's *Mirror and Lamp*, The Prague School member Mukarovsky's "The Esthetics of Language", etc. There are two criteria to judge whether a theory is later formed comprehensive theories on the Romantic esthetic paradigm and esthetic paradigm shift or not: Firstly, it must be the metaphysical study on them by critics not belonging to that period; Secondly, it must be a general, systematic and comprehensive study on them.

4.2 Later formed local theories

Sometimes the later critics pay attention not to the whole esthetic paradigm or esthetic paradigm shift, but on one or two components of them, such as my following study on Wordsworth and Coleridge's debate about the language for poetry.

As analyzed in the former parts of this thesis, Wordsworth writes in "Preface to Lyrical Ballads that the language for poetry is" a selection of the language really spoken by men, (2005: 299) which have been put into the sphere of sociological esthetic paradigm shift; Coleridge rejects the colloquial language spoken by men and prefers the lofty diction, which have been put into the sphere of metaphysical esthetic paradigm shift. Now a research on their debate on the language for poetry from the linguistic perspective by me, a 21st literary researcher, should be included into the sphere of later formed theories. Because here the attention is only focused on one aspect of Romanticism, i.e., the language for poetry, it is suitable to categorize it into the local aspect of the later formed theories.

By a careful study on Wordsworth's statements, it can be discovered that the language he chooses for poetry is "a selection of language really used by (common) men" (2005: 299). From the perspective of synchronic study, the "language really used by men" can be seen as a relatively closed corpus in Wordsworth's period. Wordsworth's language for poetry is a selection from that corpus, which must be the best part of it. Thus Wordsworth and Coleridge's opinions about the language of poetry are not in contradiction.

4.3 Later formed concrete theories

Different from the later formed comprehensive and local theories, later formed concrete theories mainly refer to later scholars' analysis of concrete literary works by using the achievements of metaphysical esthetic paradigm shift or later formed comprehensive or local theories, such as the application of Mukarovsky's theories to analyze Neo-Classical and Romantic writers' works by myself in this thesis.

As studied in the former part of this thesis, Mukarovsky believes that the transition from Neo-Classicism to Romanticism is one from the esthetic norm to the esthetic function or from the structured esthetic to the unstructured esthetic. This transition doesn't happen at the syntactical but at the lexical level.

Thus it can be concluded that while breaking up with the Neo-Classical norms, Wordsworth has unconsciously set up new norms for others by his abundant and influential poems.

After discussing the phenomenon of later critics' analysis on Neo-Classical poet Pope and Romantic writer Wordsworth's works and the tendency of mutual transition between the esthetic function and the esthetic norm, it can be concluded that the later critics' metaphysical research on writers belonging to the earlier esthetic paradigms should be included into the category of later formed concrete theories.

5. Conclusion

As one of the most influential poets in British literary history, William Wordsworth's poems and his poetic ideas are valueless treasures left for readers and critics. By using the theory of esthetic paradigm shift to study his relationship with the language for poetry and the studies on it, the following achievements can be reached.

Wordsworth's own literary works belong to the artefact esthetic paradigm shift from Neo-Classicism to Romanticism; His own ideas about the language for poetry belong to the sociological esthetic paradigm shift; The metaphysical studies on his opinions about the language for poetry by the critics belonging to the Romantic period should be included into the sphere of metaphysical esthetic paradigm shift; The metaphysical studies by later critics on his works and opinions about the language for poetry belong to the later formed theories, which can be furtherly divided into later formed comprehensive, local and concrete theories. By using the theory of esthetic paradigm shift to study Wordsworth's poems, his poetic ideas, his contemporary and later critics' comments on his poems and poetic ideas, multi-meanings can be achieved; The study of Wordsworth's opinions about the language for poetry can be enriched from the stylistic perspective; The respective features of Classicism and Romanticism can be understood more thoroughly and their relationships can be clarified more clearly; A fourfold research method, together with an analytical model, can be set up for the study of esthetic paradigm shift; Some rules of esthetic paradigm shift can be discovered, which can contribute to the further study of universal rules of esthetic paradigm shift in literature and art.

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