

Research on Speech Act Views in Terry Eagleton's Ideological Criticism

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Abstract: Terry Eagleton's ideological criticism and cultural criticism have been profoundly influenced by Austin's and Searle's speech act theory. He has included the speech act view of "speeches are performances of acts" into ideological power critique and elevated it to the level of cultural and political practices. In his view, literature is a speech act and fiction is also a speech act; "literature" has provided texts and propositions with particularly "specific" power. Literature is an institutionalized act, but it breeds an anti-institutional act, with a strong anti-authoritarian power.

1. Introduction

Terry Eagleton (born 1943) is recognized as the most influential Marxist literary and art theorist and literary critic in the contemporary English world. Some even refer to Fredric Jameson (the United States), Jürgen Habermas (Germany), and him as the "three big names" in contemporary Western Marxist studies. Eagleton has been a prolific author in his life and his main works include *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, *Walter Benjamin, or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, *The Function of Criticism: From 'The Spectator' to Post-Structuralism*, and *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, which have exerted a profound and far-reaching impact on contemporary Western literature, aesthetics, and, in particular, the Western circle of Marxist literary and art theory. At present, much attention has been paid to Eagleton's ideological criticism and cultural criticism, but there is a lack of exploration of Eagleton's thoughts and theoretical origin. This paper mainly focuses on the research on speech act views in Eagleton's theories, hoping to attract more attention to his theories.

2. Origin: Eagleton's speech act view

As known to all, the system of speech act theory was established by John Austin in the 1950s and developed by John Searle, and it has exerted a profound impact on over 20 contemporary Western disciplines such as philosophy, aesthetics, literature, political science, and sociology. In the 1980s and the 1990s, Eagleton attached much attention to and discussed about Austin's and Searle's speech act theory in his ideological criticism and cultural criticism, and introduced it into the field of literature and culture for exploration. In his works such as *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, and *The Event of Literature*, he directly mentioned Austin's and Searle's speech act theory. In his *The Event of Literature*, in particular, he has devoted much space to expound Austin's and Searle's speech act views. He describes the speech act theory as a trend or theoretical initiative well-known to the world, and highly praises Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* as a humorous and interesting theoretical book. He has provided critique on and developed Austin's and Searle's speech act theory. He further holds that, when literary works are treated as speech acts or imitated as speech acts, the relevance between Austin's and Searle's speech act theory becomes obvious. Literary works "are not to be reduced to their 'messages', in John Searle's revealing reductive terms". In his view, it seems that literature describes the world, but its real function is to perform acts. To be specific, literary languages are used within particular conventions, and produce effect on readers. For him, the literary criticism in rhetoric is devoted to "analyzing the material effects of particular use of language in particular social conjunctures. It was a highly elaborate theory

of specific signifying practices”; the history of text is “a supportive system of transcendental signata, in an act whose literary name is allegory”. Eagleton seems to agree to some deconstructive views, and believe that Austin’s and Searle’s parasitic literary view is negative or aberrant. In his view, a literary work is usually regarded a deviant utterance, and lacks illocutionary force that would normally attach to the sentences of which it is made; “literature restores to us this sense of linguistic performance in the most dramatic way, for whether what it asserts as existing actually exists or not is unimportant”. In a certain sense, Austin regards literature as non-serious and incomplete, and thus dismisses it more or less. Therefore, during our research, we often ignore the reality and effectivity of some descriptive discourse as actions in their own right. In his view, we should not always consider reality as an obstacle that literature needs to overcome; literature is actually composed of the body and the language; the body and the language are the ways by which we exist in things, and only in this way can we encounter and intervene in objects in the external world. Normally, “some of our speech acts relate to the world in the sense that their effect or intention is to conceal, mystify, rationalize, naturalize, universalize or otherwise legitimate parts of it, and ... this is the group of speech acts traditionally known as ideology”. Readers endeavor to uncover the potential ideological texts hidden in the texts, and, although they might not unveil the deepest truth, they may intervene in or reconstruct the meaning of literary texts. That is to say, the texts themselves are an action, and text interpretation is also an action. The text and the world constitute a pattern of ask and answer, but what matters is not the answer, but the act of ask and response. “Like virtue, literary works have their ends in themselves, in the sense that they can achieve those ends only in and through the performances they signify”. It is by the generalization act of ideological power that “literature” has provided propositions with particularly “specific” power.

3. Eagleton’s ideological criticism

Based on a Marxist research attitude, Terry Eagleton has elevated the speech act theory to the level of moral practice for review, which is closely related to the grand perspective of Austin’s and Searle’s speech act theory. Austin’s and Searle’s speech act theory focuses on the researches on the mind, language, cognition, society and culture etc.; masters of different schools, including Derrida, Habermas, Miller and Bourdieu et al, have all embarked on practical researches on society and culture on the basis of learning from and absorbing the speech act theory. For Eagleton, the most essential ones are, “above all, of the discursive practices of the juridical, political and religious apparatuses of the state”. In his view, this theory is for unveiling the political effects and impact of ideological discourse; “its intention, quite consciously, was systematically to theorize the articulations of discourse and power, and to do so in the name of political practice: to enrich the political effectivity of signification”. He holds that such political effectivity aims to arouse the ideological and rhetorical functions of literary criticism so that it can serve to promote realistic practice and stimulate people to join realistic social movements. The world is expected to be reconstructed with literature so as to transform people’s previous ways of understanding themselves and the world and participate in the construction of human being’s subjective and objective worlds in terms of ethics. Eagleton holds that, Searle’s speech act theory helps to break down the separation and distinction between meaning and acts, inside and outside, and illusion and reality; by meaning characterizing, verifying and falsifying, meanings are bound up with a performance or social practice, and the relational pattern between literature and life is reconstructed. On literature, in particular, he stresses that, “literary works represent a kind of praxis or knowledge-in-action, and are similar in this way to the ancient conception of virtue. They are forms of moral knowledge, but in a practical rather than theoretical sense”. In fact, literature itself is a discourse as material practice and social act. As a product of thinking, it serves to describe and reconstruct the world; as a practice, it serves to remold the reality and perform some acts within speeches. Literary meanings are part of the furniture of the actual world, and are not purely subjective. In other words, literature must bear its responsibility and obligation to the actual world. As a speech act, literature is bound to walk out from literature. This shares a number of similarities with Searle’s discussion about institutional facts. For him, realist

works exemplify the role of a paradigm; they perform well in delivering some special forms of life, and thus have a sociological and anthropological virtue. He holds that the real world and the literary world are both a relationship of epistemological reflection and a relationship of behavioral practice. Eagleton has elevated literature to the degree of social practice for review. In his view, literature as a speech act is not a tool for reflecting or reproducing reality, nor a means of external things, and does not need to rely on any external things for existence. The reason is that literature has its own independence, and it is for its own purpose, as a kind of discourse practice for the purpose of the body. Its greatest value lies not in “knowing”, nor in reflecting on the instrumental value of life, but in “doing”, as only “doing” can achieve what he calls a good and happy realm, thus showing the value of literature. It can be found that Eagleton has led the debate on the nature of literature to the exploration of how the nature works, and also the conscious reflection of individuals to the description of how the group acts.

4. Fiction as a speech act

Terry Eagleton does not quite approve of Seale’s parasitic and fictional view on literature. For Searle, fiction is among the essential characteristics of literature, and literature is with the characteristic of “pretending”. Normally, “the author pretends to perform illocutionary acts by way of actually uttering (writing) sentences”; “pretended illocutions ... constitute a work of fiction”. To be specific, the peculiarity of fiction literature is intensively embodied by characteristics such as “fiction” and “pretending” etc. Nonetheless, for Eagleton, fiction is also a speech act and is even the sum of constative discourse and performative discourse. Based on Austin’s separation of constative discourse from performative discourse, he further infers that, performative acts do not involve the question of true and false, as they do not make assertions on the whole world; the fictional statements in speech acts are only the parasitization or imitation of the assertions, so there is no need to make true and false judgments, either. In fact, for him, fiction and life are not contrary to each other, and fiction and reality can be mutually transformed. For example, writers writing fictional works do not hinder them from participating in social practice. Conversely, although utterance acts come from life, some utterance acts are still fictional. Another example is that, when readers face fictional works, they can sink into fantasy and keep distance. When readers are saddened by the fate of a historical archetype, their emotions are both fictional and real. Fiction is often considered as a feature of literature and even novels. In Eagleton’s view, it is not the key issue. Fiction does not appear in novels only, and it may also exist in non-narrative literary forms; more importantly, “fiction is an ontological category, not in the first place a literary genre”; “fiction is a question of how texts behave, and of how we treat them, not primarily of genre, and certainly not ... of whether they are true or false”. Unlike other literary theorist, Eagleton has noticed Searle’s view of regarding fiction and literature as a family resemblance as well as Searle’s the fictional and real references in fictional discourse. John Searle thinks that some bits of fiction may also contain historical truth, for example, while writing about historical figures. Additionally, fictional statements only exist in a fictional world and, do not actually refer in the real world, “since everything referred to must exist”. At this point, Eagleton believes that, Searle “imagines in puritanical spirit that historical fiction must be loyal to the truth of the past, and thus fail to see that historical novels that take liberties with the facts may be in some sense truer than those that do not”. In his view, one essential point in fictional history lies in the re-configuration of facts and inclusion of some contents with potential vital significance. Moreover, Eagleton has also noticed that, “John Searle holds that fiction contains both true and false statements, and that an author can make ‘serious’ assertions in the course of writing fiction”.

Eagleton’s focus on the research on literary rules and norms is somewhat attributed to the influence of Austin’s and Searle’s speech act theory. John Searle, in particular, has repeatedly stressed that speech acts are rule-bound and institutional acts, which obviously shares some similarities with Eagleton’s view of treating literature as an institution. Eagleton also points out that, based on the position of speech act, literary works involve readers in believing the operation of certain regulations, although the readers themselves may not think so. For him, “literary works did

their moral work by unmasking the arbitrary nature of the codes, norms, conventions, ideologies and forms of culture by which we lived". Literature is an art form that is difficult to define, since different eras have their different judgment standards and norms. Literature is an institutionalized act, but it breeds an anti-institutional act; this paradox exists in literature. It can be said that, literature, as an institutionalized act, has absorbed Searle's idea of institutional facts, while literature, as an anti-institutional act, has a strong anti-authoritarian power. This anti-authoritarian power appears not only as a writer's transcendence of writers, but also as a critics' reflection on literature or a breakthrough in traditional rules. We might say that this ethical value of literature has carried forward Eagleton's idea of political emancipation. Eagleton treat "normative" as one of the five essential factors of his ideological criticism theory (the other four being fictional, moral, linguistic, and non-pragmatic). For him, literature is a normalized event, and the competent reader is one who can apply to the text certain rules. "The rule seems to indicate to us the way to go, like a pointing finger". "The way you apply a rule is not just a technical affair: it is bound up with wider interpretations of reality, with commitments and predilections which are not themselves reducible to conformity to a rule". Sure, Eagleton also emphasizes that, as to literature, there is no simple translation of lived experience into laws and norms. Instead, in a unity of theory and practice, literary works yield a type of moral cognition. Readers' reading status of "pretending to believe" has also been regarded as a social practice conducted on existing rules and conventions.

While borrowing from the speech act theory, Eagleton also points out that, "there are problems with speech act theory" as a literary model. Searle writes that, "whether or not a work is literature is for the reader to decide; whether or not it is fiction is for the author to decide", but Eagleton doubts the accuracy of this view. Eagleton pays more attention to how texts work and the attitude with which we treat them, so when dealing with the meaning of text, he believes that what the author thinks does not matter much, but what texts mean to do is the focus. He holds that there is no need to exaggerate the author's authority or have blind faith in any institution, for the readers' reading process is obviously creative; they have the right to interpret the works, and they do not have to investigate the authenticity of the event, but to examine whether the work is "literary". In his view, "the concept of fiction attaches to text and their contexts, not to the hypothetical intentions of a putative narrator. Even if the presence of such a narrator can be felt in a work, the fictional truths he presents may exceed or subvert her intentions." For Eagleton, the genre has its own intention, and this intention may collide with the author's own intention and rewrite the latter. To some extent, when the author is holding a certain genre, the genre does more than what the author wants to do. Therefore, we might say that, to analyze works, a reader must comprehensively examine contexts because the text narrator is not reliable. Austin confined his analysis object to the total speech act in the total speech situation; as to this point, Eagle believes that it is also dangerous to apply this living speech situation to a literary model. Eagleton also expressed bafflement over the concern with the mind in the speech act theory and Searle's borrowing of the concept of "intentionality" from phenomenology etc; for him, we are not sure whether the speech act theory can, to stabilize itself, ultimately avoid smuggling of the concept of "intentional subject" from phenomenology. On top of that, speaking of Searle's approach to language as a rule-bound speech act, Eagleton notes that the preoccupations of this theory with language seem unhealthily juridical, focusing on "who is allowed to say what to whom in what conditions" etc.

5. Conclusion

In all, Terry Eagleton's ideological criticism and cultural criticism have been profoundly influenced by Austin's and Searle's speech act theory. He has included the speech act view of "speeches are performances of acts" into ideological power critique and elevated it to the level of cultural and political practices. In his view, literature is a speech act and fiction is also a speech act; "literature" has provided texts and propositions with particularly "specific" power. Literature is an institutionalized act, but it breeds an anti-institutional act, with a strong anti-authoritarian power.

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