Literature, Mimesis, and the Question of Good Fiction

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In this part, I will talk about what literature is, how literature should be written, and how we should analyze fiction.

Literature is any kind of written text. Literature here means fiction. So, fictional works or literary works include letters, diaries, poetry, essays, dramas, and novels. Of course, not all these forms are necessarily fictional, but here I am focusing on their literary qualities.

But the most important question is how literature should be written. And the second question is how we should analyze fiction.

To understand how to analyze written texts and how texts should be written, we should examine the principles of writing and the literary theories on this topic.

How can we define one text as good and another as not good enough?

To understand what good fiction is, we may consider time: how long literary works survive, whether they become popular only for a short period of time, or whether they survive for a longer time. Longevity may be one criterion, although it is not sufficient on its own to establish literary quality.

Another point is whether the written text is enjoyable and meaningful. What do we gain when we finish reading or when we finish watching plays on screen or on stage?

So, let me consider Charles Dickens's novels.

We can say that his works belong to the category of good fiction because Charles Dickens's novels have survived for a long time, and many people, even today, enjoy reading his texts. They find them enjoyable and meaningful.

So, we can say that Dickens's texts belong to the category of good fiction.

Another important subject is the Cinderella subject, which means that English literature as an academic subject was long treated as a Cinderella subject, rather than as a fully established discipline.

And the Church and educational institutions historically exercised considerable influence over learning, language, and literary culture, although literary writing and reading also took place outside them.

After that, at universities, especially in Western universities, we see that numerous theories emerged to understand and analyze what literature is and how fiction should be written.

Classical works, especially ancient Greek works, particularly those of Plato and Aristotle, became important points of reference in Western academic discussions of literature.

So, to understand English literature, we should focus on Plato and Aristotle very carefully.

Plato's Republic, Book X, is very important, as are Aristotle's studies on poetics.

The allegory of the cave from Book VII of The Republic gives us an idea of what fiction is, what art is, and the meaning of the term mimesis, which means imitation or representation.

According to Plato, mimesis means something that is not real, just a kind of imitation or illusion.

For example, in the allegory of the cave, Plato talks about the shadows on the cave walls. They are just illusions, and human beings are removed from reality.

Even today, we can see examples of the cave allegory. For example, billboards. These are present-day examples of the cave allegory. They invite us to consider how images shape what we take to be real.

Regarding mimesis, in Book X of The Republic, Plato gives us the idea of a bed, which comes from the ideal world, from God, and the bed itself, which is produced by a carpenter by imitating the idea of the bed.

So, the carpenter is moving away from reality.

And when we see a picture of a bed created by an artist in a painting, for example, that means the representation is three times removed from reality.

And this artistic representation can be discussed alongside the later concept of defamiliarization, although the two are not the same: defamiliarization is associated with Russian Formalism, particularly Viktor Shklovsky.

These are the main points connecting the cave allegory with Plato's discussion of imitation in Book X.

What we understand here is that literature is a kind of imitation. Art is a kind of imitation.

Imitate what?

It imitates the world, the outside reality.

But the outside reality itself is already far from the reality that exists in the ideal world, according to Plato.

So, Plato claimed that poets do not directly represent truth itself and that their representations can influence how people understand reality.

So, in his ideal state, Plato proposed excluding certain kinds of poets and poetry from his political community.

And even today, we see reflections of Plato's ideas on art and imitation.

For example, we have TVs, we have computers, and there is a capital market in a global world. But there is censorship.

For example, when we go to D&R, we see bestselling books, not theoretical ones.

And this may give us an example of the Platonic system in the present. I do not mean that commercial selection and Platonic censorship are identical. Rather, the comparison raises a question: who determines which texts become visible, and how does that shape our understanding of literature?

Regarding Plato, who is one of the most important philosophers discussing what art is, we should also consider Plato's student Aristotle and his response to his teacher's account of imitation in the Poetics.

Aristotle agrees, to some extent, with what Plato says about these issues.

But, on the other hand, Aristotle is the one who opposes Plato's ideal world and creates a new system and a new point of view, which give us many clues and help us understand what language is, what literature is, what art is in general, and its relationship to reality. For Aristotle, imitation can also reveal patterns of human action and experience; it is not merely a misleading copy of appearances.