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Traffic Victory and the Challenges to Literary Dignity of Online Novels in the Postmodern Society

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ABSTRACT

In the postmodern media-platform structure, online novels and commercial novels, as the frontier forms of the "cultural industry", have indeed expanded the accessibility of entertainment and expressive opportunities for underprivileged groups through digital distribution and low entry barriers. However, the same platform logic has also completely commercialized, metricized, and traffic-oriented the creation process, trampling on the core of "literature" as an expression of aesthetics, ethics, and cognition. By tracing the origin and development of online novels, this paper points out their positive significance in lowering the threshold of cultural consumption and enriching the entertainment supply for underprivileged groups. On this basis, it criticizes the realities of online novels under platform governance and commercial logic: being fully metricized, the creation process becoming "assembly-line-style", the text quality being extremely disconnected from real-life experience, and the evaluation system being hijacked by clicks, rewards, and fan mobilization. The phrase "this is a work loved by the public" has become a tool to suppress refined aesthetics and the depiction of complex realities. The so-called "entertainment equality" has gradually evolved into "entertainment hegemony", replacing the truth-seeking and formal exploration of literature with commodity logic. It should be noted that the criticism in this paper targets the systematic structure rather than individual audiences, and defends the dignity of literature and the diverse ecosystem by questioning the structure itself.

Keywords: Postmodernism; Cultural Industry; Online Novels; Literary Dignity; Algorithmic Governance

The term "online novels" does not simply refer to text production with the Internet as a carrier, but a production-distribution-monetization mechanism centered on platforms. Its basic units are measurable chapter updates, calculable reader behavior data, and convertible copyright chains, including subscriptions, rewards, and adaptations. Compared with

traditional publishing, which is author-centered, editor-led, and relies on offline channels, online novels replace part of the "front-end review" with algorithmic ranking and community interaction, forming a larger-scale attention allocation system. In this sense, online novels are not only an inevitable product of technological industrialization and a phased

result of the expansion of popular cultural rights, but also the culprit that commercializes and vulgarizes art into an assembly line.

1 The Phased Victory of Entertainment Equality

The Origin and Development of Online Novels

Early online writing originated from decentralized spaces such as BBS, Tianya Forum, and Tieba, presenting a collaborative model of "serialized posts - comment corrections - reader urging for updates". With the development and maturity of systems such as paid chapters, subscription revenue sharing, rewards, and "monthly tickets", writing gradually transitioned from a "calling" to a sustainable form of labor. The popularization of mobile Internet embedded reading into fragmented time, allowing readers to read easily during commutes or waits, which significantly changed the rhythm and scenarios of text consumption. This evolution is isomorphic to the dissolution of the "aura" of cultural objects by modern reproduction technology. As Walter Benjamin stated, technological reproduction strips objects from their traditions and replaces their unique existence with multiple copies^[1]. In the platform context, this "de-auraization" is no longer merely a transformation of artistic experience, but also transformed into a data-driven and scalable production logic.

The above mechanism has brought two consequences that traditional literature never experienced. First, the threshold has significantly lowered, allowing both authors and readers to enter at a lower cost. Second, the connection between texts and the market-platform has become closer; the "front-end exposure" of

creative links such as update frequency and chapter structure makes reader feedback immediately visible. These two consequences together lay the institutional foundation of online novels, integrating writing into real-time commercial measurement.

Online platforms have essentially changed the order of "whether one can obtain publication opportunities". Authors no longer need to go through the traditional editor-led review system or wait for a long publishing process; instead, they can face readers directly, with data and community feedback forming a primary screening. This reversal of order reduces entry costs, especially enabling non-professional and non-academically trained individuals to choose writing as a means of livelihood. From Raymond Williams' perspective of "culture as a technology of production and survival", writing here is not a rare talent of geniuses, but a practical ability accessible to a broader population^[2]. Empirically, this mechanism has expanded the social composition of the author pool and the sources of themes.

The Contribution of Online Novels to Entertainment Equality

Online novels not only lower the threshold for authorship but also transform reading from an "activity requiring special arrangement" to one that "can happen at any time". Mechanisms such as micro-payments, limited-time free access, monthly subscriptions, and full-book purchases allow low-income and heavy labor groups to maintain stable text consumption. Although this improved accessibility does not necessarily enhance aesthetic standards simultaneously, it objectively expands the coverage of cultural consumption. We can summarize this phenomenon with a simple

proposition: in regions and among groups with insufficient public cultural supply, online novels serve as an "entry point" rather than an "endpoint".

Online platforms have also amplified expressions and identity narratives that are marginal in the traditional publishing system, such as palace struggles, rebirth, time travel, rental house narratives, and construction site narratives. Although these texts are often criticized as "stereotyped" and "immature", their social significance lies in providing a public space for "visibility", promoting emotional resonance and identity confirmation among groups[3]. Here, we should distinguish between two dimensions: "visibility of expression" and "literary maturity". The expansion of the former has democratic value, while the improvement of the latter requires longer-term institutional support, such as education, criticism, and funding.

In terms of genres, online novels initially showed a significant tendency of hybridization. Cross-genre combinations such as Xianxia (immortal hero) and workplace, sci-fi and romance, history and puzzle-solving broke traditional genre boundaries, forming a set of narrative engineering with high-density "hooks - beats - twists". This tendency of collage and recombination can be seen as a practice of postmodern cultural logic in popular narratives. Even though this tendency was later often stylized, it did improve narrative efficiency at the communication end and reversely influenced the narrative models of print publishing, film/TV screenwriting, and game design^[4].

At the industrial level, the copyright chain of online novels has developed more secondary creations and derivatives, such as comics, films,

TV dramas, games, and peripherals. These not only provide considerable income for top-tier texts but also create the possibility for mid-tier authors to "rely on writing as a stable source of income". In terms of the relationship between "writing and making a living", this is a structural change that cannot be ignored. There is no need to avoid the risk of "utilitarianism", but we should acknowledge its practical significance in the livelihood structure of cultural workers.

Based on the above content, we can put forward the following phased judgments:

First, online novels have clear historical rationality. They are an institutional product driven by the synergy of technological reproduction, platform infrastructure, and payment innovation, which simultaneously lowers the entry thresholds for writing and reading. Although under the framework of the cultural industry, this process may imply risks of homogenization and pseudo-individualization, we cannot deny its objective contribution to "cultural democratization" on this basis.

Second, online novels have achieved "entertainment equality" in practice. On the production side, they have expanded the social composition of the author group and the genre spectrum; on the consumption side, they have improved the accessibility and continuity of cultural content; on the expression side, they have provided visibility for marginal narratives. These three aspects together constitute the operational connotation of "equality", preventing "entertainment equality" from being generalized into an abstract slogan.

In this chapter, the research has done two basic tasks: first, sorting out the genesis and mechanism of online novels to confirm their positive effects in terms of "cultural

accessibility"; second, clarifying the distinction and tension between equality and maturity, laying a baseline for subsequent criticism. It should be noted that the author first gives a cautious affirmation of the history of online novels and their contribution to "entertainment equality", then transitions to the structural criticism in the latter part. This approach is not a compromise nor does it mean the author approves of the cultural phenomenon of online novels; instead, it aims to avoid simplifying complex social mechanisms into moral judgments, thereby establishing a factual and logical baseline for subsequent criticism.

2 Text Hollowing-Out After Capital Bullies Art

In the previous chapter, we clarified how online novels, an inevitable product of social progress, made substantial contributions to entertainment equality. However, the lowered threshold for reading novels does not automatically equate to literary maturity, and the expansion of "visibility" does not automatically lead to increased "depth". Jean Baudrillard's warning about "replacing the real with symbols of the real" reminds us to pay attention to texts circulating in self-replication and eventually disconnecting from reality^[5]. Unfortunately, today's cultural market is filled with symbols of the real disguised as the real itself.

When talking about online novels, many people do not see their harm but readily accept them as a part of literary development. After all, looking at the history of literature—from the poetry of the Chu Kingdom and Han Dynasty, to Tang poetry, Song ci, Yuan qu, to the vernacular novels of the Ming and Qing dynasties, and to today's literary market with various genres—

literature, as a carrier of human spirit, has indeed become more popular and accessible. However, the core problem of online novels is not simply "popularity", but the motivation shift caused by taking commercialization as the highest principle. That is, writing no longer takes truth, experience, emotional exploration, and insight into the world as its intrinsic goals; instead, it takes measurable external indicators such as clicks, retention rates, conversion rates, and monthly tickets as the sole legitimacy. This motivation shift reduces authors from "verifiers of language and the world" to operators of data dashboards. When indicators are no longer by-products of goals but become goals themselves, they cease to be good indicators; the more indicators are used for decision-making, the more likely they are to be corrupted—and in turn, corrupt the processes they measure. The proliferation of indicator instrumentalization does not lead to "efficiency improvement", but to the systematic collapse of aesthetic and epistemological significance.

Within the framework of the cultural industry, standardization and pseudo-individuality are the two pillars of commodity culture. Online platforms have advanced this to "real-timeization": every chapter update and every "satisfaction point" placement must be immediately endorsed by retention curves and hotlist rankings. The "soul motivation" of writing is completely swallowed by the indexed "profit-seeking motivation". When an author compromises to feeding the maximum reflexive pleasure through the shortest path, he is no longer worthy of being called an author, but becomes a production worker on the novel assembly line. This is both a moral accusation of "creative degradation" and a behavioral

convergence caused by incentive structures. When algorithms take "scalable replication" as the only good, the unique emergence of language is bound to be suppressed.

In the platform field, texts are disassembled into engineerable units of hooks, beats, twists, suspense, and climaxes, enabling mass replication, assembly-line division of labor, and even direct creation using artificial intelligence. The surface of this approach is "professionalization", but its essence is the supremacy of calculability, completely industrializing and commercializing literature. The direct consequences of this loss of creative ethics are threefold: first, the poverty of syntax and vocabulary. To maintain reading speed and "smooth reading", sentence patterns tend to be short and linear, vocabulary density decreases, and rhetoric is reduced to tokenized words; second, the closed loop of narrative. Characters' fates are trapped in the closed model of "leveling up - face-slapping - new boss - leveling up again"; real-world problems are replaced by satisfaction points; compassion and complexity give way to "repetition of victory"; third, the domestication effect of reader feedback. Daily updates and reader urging outsource "creative progress" to the immediate emotions of comments and bullet screens. Authors passively revise drafts around emotional peaks, systematically excluding language with richer emotions and complex structures.

This is not a "productivity improvement" with neutral technology, but the de-verbalization and de-experience of writing. Engineering turns literature into a "pleasure device"; texts are reduced to a mechanical cycle of minimal conflict and fastest reward. When "engineering correctness" replaces "creative correctness",

literature is gradually expelled from the domain of "difficulty" and "slowness".

Online novels often take millions of words as the minimum threshold for "completion", but this "myth of volume" has little to do with "complexity". On the contrary, under the binding of indicators and profits, verbosity becomes a technical choice to optimize income—extending the serialization duration to increase subscriptions and rewards, and maintaining daily update frequency with "filler side quests". This forms a paradox: the more words there are, the less meaning there is; the longer the length, the thinner the depth. It is not a "profound novel" but an accumulation of low-density language. Here, verbosity is not aesthetically "profound" but commercially "sticky"; "long but shallow" is a structural writing disease under platform conditions^{[6][7]}.

In terms of narrative ethics, most of these texts refuse to acknowledge "costs". Characters make choices without bearing irreversible consequences; all trauma can be automatically offset by "victory in the next chapter". Experience is redeemed by pleasure; the world is replaced by the cost-free justice of the protagonist's halo. Baudrillard's concept of "hyperreality"—replacing the real with symbols of the real—manifests here as an anesthetic narrative that "replaces real dilemmas with plot victories".

Furthermore, the objective function of platform narratives is "maintaining arousal - avoiding drop-off". The safest strategy is to continuously provide immediate victory as positive feedback, forming a cost-free pleasure economy. This is psychologically complementary to Benjamin's "decline of aura in the age of replication and consumption". When

the unique presence of art is dissolved and replaceable pleasure becomes the protagonist, this pleasure structure reduces reading to "spiritual masturbation". It is fast, secret, and short-circuited; satisfaction is disconnected from meaning-making. Readers gain abundant "satisfaction" but rarely rub against real emotions and thoughts. Texts polish "pain" and "contradictions" into rounded edges, and dispose of "unresolvable things" as ornaments for "winning again in the next chapter". When reading no longer conveys difficulty, it no longer conveys the world.

Fan communities play a dual role in the platform field: on the one hand, they provide motivation and support for novel creators; on the other hand, they constitute collective punishment for "slow writing - rewriting - difficult writing". When slogans like "the people like it" and "the public likes it" become politically correct, they no longer signify aesthetic democracy, but a new form of cultural hegemony that tames and expels minority difficult expressions. Under algorithmic distribution, the so-called "free choice" is often just a "pre-educated choice"—hotlists, topics, recommendations, and linked adaptations gradually narrow the aesthetic path into a predictable and calculable track.

This causes deeper harm: the degradation of aesthetic and in-depth reading abilities. More and more readers cannot engage with deeper, philosophical texts; people's thinking becomes increasingly shallow, and their brains are tamed by dopamine to only pursue stimulation. This phenomenon is also trending younger. For example, many middle school students have never been exposed to real classics but praise a certain online novel—with lofty themes but shallow content—as "serious literature".

This phenomenon cannot be blamed solely on individual "laziness"; it is institutionally trained. When people can no longer tolerate blank spaces, silence, and ambiguity, the so-called "free choice" is actually confined to the short circuit of "giving me pleasure immediately". This "short-video-style literature" locks people in the factory of attention exploitation; choices are no longer free, only arranged joy remains.

Pierre Bourdieu's "field" theory reveals that when economic capital and social capital dominate the distribution rules, aesthetic capital and academic capital will be squeezed out[8]. The profit function of platforms is inherently inclined to "moderate innovation" that is measurable, scalable, and risk-controllable, which structurally places language innovation, formal experimentation, and complex expressions of real dilemmas in a "bad money drives out good" position. At the same time, the criticism system is dismantled by fan discourse and publicity logic: criticism degenerates into marketing, awards degenerate into rankings, and the original "slow institutions" of the literary community—such as academic analysis and aesthetic value—are marginalized.

3 On Copyright Systems and Literary Dignity

The Opportunity for Literary Commercialization

In the previous chapter, the author has explained that the loss of literary dignity in postmodern society is the consequence of capitalism and commodity economy extensively bullying art and aesthetics. The current status of the online novel market can be traced back to the modern system of "copyright". However, the copyright system was not originally designed to

"encourage output"; on the contrary, it was to recognize and protect the author's personality and labor, and set a necessary entry cost for readers. Reading is not cost-free entertainment, but an ethical payment for the author's efforts. From the Statute of Anne to the "moral rights" established by the Berne Convention, the normative core of copyright can be summarized in three points: first, authorship—the unique connection between a work and its specific creator should be recognized by law and society; second, cost—readers' reading, reproduction, and use should bear the minimum compensation for creative labor; third, dignity—as an aesthetic, cognitive, and ethical practice, works should not be reduced to zero-cost commodities that can be infinitely replicated[9].

"Cost" is not intended to encourage literary commercialization, but to maintain the minimum sense of scarcity and seriousness for literature. Only when reading carries an appropriate cost can texts have the opportunity to be taken seriously. However, after entering the era of postmodern platform capitalism, this "cost" has been severely distorted, and its original intention has been eroded. In the platform era, the copyright system is placed within the profit function of traffic, indicators, and subscriptions. Authorship is diluted; outsourced assembly lines and collective personas obscure individual creators, reducing the "author" to part of brand operation. Cost is rewritten; the so-called "free reading" and "zero-threshold trial reading" replace money with attention and data. What readers pay is no longer the "cost of respecting the author", but an attention tax resold by algorithms. The dignity of literature is dissolved; texts are disassembled into calculable "retention rates", "conversion rates", and "average reading

minutes per person". Structurally, writing gives way to the engineering of producing satisfaction points.

Why must literature reject "industrialized pleasure"? "Pleasure" itself is not original sin; systematically industrialized pleasure is the problem. It takes the fastest reward and minimal resistance as its objective function, excluding experiences of "difficulty, slowness, pain, and doubt"—which are precisely the necessary conditions for literature to generate insights and inject emotions. It replaces specific life pains with replicable satisfaction templates, "dramatizes" and "triumphs" real dilemmas, and exempts readers from facing reality in the cycle of pleasure. It reduces authors from pathfinders of truth and form to suppliers of pleasure[10], ultimately emptying the social role and public value of "literature" from the inside. Therefore, "rejecting industrialized pleasure" is to preserve the conditions for literature to generate meaning; it is not rejecting popular reading, but rejecting reading that takes indicators as the sole legitimacy.

Therefore, based on the above judgments, the author advocates that those who truly love literature should maintain a firm rejection of the industrial invasion of online novels both institutionally and ethically. The object of rejection is not "popular narratives", but the institutional logic that turns literature into a traffic container. Unfortunately, as an inevitable product of postmodern society, online novels are closely connected to the entire postmodern society. We cannot turn the entire society from "post-" back to "pre-"; however, without reversing history, we can still find a set of operable, supervisable, and iterable governance measures to safeguard the dignity of literature.

Approaches to Safeguarding Literary Dignity

The following suggestions put forward by the author aim to retain the accessibility and expressive opportunities of the digital age, while re-establishing costs, reshaping incentives, and restarting slow institutions to reclaim space for the "difficulty and slowness" of literature.

1. Structural Transformation of Platform Governance

Relevant platforms can set up dedicated channels that hide popularity indicators such as clicks, comments, and active readers by default, with editor curation and peer review as the primary ranking signals. Recommendation algorithms should include more diversity constraints instead of only considering popularity and traffic, reducing "single satisfaction points" and "top-tier siphoning". In addition, disclosing the composition and weight of hotlists, and allowing academic institutions or industry associations to conduct third-party annual audits of recommended samples are also important steps. Replace "extending serialization" with "completion incentives"; provide additional exposure and revenue weighting for works with limited volume and complete structure to curb "using verbosity for stickiness".

2. Reconstruction of Education, Literacy, and Aesthetic Abilities

Middle schools and universities can offer "difficult reading" courses to students whose outlooks are being shaped, incorporating long-form, complex narratives, and non-linear texts into the curriculum to train the basic skills of slow reading, close reading, and re-reading. At the same time, focus on cultivating students' aesthetic taste and thinking abilities,

encouraging them to expand the boundaries of thinking, perceive the world from aesthetic and emotional perspectives, and reflect on the world from philosophical perspectives. This helps them judge "what constitutes good literature". Correspondingly, the education of teachers and editors should also be valued; through workshops and online academies, train front-line teachers and editors in the teaching of complex texts and curation abilities.

3. Industry Ethics and Collective Bargaining

Traditional literature should adhere to creative ethics, clarifying a list of prohibitions including disclosure of ghostwriting, comment bots, data fraud, and excessive fan mobilization, with platform-level joint punishment for violations. Members of author associations should improve their own standards, proactively safeguard the dignity of literature, and negotiate with platforms and publishers on minimum remuneration, completion bonuses, and copyright retroactivity rights to improve the situation of authors who truly engage in serious creation and reduce the structural pressure of "surviving by quantity". The most important point is to re-publicize the criticism system—restoring the disputable public nature of criticism, no longer accepting online literature for the sake of so-called political correctness, and only issuing seemingly rational, neutral, and objective evaluations of it.

Conclusion: Reclaiming the "Right to Difficulty" for Literature

In the relatively long history of literature, writing has usually been a slow endeavor. It takes time and silence as costs, placing creators at the intersection of experience, emotion, and language. The completion of a work often means the author must repeatedly suffer damage

and re-sew in long periods of self-doubt, rejection, and rewriting. Admittedly, there have been writers who prioritized making a living, but they did not change the basic expectation of the literary field for "difficulty, slowness, and authenticity". Words must rub against reality; narratives must bear costs; forms must reflect their own sincerity—this is the bottom line of literary creation. Writing is regarded as a serious practice precisely because it is by no means a simple production activity, but an in-depth reflection and exploration of meaning and humanity.

The platform era has completely distorted this. The commercialization logic that takes indicators as legitimacy transforms writing into an industrial project of "pleasure devices". Chapters are disassembled into calculable beats; characters' fates are enclosed in replicable victory curves; verbosity becomes a technical choice to retain readers, not a result of complexity. Creators are trained into operators of data dashboards; they do not need to bear the "pain of difficult writing", but only need to skillfully apply "effective routines". This kind of writing tends to be linguistically poor, ethically evasive of costs, and epistemologically reduced to immediate rewards. It is not "popularity" but engineered vulgarity; it "touches upon" the name of literature but erodes the insights and shocks that reading should bring with gentle pleasure time and again.

The author does not deny the entire historical role of online writing. The author acknowledges that it has expanded the entrance to expression, lowered the threshold for access, improved the livelihoods of some people who temporarily have no other skills, and activated narrative experiments in

certain genres. The problem lies in that when platforms and algorithms set measurability and scalability as the only standards, the so-called "entertainment equality" quickly degenerates into "entertainment hegemony". Difficult language, heavy reality, and non-utilitarian forms are systematically marginalized; the phrase "the people like it" is used to suppress public discussions on quality; readers are "pre-educated" through hotlists and recommendations; aesthetics degenerate into arranged joy; free choice is reduced to tamed preference. The dignity of literature is thus lost not in grand declarations, but in the quiet emptiness of countless seemingly harmless indicator victories.

Therefore, safeguarding the bottom line of literature requires a three-pronged approach of institutions, ethics, and education to reclaim space for the original "difficulty and slowness" of literature. In other words, literature needs to be re-endowed with the "right to difficulty"—the right to slow down, the right to not please the majority, and the right to experience failure and pain before meaning is generated. Readers also need to be re-endowed with the "right to be respected"—the right to encounter complexity beyond pleasure and bear strangeness beyond familiarity. What we defend is not cultural elitism, but the public conditions that allow literature to still generate insights, convey pain, and change perception. Only in this way will writing no longer be devoured by one-dimensional "effectiveness", and reading will once again bear the weight of accessing the world.

Only when writing once again demands cost, and reading once again bears difficulty, will literature not be silently reduced to zero

in the noisy attention market. The so-called "dignity" will no longer be an empty slogan, but solid institutions and practices.

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