



## Literary Criticism and its Evolution

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The newfangled world arises from the long slumbers of medieval ages with the world shaking slogans of equality, liberty and fraternity but humanity is still awaiting to realise these ideals. In the times when humanity is bleeding and haemorrhaging grotesquely with one poor child dying of hunger every ten seconds somewhere in the sad melancholy, a woman being raped every minute with inexpressible brutality, the heartbreaking crimes meted out to millions in the outpouring insurgencies and unrest all around the world, some that will never even be known to humankind; *it has become indisputably clear that the study of the humanities in general is no longer a luxury but a necessity*, vital to our very survival as an enlightened civilization that we claim to be. The articulate vision of moral, educational and political values of the world's multifarious cultures can't be understood today unless we don't revisit our past to understand where those values come from, the struggles in which they were forged, and the historical contexts which generated those struggles. In spite of succumbing to blind ignorance of nationalism, religiosity or chauvinism in all its manifold guises; it is now rather essentially important to undertake close, careful, critical reading of the Bible, Plato's Republic, Greek tragedy, Shakespeare, or Roman Law, Jewish or African-American history, likewise to examine the Quran and the long history of the Western world's fraught engagement with Islam. It entails not merely the call for critical and comprehensive reading of immediate text written in accordance with its language, style, rhetorical devices and deployment of literary techniques that confront us but also the need to understand that why and for what purpose the particular text was enacted or written. There is one discipline which is defined by its insistence on such strategies: this is the discipline of *Art criticism*, as operating through both practice and theory.

The word criticism has been derived from the greek word "*Kritikos*" which means "able to discern and judge" and whoever does the act of judging is called a Critic. Today when one hears the word 'critic', one might first imagine people standing in an art gallery furrowing their brows as they point out the flaws in a painting. But the work of an art critic is much more than just commenting on a work of art or pointing out what's wrong with it. A literary critic is not someone who merely evaluates the worth or quality of a piece of literature by studying its merits and demerits but, rather, is someone who argues on behalf of an interpretation or understanding of the particular meaning(s) of literary texts. A literary critic does more than simply discuss or evaluate the importance of a literary text; rather, a literary critic seeks to reach a logical and reasonable understanding of not only what a text's author intends for it to mean but, also, what different cultures and ideologies render it capable of meaning. The task of a literary critic is to explain and attempt to reach a critical understanding of what literary texts mean in terms of their aesthetic, as well as social, political, and cultural aspects. In fact, the work of literary critic is to analyze and evaluate any type of art that involves his own interpretation, which actually starts to have as much of an influence on art as art has on it, done to help others understand a particular work of art by using what he knows of art theory, and establishing where a work fits in with the different artistic styles and movements throughout art history, sometimes from feudal Christianity or Judaism or Islam (loyalty, devotion, faith) or from Romantic attitudes (an emphasis on imagination, creativity, emotion, and a sense of the mystery of the world), as well as from Marxism (a belief in equality of opportunity, an openness to various modes of reconceiving history, and a redefinition of bourgeois values such as freedom in a comprehensive sense that applies to all people), not to mention certain many more radical ideas of the human psyche deriving from Freud and other pioneers in the fields of psychoanalysis. The work of a literary critic is not as simple as it seems, having evolved and emulated in various forms throughout the history of human evolution.

The history of art criticism is profoundly imbricated in the history of thought in a broad range of spheres, philosophical, religious, social, economic, and psychological. Art criticism has been a part of many different cultures, as evaluating art has been seen as a tradition thus evolving from the outrageous political criticism of *Greeks* to *Chinese* tradition of evaluating principles of great art and biographies of artists in the sixth century to *African* cultures of verbal evaluations to recognize order, form, beauty of an artwork with spiritual and communal effect to *Islamic* cultures of a long-standing tradition of writing about art, often focusing on arts concerning the production of decorative-yet-useful objects, such as woodwork, metalwork, textiles, and calligraphy. But today, art criticism has become its own monster, in a way. A food reviewer in the Pixar movie *Ratatouille* gave a surprisingly nuanced take of criticism's role in art. "*We thrive on negative criticism, which is fun to write and to read. But the bitter truth we critics must face is that in the grand scheme of things, the average piece of junk is probably more meaningful than our criticism designating it so. But there are times when a critic truly risks something, and that is in the discovery and defence of the new.*" It's no accident that this genre of literary criticism starts to evolve alongside movements like Modernism in the early 20th century avant-grade work, which was kind of self-consciously about making things new. That's Ezra Pound's famous statement about Modernism - '*Make it new.*' If criticism becomes important in the defence of the new, we can see how art and criticism would evolve alongside each other

Criticism and creativity are inextricably mingled with each other. Thus the artist is the critic of life and Critic, that of art. The artist must have the imagination and vision to critically imitate the life/nature; the Critic from beginning to end relives the same experience. No critic can ever form accurate judgement unless he possesses the artist's vision. The amount of work and labour that is required and put in making a piece of art, the same is required to interpret it. Alexander Pope has rightly said: "*Both from Heaven derive their light these born to judge, as well as those to write*" giving equal value to both the critic and the creative writer. To him both are gifted writers, one to write creatively and the

other to judge the creativity. But this idea has received opposition throughout the history. For instance, Dryden believed that *“the corruption of a poet is the generation of a critic.”* Similarly Oliver Goldsmith calls them *“eunuchs – themselves unable to create, and therefore they hinder creativity in others.”* In the words of Thomas De Quincey, *“Criticism may be termed as the literature of knowledge and creative writing as the literature of power”*. Literature of power deals with life, where as literature of knowledge share information on creative composition. Ben Jonson said that to *‘judge a poet is only the faculty of poets; and not of all poets, but the best’*. Only the best of poets have the right to pass judgments on the merit or defects of poetry, for they alone have experienced the creative process from beginning to end, and they alone can rightly understand it. Though these kinds of contradictory ideas can't be eliminated completely, yet this doesn't seem to diminish the importance of the work of any good critic.

On the contrary, a more profound overview is provided in R.A. Scott's statement *“To the critics of the arts and especially literature, custom has given an independent place. In this respect it differs from all other kind of criticism.”* The critic of architecture is architect, of that of gardening is gardener, but that of poet may or may not be a poet. Thus, since time immemorial, it has been customary to accept the criticism of art from a man who may or may not have been artist himself. While it is true that the critic has understanding of poetry as well as analytical mind, the poets are not quite without the gift of analytical thinking. However sometimes we find purely professional critics who lack both sympathy and impartiality of an ideal critic thus not being fair and qualified for the subject. They do not render good service to literature but hinder the young and rising talent taking for instance Hardy's giving up of writing novels. Scott James has commented that, *“Less gifted man would be certain to miss the significance of his drawing. If you show a dog a photograph of his master he will not recognize it. It will show more excitement at the photographs of dog next door”*. Most often, the poet who bursts out into spontaneous utterance has no critical awareness of it. He has a powerful experience, a vision of life which he wishes to communicate to others through his work, but whether it is adequately communicated or not, whether it has moving, transporting qualities or not, whether the writer has succeeded in expressing what he intended to express etc are the questions which a literary critic with balanced mind, poetic sensibility – though not poetic ability and capacity – has to reply that makes him distinguished person qualified for his task.

Any student of literature who wishes to take some profitable use of the critical literature available to him will do well to keep the following words of Scott James in his mind before he goes on with the task that he has undertaken to accomplish: *“It may be a gain to attend to the writer of this critical literature precisely in so far as they are not standing aloof, like magistrate who were never guilty of crime pronouncing dispassionately upon the blamelessness or the misdemeanour of artist”*. There is generally a four-step process of description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation through which critics define a piece of art. In describing any piece of art, it is significant to leave out judgments and our own interpretations of what we think it means and our analysis of it and instead, we ought to **describe** elements such as articulation and where and when the work was written to give its historical context. Next step is **analyzing** the work of art in which the elements are described suggesting why the artist used those specific themes to convey feelings, ideas, or historical events focusing on details and its purposeful disproportion. After the apt description and analyzation of the work of art, it must be **interpreted** to establish context, explaining why the artist created it and what it means by pointing to evidence inside the work, historical context clues such as what was going on in history when it was created, and what art theories or movements relate to it. And the fourth step is **evaluation**, or judgment where an artwork stands alongside similar works and the critic has to explain its most important when deciding its quality. Evaluation can be tricky because our own biased views often come into play here, and they shouldn't because we should let the work decide its own significance. For example, a psychoanalytic literary theorist might take the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud or Carl Jung and seek to reach a critical understanding of a novel such as Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. A literary theorist applying, perhaps, Sigmund Freud's notions of trauma to Hemingway's novel might explore the protagonist's psychology, using Freud's theoretical “tools”, argue that the protagonist suffers from what Freud termed “shell shock” and that the novel, then, can reasonably be argued to be a commentary upon the effects of war on the psychology of individuals. Literary theorists and critics often adapt systems of knowledge developed largely outside the realm of literary studies and impose them upon literary texts for the purpose of discovering or developing new and unique understandings of those texts that its traditional literary writer might not be intellectually equipped to recognize.

*“Western philosophy is a series of foot- notes to Plato”* remarked the great mathematician and philosopher A. N. Whitehead. While this claim may be exaggerated, it rightly suggests that Plato gave initial formulation to the most basic questions and problems of Western thought: How can we define goodness and virtue? How do we arrive at truth and knowledge? What is the connection between soul and body? What is the ideal political state? What is the use of literature and the arts? Plato's answers to these questions are still disputed; yet the questions themselves have endured, often in the forms and contexts posed by Plato. According to Plato, the world of Forms, being changeless and eternal, alone constitutes reality that attempts to give reality an objective foundation which transcends mere subjective opinion. In his theory of mimesis, he states that art deals with illusion, being imitation of an imitation and thus twice removed from reality. Plato writes: *“If we mean our future guardians to regard the habit of quarrelling among themselves as of all things the basest, no word should be said to them of the wars in the heaven, or of the plots and fighting of the gods against one another, for they are not true. If they would only believe as we would tell them that quarrelling is unholy, and that never up to this time has there been any quarrelling between citizens. These tales (of epics) must not be admitted into our State, whether they are supposed to have allegorical meaning or not.”* Plato confused the study of ‘aesthetics’ with the study of ‘morals’. Aristotle, his disciple removed that confusion and created the study of aesthetics clearly stating that neither art is slavish imitation of reality nor literature the photographic reproduction of life in all its totality, rather they are the representations of selected events and characters necessary in a coherent action for the realization of artist's purpose. He even exalts, idealizes and imaginatively recreates a world which has its own meaning and beauty. Comparing poetry with history, he says that poet and the historian differ not by their medium, but the true difference is that the historian relates ‘what has happened?’ but the poet deals with ‘what may/ought to have happened?- the ideal’. He therefore calls poetry more philosophical as it tends to express the universal. Aristotle also argued Plato's claim of poetry making people weaker and sentimental. In his famous *Poetics*, he has defined catharsis as ennobling that humbles human

being. Aristotle therefore believed that all good literature gives pleasure, which is not divorced from moral lessons or civic morality.

Artistic creation cannot be fairly criticized on the ground that it is not the creation in concrete terms of things and beings. R.A.Scott-James rightly observes: "*But though he (Poet) creates something less than that reality, he also creates something more. He puts an idea and his perception into it giving us his intuition of certain distinctive and essential qualities.*" Plato's theory may sound strange to modern-day readers brought up on empiricist assumptions who tend to value what is particular and unique as our modern science rests on accurate observation of physical phenomena and we are trained to view the world immediately before us as real. Such thinking was entirely foreign to Plato, whose insistence that reality lies in the universal rather than in the particular that continued to profoundly influence philosophy and theology until at least the eighteenth century when Enlightenment thinkers began to see knowledge not as innately present in the mind but as deriving from the particulars of sensory experiences. The inheritance of the modern world from classical period is profound and pervasive and its influence in education is still visible in its continued domination of the teaching of composition, influenced by theorists of argumentation such as Stephen Toulmin.

To understand the importance of the gloss and commentary in the teaching and transmission of texts, we need to analyze medieval books and manuscripts like Bede's *De Arte Metrica*, Dante's *Epistle* etc closely. They were designed to include gloss and substantial commentary within the very wide margins having negligible division between the text and commentary unlike modern texts. Martin Irvine suggests that medieval literary theory gave priority to inherited forms of literature and stressed the virtue of treating traditional matter in novel ways rather than the invention of radically new viewpoints giving much broader notion of "grammar," and its ideological importance in the entire scheme of medieval thought. From late classical times until the early Renaissance, grammar had a foundational role, furnishing a model of learning and interpretation particularly playing an analytical role in deciding the critical role of significant texts. After the Renaissance, the gradual rise of bourgeois economy and modes of thought reaching an explosive predominance in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries contributed to the disintegration of arts in a severe process through increasing specialization, whereby each area of inquiry aspired to a relative autonomy possessing not only its own unique content but also its own methods.

The British Romantic movement of the early nineteenth century introduced new aesthetic ideas to critical study of literature including the idea that the object of literature need not always be beautiful, noble, or perfect, but that literature itself could elevate a common subject to the level of the sublime Towards the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century one of the greatest critic, Mathew Arnold remarked "This new swarm of sophorists has got empire in our schools." emphasizing the role of negative criticism thriving in the literary circles revering the change of intellectual climate to that of nihilism, nominalism and every degrading nature of interpretation which man is capable of conceiving. He argues if criticism is really, in itself, a baneful and injurious employment? And that all time given to writing critiques on the works of others would be much better employed if it were given to original composition, of whatever kind this may be? And that Johnson had better have gone on producing more *Irenes* instead of writing his *Lives of the Poets*? Or that Wordsworth himself was better employed in making his *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, than when he made his celebrated *Preface*, so full of criticism, and criticism of the works of others? He states that a critic may with advantage seize an occasion for trying his own conscience, and for asking himself of what real service, at any given moment, the practice of criticism either is, or may be made, to his own mind and spirit, and to the minds and spirits of others.

A formalist movement began in the start of 19<sup>th</sup> century with the belief that a work of literature functions as a self-contained, self-referential aesthetic object, thus opposing the philological schools focused on the history and meaning of individual words and their relation to foreign and ancient languages, comparative sources, and the biographical circumstances of the authors. It was called "New criticism" and the pioneer critics of this movement were J.C. Ransom, I.A. Richards, T.S. Eliot etc. Although T.S. Eliot regarded his criticism as merely a by-product of his private poetry-workshop, he is by far regarded as the most important literary critic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the English-speaking world who influenced contemporary taste in poetry most conspicuously, reevaluating major periods of English poetry. In his "Traditional and Individual talent", he exalted Metaphysical poets, Dryden and the French symbolists as the tradition of great poetry reacting strongly against Romanicism, further criticizing Miltonic tradition. His concept of 'impersonal' poetry, the description of creative process that demands 'unified sensibility' and uses 'objective correlative', his scheme of the history of English poetry as a process that led to the 'dissociation' of an originally unified sensibility, his emphasis on the 'perfection of common speech' as the language of poetry, his discussion of the relation between ideas and poetry under the term "belief"; all these are important critical matters for which Eliot found memorable formulas, if not always convincing solutions. Eliot argues that art must be understood not in a vacuum, but in the context of previous pieces of art. Eliot's essay "Hamlet and his problems" interprets a connection among the words of the text and events, states of mind, and experiences and is also an important idea of New criticism that treated literary texts as autonomous and divorced from historical context.

Since the late 19th century, literary criticism has often made use of different "theories" drawn from particular academic, scientific, or philosophical approaches that appeared and peaked throughout European and North American intellectual circles, colleges, and universities in the middle part of the 20th century. Northrope Fry published the influential *Anatomy of Criticism* in 1957 noticing that some critics tend to embrace an ideology and judge literary pieces on the basis of their adherence to such ideology. For example, a psychoanalytic theorist might examine and interpret a literary text strictly through the theoretical lens of psychoanalysis and psychology and, in turn, offer an interpretation or reading of a text that focuses entirely on the psychological dimensions of it. Literary theory proposes particular, systematic approaches to literary texts that impose a particular line of intellectual reasoning to it; influenced by *Historical approach* evaluating the life and society of author, *Philosophical approach* probing into the seriousness of moral objective, *Formalistic study* highlighting the value of analyzing text solely, *Psychological approach* of Freud and Jung interpreting various influences on the character's psyche, *Feministic approach* focussing upon the effect on gender, *Marxist approach* emphasizing the role of class and ideology, *Deconstructionalism approach* of Jacques Derrida based on inherent contradictions in examining text, *Eco-critical approach* deriving relation of natural sciences with literature.

Modern day critics find literary theory quite challenging to master but nevertheless can allow for incredibly insights into literary texts that would otherwise be unreachable without making use of the interpretive apparatus of literary theory.

Thus we see the role of criticism and thus of literary critics evolving throughout history but their importance never reduced, rather increasing exponentially in the modern era to provide a better understanding of the world, to form a better outlook of nature of things and to arrive at better interpretation of conditions predominant around us.

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