

Tracing the Different Phases of Literary Criticism

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Abstract

Literary criticism is the play of mind on the work of literature and in asking questions and answering them. The purpose is better understanding and appreciation of the pleasure. Inquiry helps us think rightly about literature. In this way is built up a theory of literature. The inquiry may be directed towards a particular work of literature and distinctive qualities may be examined. The matter, manner, technique and language are assessed. Certain rules may be formed and literary work tested against them, with reference to other similar works of literature. Thus, reader is helped by critic in formation of idea of literary merit. This study deals with the movement of different phases and to examine these phases in details. Besides the impact of ages on literary criticism according to ideas of different critics.

Keywords: Tracing, phases, literary criticism, movement, impact, spirit of the ages, critics.

Introduction

In tracing the different phases of Literary criticism we can define criticism as the play of mind on the work of literature and in asking questions and answering them. The purpose is better understanding and appreciation of the pleasure. Inquiry helps us think rightly about literature. In this way is built up a theory of literature. The inquiry may be directed towards a particular work of literature and distinctive qualities may be examined. The matter, manner, technique and language are assessed. Certain rules may be formed and literary work tested against them, with reference to other similar works of literature. Thus, reader is helped by critic in formation of idea of literary merit. The task of writer is facilitated in the process. Both indiscriminate praise and indiscriminate fault finding are bad. The intellectual and moral environment in which a critic, a live will have effect on their attitude and personality. Hence we see a change in criticism visa vis development, social and behavioral sciences – psychological, sociologic, economic thoughts bringing out new approach to criticism. Marxism gave rise to Marxist theory of literary criticism. Existentialism after World War II accounts for existential criticism.

2-Literature Review

2-1-Critical approach

It is an epitome of renaissance theory. It is not merely a compilation or summary of classical and Italian doctrine. Sidney possesses originality and resources in order to set forth ultimately his own conception of poetry. He makes use of Italians, Plato and Aristotle, Horace and Plutarch. They are the result of his wide reading and personal reflections. Plato plays important role sapping his views, owing to affinity of spirit. To him poetry was a natural human activity. Poetry enables man to sing of beauty and truth. Poet longs for a transformed world thus nurturing in it what is good and noble.

In a sense it is criticism of life. Truth and beauty are sum and substance of Sidney's message to an age perplexed and even hostile. He faced traditional objections boldly. He restored to poetry something of its prestige and meaning, brought enlightenment and reassurance to his own generation. His originality is apparent in manner of presentation too. We find freshness and vigour characteristics of Sidney. He wrote for courtly circles and was removed from pedestrian style of his contemporary pamphlets.

Nowhere we find such a blend of dignity and humour, of sincerity and irony, of controlled enthusiasm and racy colloquialism, or again that unstudied simplicity and grace which everywhere pervade the work. It was a realistic presentation of his abstract theme in concrete terms. It is a first piece of English criticism. It is literature in itself a worthy prelude to what was to follow. Opinion of his time was hostile to poetry. Sidney shows that poetry does not deserve this scorn. Poetry instructs that its purpose is moral and it is consistent with religion. He weeds out poetry which does not deserve the name. He pours scorn upon 'mongrel tragic comedy' of his time, the 'gross absurdities' which are neither right tragedies nor right comedies, mingling 'kings and clowns' not because the matter so carrieth it. He exposes false view that 'there is no delight without laughter' The main argument that poetry which is history, philosophy, and morals all are under debt of gratitude to poets who went before with their charming sweetness. Sidney pays high tributes to poets. He shows that poets have not only been scientists, historians, philosophers, but that the calling of poetry is one which has never failed to command the highest admiration. Even the body of work of Plato the philosopher 'though inside and strength were philosophy, the skin as it were and beauty depended most on poetry' Among Romans a poet was called vates – diviner, a foreseer or a prophet. It is interesting to note the essay includes a preliminary double definition of poetry.

One from Aristotle and from Horace. Aristotle makes poetry a meeting point of philosophy, history and giving it a highest palm after scriptures. Sidney applies scaligerian and Horarian norms to English poetry. He protests against the slack unities of academic tragedies and the clatter of wooden swords in battle endings. His respect for Spencer and Chaucer is noteworthy. Sidney provides moral support to English poetry especially in his second definition of poetry is such as to make moral content of poetry a part of its essential requirement. His first definition names the purpose of poetry explicitly as teaching. At a later stage considering platonic objections he reasons about moral requirement and how to reconcile it with start fact that much fine poetry is immoral. Here Sidney says something different. The phenomenon of immoral poetry means 'not that poetry abuseth man's wit, but that man's wit abuseth poetry'. He could have said in earlier definition that immoral poetry was no poetry at all. However, his argument cannot be dismissed lightly. Whatsoever being abused does harm and being rightly used receives title. He was the first critic to put forward the theory of poetry. He was the first to apply 'Vates' that is 'makers' to English poets. He says poetry is an art of imitation, Literary Theory and Criticism. Aristotle uses term *Mimesis* that is to say a representing counterfeiting or figure forth to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture, with its end, to teach and delight nature's world is brazen the poets only deliver golden or valuable. Sidney discussed the superiority of poetry over philosophy, history. He first makes remark that versing does not make a poet. A verifier is not a poet and a poet is not necessarily a verifier. Pastoral poetry showed the misery of people under hard lords or revenging soldiers. Elegiac would move rather pity than blame. Comedy is an imitation of common errors of our life which he represents in the most ridiculous and scornful sort. The excellent tragedy opens wounds and shows ulcers that are covered. The lyric gives praise the reward of virtue to virtuous acts. Sidney was the first to start judicial criticism in England. Gosson as a puritan mercilessly attacked poets and their art. Sidney like a true knight showed his greatest chivalry in defending mistress poetry. His judicial attitude in criticism paved way for better understanding and appreciation of imaginative literature. A judicial critic will judge things according to the laws set down by the ancients. He expanded the horizons of law and make amendments in order to fit in with time. In this he is liberal. His views were warmly accepted by later generation.

Sidney as a critic was both a classicist and a romanticist. Like classicist he also believed in the order of beauty, but he challenged some of the rules. He was a disciple of ancient but not a slave. He could agree with them and also disagree but not violently. He always wanted a compromise. Liberalism, nobility and gentleness were his marks. He felt literature was to move and uplift. He was not pedantic critic but creative. Poetry to him was beauty and truth. It taught delightfully. Very politely and respectfully he set aside rules. When poetry had fallen from high pedestal to be a laughing stock of children, he raised to the occasion. The puritans had called poetry a nurse of abuse and wanted to close the theatres and banish poetry. Sidney took the cause and made out a strong case on the grounds of divinity, its prophetic nature, its cultural values, its universal appeal, its elevating power and alluring methods. His perceptions were mostly classical and Italian, but he used them after suitable changes. He wrote with his heart. All qualities of his writings are hardly to be met with his predecessors and contemporary. He shows himself able as Gosson had been able to take a wide and catholic instead of peddling view of morality. He was spiritual descendent of Plato who wanted poetry of didactic purpose. Poetry aimed at the purification of wit, enriching memory, enabling of judgement and enlarging of conceit. Sidney laid down the foundation of an appreciative, interpretative, impressionistic and judicial criticism.

Sidney has drawn on earlier teaching, selecting, adapting and fusing together ideas gathered from many sources in order to set forth ultimately his own conception of poetry, independently. Sidney is original not in theory and subject matter alone but also in style. Rightly has Cowper called Sidney 'a warbler of poetic prose'. It has colloquial ease blended with dignity. He felicity of expression is remarkable.

2-2-Critical opinions:

T. S. Eliot's has said that the academic literary opinions of our time were formed by Arnold. Eliot finds that the assumptions of Arnold's criticism were adopted by Walter Pater, Arthur Symonds." For half a century." says R. A. Scott-James. "Arnold's position in England was comparable with that of (Aristotle) in respect of the wide influence he exercised, the mark he impressed upon criticism, and the blind faith which he was trusted by his votaries." (Matthew Arnold by Lionel Trilling.) Arnold as a literary critic has clearly defined doctrines as a scale of merits founded in principle. With him a new school may be said to begin. None of his predecessors had such a coherent set of ideas, nor have they applied or explained their views with so elegant a precision. The profound desire of this age to return to a standard of beauty which reason can comprehend, and whose form reason can control, is revealed best of all in the effort of Arnold to renew classical tradition, to base it on the now better understood example of the ancients, on that of the moderns as well, so essential a gesture of art. He judges books as one trained to take account of their construction, to comprehend Arnold as a critic we must grasp his conception of culture. His aim is to know the best that has been thought and said in all ages and by all nations.

No criticism was ever less negative. He sees indeed that the pointing out of deficiencies, indirectly, if not directly, is an essential part of criticism, but it is not the end in view. Again Arnold's purpose is a ways practical. He was long regarded as a dreamer, a 'superior person' sitting on a solitary height and on the whole proud of the isolation. On the contrary, it was just because he was at heart essentially English, and therefore practical, that he acquired this reputation. Two of his favorite dogmas in criticism were the necessity of going back to studying the classics, and the equally crying necessity of going beyond our own island and studying the mind of Europe. He was never content unless he brought English opinion to the test of foreign opinion. Hence the interest in knowing how Milton appears to a French critic. For a similar reason he frequently went to foreign writers for the subjects of his own criticism. In the first series of *Essays in Criticism*, the most characteristic and the most valuable as a whole of his critical writings, the subjects are principally foreign. He turns to these, not because he thinks them better than the writers of his own country, but because he thinks more good will come, both to himself and to familiar, that from an examination of what is foreign and unfamiliar than from an examination of writings illustrating our own merits and charged with our own defects. The impulse which determines his choice in criticism is revealed in his letters. The same principle explains Arnold's insistence on the study of the ancients "They can help to cure us of what is. The great vice of our intellect, manifesting itself in our incredible vagaries in literature, in art, in religion, in morals: namely, that it is fantastic, and wants sanity." It was for this reason that he dwelt on this distasteful to his countrymen, or to whom so ever he was addressing. The first and most famous paper – the general manifesto, as the earlier preface to the poems is the special one, of its author's literary creed-on the function of criticism at the present time must indeed underlie much the same objections as those that have been made to the introduction.

Here is the celebrated passage about "Wagg is in custody." the text of which, though no doubt painful in subject and urbane in phraseology, is really a rather slender basis on which to draw up an indictment against a nation. There can be no doubt that in the main contention of his manifesto, as of his book, Mr. Arnold was absolutely right: It was true that England, save for spasmodic and very partial appearances of it in a few of her great men of letters- Ben Johnson, Dryden, Addison, Johnson-had been wonderfully deficient in criticism up to the end of the eighteenth century in the early nineteenth the had produced one great philosophical critic, another even greater on the purely literary side, and a third of unique appreciative sympathy, in Coleridge, Hazit, and Lamb, she had not followed these up, and had ,even in them, shown certain critical limitations. It was true that though the Germans had little and the French nothing to teach us in range, both had much to teach us in thoroughness, method, style of criticism. And it was truest of all (though Mr. Arnold, who did not like the historic estimate, would have admitted this with a certain grudge) that the time imperatively demanded a thorough "stock-taking of our own literature in the light and with the help of others.

2-3-Period of changing of Critical opinions:

In short, at a time when class set itself against class and interest against interest, Arnold, in his great essay," The function of criticism at the present times." speaks of criticism, whose peculiar quality it is to be disinterested.

Criticism like science, espouses no party, no cause, however good, except the cause of truth and the general welfare of man. The French Revolution was not so much the fulfillment, Arnold believes, as the betrayal of the great ideas of France in the 18th century and failed because of the desire of men to give "an immediate and practical application to all these fine ideas of the reason." Criticism must maintain its independence of the practical spirit and its aims. Even with well-meant efforts of the practical spirit it must express dissatisfaction, if in the sphere of the ideal they seem impoverishing and limiting. It must not hurry on to the goal because of its practical, and know how to wait, and flexible, and how to withdraw from them. The spirit of criticism, then, is that which measures the actual and the practical by the ideal. It never relinquishes its vision of what might be and never says that what can be is perfect merely because it is better than what is. Criticism does an ever more difficult thing than this: It must be apt to study and praise elements that for the fullness of spiritual perfection are wanted, even though they belong to a power which in the practical sphere may be maleficent. It must be apt to discern the spiritual shortcomings or illusions of powers that in the practical sphere may be beneficent. Perhaps no man has ever formulated though some have practiced-so difficult an intellectual course. "To study and praise elements that for the fullness of spiritual perfection are wanted, even though they belong to a power which in they belong to a power which in the practical sphere may be maleficent" It is the dangerous but it is necessary to study for cultural complements, only the man of perfect equipoise and great spiritual strength may undertake it, the man utterly sure of the beneficent goal toward which he is striving. Here, if anywhere, we have the key to Arnold's importance and to this method.

Materials and methods:

The present paper, under the title of the tracing the different phases of literary criticism through ages is to examine the notion of the phases of literary criticism in details and explore changes during these periods. The first step is to clarify the phases of literary criticism. This is a survey on phases and periods of literary criticism.

3-2-Phases of literary criticism:

Hellenic Criticism: Criticism follows creative activity. In Greece, Plato and Aristotle were the most important critics. Aristotle is the first scientific critic, theorist. A study of poetics is therefore a starting point for students of literature. **Hellenistic Phase:** By close of third century B.C., Athenian culture declined, Alexandria came up in Egypt. It made a small contribution of preserving, classifying and conducting research. **Greco-Roman:** Rome was capital of Roman Empire. Scholars inspired by ancient Greece, wanted to equal and excel. They aimed at originality, however, were neither original nor comprehensive. Criticism largely consisted of elaboration, interpretation and application of rules. The purity of Aristotle was colored, clouded by Horace, Quintilian and Longinus. **The Dark Middle Ages:** Roman Empire broke up in fifth century A.D. Confusion and dislocation prevailed. Literature was frowned upon as sensuous and pagan. Only ray of hope was Dante. **Renaissance:** Constantinople fell to Turks in 1453 and consequent Western movement of literary masterpieces of antiquity. One sees spurt in literary and critical activity. End of medievalism and renewal of zest for life and the enjoyment of beauty are hallmarks. Desire to emulate examples of ancient Greece and Rome is remarkable. In England in last phase, justification of literature and art against the attacks of Puritans and moralist Sidney's work, "Apology of Poetry". Ben Johnson is the most important contributor. **Neo Classic criticism:** Classicism which became more rigid and stringent with passage of time. Dryden, Pope, Addison, Dr. Johnson are some of the greatest critics during this period. **The Romantic Phase:** French revolution and German idealism had effect on England. Hollow rules were discarded. Wordsworth's "Preface to the lyrical Ballads" and Coleridge's "Biographia Literaria" paved the way leading to new beauty. **Victorian Criticism:** Mood and individualism of romantics resulted in many excesses and absurdities. Mathew Arnold, a leading critic leading aesthetic movement as a consequence of French symbolist Baudelaire "Art for arts sake" cult of Walter Pater turned to impressionism and expressive. **The Modern Age:** T.S.Eliot the Neo classic sought to correct the faults of impressions by appealing to tradition and authority. Dr. I.A. Richard on the other hand turned to psychology. F.R. Leavis is one of the most competent critics of Textual school. Situation appears chaotic but it appears to be too early to predict which school will have permanent validity. Plato was the first scholastic philosopher who had given a systematic shape to criticism. He lived in the fourth century B.C. He was the most celebrated disciple of Socrates. By his time the glory of Athenian art and literature began to fade and was taken by philosophy and oratory. The great philosophers of the period discussed a great variety of matters including the value of literature of society and its nature and functions. The fourth century B.C. was an age of critical enquiry and analysis. Plato was not a professed critic of literature and there is no single work that contains his critical observations.

His ideas are expressed in several books, chief among them being the “Dialogues” and the “Republic” Plato’s view of art: Plato’s view of art is closely related to his theory of ideas. Ideas, he says are the ultimate reality and things are conceived as ideas before they take practical shape as things. The idea of everything is therefore its original pattern, and the thing itself its copy. As copy ever falls short of the original, it is once removed from reality. Art – literature, painting, sculpture- reproduces but things as mere pastime, the first in words, the next in colours and the last in stone. So it merely copies a copy; it is twice removed from reality. Art takes men away from reality. The productions of art helped neither to mould character nor to promote the well-being of the state-. He was however not aware of its potentialities for good. Rightly pursued, it could inculcate a love for beauty and for whatever is noble in character and life.

Plato’s attack on poetry: In Plato’s opinion, poetry cannot shape the character of the individual nor can it promote the well-being of the state. It is a copy of the copy. It is twice removed from reality. The poet writes not because he has thought long over but because he is inspired. It is a spontaneous overflow or a sudden outpouring of the soul. No one can rely on such sudden outpourings. It might have certain profound truth, but it should be suspected to the test of reason. Then only it will be acceptable. Otherwise they are not safe guides. So they can’t be substitutes to philosophy which is guided by the cool deliberation. Poetry, on the other hand, is created by the impulse of moment. So it cannot make a better citizen or a Nation. The emotional appeal of poetry: Poetry appeals to the emotions and not to the reason. Its pictures of life are therefore misleading. Poetry is the product of inspiration. Hence it cannot be safe guide as reason. Plato illustrates this with reference to the tragic poetry. In tragedy, there is much weeping and wailing. This moves the heart of the spectators. It is harmful in its effect. If we let our own pity grow on watching the grief of others, it will not be easy to restrain it in the case of our own sufferings. Poetry feeds the passions and let them rule us. Poetry lacks concern with morality. It treats both virtue and vice alike. Virtue often comes to grief in literature. Many evil characters are happy and many virtuous men are seen unhappy. It is seen that wickedness is profitable and that honest dealing is harmful to one’s self. Their portraits of Gods and Heroes are also objectionable. Gods are presented as unjust or revengeful or guilty and heroes are full of pride, anger, grief and so on. Such literature corrupted both the citizen and the state.

Plato lays down a few principles of good speech. They apply equally to good writing. The first essential of a speech is a thorough knowledge of the subject matter. The speaker should also know the art of speaking. The presentation must have an organic unity. i.e. it must have a beginning, middle and an end. The speaker must also have a thorough knowledge of human psychology. These principles are equally true in the case of written word. The Value of Plato’s Criticism Plato is a discerning critic in both poetry and drama. In his attack on poetry, he exhibits a thorough insight into their nature, function and method. He insists on truth as the test of poetry. He says that poetry is twice removed from reality. He disapproves of the non-moral character of poetry. He makes a distinction between the function of poetry and that of philosophy. He also derides the emotional appeal of poetry. He makes valuable observations on the source of comic and tragic pleasure. He was also, perhaps, the first to see that all art is imitation of mimesis. He divides poetry into the dithyrambic or the purely lyrical, the purely mimetic or imitative such as drama and the mixed kind such as the epic. He makes valuable observation on style of good speech and writing

Conclusion

According to different phases criticism largely consisted of elaboration, interpretation and application of rules. The purity of Aristotle was colored, clouded by Horace, Quintillion and Longinus. The Dark Middle Ages: Roman Empire broke up in fifth century A.D. Confusion and dislocation prevailed. Literature was frowned upon as sensuous and pagan. Only ray of hope was Dante. Renaissance. Constantinople fell to Turks in 1453 and consequent Western movement of literary masterpieces of antiquity. One sees spurt in literary and critical activity. End of medievalism and renewal of zest for life and the enjoyment of beauty are hallmarks. Desire to emulate examples of ancient Greece and Rome is remarkable. In England in last phases, justification of literature and art against the attacks of Puritans and moralist Sidney’s work, “Apology of Poetry”. Ben Johnson is the most important contributor. Neo Classic criticism: Classicism which became more rigid and stringent with passage of time. Dryden, Pope, Addison, Dr. Johnson are some of the greatest critics during this period. The Romantic Phase: French revolution and German idealism had effect on England. Hollow rules were discarded.

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Critically comment on Eliot’s contribution to the twentieth century criticism on the basis of his essay “Tradition and Individual Talent”.

Critically comment on Eliot’s theory of impersonality of poetry.

Discuss this view of Eliot with reference to his essay “Tradition and Individual Talent”