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## Eclecticism at the End of the Tunnel

Dr. K. Venkatramana Rao, Ph.D.

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### Chaos of Literary Theories

I. A. Richards opens his book *Principles of Literary Criticism* with the chapter “**A Chaos of Critical Theories**”. The fecundity of literary theories and the prolific outputs that followed them were bafflingly multifarious and perplexingly variegated. I. A. Richards meant that it is critical theory that imparts significance to the work of art taken for scrutiny. As a psychologist he was able to see many different layers of experience tagged into the work of art.

### Eliot and Literary Criticism

Eliot, who is famous and notorious for his shockingly original statements, meaningfully rich definitions, intellectually alluring ironies and expressive phrases, contributed much to critical thought. Impersonality of art disassociation of sensibility, amalgamation of sensibilities, and the impersonality of art are some of his original

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contributions to literary criticism. Objective correlative, literary pastiche, feeling and emotion as universal and literary respectively, are part of present literary heritage.

Eliot's regret is that the right questions about poetry have not been asked. He sets it right by asking questions about the nature of poetry and its structural details. These thoughts took poetry out of the shackles of romantic pre-disposition and brought poetry to a wider domain of psycho-sociological and literary space. The growth of studies in human, social and mental sciences, the findings of anthropology and myth were all brought into literary interpretation and what was merely a linguistic artefact became a complex, excellent amalgam of the experience of the sensitive individual whose perceptions are governed by the culture and history of the people he lived with.

### **Dealing with Newer Approaches**

If poetry is considered an expression of the supra-mental and intellectual experience, it belongs to the time when it is written with the literary and social heritage of the time of its writing being included in it. With every passing age newer approaches get defined and the critical theories of the critics themselves undergo change. The interpretation of poetry also changes in the same way.

### **Distinction between the Permanent and the Changing**

Eliot distinguishes between the permanent and the changing, with *words, taste and fashion*. "We must distinguish of course, between "taste and fashion". Fashion the love of change for its own sake, the desire for something new is very transient; taste is something that springs from a deeper source"<sup>1</sup>. As a commentary on this observation we may infer that great poetry has been written for generations and each generation has shown its preference. Some generations indulge in fashion and some in preserving taste. Hence, it is necessary to take into account all these changes. Every critic, whatever his earlier stance, has to change according to his changed perceptions and the change in contemporary thought.

### **Role of Personal Persuasions and Preferences**

Eliot considers the critics under different heads to show that it is the personal persuasions and preferences that contribute to the critics' approach. There is the professional critic whom Eliot mentions as one writing with loyalty to the previous generation of poets

and critics. The next is the critic with gusto and he is the advocate for the authors he expounds. Such critics are genial and would not shrink from idolizing the second rate.

### **The Critic of Gusto and Critic's Predilections**

Eliot, who put Jonson as first among the second line of critics, says that the critic of gusto discovers excellence in the second rate. Then there is the academic and theoretical critic. He is merely scholarly. Then there is the philosophical critic for whom criticism is the by-product of poetry. There is the moral critic who brings in ethics into literary interpretation, and the specialist critic who appropriates to himself the right to examine whatever literature he chooses to examine.

The above mentioned list of Eliot lays bare the fact that literary criticism is in bits and pieces and their quality is decided by the critics' predilections. Eliot recommends that a true critic should go beyond these limitations without discarding them. It must be borne in mind that some of the observations of these critics have been accepted, some neglected, some provided stimulant and some interpreting to the historical context.

### **Creativity and Tradition**

Eliot again does not put a poet into a professional straitjacket. This would restrict creativity to the tradition. Deviating from it would lead to anarchy. Every new deviation is an exploration into defined areas and certainly does not explain the landscape. Only when all these pieces are collated and placed in the proper perspective, the variety and splendour of the landscape would emerge. When we place the truths in a proper configuration, the synergy in them communicates more than the sum total of the elements.

### **Read the Poem *Qua Poem* – *Lemon Squeezer***

Adopting a theory and then fitting the interpretation to it, is far from satisfactory. To be influenced is worse. Limitations will sterilize the artist and the critic. When the chaos of critical theories dominated the literary scene, Eliot came up with the new criticism which wanted the critic to read the poem *qua* poem or a poem *per se* - the poem from the social and literary context.

Eliot used a metaphor to define this criticism – lemon squeezer. The better the machine the more exhaustive the meaning would be. Apart from the language of poetry which cannot be exhausted with syntactic devices there is the literary import and the literary devices. The meaning gets expanded, not postponed. The literary or the poetic idiom goes beyond the meaning and spreads into the psychological, the sociological and the cultural spheres of the poet and the critic.

### **No Surrender to the Past or No Yielding to Temptations of Undefined Future**

During Eliot's time books on anthropology, interpretation of mythology and legend and the linguistic theories of Saussure and Chomsky were digging deep into the origins and methods of poetic expression and linguistic application. Eliot confesses that every critic transcends the limitations imposed on him and the work of art by the past and without surrendering to the past, or yielding to the temptations of undefined future, explores the work of art.

### **Stages of Evolution of Literary Criticism**

Literary criticism which began as evaluatory and judgemental during the time of Aristotle moved to the Romantic with Horace and Longinus. The criticism was based on generalised principles derived from the extant work of art.

During the romantic period it became philosophical and transcendental. With the growth in humanistic sciences and linguistic sciences, the focus was on the linguistic aspect and the psychology of the reader and the writer.

Eliot, because of his anti-romantic stance, culled it out of the sphere of romantic influence and with his predilection for philosophy, brought in philosophical principles into interpretation.

Subsequent schools of thought were the psychological school, the sociological school, the psycho-analytical school, structuralism, post-structuralism and finally deconstruction. Structuralism studies both the linguistic structure and the architecture of the poem. It was on the lines of what the Greeks called *Architectonics*, that is, to imagine the whole and execute the parts.

As Eliot says between the ideal and the actual there is a shadow. In his *Hollow Men* what he presents is not so much the philosophical as the literary: “between the idea and the reality, between the motion and the act, between the conception and creation, between the emotion and response, between the desire and spasm, between the potency and existence, between the existence and the essence falls the shadow”<sup>2</sup>.

The actualization is the confinement of the concept into the limited space of the verbal and the grammatical representation. The Psycho- analytical theory is both a method and a metaphor. As a method it applies Freudian principles to the interpretation of a poem which is the child of the poets psyche and intellect, but as a metaphor it has greater ramifications. Just as the psycho-analytical method explores the depths of the human psyche’ by interpreting the structures, psycho-analytical criticism penetrates deeper and deeper into the inner world of the poet. In effect there are two worlds, the intellectual and the psychological, each complementing the other and enriching both. In Derrida we find the culmination of the combination where he speaks of the linguistic parameters. In the text, the literary parameter in the context, the semiotic parameter in the inter text and the psycho cultural in the sub text. Derrida seems to span all aspects in the four steps provided by him.

### **Can We Postpone Considering the Meaning?**

The postponement of meaning poses a problem. When the meaning is postponed what is the value of the existing meaning, is a question to be answered. The extant meaning is not rejected but is a trigger for the next stage of perception. Postponement is only taking the present to a later point of time, it does not deny the present moment. Postponement is based on the present and Derrida’s postponement of meaning includes the present without negating it and encompasses the latter too.

Derrida’s theory makes superfluous the theories of Modernisms and Nowism. To say that Derrida does not guarantee any minimum meaning, or that the meaning jumps from one orbit to another as an electron does, is not a versatile metaphor. When an electron jumps an orbit, there is no old orbit and only the new is true. Can one say that of a meaning which has yielded a postponement?

Hence, Derrida's interpretation in the four-fold steps accounts for all the earlier meanings and includes all future meanings. To use a simile from science may not make literary criticism a science, but may illustrate the underlying methodology. Continuing in the same vein, we may say that a critic must have a stethoscope to read the pulse of the poet, a microscope to examine the details of the text, a telescope to understand it from a remote point of view, a periscope to read the unrevealed part of it, an ECG to measure its vibrations and EEG to understand the cerebrations. Scientific eclecticism and critical eclecticism meet and mingle to interpret a poem now and hereafter. The crowning glory of a critical pursuit is in the concluding line of Eliot's essay "As the critic grows older, his critical writings may be less fired by enthusiasm, but informed by wider interest and, one hopes, greater wisdom and humility".

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1. Eliot T. S., *To Criticise The Critic and Other Writings*, London. Faber & Faber 1965. P.21.
  2. "The Hollow Men" T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems of T.S.Eliot*. Faber & Faber, London 1974.
  3. *To Criticise The Critic and Other Writings*. P.26.
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