

Theoretical Foundations of T.S. Eliot's Criticism

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Abstract

T.S. Eliot's (1888-1965) is one of the greatest literary critics of England. Eliot's position as a critic has provoked a great deal of controversy, reaction and reassessments. For Eliot, criticism is not merely concerned with establishing literary and critical standards but also with indicating how a literary work can attain the height or level at which it can be called great. The greatness of literature has a great deal to do with a view of life, its aims and ideals and objectives. Therefore in the light of the higher values of life, criticism has an important function to perform. Eliot's proper criticism can be found in his essays on Marvell, Blake, Swinburne and Ezra Pound. In these essays Eliot repeatedly stresses the procedure of comparison and analysis, direct inquiry. In "The Function of criticism" Eliot defines criticism as "The commendation and exposition of works of art by means of written words." He says that criticism is not an autotelic activity. For a critic the traditional or the historical sense is more important than for a poet. We also get further insights into Eliot's Critical theory when he examines and distinguishes between different types of Critics in the essay "To criticize the critic." First, he tells about the nature of professional critics. Eliot points out that the second type of critic is the critic with a gusto. This Critic is the Critic draws our attention to the merits of the writers to whom we have negative and indifferent attitudes- and helps us to see their beauty and charm. The third type of critic is the theoretical or academic. Thus Eliot does not hesitate to make observations which may militate against his own theoretical standpoint behind the actual practice to criticism. In Eliot we find the signs of a developing and flexible mind. As a critic, Eliot has a definite theoretical approach based on merit, intelligence, and other human considerations.

Key Words: Eliot's, literary critics, deal of controversy, reaction and reassessments, proper criticism, hesitate, beauty and charm,

Thomas Stearns Eliot, (1888-1965) is one of the greatest literary critics of England from the point of view of the bulk and quality of his critical writings. In considering the function of criticism Eliot does not overlook the importance of the relationship between Life and Literature. He looks at both Life and Literature from a definite standpoint. For Eliot, criticism is not merely concerned with establishing literary and critical standards but also with indicating how a literary work can attain the height or level at which it can be called great. The greatness of literature has a great deal to do with a view of life, its aims and ideals and objectives. Therefore, in the light of the higher values of life, criticism has an important function to perform. In his view, the purpose of criticism is “the elucidation of works of art and correction of taste.”

The word ‘Criticism’ was used in the modern sense by Dryden in his preface to the State of Innocence (1677). He wrote, “Criticism as it was first instituted by Aristotle was meant to be a standard of Judging Well.” With Pope’s Essay on Criticism (1711) the term ‘Criticism’ was firmly established in English. Now the term literary Criticism is applied to the study of works of literature.

T.S. Eliot defines the nature and function of criticism in different contexts and on different occasions. In Selected Essays, he defines Criticism as the elucidation of works of art and correction of taste. He thus gives the first theoretical statement on the relationship between literary criticism and its function to inculcate in the reader the correct way of appreciating literature.

Later, he remarks that the function of criticism is to promote the understanding and enjoyment of literature. Eliot is of the view that the rudiment of criticism is to enable the critic to select a good poem and reject a bad one.

Eliot relates criticism to philosophical activity in respect of its serious function. He observes: “It would appear that criticism like any Philosophical activity is so inevitable

and requires no justification you cannot deplore criticism unless you deprecate Philosophy”.

In “The Function of Criticism” Eliot stresses the fact – finding responsibility of a critic which may require him to examine even the minutest details connected with the work of literature. He advises the critic to go directly to a work of art, and analyse it and appreciate it instead of examining any extraneous details. Discussing Wordsworth, Eliot states that Wordsworth secretly loved his sister Dorothy may be true, but that fact does not add to our enjoyment and understanding of the Lucy poems. Eliot turns down any critical effort at “the explanation of poetry by examination of its source.” In On Poetry and Poets he observes :

For analysis, I can only say that a knowledge of the springs which released a poem is not necessarily a help towards understanding the poem: too much information about the origins of the poem may even break my contact with it

While Eliot discourages this method of Criticism which seeks “a knowledge of the springs”, he draws attention to the more serious issues that criticism is concerned with.

F.R. Leavis in a review captioned “Eliot’s stature as Critic”, brings serious charges against Eliot as a Critic. He writes:

What was not at once apparent to all of those impressed was that some of the ideas, attitudes and valuations put into currency by Eliot were arbitrary

Leavis uses even harsh words like “the absurdity of the dictum” to criticise Eliot’s important formulation about the perfect artist. But Leavis’s remarks about Eliot are not to the point. They are emotional or smack of rancour when, for instance, he finds a significant defect of intelligence in Eliot.

Eliot's position as a critic has provoked a great deal of controversy, reaction and reassessments. Consequently, different meanings have been read into the intentions behind this reaction. R.H. Robbins, a hostile critic, in a book The T.S. Eliot Myth, now regarded as a very monument to incomprehension, sees Eliot's criticism as part of the Counter – pressure of this century against the Liberal achievement of the past three or four centuries. It is true that Eliot has been markedly influenced by the great thinker – critics who hated that “Liberal achievement.” Chief among them is T.E. Hulme. Of course there were other distinguished figures such as Remy de Gourmont, Irving Babbitt, Pound, Laforgue and F.H. Bradley – names which appear prominently in scholarly estimates. They too seem to have influenced Eliot. But Hulme had a greater impact on him.

Eliot's proper criticism can be found in his essays on Marvell, Blake, Swinburne and Ezra Pound. In these essays Eliot repeatedly stresses the procedure of comparison and analysis, direct inquiry, examination of a text and a disinterested assessment. In the essay “From Poe to Valery” we find that no apparent musical rhyme is able to soothe Eliot's critical eye to slumber. Regarding Poe's “The Ravan” Eliot makes a significant remarks:

The bird is addressed as ‘no Craven’ quite
needlessly except for the pressing need of a
rhyme to ‘ravan’ – a surrender to the
exigencies of rhyme with which I am sure
Malherbe would have had no patience.

Eliot's critical essays, namely “The Function of Criticism”, “The Frontiers of Criticism”, and “The Experiment in Criticism”, deserve particular attention because they represent the theoretical grounds of his criticism. These essays underline Eliot's unhappiness with impressionistic or aesthetic criticism. He has a wrangle with Middleton Murry's “Inner Voice” in “The Function of Criticism.” Eliot maintains that true criticism always aims at objectivity and springs directly from the text, and every generalization is said to be based upon it or is immediately relevant to it. Rebutting Murry's argument Eliot holds that in the pursuit of objectivity in criticism some rules, some guideline or authority should be

acknowledged, for constant listening to one's inner voice will lead one to fancy or fiction or sheer subjectivity and make criticism meaningless. Eliot is critical of Middleton Murry's lines :

The English writer, the English divine, the
English statesman, inherit no rules from their
forebears; they inherit only this : a sense
that in the last resort they must depend upon
the inner voice – and says that in criticism
the “inner-voice” will not work, it will rather
lead the critic away as it is equal
to “doing as one likes”.

Eliot terms this “inner voice” as “Whiggery” or
“Muddle through”.

In “The Function of Criticism” Eliot defines criticism as “The Commendation and exposition of works of art by means of written words.” He says that Criticism is not an autotelic activity. For a critic the traditional or the historical sense is more important than for a poet. As Remy de Gourmont puts it, the chief tools of a critic are “Comparison and analysis.” And indeed they are tools to be handled with care. Analysis, then, demands that a Critic should have a highly developed sense of fact. Scholarship, even in its humblest forms implies stress on facts. As Eliot remarks:

And any book, any essay, any note in Notes and Queries,
which produces a fact even of the
lowest order about a work of art but
fact cannot corrupt taste, The real
corrupters are those who supply opinion or
fancy an attempt to present Coleridge
in an attraction costume?

About a Critic's task he further says that a Critic should try to overcome his prejudices and Whims in order to love balance, truth and objectivity in his criticism. He makes a commendable remark in this context:

The critic, one should suppose, is he is to justify his existence, should endeavor to discipline his personal prejudices and cranks – tares to which we are all subject – and compose his differences with as many of his fellows as possible, in the common pursuit of true judgment.

Eliot regards Wordsworth's preface to 'Lyrical Ballads' Coleridge's Biographia Literaria and Keats' letters and his comments on poetry as significant contributions to Criticism. He finds the marks of real genius in Keats' utterances on poetry and art. Eliot says that each new master of criticism renders a useful service merely by the fact that his errors are different from the last, and if the sequence of critics is longer then there is the possibility of a greater amount of correction.

We also get further insights into Eliot's critical theory when he examines and distinguishes between different types of critics in the essay "To Criticise The Critic." First, he tells about the nature of a professional critic. According to Eliot, a professional critic is one who thinks that his literary criticism is the chief and only title to fame. He regards the professional critic as the super Reviewer, as he has been the official critic for some magazine or newspaper. In this category he includes critics like Paul Elmer More, Saint-Beuve, Desmond Mac Carthy and also Edmund Gosse.

Eliot point out that the second type of Critic is the Critic with a gusto. This critic draws our attention to the merits of the writers to whom we have a negative and indifferent attitude – and helps us to see their beauty and charm. Critics who belong to this type include George Saintsbury, Charles Whibley and Arthur Quiller Couch.

The third type of critic is the theoretical or academic. The critics who belong to this category include I.A. Richards, W.P. Ker, William Empson, and some others.

Commenting on F.B. Leavis, Eliot says that Leavis is an important Critic and also Calls him a moralistic critic.

Eliot's essays on Dante, Marvell, Massinger, Swinburne, Ezra Pound, Tennyson and Johnson may be regarded among the most valuable attempts at criticism. It is evident that in these essays one finds Eliot's emphasis on analysis and comparison, insight, intensity, impersonality, objectivity and generalizations based upon the text as the essential principles of criticism in his theoretical framework.

In his preface to Leon Vivante's English Poetry and Its contributions to the knowledge of a Creative Principle, Eliot admits that he always remembered a distinction drawn by R.G. Collingwood at the beginning of The Principles of Art. In this book Collingwood contrasts two types of theorists in the field of aesthetics the "Philosopher – aestheticism" and the "artist - aestheticism" and draws attention to different types of errors that each type of theoreticism is liable to commit though Vivante seems to escape the mistakes of both.

In Eliot's opinion the Philosopher – aesthetician is a Philosopher who considers it necessary to produce a volume on aesthetics to complete his philosophical system. His theory appears to have no relation to our appreciation of the arts and as such fails to impress us. On the other hand the artist – aestheticism in order to compensate for his ignorance of philosophy may rely too much upon his sensibility.

Thus Eliot does not hesitate to make observations which may militate against his own theoretical standpoint behind the actual practice to criticism. In Eliot we find the signs of a developing and flexible mind. As a critic then, Eliot has a definite theoretical approach based on merit, intelligence, and other human considerations, but all these must help towards providing a useful elucidation of a literary text, and not isolating it from Social, human or moral realities. He is a new critic but not in the usual sense of the new critics who wanted literary criticism to remain confined to the printed page. Like most of the New Critics Eliot's Critical Theory also has implications for his criticism of poetry.

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