

The History, Nature, and Functions of Literary Criticism - A Brief Survey

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Abstract

This study purports to enquire into the history, nature, and function of literary criticism. The function of criticism and the role of the critics change from time to time. This study also explores Aristotle's conception of tragedy as the perfect form of art. Aristotle's *Poetics* (1961) offers an account of what he calls poetry, which is a synthesis of a poet, author, comedy, tragedy, lyric poetry, epic poetry and that they are all imitations but in different ways. It is through imitation that man acquires knowledge, and the end of knowledge is pleasure. Aristotle's *Poetics* defines poetry from the point of view of aesthetics and poetry is primarily a structure. This insistence on structure is the central point of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Plato, who was endowed with literary gifts, looked at all the problems with a lofty mind. He believed that all earthly things are mere copies of the ideal which exists only in heaven.

Keywords: Aristotle, criticism, functions, Horace, Longinus, Plato.

Nature and functions of criticism

What is criticism?

The term criticism is derived from the Greek word 'Krites' which literally means 'to judge'. Literary criticism is, therefore, the exercise of judgement on works of literature. In other words, it is the play of the mind on a work of literature and its function is to examine the merits and demerits and eventually to evaluate its artistic values. But when we endeavour to examine the nature and function of literary criticism in some details, we are confronted with various and contradictory theories and definitions put forward by different critics from antiquity to the present day.

The monumental New English dictionary defines criticism as 'the art of estimating the qualities and character of literary or artistic work'. It also gives Dryden's definition of criticism as 'a standard of judging well' and Professor Dowden's as 'the effort to see things as they are without partiality, without the obtrusion of personal liking or disliking'. According to Matthew Arnold (1893), criticism is a disinterested endeavour to learn and to propagate the best that is known and taught in the world. The most authoritative American dictionary Webster's New International defines criticism as 'the art of judging or evaluating with knowledge and propriety, the beauties and faults of works of art or literature'. In the encyclopaedia, critics may analyse without judging. However, Professor Moulton (1971) admits that there are two types of criticism. They are judicial criticism which is an enquiry into what the object of study ought to be: and analytical criticism which is an enquiry into what it is. In other words, the judicial critic does the function of a judge whereas the

analytical critic does the function of an investigator. The literary judge uses evaluative terms freely and by preference. The scientific critic, on the other hand, does not commit himself to assertions, goodness, or badness. He accepts the object of his time as what it is and tries to comprehend it by analysis. Although Moulton does not altogether rule out judgement, his emphasis is on the judgement aspect of criticism. His repudiation of judicial criticism has been followed by many other critics like Joel Elias Spingarn (1910); Prof I.A. Richards (1968) himself shifted his emphasis from the judicial to the analytical criticism. Prof I.A. Richards in (1928) remarked that 'to set up as a critic is to set up as a judge of values.' Later he recanted this view in his critical works and expressed his mature view that evaluation or judgment is no essential part of the critical process. Moreover, he himself follows the method of experiment and analysis.

Joseph Addison (2014) defines criticism as 'the true critic will dwell on excellences rather than imperfections, to discover the concealed beauties of a writer and communicate to the world such things as are worth their observations'. J.W.H. Atkins (1952) opines that 'criticism is the play of the mind on the aesthetic qualities of literature, having for its object an interpretation of literary values'. Walter Pater goes on to define criticism as 'to feel the virtue of the poet or the painter, to disengage it, to set it forth are the three stages of a critics' duty.' The sole task of criticism is to answer three questions: what has the artist tried to express? How has he succeeded in expressing it? Was it worth expressing? - Springer.

Why such diversity of critical values?

The fact that there is no unanimity among thinkers about the definitions and theories of criticism evidently reveals the complex nature of criticism and its functions. There are as many theories of criticism as there are critics. This is so because the attitude towards criticism is determined by several factors.

In the first place, criticism is to a great extent determined and guided by the prejudices and predilections of the critic himself. Criticism is thus directly related to the critics' own intellectual preoccupations and his philosophy of life, that is, his perspective. These aspects vary from person to person. Hence the diversity of critical theories. A critic with a moral and religious bias would hold the view that the function of criticism is to examine the moral significance of the work of art. Similarly, to a critic with an artistic bend of mind, the function of criticism would be mainly appreciation.

Secondly, the theory of criticism is closely linked with the theory of poetry. Hence the idea of criticism varies with the idea of literature. For instance, the Neoclassical Criticism is built upon the neoclassical theory of literature. Romantic emphasis on individualism accounts for the romantic impressionistic view of criticism.

Thirdly the critical theories are closely connected with the spirit of the age. They are also influenced by the intellectual and moral environments in which the critic lives and works. The modern age is remarkable for its unprecedented development in social and behavioural sciences such as sociology, psychology, and anthropology. Hence, we have the psychological and sociological approach to criticism. Marxism paves the way for Marxian theory of literary criticism. Existentialism accounts for existential criticism.

Functions of Criticism

There has been a lot of controversy concerning the functions of criticism and the role of critics. According to the formal and classical view, the critic is the lawgiver whose main concern is to instruct the writers and to lay down rules which they are in duty bound to follow. The opposite view is that the function of criticism is to interpret and analyse the works of art and compare them with others. Literary criticism is the play of the

mind on a work of literature and the critics business is, instead of laying down rules, to follow the artist and examine the work of art as it really is. In other words, the critic should put to searching examination the matter, the manner, the technique, and the language of a piece of literature and thereby assess its literary merits. However, the function of criticism is not fault-finding nor is its function to shower encomium on a favourite author. Indiscriminate flattery is as bad as indiscriminate fault finding. Literary criticism is the science of forming and expressing correct judgment upon the value and merits of work of literature. It is only through criticism that intelligent appreciation and comprehension become possible. As Cecil Day-Lewis has aptly remarked that the critic has one preeminent task, the task of easing or widening or deepening our response to poetry or to whatever branch of literature he may have chosen as his special study.

The Changing Role of Criticism

The function of criticism and the role of critics change from age to age. Literary criticism as a systematic study of literature, its principles and problems began in Europe with the Greeks. Plato was the first Greek critic (427-387 B.C). He was concerned with the problem of defining the utility of poetry in the educational system of his ideal state. He found poetry wanting. His approach was thus fundamentally utilitarian. His theories of literature are also based on his system of ethics. He argued that poetry is merely an imitation of life and therefore appeals not to the reason but the emotions of man. On this ground, he condemned poetry as immoral and untruthful and positively harmful and banished poets from his ideal republic. Aristotle (384-322 B.C) in his Poetics effectively answered Plato's charges against poetry and asserted the superiority of poetry over philosophy. He proved convincingly that poetry represents the universal truth about life and imparts a sort of divine pleasure and in the form of tragedy, it purges off the latent emotions of pity and fear. Longinus in his Treatise: On the Sublime (1st century A.D) proves that the value of literature lies in its unique powers of moving, transporting the reader and lifting him out of himself. Emphasising the importance of strong feelings in literature, he believed the delighted ecstasy rather than persuasiveness is the aim of great writing.

Horace and Quintilian are the most important Latin critics who flourished in the 1st century B.C. Horace in his Ars Poetica advocated the imitation of Greek models and laid down literary principles based on Greek literature to be followed by those who aspired to become poets and dramatists. With him began the formal criticism. Quintilian was more concerned with prose, especially on the qualities of clearness, terseness, and design in prose writings. It was he who started the comparative method of criticism by comparing Greek literature with Roman as well as the Greek language with Latin.

During the Medieval Period, literary criticism was merely a compendium of the contributions of the ancient writers. The greatest critic of the Middle Ages was Dante. As a literary critic, he was concerned with the problem of an appropriate language for poetry or poetic diction. We see in Dante for the first time, a great critic's analysis of the main problem of language that a poet faces in the process of poetic composition. Thus, with Dante begins modern literary criticism. The renaissance critics in Europe have very simple standards of literary criticism. They revived the criticism of Aristotle and Horace. They believed that the function of criticism is to teach the writers how to write effectively. Thus, they constructed dogmatic principles based on the generalisation of Aristotle and Horace and writers were advised to follow them strictly. This view was even held by such liberal critics as Philip Sidney and Ben Jonson. Sidney (1585) was the first important critic in England who defended poetry for its ennobling effect on the minds of the readers as well as its universal appeal. Throughout the renaissance period, the main purpose of critical writing was

to set up a defence of poetry and to emphasise its moral value. Ben Jonson (1923) gave a vigorous account of his classical view. He stood for discipline and restraint and thus he anticipated the more rigid view on the imitation of the classics which became prominent in the latter half of the 17th century.

John Dryden was the greatest critic in 17th century England. His achievements in the field of literary criticism are so comprehensive that he is rightly regarded as 'the father of English criticism'. As a literary critic, Dryden has cut entirely new channels. In his critical Treatises, we get not only criticism but criticism becoming conscious of itself, analysing its objects with sympathy, and understanding. His attitude towards literary problems was so liberal that he cheerfully abandoned ideas when he found they were no longer tenable or relevant. He thus refused to be influenced by the pronouncements of French neoclassical critics like Nicolas Boileau who were bent on curtailing the freedom of literary compositions as well as judgment. It is because of his liberal attitude that he invariably followed the tragicomedies of the English playwrights though they were not in conformity with the French ideal of singleness of plot. This also shows that he refused to render servile obedience even to Aristotle. He was the first critic who asserted that literature is an organic force that develops with the development of a nation. He was also the first critic to introduce the methods of biographical criticism, historical criticism, and comparative criticism.

The literary criticism of the 17th and 18th centuries indeed derived its inspiration from renaissance critics of Europe. But it assumed that the principles of literature were to be explored in the same rational spirit as the laws of the physical universe. Alexander Pope (1688-1744) in his versified Treatise, "An Essay on Criticism" gave his advice to the critics to follow nature which means to follow the classical rules which have been derived from the ancients. But Pope like Dryden is not a blind follower. He admits that literary beauty is possible even without following the rules and in this manner, he asserts the native independence of the English temperament. This rational and moral approach was explicit in Dr Johnson (1709-1784) the literary dictator of his age. He, in his 'Lives of Poets' played the role of a typical judicial critic who expected the poets to conform to his standards. Other critics of the 18th century like Joseph Addison also stood for the genuine exploration of the essential nature of literature and the absolute standards of judgment. Thus, throughout the neoclassical period, criticism was concerned with the notion that poetry both instructs and delights.

However, such a view of the function of criticism soon became out modelled. In the latter half of the 18th century and the early 19th century, with the rise of romantic individualism, the conception of the function of criticism underwent a radical change. Under the pressure of the romantic movement, the main function of criticism turned out to be aesthetic. In other words, the function of criticism was to promote appreciation and enjoyment of literature. As the critic is a man of deep learning and good taste, he himself enjoys what he reads. Then he endeavours to communicate his own aesthetic pleasure to his readers. Criticism of the highest order is the uninhibited expression of the personal impression of an exceptionally gifted and sensitive individual. It stimulates and encourages the readers to develop their sensibility and understand literature- its virtues and its beauties. It was also in the romantic era that several critics turned their attention to the creative process within the poet himself and the role of imagination in it. The best of such critics has been the poets themselves. Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads (1800) although remarkable for his discussion of the language of poetry is mainly concerned with the theory of poetic creation, that is the analysis of the nature of the poetic mind and its characteristic kind of consciousness. Coleridge's Biographia Literaria (1817) gives a philosophical definition of imagination and distinguishes it from fancy. Shelley's Defence of Poetry is another celebrated critical treatise which reaffirms that the utility of poetry lies in the fact that it widens the sphere of human sensibility. According to him, poets are the unacknowledged

legislators of the world. They enlarge and enrich human consciousness and hence what they compose has value for humanity.

In the 19th century, there was thus a tremendous activity in the realm of impressionistic criticism, but it tended to be wayward and unbalanced because of the unscrupulous likes and dislikes on the part of the critics.

Aristotle's Conception of Tragedy

Aristotle's definition of tragedy is the culmination of his view that tragedy is the perfect form of art. All the elements of an epic are to be found in tragedy but not all qualities of tragedy are to be found in the epic. Although at the end of the 'Poetics' he offers a brief analysis of the epic, he acknowledges tragedy as the superior literary form. His definition of tragedy has evoked more response than any other critical passage in literature. The definition of tragedy runs as follows: 'tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative, through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation (catharsis) of these emotions'' – Prof Butcher

An analysis of the definition would reveal that tragedy is primarily an artistic structure, and that the emphasis is an artistic unity. Imitation of action implies that tragic art is more than a matter of character as is understood in English dramatic criticism. Moreover, the action imitated is of a certain magnitude. Magnitude implies the size that is the plot must have order, logic, symmetry, and perspicuity. Tragic action must be contained within the limits of artistic probability and the total structure should be complete that is the various elements must support one another and sustain the total effect. Thus, when we consider this definition. The first thing that we notice is that it places its emphasis on plot.

Plot and Characters:

The structure of the play is called its plot. The plot of the play is not the summary of its story. It is a restructuring of the story and ordering of the significant elements of action, character, thought, diction, melody, and spectacle to produce a final total effect. Aristotle says that the plot is the first principle and the soul of tragedy and that there can be no tragedy without plot. The use of the word 'soul' is significant because it engenders the idea of organic unity. The plot is not a mechanical manipulation of incidents and situations in an order. It is the first principle by which the various ingredients of drama are harmoniously blended into a living unity even as the various organs of a living body are held together by the soul. The relation between action (praxis) and plot (muthos) is significant to the correct understanding of Aristotle's conception of the tragedy. The action does not mean plot because an action is a form which a tragedian contemplates, and it stands logically and chronologically before the business of composition. The plot does not appear until the artist sets about rendering the apprehended form into the dramatic medium. Hence as Aristotle says the plot is the imitation of an action. This may appear double imitation. But the action is visible only to the artist's eye and the dramatist then articulates it in the form of the plot in which a line is visible to the reader or spectator. Aristotle says that the action of the plot must be complete which means that it must have a beginning, a middle and an end, all parts of the action must be equally essential to the whole, so that it would not be possible to remove a part without doing damage to the whole; all the parts must be properly ordered with an appreciable coherence. Aristotle himself draws an analogy of an animal. An animal of excessive length is ugly because it lacks proportion and balance. The same is true of the plot

which can produce aesthetic pleasure only if it has harmony, proportion, order, and unity- in short beauty. All these precepts add up to what is known as the principle of organic unity in literature.

Having said this much we must consider the relative importance of plot and character. The crucial point is that Aristotle puts the plot above character. According to him, the character is only an agency like plot, thought, diction, music, and spectacle to promote the interest of the plot in which the meaning of the play subsists. This subordination of character- interest is the main hitch in Aristotelian criticism for the modern tendency has been to put character above plot. The rise of romantic criticism and the drama of soul analysis through reverie and soliloquy has shifted the interest to the character. Coleridge who could well be called the progenitor of modern criticism says that Shakespeare's plays illustrate the principle of character deciding plot. He cites Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* as an instance in point. The course of the plot is determined by Dogberry and Verges. Had they been less stupid, the action would have taken a different course. Through him, Shakespeare evidently demonstrates the primacy of character over plot. This point of view reaches its acme in A.C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* where all attention is centred on character study, pushing it to the extreme limit of reconstructing the biographies of the heroes. Bradley defines tragedy from the point of view of the tragic hero: what the hero does is decided by what he is. What Hamlet decides is his destiny. This approach has further been expanded by novel criticism. Henry James in his 'Art of Fiction' goes to the extent of saying that action is but a manifestation of character and if a lady holds her head and looks at you in a certain way, it is action enough. This implies that everything is decided by the psychology of characters. In modern psychological novels, we think of the stream of consciousness and not of anything done.

In criticism, the predominance of character over plot begins with the appearance of the novel as a popular literary form in the 18th century. A novel is a literary form where the writer has almost infinite scope to develop character and to comment upon it. It is from the novel that literary sensibility turned to drama. Shakespeare's plays were discussed as though they were written to be read as we read novels. Hence the close study of Shakespearean characters. Now there is a reversal. Aristotle's point of view is now given greater importance. A play is essentially a structure within which alone can we see the character of the tragic hero. What Hamlet is, is already fixed by what he does within the four corners of the plot. Shakespeare does not make a plot; he explores the tragic hero within the four corners of the plot that borrows. Dover Wilson writes about 'what happens in Hamlet thereby conceding that action is what decides character.

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.)-Poetics

Vindication of Poetry

Aristotle is the greatest of the philosophers that the world has ever witnessed, was the disciple of Plato. But it was given to him to defend poetry against his own master. In his 'Poetics' Aristotle answers Plato's charges against poetry by circumventing Plato's philosophical approach but directs his investigation to other channels. Poetry should be studied as poetry and not from the point of view of its influence on the readers. True to his scientific bent of mind, Aristotle, first, classifies the various types of poetry to trace its development and to distil out of his observed facts the essence of poetry. He uses the word poetry to include all fine arts and everything that comes under imaginative literature. The epic, the lyric, the dithyrambic (Greek choric song of vehement character) comedy and tragedy are among the fine arts. Poetry is distinguished from other arts in the matter of imitation whereas music imitates the sound and paint colours. Poetry uses words within the art of poetry. Further distinctions can be seen in the matter, manner, and method of imitation. Thus, tragic poetry is an imitation of high life while comic poetry imitates low life. We

can see a distinction between the epic and tragedy. In an epic, the method is narration whereas in tragedy the method is dialogue. This is how criticism approaches art. The critic is not concerned with the influence of poetry. The function of the critic is to investigate poetry as an autonomous self-sufficient structure. Imitation is an integral function of human nature. It is through imitation that man acquires knowledge. The end of knowledge is pleasure. Knowledge may lead to philosophy. This is what happens in the realm of philosophy. But in poetry, the purpose of knowledge is aesthetic pleasure and not moral edification. When Aristotle says that poetry has only pleasure as its end, he opens the aesthetic approach as opposed to Plato's moralistic approach.

During the development of thought in 'Poetics', Aristotle indirectly answers Plato's philosophy of idea in imitation. According to Plato, the idea lies outside the phenomena of life and nature. Hence poetry has no chance to enter the idea directly; it should stand twice removed from reality. Aristotle challenges the idea behind this through his theory of the universal which paved the way for an altogether new approach to poetry. It says that every object in nature has its idea embedded within it.

The poets' function is to seize the universal embedded in the particular and to give it a structure. The distinction between poetry and history tells us what happened; poetry, what may happen. The historian is concerned with the particular facts which exist in time and space. The poet is concerned with the probable that is, he abstracts out of reality something that exists independent of the restrictions of time and space. For example, take Shakespeare's Hamlet. Hamlet is a character recorded in the history of Denmark. Shakespeare's Hamlet is rescued from the limitations of history, and he becomes a character of universal validity, a character that has meaning at any time and any place. In simpler language, Aristotle means to say that what is created in poetry has a universal appeal, because the poet has imitated not the particular but the universal, not the real but the ideal that is contained within reality. The poet has the power to penetrate the appearance of reality and reach out for the truth or idea that lies encased within. Poetic truth is, therefore, higher than historical truth. Poetry is more philosophical than philosophy itself. Perhaps Keats is the only poet who expresses this idea best: Beauty is truth, truth beauty.

Aristotle's Poetics now must define poetry from the point of view of aesthetics. Poetry is primarily a structure. This insistence on structure is the central point of Aristotle's poetics. Structure implies an organisation or ordering of words so that the resulting structure can end in aesthetic pleasure. Beauty is always associated with harmony, order, and unity. In a poem, words, metaphors, images, meter, rhythm rhyme, and lines are organised into a structure. The elements existing together in a delicate balance, giving a total complete structure from which, the significance of the poem emanates. What is true of a poem is true of a novel or a play, the meaning of which subsists on the totality of its structure. What Aristotle says implies the basic principle of artistic discipline, restraint, and ordering. Naturally the classic conception of art ensues from it.

The modern structural critics of the Chicago school in America draw their inspiration from Aristotle. Aristotle distinguishes two kinds of poetry- the epic, dramatic (tragic and comic) and the lyric. He discusses the differences between these from the point of view of content, form and style and applying his scientific method, discovers a certain process of evolution in poetry. This is how he arrives at the conclusion that the tragic poetry is the most evolved literary form. There is of course the rivalry between the epic and the tragic as superior forms of poetry. In subject matter, they are alike in imitating the high noble life, but in form and rigour of structure tragic poetry gains the upper hand. the tragic and the comic are distinguished by their themes of imitation. Tragedy imitates high life whereas comedy imitates low life. It is unfortunate that

Aristotle does not deal with comedy in poetics, he postpones it to another lecture. This has had the effects of later criticism always dealing with tragedy as serious work of art while saying very little about comedy. Although we have Aristophanes, Plautus, Moliere, Sheridan, Oscar Wilde writing comedies, we have not had any significant critical theory of comedy. We must blame Aristotle for his neglect of comedy.

Thus, Aristotle successfully and finally refuted the charges of Plato and provided a defence of poetry which has ever since used by lovers of poetry in justification of their muse. He breathed new life and soul into the concept of poetic imitation, enlarged its scope and showed that it is, a creative process.

The Three Unities

Aristotle's concern with plot has resulted in many significant critical observations. For instance, there is the famous theory of the three unities-of time, place, and action. Only the last of these can be ascribed to Aristotle. The principle of organic unity requires that all characters and scenes must make an essential contribution to the all-important plot, while the choice of writing either comedy or tragedy, leads us to write about characters who are either better or worse than we are. On both these grounds, it would be improper to mingle comic action with tragic or tragic action with comic since the unity and integrity of form will be lost. The plot requires only this unity of action, according to Aristotle: of time in drama, he says only that tragedy tries for the most part to stay within a single revolution of the sun whereas the epic recognises no limits in the time of its action. This is only an observation on the usual practice of tragedy and epic as Aristotle knew them and in no sense a rule. He has nothing whatsoever to say about the place or setting of a tragedy. He does not say whether the action must take place in one locality. Yet the Italian renaissance critic Lodovico Castelvetro misconstrued these hints and expounded the Aristotelian rules of the unity of time, place, and action in drama in the 1450 edition of 'Poetics'. In other words, he misinterpreted the hints as an Aristotelian injunction that a well-knit play should follow the rule of 24 hours of action in the same place and the action itself must be one. The principle of the three unities was very influential in France in the 17th century and the French critic Boileau pronounced the three unities as a sine-qua-non (something essential) of dramatic composition. In England, Philip Sidney was its exponent, and the theory was a source of embarrassment to the late 17th century and 18th century critics who faced the fact that Shakespeare and most other Elizabethan dramatists had paid no attention to them. It was Dryden who first freed English criticism from this dogma which Dr Johnson finally buried.

Now that the primacy of plot has been established, Aristotle goes on to a technical discussion of plot in tragedy: the difference between simple and complex plots the nature of reversals, discoveries, and calamities. A simple plot moves without any complication is without any violent or sudden change. A complex plot according to Aristotle must not be simple, but it must have peripeteia (reversal of intention) and anagnorisis (discovery or recognition of truth). In the best ideal tragic plot, the two coincide, that is the discovery leads to the reversal in action; the best example of complex plot is Oedipus, the king by Sophocles. It is the discovery of Oedipus' history that ironically reverses his fortune, leading to catastrophe.

Catharsis

One of the most debated clauses in the definition of tragedy, the last one regarding catharsis. At the end of the definition, Aristotle speaks of the end of tragedy as the rousing of the emotions of pity and fear for a proper catharsis of these emotions. Aristotle does not explain the term catharsis in the poetics. Since he suggests that he would apply the word to comedy also, he might have elaborated upon it in the last lecture on comedy. So, we are left to fend for ourselves, to discover its meaning and application. In the context of

the 'poetics' however one important observation must be made. Plato has banished poetry from his ideal kingdom because it is untruthful, irrational, and immoral. Aristotle indirectly answers his master at the final turn of the definition where he suggests that poetry has its own method of dealing with emotion and thus aiding and assisting the health of the human soul. Aristotle thereby answers his master and justifies the value of all imaginative literature.

Catharsis is a difficult word to translate. In its technical sense, it appears only once in Poetics though else where he uses it to mean a purging or purification of the soul. The word appears in Aristotle's Poetics also where he speaks of the cathartic effect of music. He promises to explain the meaning of the word. When he talks of poetry but in the extant version of poetics no explanation is found. Hence the word has been a fertile ground for critical interpretations. The first question is whether it is a medical or religious metaphor. Aristotle's father was a physician and hence the son must have observed his father purging the body of malcontents thus restoring the health of the body. The problem is whether the emotions of pity and fear are to be expelled. There is nothing in pity and fear to show that they are evil passions. Hence the expulsion could not have been meant. The emotions are roused to strike a balance between them. Catharsis implies a mean or middle path between extremes of pity and fear. While discussing ethics Aristotle recommends the principle of balance between different moral values. The basic Greek virtue is in the precept, nothing in excess. Therefore, excess emotions of pity and fear would lead to the physical, spiritual, and moral ill health; when a balance is achieved, a state of health is attained. This might have been Aristotle's meaning.

Catharsis could also be a religious metaphor. It is the equivalent of the act of worship or prayer. It is an experience when the individual's soul is surrendering to something larger and greater than itself. It implies abnegation of all desires and will, a state that Buddha calls 'nirvana'. Wordsworth comes very close to this meaning of catharsis when he speaks of a 'serene, blessed mood' in which the burden of the mystery is lightened, even the motion of the blood is suspended and by an eye made quiet by the power of joy, we can see into the life of things. It is perhaps in this sense that Milton interprets catharsis in his preface to 'Samson Agonistes'. At the end of the play when the death of Samson along with the destruction of philistines is quoted, the mood is 'calm of mind, all passions spent.' This is a religious experience. The Greek tragic theatre is the equivalent of a cathedral where the devout Christian rushes and blesses himself in silence. 'How does catharsis operate? Does it work on the character upon the stage or on the spectator in the theatre? It should also imply an identification between the spectator and the character. The experience is intimately connected with the idea of dramatic illusion. Quiller C ouch comes very close to this idea when he says that it is the spectator's feeling when he sees the tragic hero suffering upon the stage saying to himself, 'there but for the grace of God, go I'. When Lear suffers on the stage the spectators feeling is that he would well have been a Lear in the world, and it is only his good luck that he is a spectator and not the tragic hero upon the stage. Incidentally it is interesting to investigate if catharsis is applicable to Shakespeare's tragedies. Greek tragedy is founded on Greek myth, which is a shared experience of the Greek spectators. But Shakespeare's tragedies do not have behind them any such myth. For the Greek spectators there is no distinction between their religious faith and the myth they believe in when they witnessed the ordered experience calculated to rouse the emotions of pity and fear, it was easy for them to go through catharsis. Shakespeare could not work upon any such shared religious experience. Hence the inapplicability of Aristotelian catharsis to his plays. Nevertheless, king Lear comes very close to the Greek conception of tragedy, for what happens to Lear can be called a cathartic experience, when his inborn pride is beaten out of him by irony of circumstances provoked by his own character and action as well as external agencies beyond his control.

When he finally stands stark naked in the storm and breaks out into a cry ‘unaccommodated man is but a forked animal’, we know what it is to feel pity and fear at the destiny of man.

In more recent criticism Aristotle’s catharsis has been given a broader meaning. I.A. Richards for instance says that pity and fear, two generic emotions, pity stands for all emotions that attract and fear for all emotions that repel. When poetic creation takes place emotions are thus dialectically organised and ordered into a balance. Third balance is catharsis. All poetry implies the balancing of emotions. Thus Keats ‘Nightingale Ode begins by balancing pain and happiness. T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* brings together the joy and cruelty of April. When we use the terms like paradox, tension, irony, ambiguity in modern poetry, we unconsciously make use of the Aristotelian concept of catharsis when the word is properly understood.

Plato (427-387 B.C)

Classical criticism began with Plato who of course recorded the thoughts of his master Socrates. He is the first conscious critic who has put his unique ideas in the most systematic manner in his ‘Dialogues’. He has placed criticism on an exalted plain and has something substantial to say to all ages. *Ion* and *The Republic* (book X) are two works in which he has expressed his views on art and literature forcefully and at length. His theories on poetic inspiration, imitation and his condemnation of poetry are not only interesting in themselves but are of great historical significance.

Plato was richly endowed with literary gifts and being the pupil of Socrates, he looked at all the problems from the lofty moral point of view. He was thus primarily a moralist. In other words, he studied science, art and poetry not from the aesthetic point of view but from the ethical point of view. The two important critical theories of Plato are the theory of inspiration and theory of imitation. According to his theory of inspiration the poet is a possessed creature. His language is not that of normal human beings. He speaks in a divinely inspired frenzy. He is thus different from ordinary people, and he must be judged by different standards. The poet according to Plato is either a prophet or a mad man or in some case or both. This view is suggested by Plato in his *Phaedrus*. The same notion is further developed in his *Ion*: for the poet is a light and winged and holy thing and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired, and is out of his sense, and the mind is no longer in him. When he has not attained this state, he is powerless and is unable to utter his oracles’. In short, the poet speaks divine truth as he is divinely inspired like prophets. Poetry is not a craft which can be learned and practised at will. It is the consequence of inspiration, the divine speaking through the poet. This theory of inspiration as laid down by Plato in *Ion* embodying the notion that poetry is pure inspiration has survived even today with certain modifications. Shakespeare has aptly noted: ‘the lunatic, the lover and the poet are of imagination all compact.’ Later Dryden remarked in his *Absalom and Achitophel*: great wits are sure to madness near allied.’

In his *Republic*, Plato draws a distinction between the poet and the philosopher to the advantage of the latter. As Plato developed his moral ideals further, he became more conscious of the responsibilities of the poets towards the state at large. Then he realized that the poet is inferior to the philosopher because he appeals to the emotions of the people and not to their intellect and he is thus harmful to society. Moreover, what the poet expresses is not reality but an imitation of it and thereby he misleads the people. This idea is developed in his second theory of poetry which is popularly known as the Theory of Imitation.

Plato was an idealist. He believed that ideas alone are true and real. And the earthly things like beauty, goodness and justice are mere copies of the ideal beauty, ideal goodness and justice which exist only in

Heaven. He considers imitation as mere Mimesis or representation of these ideal forms and not expression which is creative. The Republic Book X gives a reasoned and elaborate statement of his views on imitation. To put it briefly, if true reality consists of the ideas of things of which individual objects are but reflections or imitations, then anyone who imitates those individual objects in imitating an imitation and so producing something which is still farther removed from reality.

Plato derived his theory of imitation from painting and then he imposed it on poetry. First the carpenter makes a chair which is nothing else but an imitation of the ideal chair, or the real chair or the absolute chair in the mind of the carpenter. The chair he makes is thus once removed from the truth. Now the painter who paints the chair gives us a copy of that imitation which the carpenter created. Thus, the work of the painter is a copy of a copy and therefore is a copy of a copy and therefore twice removed from the reality. Similarly, the poet will not paint and words and rhythms appealing to the ear where the painter to the eyes can recreate no more than a weak imitation of phantoms, appearances, unsubstantial images. He too creates a copy of a copy. His subject and his method are false. He appeals not the reason but the emotions. He excites and strengthens the most worthless part of the soul, appealing to those unrestrained sentiments and disordered impulses which are harmful to society.

Ironically enough the story of literary criticism begins with Plato's dismissal of poets from his ideal republic though in his dialogue, *Ion* he asserts that poetry is a form of divine inspiration. In *The Republic* he looks at poetry from the point of view of a social reformer. Plato was essentially a moralist. And a philosopher who in his quest for truth has found poetry untruthful, irrational, and immoral. This disapproval of poetry is based on the philosophy of time. Art according to the thought generally held by the Greeks is a form of imitation (Greek mimesis). The philosopher views reality as the idea that subsists the soul or mind of God. When the artist imitates nature and life, he is twice removed from reality. Hence art is the imitation of an imitation and therefore untruthful. The philosopher divides the mind into rational and irrational faculties. Art caters to the lower irrational faculty and hence irrational poetry is immoral because it engenders weak passions and thereby saps the moral fibre of the citizens. Poetry thereby becomes an enemy of the society 'encouraging lies, fostering unreality and striving passions. It is on this code that poets are banished from the ideal republic.

Here Plato's attitude may be called moralistic. What the moralist approves as good alone is good for poetry. The function of poetry is to educate men in moral virtues and thereby to create useful citizens, where it fails, poetry is to be rejected. The basic error to think of poetry as an aesthetic creation, which is his own justification, and which exists by values and processes that are valid only for poetry. Nevertheless, Plato's negativism has developed into the more positive moralistic approach which has had a strong influence on later critics and poets. Horace emphasises the teaching element when he says that poetry must delight and instruct. This thought has held sway during the renaissance and the neoclassical period. Renaissance criticism thinks of poetry as delightful instruction when Philip Sidney says that 'the ending end of all poetry is moral virtue.' Dryden defines a play as 'the just and lively image of human nature and the fortunes to which it is subject, for the delight and reason to its aid.' The revival of romanticism has also had its strong moralistic thrust. Wordsworth says that he is nothing if not a teacher. Shelley claims Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. Matthew Arnold calls poetry 'a criticism of life'. Bernard Shaw says that he would not have written so much as a single sentence, had it not been to change the world. Trotsky in his book 'Revolution and literature' says that art is not a disembodied element feeding on itself, but a function of man inextricably tied to life and its environments. I.A Richards says that poetry has value,

and his whole critical experiment is aimed at assessing the value of literature in the organisation and ordering of man's nervous system.

However, Plato's weakness is that he does not have a clear end conception of how the poet creates a world within his imagination, a new world which transcends the truth of the veritable world. The poet is not twice removed from the truth, but he enters the truth and transmutes it into beauty. Beauty is truth.

Horace

Horace is the critic next to Aristotle in order. He was a poet critic. Hence with him begins a new tradition in defence of one's own poetry. Horace belonged to the Augustan age in Roman Literature. He was a satirist. He wrote *Ars poetica* in the form of a letter to instruct two young aristocrats in the art of writing a drama. He advises the young men to school themselves in classics. The dead writers should be their models. He tells them that they should restrain their itch for publication by beholding their composition for nine years. The most important literary term associated with Horace is *Decorum*. This means a sense of propriety-proportion and harmony in creative writing. There ought to be the right proportion between thought and expression, conception, and execution. Thus, when an old man is imitated, he must behave and speak like an old man so that the writer may always conform to the accepted norms and values. Finally, he says that the purpose of poetry is to delight and to instruct.

Longinus- On the Sublime

We do not know who wrote the treatise, traditionally known as 'On the Sublime'. Traditionally it is ascribed to Longinus. Nor do we know precisely when it was written. It is believed that it must have been written before the 3rd century A.D. and after Horace. The key Greek term 'hypsos' is usually translated as sublime. Certainly, the sublimity aimed at is different from what we mean by the word sublime now. Perhaps William Wordsworth was closer to the point when he wrote that Longinus treats of 'animated impassioned energetic or elongated writing'. Despite these difficulties, the treatise is complete enough to be quoted. There is an argument in it which really matters.

Longinus writes as someone for whom his chief interest, a great period of Greek literature lies well in the past; the Greek dramatists have all been dead well before 300 years, Homer, a good deal longer than that. He is concerned to define exactly what it is, that constitutes the greatness of the established classes and to see if anything can be learned from this to revive literature in his own time.

Longinus asserts that sublimity is what marks out true greatness. He argues that 'the sublime consists in a particular excellence and distinction of expression and that this alone gave the greatest poets and historians their pre-eminence and won for them undying faith. For the effect of animating language is not to persuade the audience but to entrance them. Without exception, what transports us with wonder is ore telling in every way than what merely persuades or pleases us. Unlike Horace who looks first for competence and consistency and decries purple passages. Longinus is all for 'the well-timed flash of sublimity which scatters everything before it like a bolt of lightning revealing in a flash the full power of the speaker.' Such sublimity does not occur by chance, he maintains. The gift of genius may be innate, but it must be moulded and trained by emulation of the sublime writers of the past. In this respect he is surprisingly close to Horace. Art can always enhance natural ability. It is not to be expected that any author can be sublime consistently but applications to the necessary scales will help the author. Longinus parts company with Horace entirely when he makes his assertion that even occasional touches of sublimity are preferable to mere unrelieved competence.

How then are we to identify the sublime? How precisely can we define it? Here is Longinus' answer: 'some inherent quality of the true sublime lifts up our souls; elevated with a sense of proud possession, we are filled with joy as if we had ourselves produced what we heard'. If a sensible and a well-read man hears a passage several times and finds that it does not either touch him with a sense of sublimity or leave more food for thought in his mind than the mere words suggest; rather that the more carefully he considers it, the less impressive he finds it, then it cannot really be an example of the true sublime.

In general terms, you may consider that to be truly beautiful and sublime always pleases all men (ref. Keats' a thing of beauty is a joy forever). The last sentence reveals the main flaw in Longinus' approach. Does anything always please all people? Surely not. Can it really be satisfactory to leave it to some expert the work of finding out what is sublime? Longinus himself is aware of this difficulty. He devotes much of the treatise to examine the examples of what he calls the sublime. Homer, Sappho, Virgil and even genesis are analysed by him. This is the source of Matthew Arnold's touchstone method. There are five sources of the sublime, the most important is greatness or elevation of thought, the ability to grasp grand conception which is only possible if the author is truly noble of soul. In this context he quotes from homer and most strikingly from the opening passage of the book of genesis in the bible. He also cites a special example, a complete ode by Sappho, the Greek lyric poetess. The second source is vehement and inspired emotion on which he promises a separate treatise which has not survived, thirdly the sublime may derive from effective but unobtrusive use of rhetorical figures (figure of speech). Fourthly it may be found in notable language including metaphor and other verbal embellishments. Finally, Longinus cites the general dignity and elevation of style as a source of sublimity. This extends from the arrangement of words to the broad structure of the work. Longinus has ever been as influential a critic as Aristotle or Horace. Though he did enjoy an understanding vogue with the onset of romanticism. Wordsworth was very much interested in him. His contention that what matters in literature are inspired and inspiring moments, its truly memorable passages which many people find attractive. The problem is now we are to reach a consensus of what sublime is and what constitutes sublimity. We may say that the sheer enthusiasm of *On the Sublime* coupled with its sensitive response to such a wide variety of texts matters very much in the history of literary criticism.

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