

LITERARY CRITICISM

from Plato to the Present

AN INTRODUCTION

M. A. R. Habib

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Introduction

Our English word “criticism” comes from the ancient Greek noun *krites*, meaning “judge.” But what does it mean to be a “judge” of literature? We might break this down into several basic questions: what is the purpose of literary criticism? How broad is this field of inquiry, and who gets to define it? What are its connections with other disciplines such as philosophy and religion? How does it relate to the realms of morality, of knowledge, and of learning? Does it have any political implications? How does it impinge on our practices of reading and writing? Above all, what significance does it have, or could it possibly have, in our own lives? Why should we even bother to study literary criticism? Is it not enough for us to read the great works of literature, of poetry, fiction, and drama? Why should we trouble ourselves to read what people say *about* literature? And surely, after all the obscure “theory” of the last 50 years or so, what we need to get back to is the texts themselves. We need to appreciate literature for its beauty and its technical artistry. In short, we need to read literature *as* literature – without the interference of some “judge” telling us what to look for or how to read.

How can we answer such skepticism? We might begin by recalling that “theory” and critical reflection on literature began at least 2500 years ago, and have been conducted by some of the greatest Western thinkers and writers, ranging from Plato and Aristotle, through Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas, Johnson, Pope, and the great Romantics to the great modern figures such as Locke, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Freud, W. B. Yeats, and Sartre. Until 200 years ago, most great thinkers, critics, and literary artists would not have understood what was meant by reading literature *as* literature. They knew that literature had integral connections with philosophy, religion, politics, and morality; they knew, in other words, that literature was richly related to all aspects of people’s lives.

If we had no tradition of critical interpretation, if we were left with the “texts” themselves, we would be completely bewildered. We would not

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know how to classify a given writer as Romantic, classical, or modern. We would not know that a given poem was epic or lyric, mock-heroic, or even that it was a poem. We would be largely unaware of which tradition a given writer was working in and how she was trying to subvert it in certain ways. We would not be able to arrive at any comparative assessment of writers in terms of literary merit. We would not even be able to interpret the meanings of individual lines or words in any appropriate context. It has been the long tradition of literary interpretation – refined and evolved over many centuries – which has addressed these questions. It is surely naive to think that we are all endowed with some superior sensibility which can automatically discern which writers are great and which are mediocre. We do not even know for certain how the ancient Greek of Homer was pronounced; most of us cannot read the Greek of Plato or the Latin of Aquinas or the Italian of Dante or the Arabic of al-Ghazzali. How would we ever, independently, arrive at any estimation of these writers or their backgrounds or their contributions without a body of critical apparatus, without a tradition of critical expertise and interpretation, to help us? Shakespeare “is” a great writer because that has been the enduring consensus of influential critics. The reputations of writers can vary quite dramatically. At the beginning of the twentieth century, T. S. Eliot was a powerful critical voice, denigrating the Romantics, extolling the metaphysical poets and revaluating the very idea of tradition. Nowadays, Eliot commands far less critical authority, though his high status as a poet endures.

We can try to illustrate our actual reliance on the traditions of criticism and theory by using a particular example, Matthew Arnold’s famous poem “Dover Beach”:

The sea is calm to-night.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand;
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought

Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
 Of human misery; we
 Find also in the sound a thought,
 Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
 Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
 But now I only hear
 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
 Retreating, to the breath
 Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
 And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
 To one another! for the world, which seems
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,
 So various, so beautiful, so new,
 Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
 And we are here as on a darkling plain
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
 Where ignorant armies clash by night.

A conventional reading of this poem based on the immediate “text” might go like this: “Dover Beach” is a lyric poem which expresses the painful doubt and disorientation of the Victorian age. The poem is unified by the image and symbolism of the sea, which is used to express the decline of religious faith. In the first section the calm of the sea is complemented by the “grating roar,” and the motion of the waves, which the poem’s language imitates, symbolizes the cyclical movement of human history, an idea which Arnold may have derived from his father, Thomas Arnold. This symbolism is intensified as the sea meets the “moon-blached” land, the moon also symbolizing change, in which case “moon-blached land” might refer to a civilization bleached or made colorless by change or progress. The picturesque opening presents a visual scene of the moonlit ocean whose calm is interrupted only when it is *heard*, as a “grating roar” which prepares the transition from the sea as physical image to symbol, infused with “The eternal note of sadness.” The second section makes more precise the sea’s significance: the “hearing” of the sea, and the “finding” of “a thought” in its sound, has a classical precedent, not only inscribing Arnold within a literary tradition going back to Sophocles but also stressing the universality of the human predicament. The third section uses the sea as a powerful symbol of both religious faith, which once clothed the world, and the process of secularization, which leaves the world “naked”;

the symbolic “long, withdrawing roar” echoes the literal “roar” of the first section, once again creating a fusion of general and particular. The last section warns of the deceptive nature of the world’s apparent beauty and variety (as presented in the poem’s opening): beneath these “glimmering” surfaces are other, more threatening sounds, foreboding chaos, war, and destruction.

On a technical level, we might observe that the poem is written as a dramatic monologue, melancholy in tone, in four sections. It has no regular rhythm or rhyme scheme but traces of a sonnet form may be discernible in the first two sections; we might discern the ghost of an eroded blank verse in the gesture of many lines toward iambic pentameter, with the preceding and subsequent lines cut short to achieve various effects, as in “The Sea of Faith” which, in its present eroded state, stands alone as merely four syllables, while its comforting fullness in the past is evoked in two full pentameters beginning “Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore.” We might also point out that the already irregular rhyme scheme *abacdbdc* breaks down in the middle of the first section: there is no word to rhyme with “roar,” which might also mimic the fragmentation of the Victorian world. The poem employs numerous literary devices, most notably the metaphors (inherited from Romanticism) ascribing intelligence or sentience to elements of nature such as the sea and the night wind, the simile comparing the sea of faith to a protective “girdle,” and various obvious devices such as anaphora, as in the repetition of “so” and “nor” in the final section.

It is simply not possible to ascribe any meaning to the poem without referring its words to broader trends in Victorian society. We might say that the poem represents the anxiety of a world where religious faith was called into question by numerous developments in science, scholarship, and technology: the various theories and philosophies of evolution, the German Higher Criticism which discredited much of the Bible, and the Industrial Revolution which caused a mass migration of people from the country to the towns, displacing a village life centered around the parish with a life revolving around the factory or office. Arnold was reacting against a mechanical, industrial society which prided itself on progress. The only security left is that of personal relationships. But the feelings expressed in the poem are universal: we have the theme of man’s alienation and isolation, and his inability to change the world. Arnold’s poem still applies today, just as it applied in the ancient Greek world of Sophocles; that is why it is a great poem. It represents its age as well as being timeless.

Already, even at this most basic level of interpretation, we have gone far beyond the “words on the page.” Our reading already presupposes a knowledge of the Victorian era, its intellectual and religious currents, a knowledge of literary tradition going back to classical times, a knowledge of Arnold’s biography, and an awareness of theories of poetic form, genre, and rhetorical theories of literary figures. And much literary and rhetorical theory – both

ancient and modern – would challenge the view that Arnold is expressing a universal human predicament, as well as any sharp distinction between literal and figurative language. In fact the poem is very much conditioned by its historical context, a context governed by the French Revolution of 1789 and the rise to power of the middle classes through much of Europe. In England, the Reform Bill of 1832 established the power of the middle classes over the landed aristocracy. The Liberal Party, representing the middle classes, came to power in 1830. In 1867, the year in which Arnold's poem was published, the vote was extended to urban industrial workers, and in 1884 to most agricultural laborers. What Arnold expresses is perhaps his despair over the rise of middle-class society, whose narrowness and mechanical ideals he criticizes eloquently in his prose writings. Who are the "ignorant armies" that Arnold has in mind? The poem gives the impression that all such struggle is futile and ignorant but it was written in 1851, after violent revolutions in 1830 and 1848 had convulsed Europe: the main aim of these revolutions was to establish constitutional monarchies or governments where the people had some say in how they were ruled. Also, there is a contradiction between the form and content of the poem: the poet urges sentimentally that his relationship with his beloved must be one of mutuality and truth; yet there is no interaction with the woman addressed, who remains without character or voice. The very form of the dramatic monologue enacts the alienation expressed in the poem's content. Arnold was at Dover with his wife in June of 1851 and again in October, after a continental honeymoon. In the poem, which is presumably addressed to his wife, she is given no personality or individuality at all. She is reduced to a mere occasion for his grandiose reflection from his privileged vantage point on the cliffs of Dover. The poem thus invites consideration from many other perspectives, including those of feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis and various branches of rhetoric.

None of this is to deny that "Dover Beach" is a fine poem; it is, rather, intended to show that the process of "reading" – even at the most basic level – involves vast presuppositions and ever-broadening contexts. It is the task of criticism and theory to articulate these presuppositions and to furnish the contexts in which literary "judgments" can be appropriately made. Hence the *practice* of literary criticism as applied to given texts is underlain by complex assumptions and principles. *Theory* is devoted to examining these principles. As such, theory is a systematic explanation of practice or a situation of practice in a broader framework; theory brings to light the motives behind our practice; it shows us the connection of practice to ideology, power structures, our own unconscious, our political and religious attitudes, our economic structures; above all, theory shows us that practice is not something natural or neutral but is a specific historical construct, resting on specific assumptions and motives, even if these are unacknowledged.

This book aims to offer a concise introduction to the major tendencies and figures of literary criticism and theory from ancient Greek times until the present. An endeavor of such broad scope is bound to be incomplete: there is not enough room to include, or even to do justice to, all of the important figures. I do hope, however, that the following account will have the virtues of clarity, close reading, and appropriate contextualization, in making accessible to a general reader these sometimes difficult theories, their philosophical premises and their historical contexts. We will see, in the chapters that follow, that the questions raised at the beginning of this introduction have been addressed in a rich variety of ways by great thinkers and great literary artists and critics for more than 2000 years.

Part I

Classical Literary Criticism and Rhetoric

Chapter 1

Classical Literary Criticism

Introduction to the Classical Period

The story of Western literary criticism begins shortly after 800 BC in ancient Greece, the era of the great Homeric epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as well as the poets Hesiod and Sappho. The so-called “classical” period, starting around 500 BC, witnessed the great tragedies of Euripides, Aeschylus, and Sophocles, and the comedies of Aristophanes. It was around this time that the foundations of Western philosophy were laid by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle; the discipline of rhetoric and the political system of democracy were established in Athens. The classical period is usually said to end in 323 BC with the death of Alexander the Great. After this is the “Hellenistic” period, witnessing the diffusion of Greek culture through much of the Mediterranean and Middle East, a diffusion vastly accelerated by Alexander’s conquests, and the various dynasties established by his generals after his death. The city of Alexandria in Egypt, founded by Alexander in 331 BC, became a center of scholarship and letters, housing an enormous library and museum, and hosting such renowned poets and grammarians as Callimachus, Apollonius Rhodius, Aristarchus, and Zenodotus. We know of these figures partly through the work of Suetonius (ca. 69–140 AD) who wrote the first histories of literature and criticism.

The Hellenistic period is usually said to end with the battle of Actium in 31 BC in which the last portion of Alexander’s empire, Egypt, was annexed by the increasingly powerful and expanding Roman republic. After his victory at Actium, the entire Roman world fell under the sole rulership of Julius Caesar’s nephew, Octavian, soon to become revered as the first Roman emperor, Augustus. During this span of almost a thousand years, poets, philosophers, rhetoricians, grammarians, and critics laid down many of the basic terms, concepts, and questions that were to shape the future of literary criticism as it evolved all the way through to our own century. These include the concept of “mimesis” or imitation; the concept of beauty and its connection with truth and goodness; the ideal of the organic unity of a literary work; the social,

political, and moral functions of literature; the connection between literature, philosophy, and rhetoric; the nature and status of language; the impact of literary performance on an audience; the definition of figures of speech such as metaphor, metonymy, and symbol; the notion of a “canon” of the most important literary works; and the development of various genres such as epic, tragedy, comedy, lyric poetry, and song.

The first recorded instances of criticism go back to dramatic festivals in ancient Athens. A particularly striking literary critical discussion occurs in Aristophanes’ play *The Frogs*, first performed in 405 BC. This comedy stages a contest between two literary theories, representing older and younger generations; it is also a contest in poetic art.¹ The two competing poets are presented as Aeschylus and Euripides. Aeschylus represents the more traditional virtues of a bygone generation, such as martial prowess, heroism, and respect for social hierarchy – all embodied in a lofty, decorous, and sublime style of speech – while Euripides is the voice of a more recent, democratic, secular, and plain-speaking generation (*Frogs*, l. 1055). Aristophanes’ play reveals that for the ancient Greeks poetry was an important element in the educational process; its ramifications extended over morality, religion, and the entire sphere of civic responsibility. By the time of Plato and Aristotle, poetry had achieved considerable authority and status. Plato rejected poetry’s vision of the world as unpredictable, ruled by chance, and always prone to the whims of the gods. Much of Plato’s philosophy is generated by a desire to view the gods as wholly good, to impose order on chaos, to enclose change and temporality within a scheme of permanence, and to ground our thinking about morality, politics, and religion on timeless and universal truths. So Greek philosophy begins as a challenge to the monopoly of poetry and the extension of its vision in more recent trends such as sophistic and rhetoric which offered a secular, humanistic, and relativistic view of the world. Plato’s opposition of philosophy to poetry effectively sets the stage for more than 2000 years of literary theory and criticism.

Plato (428–ca. 347 BC)

It is widely acknowledged that the Greek philosopher Plato laid the foundations of Western philosophy. The mathematician and philosopher A. N. Whitehead stated that Western philosophy is “a series of footnotes” to Plato, who indeed gave initial formulation to the most fundamental questions: how can we define goodness and virtue? How do we arrive at truth and knowledge? What is the connection between soul and body? What is the ideal political state? Of what use are literature and the arts? What is the nature of language? Plato’s answers to these questions are still disputed; yet the questions themselves have endured.

At the age of 20, like many other young men in Athens, Plato fell under the spell of the controversial thinker and teacher Socrates. In a story later to be recounted in Plato's *Apology*, Socrates had been hailed by the Oracle at Delphi as "the wisest man alive." He devoted his life to the pursuit of knowledge, wisdom, and virtue. Using a dialectical method of question and answer, he would often arouse hostility by deflating the pretensions of those who claimed to be wise and who professed to teach. A wide range of people, including rhetoricians, poets, politicians, and artisans, felt the razor edge of his intellect, which undermined conventional views of goodness and truth. Eventually he was tried on a charge of impiety and condemned to death in 399 BC. After the death of his revered master, Plato eventually founded an Academy in Athens.

Most of Plato's philosophy is expounded in dialogue form, using a dialectical method of pursuing truth by a systematic questioning of received ideas and opinions ("dialectic" derives from the Greek *dialegomai*, "to converse"). Socrates is usually cast as the main speaker. The canon attributed to Plato includes 35 dialogues and 13 letters. The early dialogues are devoted to exploring and defining concepts such as virtue, temperance, courage, piety, and justice. The major dialogues of Plato's middle period – *Gorgias*, *Apology*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Republic* – move into the realms of epistemology (theory of knowledge), metaphysics, political theory, and art. What unifies these various concerns is Plato's renowned theory of Forms, which sees the familiar world of objects which surrounds us, and which we perceive through our senses, as not independent or real but as dependent upon another world, the realm of pure Forms or ideas, which can be known only by reason and not by our bodily sense-perceptions. Plato says that the qualities of any object in the physical world are derived from the ideal Forms. For example, an object in the physical world is beautiful because it partakes of the ideal Form of Beauty which exists in the higher realm. And so with Tallness, Equality, or Goodness, which Plato sees as the highest of the Forms. The connection between the two realms can best be illustrated using examples from geometry: any triangle or square that we construct using physical instruments is bound to be imperfect. At most it can merely approximate the ideal triangle which is perfect and which is perceived not by the senses but by reason: the ideal triangle is not a physical object but a *concept*, an idea, a Form.

According to Plato, the world of Forms, being changeless and eternal, alone constitutes reality. It is the world of essences, unity, and universality, whereas the physical world is characterized by perpetual change and decay, mere existence (as opposed to essence), multiplicity, and particularity. A central function of the theory of Forms is to unify groups of objects or concepts in the world by treating them as belonging to a class, by referring them back to a common essence, and thereby making sense of our innumerable diverse experiences. A renowned expression of Plato's theory occurs in the seventh