

# THE FRONTIERS OF CRITICISM

Discuss Eliot's Criticism of modern Criticism

OR

What are the frontiers of criticism?

In "The Frontiers of Criticism" Eliot's thesis is that there are limits which must not be crossed by literary criticism. If they are crossed in one direction, literary criticism ceases to be literary. If they are crossed in another direction, it ceases to be criticism. Thus criticism has frontiers within which it must work.

Eliot shows how scholarship that turns into criticism or criticism that turns into scholarship is criticism of explanation by origins. This kind of criticism is an investigation of process which according to Eliot is beyond the frontiers of literary criticism. "The road to Kanadu" and "Finnegan's Wake" is largely responsible for the rise of this kind of criticism. In the first book Dr. Lowes refers to all the obscure books that Coleridge read before writing "Kubla Khan" and "The Ancient Mariner" and shows how Coleridge borrowed

expressions and images from those books. This study of origins is laudable, <sup>making</sup> poems better.

The other book "Finnegan's Wake" is monumental. Though much of it is obscure, read in the Irish voice of Joyce the prose seems extremely beautiful. So Eliot considers the novel to be a vast poem. Many critics try to interpret this novel and offer absurd interpretations. Eliot says that "Finnegan's Wake" makes people take every word of art as a riddle.

The form of criticism which depends heavily on causal explanation is the critical biography. The writer of a critical biography may be a critic or a biographer<sup>er</sup>, but if he is a critic he must know all about the man and if he is a biographer he must have a critical understanding of the literary works of that man. Moreover, he must use his knowledge of psychology learnt from Freud, Jung and others. Naturally, it is very difficult to write a critical biography. We all know that Wordsworth wrote some very good poems during a brief period of his life. Herbert Read wrote a critical biography of Wordsworth which is not very satisfactory. He did some justice to Wordsworth in a later work entitled "A Coat of many Colours" in which the Annette Gallon episode is presented as

the source of Wordsworth's best poetry. Later on Bateson wrote a critical biography of Wordsworth explaining his two voices. According to him the best poems of Wordsworth were inspired by Dorothy and not Annette Vallon. In particular, Lucy was no one else but Dorothy herself. Eliot says that these two books do not help anyone to enjoy the poetry of Wordsworth in a better manner. So we see that according to Eliot, the critical biography is worse than useless because it hinders the appreciation of poetry. Moreover, even if the information about a poet's life is complete, there is something in great poetry which cannot be explained away.

Then Eliot discusses the Lemon Squeezer School. The classroom method of I. A. Richards is concerned with showing the student how to appreciate poetry. His disciple, Empson, devotes himself to the verbal subtleties of poetry. Both Richards and Empson have tried to divert the attention of the reader from the poet to his poetry. Twelve of the younger English critics studied some well-known poem from the sixteenth century to the modern age. The collection of these critical essays is known as "Interpretations" Eliot calls the school of such critics the Lemon Squeezer School. The limitations and dangers of this school are three. The first is that this school thinks a poem can

have only one interpretation. The second danger is that if the interpretation of a poem is valid the critic may think that the poet wanted to produce that effect consciously or unconsciously. The third point is that by analyzing a new poem a critic must find out whether he enjoys it or not, but these critics do not take enjoyment into account.

Thus we see that psychological interpretations of the origin of a poem, the wild interpretations of an obscure work and information about a poet's life are not literary criticism because they do not consider poems as poems. On the other hand, the criticism of the Lemon Squeezer School depends entirely on the printed words and so it is not the right kind of literary criticism. Eliot's view is that the right kind of criticism should be somewhere between the two types. It is the understanding and enjoyment of poetry. In fact, they are one because the understanding of poetry is the enjoyment of it for the right reasons.

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