

Reconciling Poetic Autonomy and Poetic Relevance

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Abstract:

It was the New Critics who sought to establish the ontological existence of a work of literature by focusing on the aesthetic experience provided by literature. They also sought to disengage literature from non-aesthetic considerations for its evaluation and appreciation. By their insistence on the aesthetic evaluation of literature, they divested literature of its existence as a cognitive discourse. The words that make up a piece of literature, it may be noted, are not mere self-referring independent units limited by their spatial existence. Besides their aesthetic existence, they also have thought-content and culture content. They refer to the world outside their spatial boundaries. The monistic focus on the aesthetic ontology of literature excludes the contextual relevance and moralistic significance of poetic statements. Similarly, judgement of literature solely on the basis of its content in exclusion of the aesthetic considerations equally leads to a biased appreciation of literature and holds it up as a sociological document. Insistence on the pedagogical and moralistic value deprives literature of its significance as a source of delight and pleasure. This leads to the conclusion that neither aesthetic nor moralistic criteria alone, in exclusion of one or the other, can help us to have a holistic appreciation of literature.

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Only deployment of pluralistic principles can bring out the objective relevance of a work of art.

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The New Critics made a commendable effort to validate the study of English as a distinct discipline and professionalise the study of literary theory. In the process, they prioritised one particular definition of literature, inevitably excluding most of the conventional definitions prevalent at the time. Their concentration on literary norms for the evaluation of literature had its inbuilt difficulties, which they struggled hard to bring to a resolution.

The New Critics were advocates for the autonomy of literature. In their view, a work of art was an autonomous aesthetic object. So our experience of it would be an aesthetic experience. They also claimed that aesthetic criteria alone were necessary for the evaluation and judgement of literature. Thus they were able to disengage literature from extra-literary considerations which, according to the New Critics, not only hampered the proper appreciation of literature but also made literature a handmaid of other disciplines, like philosophy, history, and sociology. The New Critics' reliance upon aesthetic criteria alone for the analysis and appreciation of literature made their approach unarguably monistic. The development and practice of their critical method was concerned with their view of a work of art as a self-sufficient, autonomous object in which the component elements were interdependent and formed an organic whole.

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The New Critics' insistence on the formal elements that made a work of art what it was helped evolve the view of literature as a self-sustaining object. Their focus on one aspect of literature implied exclusion of other aspects which demanded equal attention. Literature, for its holistic appreciation, depended not only on form, but also on content. Though the New Critics claimed that form and content were inseparable, they did not pay sufficient attention to the content. Literature, say a piece of poetry, is made of words. The words not only refer to themselves but also point to the world outside. A poem is an aesthetic object as well as a cognitive discourse. Words are not merely self-referring units of an art-object; they contain meanings which refer to the world beyond the spatial existence of words. This aspect challenges very patently the attempt of the New Critics to look upon the literary object as enclosed within a space, as is evident from Cleanth Brooks's characterisation of a poem as "well-wrought urn." Words tell us something about the human experience in general. They give us knowledge of the world at large. So they cannot be alienated from the outside world. The New Critics, while drawing attention to the self-contained nature of literature, specifically ignore its referential context.

The basic weakness of the New Criticism thus comes to this: the New Critics were faced with the problem of reconciling their view of poetry as an aesthetic object with the view of poetry as a cognitive discourse. To put it in another way, they could not resolve the tension that emerged from their judgement of literature by aesthetic criteria, to the exclusion of its non-aesthetic values. The point can be clarified with the help of an example. The following example

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is from Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*, Act II, Scene ii.

“Amen stuck in my throat.”

What is the value-judgement attached to the line? Is it merely because the line is aesthetically sound and satisfying that the readers enjoy it? If we locate the line in the context of the play, it will be found to have a meaning which is verifiable from its situational context. The line has its significance in view of the morally degenerating situation in which the speaker is placed. So the contextual reference has to be taken into account while passing a judgement on its value as an aesthetic object. If aesthetic value alone could judge the greatness of a work of art or the lack of it, in that case Swinburne's poetry would have the highest reckoning in the estimate of the readers. On the other hand, the poetry of Shakespeare or Eliot or Owen would find a very lowly place in the scale of value-judgement.

The opposite claim is equally disastrous. As the evaluation of literature cannot be done on the basis of aesthetic criteria alone, the judgement on the basis of its *content only* also cannot bring out the complete significance. The tendency of the sociological, especially the Marxist critics, to chaff out the content from the form in which the text is couched offers only a biased knowledge. Such evaluation of literature totally ignores the literary value, and imperils the existence of literature as literature.

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Besides, a work of literature may also have moral effects on the readers. The idea of literature as having the capacity to delight and to teach at the same time is a result of this focus on its moral function. It may not be possible to demonstrate objectively how literature can have salubrious effects on human acts. But it has been argued, time and again, that literature can move human beings to the highest and excellent truths. In Plato's 'Republic,' only those poets who could morally uplift the readers could find their place. Moreover, a work of literature may have indirect moral effects. It is possible that the reading of poetry may quieten the fretted nerves of a jaded reader. Such a moral effect actually flows from the aesthetic effect. Hence greater aesthetic value would entail the capacity to provide greater moral satisfaction. However, it must be kept in mind that a work of literature is primarily an aesthetic object; and the moral effect of literature, if any, is only a by-product.

So it may be safely concluded that a purely aesthetic analysis is not adequate for a total evaluation of a literary work. The function of literature as offering knowledge has also to be taken into consideration. This obviously leads to a consideration of its ontological entity, that is, a description of its nature and function—whether it offers merely aesthetic satisfaction or it also offers knowledge; and if it offers knowledge, what the nature of that knowledge is. All these are aspects of the ontological question on which Ransom, the best-known of the New Critics, pays so much attention. Aesthetic criteria may not be adequate to resolve this ontological question. Once a poem is found aesthetically sound, the critic should apply cognitive criteria as well to offer a holistic judgement. In other words, the critic must not restrict himself to the monistic approach, and must deploy the pluralistic principles of criticism.

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