

Deg-III
Eng. Hons

Lemon-Squeezer School of Criticism

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Lecture No- 10 ^{Dept. of English}

T.S. Eliot ①

The essay 'The Frontiers of Criticism' by T.S. Eliot is concerned with a description of the nature and function of criticism. In this essay Eliot points out certain dominant trends in contemporary English criticism. In this regard he mentions the classroom methods ^{of writing criticism} initiated by Professor I.A. Richards. Richards through this method investigated the problem of how the appreciation of poetry can be taught. William Empson, his distinguished pupil carried on the task of the anatomy of poetry admirably well. Richards' classroom methods have initiated development in contemporary criticism which certain modern critics now practice and this Eliot describes as 'Practical Criticism'. This is a healthy reaction against the diversion of attention from the poetry to the poet. This method of criticism is practised in a model fashion in a book entitled 'Interpretations'. It is a series of essays by twelve of the younger English critics each analysing one poem of his choice. Each of the poem analysed in this book is a good one of its kind. Each poem is analysed with reference to the author or to his other works. Each poem is interpreted stanza by stanza and line by line. Every drop of meaning is extracted and squeezed out of the lines of the poem. Eliot feels that such a method of writing criticism may be compared to the squeezing of lemons and hence he calls them Lemon Squeezer School of Criticism. Just as a lemon is squeezed to bring out even the last drop of juice out of it, so the poems are ^{to bring out} extracted, squeezed, teased, pressed every

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drop of meaning out of them.

The represented poems in the book range from the sixteenth century to the present day. They differ a good deal from one another. The book begins with 'The Phoenix and the Turtle' and ends with 'Purbeck' and 'Yeats' 'Among School Children'. As each critic has his own procedure, the result is interesting but at the same time a little confusing. The study of all twelve poems analysed so painstakingly is a very ~~tiring~~^{tiring} way of passing time. As all the poems were previously well known to Eliot, he feels that is surprised to learn the new meaning propounded by the critics. He has a bit of surprise for the meaning of his own poem 'Purbeck' as well. Yet Eliot finds many of the essays quite good because in them the critics attempted to find out what the poems really meant.

Eliot is cautious enough ~~not~~ to endorse the classroom method point out the limitations and dangers of classroom method of writing criticism. If this method is used for the benefit of students, it must be the responsibility of the teacher to warn the class of its limitations and dangers. The first danger as Eliot points out, is that of assuming that there must be just one interpretation of the poem as a whole, that must be right. As far as details of explanation especially if the poem belongs to another age, matters of fact, historical allusions, the meaning of certain

words at certain date, are concerned, these may be established. "But as for the meaning of the poem as a whole, it is not exhausted by any explanation, for the meaning of the poem is what the poem means to different sensitive readers." A poem has multi layers perspective of meaning and may mean different things to different readers. Eliot warns of the another resulting from the assumption that the interpretation of a poem, if valid, is necessarily an account of what the author consciously or unconsciously was trying to do. It is generally believed that any explanation of the poem is also an account of how it was written. According to Eliot it is wrong. ~~Through~~ ^{the} analysis of his own poem 'Prufrock' in the anthology Eliot saw the poem through the eyes of an intelligent, sensitive ~~reader~~ ^{and sensitive} and diligent reader. But this does not mean that the account of the poem given in the analysis has anything to do with the experiences that led up to his writing it.

Eliot wants to see the method of Practical criticism applied as a test to some new poem, some very good poem that was previously unknown to him. So far as the analysis of the well known poems is concerned, Eliot asserts that such analytical criticism did not contribute to enrichment of his previous feelings about the poems. Eliot observes "It was as if someone had taken a machine to pieces and left me with the task of reassembling the parts." So the mechanical character of the interpretation may

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nullify

~~eliminate~~ the quality of enjoyment in it.

Thus in this portion of the essay Elot sounds a note of caution against the limitations and pitfalls of pursuing the method of practical criticism over jealously.
