

Frontiers of Criticism

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T.S. Eliot

"The Frontiers of Criticism" is the text of "The Gideon Seymour lectures" delivered by Eliot at the University of Minnesota in 1956. It was later included in the book 'On Poetry and Poets' published in 1957. In this significant essay Eliot examines the dominant trends in modern literary criticism in order to indicate the true province of literary criticism. The essay is written in the methodical fashion. In the very beginning of the essay Eliot states the objective of this piece "The thesis of this paper is that there are limits, exceeding which in one direction literary criticism ceases to be literary, and exceeding which in another it ceases to be criticism".

Eliot recalls that in 1923 he had written an article entitled 'The Function of Criticism' which was later included in his 'Selected Essays'. But now in the context of the latest trends which have developed in modern literary criticism, he thinks that the essay 'The Function of Criticism' has become dated. He feels that in that essay he had been unjustly severe towards the impressionistic criticism. I.A. Richards' 'Principles of Literary Criticism' was published in 1925 and it ^{was} considerably an influential book. Since its publication criticism has developed and branched out in several directions. The term 'The New Criticism' is very much current today. Its currency shows that "the more distinguished critics of today, however widely they differ from each other,

all differ in some significant way from the critics of a previous generation. "Many years ago Eliot pointed out that every generation must provide its ^{own} literary criticism, each generation brings to the contemplation of art its own categories of appreciation, makes its own demands upon art, and has its own ^{of each age} use of art." The creative sensibility is reflected in its literary criticism. Sensibility alters from generation to generation and with it the perspective of criticism also changes. An important work of literary criticism can alter and expand the content of the term 'literary criticism' itself. Thus Dr. Johnson's 'Lives of the Poets' represents a literary tradition to the end of which he himself belongs. Coleridge's 'Biographia Literaria' is a work of revolutionary significance. Coleridge's work is important because of the scope and variety of interests which he brought to bear on his discussion of poetry. He established the relevance of philosophy, aesthetics and psychology for criticism. A modern critic may not have much in common with Dr. Johnson, but he can find much in common with Coleridge. Eliot also says that if Coleridge would have been alive he would have certainly taken the same interest in the social sciences and in the study of language and semantics, that he took in the sciences available to him.

Following the footsteps of Coleridge, some of the modern critics consider literature in the light of one or more of the allied disciplines. This is one of the

two main ^{causes} clauses of the transformation of literary criticism in our time. The other cause is to be found in the intensive study of English and American literature in the universities. Most of the interesting criticism today is the work of scholarly and ~~critic~~ teachers attached to the universities. The critic seems today to have a somewhat different contact with the world than the critic in the past.

Aldous Huxley in a preface to the English translation of 'The Supreme Wisdom' compares western psychiatry with the discipline of the East and finds it lacking in a proper awareness of its purpose. Just as western psychiatry from a Zen Buddhist point of view, is confused or mistaken as to the proper purpose of feeling, so it appears to Eliot that the weakness of the modern criticism consists in a sense of uncertainty as to the purpose of criticism. Its very richness and variety have perhaps obscured its ultimate purpose. Every critic may have his eye on a definite goal, and yet criticism itself may be lost as to its aims. Eliot points out the dilemma of modern critics. He seems to be overwhelmed by our own critical activity. In the present age the frontiers of criticism have been so widened that criticism is not literary criticism but something else.

Next Eliot speaks of his own role as a critic. He is somewhat bewildered to find, from time to time, that he is regarded as one of the ancestors of modern criticism. It is believed that Eliot is the originator of the whole critical movement