



CRITICAL CONCEPTS OF THE MAJOR FORMALIST CRITICS: AN APPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT

All the major formalist writers and other critics like John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, R. P. Blackmur and Cleanth Brooks etc. laid attention to the concrete and close reading of a literary work and brought a kind of revolution in literary studies. Though all these formalist critics had their own separate critical theories and devised their own terms for the structure of poetry and represented divergent points of view both in theory and practice, but their basic assumptions and attitudes about literature and its study are more or less the same. It is held by each one of them that a poem should be treated as a poem and as an object in itself.

Key Words: Structure, Imagination, Poem, Text, Language, Gesture

The major exponents of the Formalist school of criticism like John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren and a few others stressed the need for the study of the formal aspects of a literary work but they coined their own terminology and conceptual scheme for making this kind of study. These critics differ from one another in the coinage of terms and application of their critical theory but the ultimate concern for each of them is the same i.e. the literary work itself. First of all, in this paper, I will take up the critical concepts of John Crowe Ransom, the major preceptor of this school, for analysis and study. In fact, this movement also known as 'new' criticism owes considerably to J.C. Ransom. In his three major works *The New Criticism*, *The World's Body* and *God Without Thunder*, he expressed his theories, and he was also the editor of the journal *The Kenyan Review* for a long period. Ransom was basically a poet, and more of a theoretician of poetry and literature than a practical and poetry is made out emotional truth. He condemns Romantic poetry because it is a poetry of escapism and a poetry of opium dream. Ransom contends in his 'Preface' to *The World's Body*, "It indicates in the subject a poor adaptation to reality, a sub normal equipment in animal courage-fight and escapism, furtive libido" (Ransom 9). It is not a true poetry since it idealizes the world and he dismissed the knowledge furnished by Science because it has utilitarian relation only to the material life of man and it gives a limited and rather incomplete knowledge of reality. Ransom again remarks:

By it we know the world only as a scheme of abstract conveniences. What we cannot know constitutionally as scientists is the world which is made of infeasible objects, and this is the world which poetry recovers for us" (Ransom 21)

It is important to mention here that philosophers and poets like Aristotle, Dante, Sidney, Arnold and I.A. Richards etc. also had similar ideas about the value of poetry and 'new' critics are also concerned with defending poetry from its rival, science. The distinction between scientific cognition and poetic apprehension of the world is based on the idea that science deals with the rational aspect of man and poetry provides us a knowledge which helps us to see the world better. I. A. Richards warns that the aesthetic experience which is capable of engendering poetic knowledge is not to be conceived in an idealistic manner. Ransom also feels that it is not right that the ideal concepts pre-exists in the mind of the poet, and then we range out in search of a concrete and particular image of it and seek to capture that image in words to commensurate that ideal concept or to fix it in the mind of the reader. In poetic experience, the perception of the particular object and the birth of the concept are simultaneous. So in the sensibility of the poet, both the universal and the particular are seen in one instance and merged together in an inseparable form. In poetry, there cannot be made an exact assertion of the meaning and knowledge apart from the manner and style of the articulation which determined the subject matter and are determined by it. This is the hypothesis of J.C. Ransom on which all his enquiries and his conception of the structure of poetry are based.

Now we discuss the critical concepts of another major formalist critic Allen Tate who was one of the youngest among the new critics. John Paul Pritchard remarks, "Allen Tate's prominence among the New Critics sets him in a position next to Ransom" (Pritchard 251). Allen Tate was a poet also and it has been pointed out that like Ransom, his place as a poet is higher than as a critic. Both of them were the members of Southern Agrarian group. Tate has continued a number of Ransom's traditions and has also developed some of his own. His collection of essays like *On the Limits of Poetry*, *The Hovering Fly*, *The Forlorn Demon* and a few essays in *The Fugitive* set a new critical tradition in which he preached against the opposed Science, positivism and Scientific historical criticism in ever sharper terms than Ransom. His opposition of Science is an important aspect of his literary criticism because like Ransom, he also wrote a great deal against social criticism. He opens his essay - 'The present Function of Criticism' with an attack on historical, sociological and psychological criticism which he thinks are a denigration of the very spirit of literature. Allan Tate observes:

In our time, the historical criticism, in so far as it has attempted to be a scientific method, has undermined the significance of the material which it proves to investigate because on principles, the sociological and historical scholar must not permit himself to see in arts meanings that his method does not assure. (Tate 4)

Like other formalist critics, Tate severely attacks scholarly - historical criticism because it derives its technique from Science and keeps changing itself to suit the particular science which happens to be prevalent at the particular time. He takes to Richards's 'Stimulus-Response' theory which investigates literature in terms of the effect on the reader saying that this will make literary criticism a laboratory technique. Contrasting literature with science, Allen Tate pointed out that literature gives us a glimpse of absolute truth, and science can hardly reach this truth because it deals with life and creation in a fragmentary way. Tate like other formalist critics propagates the close study of the form of the poem which balances different elements, and content is a part of the form. In order to set the absolute truth, a critic must concentrate on the form and to reveal the real content of the poem, it is necessary that all critical efforts should be directed to the poem itself and not to the external circumstances.

After Allen Tate, the next formalist critic for discussion is Cleanth Brooks. All his three major works *Understanding Poetry* (1938) written in collaboration with Robert Penn Warren, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939) and *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947) are replete with remarkable illustrations. Like Richards and Tate, Cleanth Brooks also laid stress on the difference between Scientific and Poetic expression since they deal with different kinds of truth. Science always says things explicitly, simply and in a rational language but a poet has to express a different kind of truth with the combination of words and imagination. In Brooks's conception, the structure of poetry is opposed to science because in art, the imagination of the artist works in a logic of his own. A poet also gives expression to the human experience as it is, chaotic and irrational. The structure of poetry is based on the same realisation of human experience to which the unity is given by the imagination of the artist so the structure of poetry is for him not merely an envelop covering the content. What the structure means for him is "...a structure of meanings, evaluations and interpretations and the principle of unity which informs it seems to be one of the balancing and harmonising connotations, attitude and meanings" (Brooks 72). To demonstrate the presence of such special kind of structure in poetry he uses such key terms as 'ambiguity', 'paradox', 'irony' and 'complex of attitudes'. He proclaims that these terms may be changed but the essential structure will remain the same.

Since the structure of the poetic composition is not simple and the language employed is also not simple, therefore, to analyse a poem by studying its paraphrasable content is committing 'The Heresy of Paraphrase' against which Brooks has presented his theory. In the concluding essay of *The Well Wrought Urn* "The Heresy of Paraphrase", Brooks declares that poetry basically differs from prose, and substituting paraphrase will harm the real spirit and meaning of the poem. The aggregate of dictionary definitions of the words which the poem is made with all its regard to grammar and syntax will not bring the readers anywhere close to the real meaning of the poem because the different types of irony, paradox, ambiguity and the devices of evocation invoke something that lies dormant in reader's mind. He explores that what is common between the poems of all ages is not the subject matter or content but the structure. Brooks recommends that critical endeavour should be focussed on the study and the

particular structure of the poems and not on the external details. Moreover the language of poetry gains something from irony, paradox and metaphor which is not present in the dictionary definition or every day usage. Every poet creates his own language for his special purpose and thus by taking the paraphrase as equivalent to the meaning of the poem or taking the exercise as the criticism of the poem is detrimental to the proper understanding of poetry.

The next prominent formalist critic is R. P. Blackmur who is also known as the chief exemplar of the formalist criticism in practice. Blackmur is a critic who is known by means of his articles, reviews and essays rather than by means of a whole book. Twelve of Blackmur's essays are collected in *The Double Agent* (1935) and other thirteen in *The Expense of Greatness* (1940) and a dozen of essays have appeared since then. Blackmur is one of those formalist critics who have expressed their views not only on poetry but also on the function and role of criticism. Among all the formalist critics, he alone laid stress on the proper study of words and he also made distinction between the dictionary meaning of the words and their poetic meanings, but even his more important is his distinction between language and gesture. In his famous essay "Language as Gesture", he points out that there is seemingly paradoxical affinity between language and gesture. Language is made of words and gesture if made of motions but at the same time, words are made of motion and gesture is made of language and words. Blackmur remarks, "The highest use of language cannot be made without incorporating some quality of gesture within it" (Blackmur 21). A novelist cannot make his dialogue sing, a poet cannot make his cry lyrical, a dramatist cannot make incongruities comical without exploiting the gesture inherent in language. One cannot master the language without mastering the gesture within it. If a critic confines his attention only to the dictionary meaning of words, he will miss the real meaning of poetry. So no one among the formalists laid so much stress on the significance of words as Blackmur did.

In his opinion, words are the immediate as well as the ultimate source of poetry and allied arts. In his critical essays, Blackmur has laid great emphasis on the necessity of close and attentive reading of poetry. He opined that the aim of criticism is appreciation but true appreciation must essentially involve judgement and evaluation. The success of criticism should be judged by observing how far it leads the reader to the work and teach him to analyse poetry. Another important theory of Blackmur is that he also laid stress on imagination and condemned the excessive use of intellect in literary criticism. Moreover he also opined that the literary critic must be a man of vast and varied knowledge and he should have rich endowment. Thus Blackmur widened the scope of formalist criticism and there is originality in his critical theory. His subtle and penetrating elucidation of many texts on the basis of the suggestive qualities of words made an immense contribution to formal technical analysis. His critical theory also paved a way for the assimilation of other theories which can help in approaching a literary work from various angles. He combines wide learning and labour, imaginative brilliance and humble honesty in a remarkable way in his works.

Apart from these key figures of the formalist school of criticism, there were other critics also who have contributed to the critical assumptions of formalist criticism. W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley in their two essays "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy" written in 1946 and reprinted in Wimsatt's *The Verbal Icon* in 1954 objected to the fallacies inherent in Romantic criticism, 'the intentional fallacy' and 'the affective fallacy' judged a work through its origin and psychological effects on the readers. There are two other prominent critics like Yvor Winters and F.R. Leavis who are generally considered to be the contributors to the development of formalist criticism. Yvor Winters in spite of belonging to the school of new critics, does not share many common beliefs with the formalist critics in general. His affinity with formalist critics lies in rejecting critical relativism, romantic impressionism and also in advocating the close analysis of the texts. In his book *The Function of Criticism* he evaluated formalist school and various other schools, and considers the moral evaluation of a literary work as the chief aim of criticism. An important English writer who shares some critical concepts with these Americans is F.R. Leavis, though he cannot be called thoroughly a formalist critic but he laid an emphasis on the verbal analysis and his *Scrutiny* (1952) contains some of the sharpest close readings of our time. He set out from the beginning the application of the method of Eliot and those of American Formalist critics systematically and presented a minute and brilliant examination of actual passage by close scrutiny, though his own method is different and he cherishes moral value of literature for life.

Thus all the major formalist writers and other critics also laid attention to the concrete and close reading of a literary work and brought a kind of revolution in literary studies. Though all these formalist critics had their own separate critical theories and devised their own terms for the structure of poetry and represented divergent points of view both in theory and practice, but their basic assumptions and attitudes about literature and its study are more or less the same. It is held by each one of them that a poem should be treated as a poem and as an object in itself. All the formalist critics warn the readers against such temptations to lose their sight of the object itself as in the intentional and affective fallacies and biography and the author, social conditions of the time of its production and its normal effect on the reader. Paul de Man remarks, "Their theory and practice was founded on the assumption that literature is an autonomous activity of the mind, a distinctive way of being in the world to be understood in terms of its own purposes and intention" (Paul de Man 62).

Cleanth Brooks observes that their main focus was on the close analysis and the internal factors of the literary work itself because "the causes of the poem can never be and need not be known, and the reduction of a work of literature to its causes does not constitute literary criticism, and all that is relevant to the given work lies in that work itself" (Brooks 60). Only by a close analysis of all the elements i.e. image, metaphor, symbol, rhythm, tone, language etc which are used as devices for the poem that the readers can approach the poem properly. Robert B. Heilman says about the practice of formalist criticism, "Recent criticism has been

primarily concerned with matters of tone and with the function of certain poetic devices of irony for instance, and the suggestive value of images and metaphor and symbol of the interlamination of the parts and sources of tension" (Heilman 4)

Thus the key concepts of all the formalist critics deal with the meanings and interaction of words, figures of speech and symbol. For formalist critics, among all the internal factors, language is an important aspect i.e. the literary and poetic use of language. In this context Graham Hough, "There is a great emphasis on the organic unity of structure and meaning and they study the formed meaning and unity and form of a work in terms of the inter relationship among the internal factors taking it a finished product" (Hough 20). They make analysis of the structural as well as textual properties of the poem but all these formalist critics contend that these elements are not combined mechanically but there is an organic relationship among all these elements. Hence in the theory of formalist criticism, there is an organic relationship in all the parts of a poem making it an organic whole. The meaning and content of a poem is conveyed through the combination of formal structure and different internal factors.

Conclusively, all these formalist critics declare the function of their kind a criticism to be the examination of the structure of poem as poem, and its study as an artistic document. Though all the new critics have invented their own terms like 'irony', 'metaphor', 'texture', 'symbol', 'gesture' etc. to define the paradoxical structure of poetry which is a reconciliation of diverse equilibrium of opposed forces. The form of a poem, whether or not, it has character or plot is said to be primarily, a structure of meanings and develops mainly through a play and counter-play of evolving thematic imagery and symbolic action. Thus the distinction of literary genres is not essential in their critical assumptions. These are the basic tenets and critical assumptions of formalist critics. Though they had different points of view yet they all base their interpretation of literary texts on these assumptions.

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