Literary Criticism & Theory: Introductory Discussion

**Criticism & Hermeneutics**

Criticism = interpretation and analysis (here, of literary texts). The term comes from the Greek word ‘krinei’ which means ‘to judge’.

Literary criticism and interpretation require training.

Literary criticism can be defined as the area of studies concerned with defining, classifying, analyzing, interpreting and evaluating literary works. (MH Abrams. *Glossary of Literary Terms*)

All interpretations are based on the ideological standpoints of those who do the interpretations. It cannot be ‘objective’ or ‘neutral’ in an absolute sense.

Hermeneutics literally means interpretation. Interpretation of difficult texts/religious texts. From the name of Hermes, the messenger from gods to men. The messenger must also have interpreted for mortals the messages he carried. (folk etymology)

Literary criticism/ interpretation must have originated with hermeneutics.

Naturally, in all these areas there are interpretative authorities and interpretative strategies.

**Our enterprise**

In this class, we will try to learn and internalize the ideas and strategies/methodologies of the masters. This is initiation, apprenticeship and training. The aim is that the students will, some day, acquire competence, autonomy and confidence in reading, understanding, interpreting and evaluating texts. Thus, these can be the tentative first steps towards a prospective fruitful critical enterprise.

In traditional criticism, texts were read from a moralist view (Plato – right/wrong, good/bad), or an aesthetic view (Aristotle), or a historical/biographical view, or a convenient combination of many approaches.

From the mid-20th century (i.e., from the insights of structuralism, Marxism etc.) the focus shifted to vital issues of everyday human existence like class, race, gender etc. as well as oppression and social justice, language and literary representation etc.

Post-structuralist theories focused rigorously on issues/problematics of meaning, language etc. based on the insights of philosophy and linguistics, social sciences etc. Even science and its methods became a part of the project(s) of enquiry.

Saussure. *A Course in General Linguistics*

Franz Boas – sociologist & anthropologist who studies Red Indian languages etc.

Franz Boas -> Sapir -> Whorf -> Bloomfield ->Zellig Harris -> Chomsky

Claude Levi-Strauss. *Mythologiques, TristesTropiques*

**Literary Theory**

Literary theory is centered on ideas from various disciplines and expresses strong social and political interests.

All learning is hypertextual: all learning is networked, related to other areas etc. Our duty as students is to see the connections/relations and to draw inferences which enable us to solve problems, i.e., to intervene effectively and constructively in life situations.

In *Beginning Theory* Peter Barry lists some of the fundamental assumptions/foundational notions of theory:

* Politics is pervasive. (It is everywhere and is an inescapable reality of life.)
* Language is constitutive/central.
* Truth is provisional. (It is not absolute, universal or permanent. Its validity is a property and result of the context.)
* Meaning is contingent. (Not fixed or permanent)
* Human nature is a myth. (An anti-essentialist stance. We can reductively say ‘existential’.)

These basic tenets express the central concerns of literary theory. These show a radical departure from the concerns of literary studies up to the New Critics and F R Leavis (or the liberal humanist approach, in general).

Peter Barry says that theory is not innately (or inherently) difficult. Rather, the difficulty is often in the way it is written (or written about), in the technical terminology, blending of ideas from very diverse areas of enquiry like history, sociology, philosophy, political science, economics, psychology, science etc.

Our duty is to cut through the jargon and find our way(s) through the terrain of ideas.

Lacan and Chomsky -> Human mind is structured like language.

See *Introducing Critical Theory by* Stuart Sim & Borin Van Loon. (in MMC library)

**Why Theory?**

Literary theory gives us eyes, ears and insights to read and understand the hidden subtexts (of texts, events etc.). Thus it enables us to see through misinformation, and disinformation and thus to understand better the ideological underpinnings of our world and life.

Thus, literary/cultural theory is not merely an academic or ‘textual’ activity but is directly related to our daily lives.

Art is cultural production and is directly related to life and the conditions of the society (economic, social, stratificational etc.). Therefore, we cannot study, understand, appreciate and evaluate art without understanding the socio-historical conditions in which art is produced, circulated and consumed.

NB: Reception and consumption of art also is very important: as important a process as production itself.

e.g., William Blake’s poems were, so to say, rediscovered in the 20th century after a long period of insignificance and relative obscurity.

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The modern literary and cultural theories of the 20th century owe their origin to insights in linguistics (Saussurean and after) and philosophy (especially Kantian, Hegelian, Marxian etc.).

Literary theory also draws ideas from science, history, psychology, philosophy, political science, anthropology, sociology etc.

Immanuel Kant -- human reason

Hegel -- German idealism

Karl Marx -- Marxism

**Production and reception of literary texts**

Steps and/or integral factors in the production of texts are:

Author<—>Context<—>Language<—>Intended reader

The next step is the **reception** of the text by readers through reading, film/stage adaptations, translations, academic teaching and learning etc. (There are many factors involved in this, depending on the context, time etc.)

(Canon formation, canon of literature)

The general public usually reads for entertainment.

Critics and students of literature do not read literature simply for pleasure; they also try to analyse, evaluate, classify texts (and also to relate texts to the context).

Thus literary criticism is an involved activity which requires training, practice, understanding, perspicacity etc.

Innocent and simplistic reading of literary texts is not enough. There should be informed and judicious analysis and understanding.

NB: This should be read in the end also as **Conclusion**. (See, this is how we demonstrate shifting of identities and centres and meanings.)

\*\*\* Biju Joseph’s classnotes; Dec 2013; 6th Semester Class; Typed by Ranju CK in Dec 2014) \*\*\*