

Level: M1 (Civ & Lit)

Lecture: Historical Development of Literary Criticism

1. Antiquity

Although almost all of the criticism ever written dates from the 20th century, questions first posed by Plato and Aristotle are still of prime concern, and every critic who has attempted to justify the social value of literature has had to come to terms with the opposing argument made by Plato in *The Republic*. The poet as a man and poetry as a form of statement both seemed untrustworthy to Plato, who depicted the physical world as an imperfect copy of transcendent ideas and poetry as a mere copy of the copy. Thus, literature could only mislead the seeker of truth. Plato credited the poet with divine inspiration, but this, too, was cause for worry; a man possessed by such madness would subvert the interests of a rational polity. Poets were therefore to be banished from the hypothetical republic.

In his *Poetics*—still the most respected of all discussions of literature—Aristotle countered Plato's indictment by stressing what is normal and useful about literary art. The tragic poet is not so much divinely inspired as he is motivated by a universal human need to imitate, and what he imitates is not something like a bed (Plato's example) but a noble action. Such imitation presumably has a civilizing value for those who empathize with it. Tragedy does arouse emotions of pity and terror in its audience, but these emotions are purged in the process (katharsis). In this fashion, Aristotle succeeded in portraying literature as satisfying and regulating human passions instead of inflaming them.

Although Plato and Aristotle are regarded as antagonists, the narrowness of their disagreement is noteworthy. Both maintain that poetry is **mimetic**, both treat the arousing of emotion in the perceiver, and both feel that poetry takes its justification, if any, from its service to the state. It was obvious to both men that poets wielded great power over others. Unlike many modern critics who have tried to show that poetry is more than a pastime, Aristotle had to offer reassurance that it was not socially explosive.

Aristotle's practical contribution to criticism, as opposed to his ethical defense of literature, lies in his **inductive** treatment of the elements and kinds of poetry. Poetic modes are identified according to their means of imitation, the actions they imitate, the manner of imitation, and its effects. These distinctions assist the critic in judging each mode according to its proper ends instead of regarding beauty as a fixed entity. The ends of tragedy, as Aristotle

conceived them, are best served by the harmonious disposition of six elements: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song. Thanks to Aristotle's insight into universal aspects of audience psychology, many of his dicta have proved to be adaptable to genres developed long after his time.

Later Greek and Roman criticism offers no parallel to Aristotle's originality. Much ancient criticism, such as that of **Cicero**, **Horace**, and **Quintilian** in Rome, was absorbed in technical rules of **exegesis** and advice to aspiring **rhetoricians**. Horace's verse epistle *The Art of Poetry* is an urbane amplification of Aristotle's emphasis on **the decorum** or internal propriety of each genre, now including lyric, pastoral, satire, elegy, and epigram, as well as Aristotle's epic, tragedy, and comedy. This work was later to be prized by **Neoclassicists** of the 17th century not only for its rules but also for its humour, common sense, and appeal to educated taste. On the **Sublime**, by the Roman-Greek known as "**Longinus**," was to become influential in the 18th century but for a contrary reason: when decorum began to lose its sway encouragement could be found in Longinus for arousing elevated and ecstatic feeling in the reader. Horace and Longinus developed, respectively, the rhetorical and the affective sides of Aristotle's thought, but Longinus effectively reversed the Aristotelian concern with regulation of the passions.

2. The Medieval Period

In the Christian Middle Ages criticism suffered from the loss of nearly all the ancient critical texts and from an antipagan distrust of the literary imagination. Such Church Fathers as **Tertullian**, **Augustine**, and **Jerome** renewed, in churchly guise, the Platonic argument against poetry. But both the ancient gods and the surviving classics reasserted their fascination, entering medieval culture in a theologically allegorized form. Encyclopaedists and textual commentators explained the supposed Christian content of pre-Christian works and the Old Testament. Although there was no lack of rhetoricians to dictate the correct use of literary figures, no attempt was made to derive critical principles from emergent genres such as the fabliau and the chivalric romance. Criticism was in fact inhibited by the very coherence of the theologically explained universe. When nature is conceived as endlessly and purposefully symbolic of revealed truth, specifically literary problems of form and meaning are bound to be neglected. Even such an original vernacular poet of the 14th century as **Dante** appears to have expected his *Divine Comedy* to be interpreted according to the rules of scriptural exegesis.

3. The Renaissance

Renaissance criticism grew directly from the recovery of classic texts and notably from **Giorgio Valla**'s translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* into Latin in 1498. By 1549 the *Poetics* had been rendered into Italian as well. From this period until the later part of the 18th century Aristotle was once again the most imposing presence behind literary theory. Critics looked to ancient poems and plays for insight into the permanent laws of art. The most influential of Renaissance critics was probably **Lodovico Castelvetro**, whose 1570 commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics* encouraged the writing of tightly structured plays by extending and codifying Aristotle's **idea of the dramatic unities**. It is difficult today to appreciate that this obeisance to antique models had a liberating effect; one must recall that imitation of the ancients entailed rejecting scriptural allegory and asserting the individual author's ambition to create works that would be unashamedly great and beautiful. Classicism, individualism, and national pride joined forces against literary asceticism. Thus, a group of 16th-century French writers known as **the Pléiade**—notably **Pierre de Ronsard** and **Joachim du Bellay**—were simultaneously classicists, poetic innovators, and advocates of a purified vernacular tongue. They aimed to elevate the French language to the level of the classical tongues as a medium for literary expression. The writers of La Pléiade are considered the first representatives of French Renaissance poetry, one reason being that they revived the alexandrine verse form (composed of 12-syllable lines, rhyming in alternate masculine and feminine couplets), the dominant poetic form of the French Renaissance.

The ideas of the Italian and French Renaissance were transmitted to England by **Roger Ascham**, **George Gascoigne**, **Sir Philip Sidney**, and others. Gascoigne's "Certayne notes of Instruction" (1575), the first English manual of versification, had a considerable effect on poetic practice in the Elizabethan Age. Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* (1595) vigorously argued the poet's superiority to the philosopher and the historian on the grounds that his imagination is chained neither to lifeless abstractions nor to dull actualities. The poet, according to Sidney, "doth not only show the way, but giveth so sweet a prospect into the way, as will entice any man to enter into it." While still honouring the traditional conception of poetry's role as bestowing pleasure and instruction, Sidney's essay presages the Romantic claim that the poetic mind is a law unto itself.

4. Neoclassicism

The Renaissance in general could be regarded as a neoclassical period, in that ancient works were considered the surest models for modern greatness. Neoclassicism, however, usually connotes narrower attitudes that are at once literary and social: a worldly-wise tempering of enthusiasm, a fondness for proved ways, a gentlemanly sense of propriety and balance. Criticism of the 17th and 18th centuries, particularly in France, was dominated by **these Horatian norms**. French critics such as **Pierre Corneille** and **Nicolas Boileau** urged a strict orthodoxy regarding the dramatic unities and the requirements of each distinct genre, as if to disregard them were to lapse into barbarity. The poet was not to imagine that his genius exempted him from the established laws of craftsmanship.

Neoclassicism had a lesser impact in England, partly because **English Puritanism** had kept alive some of the original Christian hostility to secular art, partly because English authors were on the whole closer to plebeian taste (a commoner) than were the court-oriented French, and partly because of the difficult example of Shakespeare, who magnificently broke all of the rules. Not even the relatively severe classicist **Ben Jonson** could bring himself to deny Shakespeare's greatness, and the theme of Shakespearean genius triumphing over formal imperfections is echoed by major British critics from **John Dryden** and **Alexander Pope** through **Samuel Johnson**. The science of Newton and the psychology of Locke also worked subtle changes on neoclassical themes. Pope's *Essay on Criticism* (1711) is a Horatian compendium of maxims, but Pope feels obliged to defend the poetic rules as "Nature methodiz'd"—a portent of quite different literary inferences from Nature. Dr. Johnson, too, though he respected precedent, was above all a champion of moral sentiment and "mediocrity," the appeal to generally shared traits. His preference for forthright sincerity left him impatient with such intricate conventions as those of the pastoral elegy.

The decline of Neoclassicism is hardly surprising; literary theory had developed very little during two centuries of artistic, political, and scientific ferment. The 18th century's important new genre, **the novel**, drew most of its readers from a bourgeoisie that had little use for **aristocratic dicta**. A Longinian cult of "feeling" gradually made headway, in various European countries, against Neoclassical canons of proportion and moderation. Emphasis shifted from concern for meeting fixed criteria to **the subjective state of the reader** and then of **the author himself**. The spirit of nationalism entered criticism as a concern for the origins and growth of one's own native literature and as an esteem for such non-Aristotelian factors as "the spirit of the age." Historical consciousness produced by turns theories of literary progress

and primitivistic theories affirming, as one critic put it, that “barbarous” times are the most favourable to the poetic spirit. The new recognition of strangeness and strong feeling as literary virtues yielded various fashions of taste for misty sublimity, graveyard sentiments, medievalism, Norse epics (and forgeries), Oriental tales, and the verse of plowboys. Perhaps the most eminent foes of Neoclassicism before the 19th century were **Denis Diderot** in France and, in Germany, **Gotthold Lessing**, **Johann von Herder**, **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe**, and **Friedrich Schiller**.

5. Romanticism and “the Lamp” of Criticism

Romanticism, an amorphous movement that began in Germany and England at the turn of the 19th century, and somewhat later in France, Italy, and the United States, found spokesmen as diverse as Goethe and August and Friedrich von Schlegel in Germany, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in England, Madame de Staël and Victor Hugo in France, Alessandro Manzoni in Italy, and Ralph Waldo Emerson and Edgar Allan Poe in the United States.

Romantics tended to regard the writing of poetry as a transcendently important activity, closely related to the creative perception of meaning in the world. The poet was credited with the godlike power that Plato had feared in him; Transcendental philosophy was, indeed, a derivative of Plato’s metaphysical Idealism. In the typical view of Percy Bysshe Shelley, poetry “strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty, which is the spirit of its forms.”

Wordsworth’s preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), with its definition of poetry as the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings and its attack on Neoclassical diction, is regarded as the opening statement of English Romanticism. In England, however, only Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817) embraced the whole complex of Romantic doctrines emanating from Germany; the British empiricist tradition was too firmly rooted to be totally washed aside by the new metaphysics. Most of those who were later called Romantics did share an emphasis on individual passion and inspiration, a taste for symbolism and historical awareness, and a conception of art works as internally whole structures in which feelings are dialectically merged with their contraries. Romantic criticism coincided with the emergence of aesthetics as a separate branch of philosophy, and both signalled a weakening in ethical demands upon literature. The lasting achievement of Romantic theory is its recognition that artistic creations are justified, not by their promotion of virtue, but by their own coherence and intensity.

6. The late 19th Century and the 20th Century

The Romantic movement had been spurred not only by German philosophy but also by the universalistic and utopian hopes that accompanied the French Revolution. Some of those hopes were thwarted by political reaction, while others were blunted by industrial capitalism and the accession to power of the class that had demanded general liberty. Advocates of the literary imagination now began to think of themselves as enemies or gadflies of the newly entrenched bourgeoisie. In some hands the idea of creative freedom dwindled to a **bohemianism** pitting “art for its own sake” against commerce and respectability. Aestheticism characterized both **the Symbolist criticism** of Charles Baudelaire in France and the self-conscious decadence of Algernon Swinburne, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde in England. At an opposite extreme, realistic and naturalistic views of literature as an exact record of social truth were developed by Vissarion Belinsky in Russia, Gustave Flaubert and Émile Zola in France, and William Dean Howells in the United States. Zola’s program, however, was no less anti-bourgeois than that of the Symbolists; he wanted novels to document conditions so as to expose their injustice. Post-Romantic disillusion was epitomized in Britain in the criticism of **Matthew Arnold**, who thought of critical taste as a substitute for religion and for the unsatisfactory values embodied in every social class.

Toward the end of the 19th century, especially in Germany, England, and the United States, literary study became an academic discipline “at the doctoral level.” Philology, linguistics, folklore study, and the textual principles that had been devised for biblical criticism provided curricular guidelines, while academic taste mirrored the prevailing impressionistic concern for the quality of the author’s spirit. Several intellectual currents joined to make possible the writing of systematic and ambitious **literary histories**. Primitivism and Medievalism had awakened interest in neglected early texts; scientific Positivism encouraged a scrupulous regard for facts; and the German idea that **each country’s literature had sprung from a unique national consciousness** provided a conceptual framework. The French critic **Hippolyte Taine**’s *History of English Literature* (published in French, 1863–69) reflected the prevailing determinism of scientific thought; for him a work could be explained in terms of the race, milieu, and moment that produced it. For other critics of comparable stature, such as Charles Sainte-Beuve in France, Benedetto Croce in Italy, and George Saintsbury in England, historical learning only threw into relief the expressive uniqueness of each artistic temperament.

The ideal of objective research has continued to guide Anglo-American literary scholarship and criticism and has prompted work of unprecedented accuracy. Bibliographic

procedures have been revolutionized; historical scholars, biographers, and historians of theory have placed criticism on a sounder basis of factuality. Important contributions to literary understanding have meanwhile been drawn from anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, and psychoanalysis.

The totality of Western criticism in the 20th century defies summary except in terms of its restless multiplicity and factionalism. Schools of literary practice, such as Imagism, Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism, have found no want of defenders and explicators. Ideological groupings, psychological dogmas, and philosophical trends have generated polemics and analysis, and literary materials have been taken as primary data by sociologists and historians. Literary creators themselves have continued to write illuminating commentary on their own principles and aims. In poetry, Paul Valéry, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens and T. S. Eliot; in the theatre, George Bernard Shaw, Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht; and in fiction, Marcel Proust, D.H. Lawrence, and Thomas Mann have contributed to criticism in the act of justifying their art.