

ENGLISH (Hons) Part-3; Paper-5; Unit-3; Topic - "The Frontiers of Criticism"; Lec-NO-38; by - GANESH KUMAR.

Remaining part of the lecture-NO-80:

The second kind of Criticism that T.S. Eliot talks against is the kind of explanations by origins. A large part of this lecture is devoted to Eliot's critique of what he calls "the criticism of explanation by origins". One of these is 'The Road to Xanadu', by Thorliefson Howes, a work that is now virtually unknown; the other, however, is James Joyce's 'Finnegans Wake', a work composed mostly what Eliot refers to a "merely beautiful nonsense" that has puzzled critics since its publication. What Eliot means by 'criticism of explanations of origins' is that whether the critic goes into the details of what is the influence and the origins of a particular work of art. Eliot says that:

"I take this simply as a suggestive analogy. One can explain a poem by investigating what it is made of and the causes that brought it about; and explanation may be a necessary preparation for understanding. But to understand a poem it is also necessary, and I should say in most instances still more necessary

that we should endeavour to grasp what the poetry is aiming to be, one might say - though it is long since I have employed such terms with my assurance - endeavouring to grasp its entelechy?

Thus, according to Eliot, just merely thinking in terms of the origin of a particular poem does not in any way form the ambit of literary criticism. It is a scholarship of a particular kind, but this kind of scholarship is not criticism as the origin of the poem does not necessarily explain the way the poet tried to mean what the poem is all about.

The third kind of criticism that Eliot talks about in great detail is 'the classroom method of I. A. Richards' along with the emphasis of Richard's student William Empson. Enumerating on the ways of class-room method Eliot mentions that:

"The method is to take a well-known poem - each of the poem analyzed in this book is a good one of its kind - without reference to the author or to his other works, analyze it stanza by stanza and line by line, and extract, squeeze, tease, press every drop of meaning out of it that one can. It might be called The lemon-squeezer school of criticism."

This method also has its own dangers and Eliot mentions them one by one -

→ assumption of just one interpretation of the poem as a whole...

→ The second danger is that of assuming that the interpretation, if valid, is necessarily an account of what the author consciously or unconsciously was trying to do.

→ The third is as if someone had taken a machine to pieces and left me with the task of reassembling the parts.

After, thus, providing the limitations of the kinds of criticism that were prevalent during his time, Eliot mentions that whereas in 1923, "the essential function of literary criticism was" the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste, but in 1956, the objective has changed to "Promote the understanding and enjoyment of literature".

Eliot further mentions that "to understand a poem comes to the same thing as to enjoy it for the right reasons". In this regard, he further elaborates - "It is certain that we do not fully enjoy a poem unless we understand it; and on the other hand, it is equally true that we do not fully understand a poem unless we enjoy it."

Thus, as per Eliot, the role of a critic is to provide the necessary background to the readers about how to understand

and enjoy a poem or a poet and then leave the readers at that so that they can have their own appreciation of poems. Thus he ends his essay on 'The Frontiers of Criticism' by saying that -

"So the critic to whom I am most grateful is the one who can make me look at something I have never looked at before, or looked at only with eyes clouded by prejudice, set my face with it and then leave me alone with it. From that point, I must rely upon my own sensibility, intelligence, and capacity for wisdom".

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