Lecture 10

New Criticism

Hello and welcome back to this lecture series. Today we are going to start our discussion on the school of literary criticism that is usually identified within the field of English studies as Anglo-American New Criticism or simply as New Criticism. It is a way of approaching and understanding literature that held sway in the field of English studies both in the universities of Britain and of America roughly during the second and third quarters of the twentieth century. So we are moving forward by about a hundred years or so from the Romantic literary theory which we discussed in our previous two lectures.

New Criticism and the Political Context

I think that by now you have already been able to notice a trend emerging in this series of lectures. Whenever we take up any new literary theory for discussion we see that its emergence is strongly tied up with some kind of socio-political change or even turmoil. And this goes on to show how integrally the politics and revolutionary social movements are tied to the changes in the cultural world. Thus, in my introductory lecture, I have discussed how what is today often labeled as literary theory or simply as theory was an intellectual product of the political turmoil of the 1960s when students and workers gathered on the streets of Paris to protest against authoritarianism. But as I have explained earlier, the 1960s, though important, is not a one-off moment in the history when socio-political revolution has led to the emergence of new cultural theories about how to create and understand literature. Indeed, as we have seen, the very emergence of English literature as a subject of systematic study and criticism was connected with

its own history of socio-political upheaval. This was the history of the decline of the power of monarchy and aristocracy in England and the emergence of a new bourgeois public sphere during the eighteenth century. Similarly, while discussing the Romantic literary theory, we have seen how the ideals of the French Revolution have shaped it. In today's discussion of New Criticism we will see how a political epicenter of this new intellectual movement might be located in outbreak of the First World War, which continued from 1914 to 1918 and resulted in a man slaughter that was unprecedented in human history. It was really a world that was in war! So even though the immediate incident that triggered the war was a rather localized issue of European politics – which was the killing of the crown prince of the Austro-Hungarian empire, Franz Ferdinand – it soon grew to involve not only the whole of Europe but also America, Russia and a large part of Asia and Africa since they were European colonies. So just to give you a perspective, a war that began with the murder of an Austrian prince, ended up with the killing of more than 1 crore or 10 million soldiers worldwide, out of whom seventy thousand were Indian soldiers.

Amidst this widespread killing and destruction, there was a pervasive sense of losing one's grip on the world as it was known. And of course this sense of alienation and loss was the sharpest in Europe which was at the epicenter of the whole political turmoil. The German intellectual Walter Benjamin eloquently wrote about these feelings in his essay titled "The Storyteller". Benjamin observed that it was noticeable how after the First World War, "men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer but poorer in communicable experience?" Benjamin argues that this was because all their past experiences that allowed them to communicate with the world around them and understand how things functioned within it were destroyed by the First World War:

> For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.

New Criticism, in many ways is the literary theory produced by this fragile human being who has been shorn of all certainties of the world that he knew by the destructive torrents and explosions of the First World War. Hence, it is a literary theory that sways between the desire to rediscover for oneself the lost sense of tradition through literature and literary appreciation on the one hand *and* on the other hand the effort to read literature without the help of any context or socio-cultural tradition because all that has been made meaningless by the experiences of the First World War. One of these poles is represented by the theoretical works of T. S. Eliot and the other pole is represented by the Practical Criticism propounded by I.A. Richards. So let's start with Eliot.

T. S. Eliot and New Criticism

T. S. Eliot is too famous a figure within the field of English literary studies to be introduced separately. And in any case we will have to return to the works of T. S. Eliot as a poet when we engage with theories of modernism in one of our later lectures. For now, I will just mention his dates which are 1888 CE to 1965 CE and also the fact that Eliot was born in America but spent the most part of his adult life in England which is in contrast to the other major theorist of New Criticism I. A. Richards, who was born in England but then went on to teach at the Harvard University in America. This explains why New Criticism is also regarded as an Anglo-American

critical tradition. And since we are talking about nomenclatures, let me note here that the term New Criticism was derived from the 1941 book titled *The New Criticism* written by the American scholar John Ransom Crowe who used this name to bring under a common umbrella the critical thoughts of intellectuals like Eliot, Richards and others. So the name New Criticism actually came much later and only after the critical positions of people like Eliot and Richards had become mainstream within the Anglo-American academia.

Now, coming back to Eliot, the piece of theoretical work that I want to focus on is his essay titled "Tradition and Individual Talent". It was published in 1919, which means almost immediately after the end of the First World War, and it contains basically two inter-related sections and a brief conclusion. The first of these sections revolve around the idea of "tradition". At the heart of how Eliot defines tradition is the notion of what he calls the "historic sense", and I quote from the essay: "the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence". In other words, tradition which is posited on the historical sense is a constant folding in of the present into a temporal continuum and thereby fitting in of the present within the past. It is important to note here that this constant fitting in of the present within the past is a dynamic process. The present and the new become meaningful only when inscribed on to the template of the past but it also simultaneously changes what the past is, thereby modifying the sense of tradition. Now all of this might sound rather complex and vague so let me try and produce a concrete example of how tradition connects the present with the past. Let's say I write a poem of fourteen lines praising the beauty and intelligence of my pet cat. Now this poem, written in the present, will not make much sense from the point of view of literary criticism and literary appreciation until and unless we have what Eliot calls the historical sense and connect the poem on my cat with the poetic tradition of sonnet writing which uses this fourteen-line

form. It is only when the present poem is enfolded within the sonnet tradition that we will be able to see how the cat in my poem plays the same role as the beloved named Beatrice in the sonnets written by the medieval Italian poet Dante. Indeed, this comparison is important for my cat poem to work at all as a piece of literary creation. Therefore, Eliot argues:

> "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead."

Now, it is also important to note here that the influence of the past tradition on the present poetry or work of art is not unidirectional but rather it works both ways. In other words, my cat poem does gain in meaning by being folded within the sonnet tradition but it also simultaneously changes the sonnet tradition. That is to say any of you trying your hand at sonnet writing tomorrow will now have to engage with a tradition that is constituted not only of the sonnets written on the beloved by Dante but also my cat sonnet. So my poem of fourteen lines written in the present is subsumed within the existing tradition even while altering the contours of that tradition for the future generation of poets.

But having established the fact that a historical sense of the tradition is significant for any poet or even any creative artist to produce a work of art, we are confronted with a question: how does the individual artist relate to tradition? Eliot makes two important points here. First is that an individual artist can only engage with tradition at the expenditure of tremendous labour. It cannot be simply inherited by being born within a cultural milieu. The second point that Eliot makes is that an artist can properly engage with tradition only through a process of "continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality". Now the first point of the two points is easily understood. If in order to write a sonnet you would need to know not only about sonnets written

by the medieval Italian poet Dante or the sixteenth century English poet William Shakespeare but also an obscure cat sonnet written by me then this would require tremendous amount of labour and, what Eliot rightly points out, a "ridiculous amount of erudition". That this sense of tradition cannot just be passively inherited is also easily understandable especially if we put this statement within the context of the years immediately following the First World War. Since the experience of the war had so radically severed the connection of an individual with the familiar past, a sense of tradition could only be gained through a painstaking reconstruction of this past in order to make it usable again.

But what does it mean to sacrifice one's personality in order to creatively engage with tradition? This is the question that Eliot answers in the second half of his essay. To understand this answer let us start with Eliot's assertion that "the poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium". Now if you go back to our lectures on Aristotle's *Poetics* you will note that one of the things Aristotle was stressing was how poetry was essentially a craft which used mediums like rhythm, language, and harmony to express itself even as a carpenter uses mediums like wood, chisel and lathe machine. The point Eliot makes in his essay is similar to that of Aristotle. In Eliot too the understanding of poetry is that of a craft which uses phrases and images to construct itself. So what the poet creates is a combination of these phrases, images and even feelings which are not exclusively his own but already available to him and to others in the form of tradition. So for instance in writing my cat sonnet, I will not only be recycling the poetic form and some of the phrases available to me through the sonnet tradition but also the feeling of awe and reverence that is to be directed towards the subject of my poem. In this combination, nothing needs to come from my personality. Not even the feelings that I put in my poem, because it is not necessary to personally feel any sense of reverence towards my cat or towards my beloved for that matter in

order to poetically use the feeling of reverence that is already part of the sonnet tradition and thereby available to me. In fact, Eliot argues that it is an error in poetry "to seek for new human emotions to express; [because] in this search for novelty in the wrong place it discovers the perverse". This explains why, for Eliot, poetry is "not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality". Now, as you can see here, this position is radically different from the Romantic literary theory that was based on the cult of the poet's personality. This is precisely the reason why we find Eliot attacking again and again the view of poetry as forwarded by Romantics like Wordsworth. Indeed, this disappearance of the poet or the author from critical consideration is to be among the chief identifying traits of a number of theories that emerged during the twentieth century and that we are going to look at in the course of our next few lectures. But right now let us move on to I. A. Richards and see how this denial of the personality of the poet shapes his theoretical approach to literature.

I.A. Richards and Practical Criticism

I.A. Richards, his dates are 1893 to 1979, is today most well-known for an experiment that he conducted while teaching at the University of Cambridge, and the principles of reading literature that he built from it. Richards gave his class a number of poems and asked them to submit readings of these poems. There was however one interesting thing that Richards did. The poems that he offered his students were devoid of any references that might allow them to connect these poems either with any particular author or even to any particular historical, social or cultural context. Richards analyzed the readings that he received from his students in his seminal study titled *Practical Criticism* published in 1929. In this study he observes how, irrespective of whether the poem was actually produced by a "great poet" or by an obscure one, what the student mostly produced in the form of readings were stock responses which had little to do with

the texts that the students actually encountered. And this, Richards argued, was a wide spread problem with literary criticism. In Richards' own words:

> We should be better advised to acknowledge frankly that, when people put poems in our hands […] what we say, in nine cases out of ten, has nothing to do with the poem, but arises from politeness or spleen or some other social motive. [...] It would be an excellent thing if all the critical chitchat which we produce on these occasions were universally recognised to be what it is, social gesture […].

In this experiment with nameless and context-less poems, we again come across a critique of the Romantic theory but a critique that is even more radical than that of Eliot. Thus, whereas Eliot stressed on the irrelevance of the personality of the poet in creating and reading poetry, Richards talks about the irrelevance of both the poet as well as the historical context of the poem. Any commentary about these issues results in what Richards would consider banal chitchat. What matters for Richards are just the words on the pages and this intense concentration on the text forms the hall mark of the new kind of literary criticism that Richards initiated and which is known as practical criticism. At the heart of this new kind of critical practice is a reading strategy that is known as "close reading". In close reading, we do not seek to understand the poet's personality through the poem nor do we seek to gain knowledge about the social, political or cultural milieu which might have produced a poem. Rather we focus on things like the poems structure, its use of rhyme, the way in which it brings together a particular choice of words, metaphors and images, the way these interact with each other and create sense of tensions and even ambiguities. In other words, we focus only on those things that are before our eyes when

we see a poem in the form of black words on a white page or a screen if you read on your computer.

According to Richards, the reason that we can subject to such intense scrutiny the internal structuring of the language of a poem in particular and of any kind of literature in general is because it employs a special kind of language. This language which Richards refers to as emotive language is different from the referential language of the more mundane and non-literary forms of communication. In case of the referential language it is used solely to refer us truly and reliably to the world outside language. On the other hand, the language of poetry or literature can be studied and indeed should be studied by focusing not on its ability to refer the reader to an external reality but by its ability to internally structures metaphors and symbols and figures of speech to create a complex pattern of meaning. This distinction between literary and non-literary language will also play an enormous role in the literary theory identified as Russian formalism which we are going to discuss in our next lecture. But before we move on to the Russian formalists let me briefly mention here some of the work of the later new critics who carried forward the legacy of I.A. Richards.

Later New Critics

The first name that I want to mention here is that of William Empson. Empson who was a student of Richards presented in his book titled *The Seven Types of Ambiguity* published in 1930 the first sustained attempt to read literature following Richards' principles of practical criticism – which is to say by focusing exclusively on the language of literature and on the production of "ambiguity" through the employment of poetic devices. Now ambiguity which results from a

multiplicity of meanings would usually be considered as a negative thing within the domain of referential language where clarity is of utmost value. But in the literary language it is celebrated by the new critics like Empson. And this is again something not very difficult to understand if we consider an example like Shakespeare's sonnet "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day". In the poem the phrase "in eternal lines to Time thou grow'st" gives us the kind of pleasure that it does primarily because of the multiple possible interpretations of the word "line" where it may mean the line of progeny that the poet and his beloved may have if they unite or even the lines of the poem itself as it grows and develops during the course of our reading. And it is precisely because the pleasure of poetry rests in such linguistic ambiguity that we must shy away, as another New Critic, Cleanth Brooks warns us, from "the heresy of paraphrase".

The other critic whom I would like to refer to before I end this lecture is the Yale university professor W. K. Wimsatt who along with his collaborator Monroe C. Beardsley produced two very influential essays in the 1940s titled "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy". In the first essay Wimsatt and Beardsley argue that it is an interpretative error to read a literary work by trying to decipher the intentions with which its author wrote it, not the least because the author is usually not available to the reader to testify what exactly his or her intention was. The second essay makes a complimentary argument by highlighting the fallacy of reading a text based on the kind of emotional affects that it might give rise to in the readers. The claim here is that in both the cases of intentional fallacy and affective fallacy we move away from the real basis of literary criticism which is the literary text itself. And what constitutes that literary text is neither the putative authorial intention nor the possible psychological effects that it may produce among its readers. It is constituted simply of language – of words on page. So with the New Critics we see how during the early half of the twentieth century literary criticism took a

definitive linguistic turn. In our upcoming lectures we are going to follow this linguistic turn in twentieth century literary criticism as it manifested in various theoretical forms like formalism, structuralism, post-structuralism and so on. Thank you for listening.