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Frederick Wilse Bateson's Critical Theory : An Eclectic
Approach to Literature.

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Contents

	page
Chapter I	
The Arnoldian Heritage.....	1
Chapter II	
An Approach to the Critical Theories of W. Empson and Lionel Trilling	92
Chapter III	
Bateson's Eclecticism As Applied to Wordsworth's Poetry	145
Conclusion	177
Bibliography	185

Preface

This thesis is an attempt to examine F.W. Bateson's critical theory with the object of proving that Bateson is an eclectic critic and this simply means that he does not want to divorce content from form in the work of art but both should be tightly woven. Like Arnold he believes that the work of art is one whole and by whole he means that a work of art is a universe of its own in which we can sense the author's attitude to life- to whatever values.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first deals with Arnold's impact on Bateson in an attempt to prove that both critics are eclectic and that both hold identical views as regards literature, the function of criticism, their attitude towards the Romantics, the role of the biographer and the moral part played by style.

The second chapter deals with Bateson's critical theory as compared to Empson's theory and that of Trilling. Empson is a close critic that is the work of art for him is a structure with internal consistency. Whereas Trilling is laying the emphasis on ideas. For him literature is involved with ideas since it deals with man in society. Bateson's main concern is to reconcile both attitudes so as to attain the real estimate in criticism and thus he says " Let us go to school with both Empson and Trilling".(English Poetry: A Critical Introduction, p. 193).

The third chapter is an application of Bateson's critical theory to Wordsworth's poetry with the object of proving that there is no separation between Bateson the theorist and Bateson the practitioner and that he is eclectic in his approach to Wordsworth.

The conclusion shows that Bateson is a true Arnoldian and that he is trying to reconcile the type of criticism based on close analysis with that which lays the emphasis on ideas. And thus the thesis proves that criticism is a relative matter which is not based on hard-and-fast rules.

There is one more point to mention here and that the approach throughout the study is analytical in the sense that it depends mainly on the text because it is the first lengthy study of Bateson's Critical Theory.

CHAPTER I

Chapter I

THE ARNOLDIAN HERITAGE

... I take literature seriously.
I am Arnoldian - this journal is called
Essays in Criticism as a proclamation of
that allegiance and I believe with Arnold
that ultimately "most of what now passes
for religion and philosophy will be
repalced by poetry" (or at any rate
literature) (1)

Literature, for Bateson is "religion minus the
supernatural metaphors" (2) and " philosophy minus the
hypostatsations of the past.". (3) Religion for him is
Christian ethics. Bateson is aware of the need for
guiding principles which can be respected and appealed
to. And therefore, he says " Once again, let Arnold be
your model." (4)

As an Arnoldian Bateson accepts "the facts of transition
without denying the values of the earlier stages of the
process" (5) and since " we take literature seriously as
essentially, even in this technological age, the most

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1. F.W. Bateson, 'Editorial Commentary', Essays in Criticism,
Vol. XX, January, 1970, p.2
 2. Ibidem.
 3. Ibidem.
 4. Ibid, p.3
 5. Ibidem.

civilized activity man can engage in on the intellectual plane- we take its criticism seriously." (1)

Bateson, like Arnold, cannot accept the one sided view of poetry as giving pleasure and no more. It is for him an embarrassing point because " the literary conscience rebels." (2) That poetry gives pleasure is something that Bateson cannot deny. The Romantic theory of poetry is difficult to accept because it neglects the moral function of poetry. Meaning is indispensable to poetry. It is true that part of the meaning acquired may be subjective but "meaning is or ought to be public as well as private." (3) The degree of intersubjective agreement between the members of a society depends mainly on the process of learning its language and upon its programme of Education as a whole.

Arnold's definition of literary criticism as the effort " to see the object as in itself it really is " (4) is at work here. A work of art is composed of common experiences a matter which opens the way for an increasing intersubjective

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1. F.W. Bateson, 'Editorial Commentary', Essays in Criticism, Op. Cit., p. 3.
 2. F.W. Bateson, English Poetry : A critical Introduction (London : Longmans, 1966 rpt.) p.2
 3. Ibid, p.3
 4. Matthew Arnold, " On Translating Homer", Selected Prose (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1970), p. 84.

agreement. A critical reader asks himself : is the poem as he has experienced it the poem as in itself it really is ? Bateson gives us the answer :

When we read a poem we must first of all translate the visual and spatial symbols we meet on the page into their oral and temporal equivalents, i.e. into their proper sequence of conventional sounds. A second and similar translation follows when the conventional sounds are translated into the meanings we have to associate with them. (1)

Bateson wants to tell the reader that the meaning in literature differs from the meaning in speech. Meaning is prior to feeling and " a poem whose meaning does not when fully understood stimulate any feeling at all, or feelings that are not in some sense pleasurable, is an unsuccessful poem. " (2) The responsible reader, for Bateson, is the one who " rejects with disgust the propaganda that offers him an alleged Beatific vision practically for nothing." (3) It is the function of the responsible reader " to discover the qualities that make a poem good rather than merely pleasurable," (4) and on the other hand, to read the poem " in its original social context and relate the meaning of

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1. F.W. Bateson, English Poetry : A Critical Introduction op. Cit. , pp. 16-17
 2. Ibid., p. 17
 3. Ibid., p. 18
 4. Ibidem.

the poem to the social forces operative at the time of its composition." (1)

Bateson's comment on an extract from The Lyrical ballads shows clearly " the all importance of meaning in poetry and the comparative insignificance of sound per se." (2) The passage reads:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
 I had no human fears:
 She seemed a thing that could not feel
 The touch of earthly years.
 No motion has she now, no force;
 She neither hears nor sees;
 Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
 With rocks, and stones, and trees.(3)

Bateson's comment reads:

The structural basis of the poem is clearly the contrast between the two verses. Verse one deals with the past (there are no less than four verbs in a past tense- did, had, seemed, could). Lucy had been such a vital person that the possibility of her growing old or dying had not crossed Wordsworth's mind. Verse two concerns the present (in addition to the now in the first line there are three main verbs in the present tense- has, hears, sees). Lucy is dead.

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1. Ibidem.
 2. Ibid. p. 28
 3. William Wordsworth : The Poetical Works, London, Oxford University, Press rpt. 1959, p. 149.

The invulnerable Ariel-like creature is now lifeless and immobile as stocks and stones. And the contrast is emphasized by the repetition of earth: Lucy, who seemed immune from the passage of earthly years, must now submit to earth's diurnal course. So far from escaping the touch of years she is now undergoing a daily contact with the earth. The use of the Solemn Latinism diurnal, the only three-syllable word in this mainly monosyllabic poem completes the contrast. But the final impression the poem leaves is not of two contrasting moods, but of a single mood mounting to a climax in the pantheistic magnificence of the two last lines. (1)

The metre used has certainly contributed in reconciling the surface conflict. The gap between verse I and verse II is abridged by the use of negatives. The use of alliterations is also important and masterly except for the initial s's in L.I. Thus Bateson comes to the conclusion that "such devices as rhyme, metre, and alliteration are the servants of the meaning rather than of music." (2) and that "The contribution that each word, image, or rhythm makes to the poem must be primarily explicable in rational terms." (3) The function of such formal devices is to achieve a certain unity

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1. F.W.Bateson, English Poetry: A Critical Introduction. Op. Cit., p. 29.
 2. Ibid., p. 28.
 3. Ibid., p. 31.

of impression . Poetry defined by Bateson is simply meaning. Thus poetry in order to exist must possess the quality of being "capable of statement in terms of meaning and not of sound." (1)

The artistic process implies that more than one unit of human experience have been synthesized through language in a wider unit that includes the separate experiences and the final effect which takes place after reading the poem is that it is one artistic whole. To make his point clear Bateson quotes Eliot:

When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking ; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes. (2)

Bateson's notion bears an affinity with Aristotle who believes that a good poet will manage to make his metaphor imply an intuitive perception of the similarity in the dissimilars :

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1. Ibid., p. 35.
 2. T.S. Eliot, " The Metaphysical Poets" Selected Essays (Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1964 rpt.) p. 247.

It is a fine thing to be able to make proper use of all devices I have mentioned, as also of compound words and unfamiliar importations, but far the most important thing to master is the use of metaphor. This is the one thing that cannot be learnt from anyone else, and it is the mark of great natural ability, for the ability to use metaphor well implies a perception of resemblances. (1)

It is the function of the poet to give meaning by abstraction and to give " a scale of social values, to the chaos of individual experience." (2) To the same effect Bateson says:

The primary function of the various poetic devices and figures of speech is not mnemonic, though their secondary effects often are. What the poet qua poet is trying to do is to 'synthesize', i.e. to say several things at the same time. The things though apparently disconnected and even contradictory, are really related, and it is their interrelationship that is the point of the poem. The poet's problem is to get to think of several separate things all at once, and not one by one, in a temporal and logical sequence. (3)

For the manifestation of normal poetry, Bateson nominates four factors he believes of the most importance.

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1. Aristotle, " On the Art of Poetry", Classical Literary Criticism (Harmondsworth : penguin, 1970 rpt.) p. 65.
 2. F.W. Bateson, English Poetry: A Critical Introduction, Op. Cit., p. 41.
 3. Ibid., pp. 44-45.

First, the poet; second, the reader; third, a common language; and fourth, the literary tradition which both the poet and the reader share. For him poetry would be impossible if one of these factors is excluded. If the balance is upset poetry will be a difficult manner. The Romantics are on the wrong track because they regard the poet and neglect the reader. The poet-reader relationship is of no importance to them, and for Bateson in it lies the essence of poetry. Hence the poet must know his audience before starting to write - a question that has not been asked by any of the Romantics. Thus Bateson agrees to the idea that "The structure and meaning of the work emerge through an account of the reader's activity." (1)

A poem is regarded as a poem when it is read. The process of reading a poem, in Bateson's opinion, falls into four stages:

- (i) the reader translates the black marks into words (meaningful sounds);
- (ii) the separate words are combined into phrases or detached statements (units of meaning);
- (iii) the associated phrases and statements are linked up so as to form a complex statement (the poetic unit);
- (iv) the various complex statements or sentences are connected

1. Jonathan Culler, On Deconstruction (London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983) p. 35.