

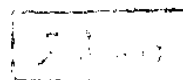
The Autonomy of Art  
A Comparative Study of the New Criticism  
and Russian Formalism

By

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## Preface

The object of this thesis is to draw a comparison between two formalist schools of criticism, the Anglo American New Criticism and Russian Formalism. Each school represents a reaction against nineteenth century expressionist and realist approaches to literature. This thesis limits itself to the discussion of one critical concept, namely the autonomy of art.

Access to the New Critical texts has been easier than in the case of the Russian Formalist texts. While the former are in English and available in Egypt, the latter are available in French and English translations and are not easy to obtain in Egypt. The availability of some of the important Russian Formalist texts was a problem, especially at the beginning of this study.

This thesis consists of four chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter is an introductory chapter which presents a survey of the two schools. The New Critical theory of poetry is indebted to the Kantian aesthetic theory of knowledge as well as the Coleridgian concept of creative imagination. The New Critics also preserve the Romantic elevation of the poem to the state of a religious object.

As for Russian Formalism, it is influenced by the Russian Futurist concept of transrational language as well as Husserlian phenomenology in its isolation of the object of study. Moreover, Russian Formalism also

reveals its indebtedness to Saussurian linguistics in the conception of the literary system as an abstract system of signs which signifies itself.

The second chapter discusses the Russian Formalist concept of art as a system. The Russian Formalists regard the quality of literariness as the specific quality of literature. Thus the literary work is defined as verbal texture and its content is considered to be the sum-total of the devices employed in its construction. However, with the Russian Formalists' realization that the synchronic analysis of literature has to be coupled with diachrony, the concept of system of systems emerges. Hence, the concept of literariness is replaced by the concept of the dominant quality which foregrounds some of the elements of the literary work while pushing the remaining elements to the background.

As for the third chapter of this thesis, it deals with the New Critical concept of art as creation. The New Critics adopt I.A. Richards' distinction between poetic language as emotive and scientific language as referential. Thus, poetry is regarded as referring to no other external truth other than itself. The Coleridgean concept of imagination, on the other hand, informs the New Critical concepts of irony, the poetry of inclusion, texture and tension. Finally, the New Critical insistence on the objective status of the poem is closely connected with their concept of the autonomy of the literary work.

The fourth chapter deals with the function of criticism, according to

the Russian Formalists and the New Critics. Boris Eichenbaum's analysis of Nikolai Gogol's *skaz* "The Overcoat" is an example of the Russian Formalist early preoccupation with the phonic stratum of verbal art which is evident in the concept of transrational language as the ultimate end of any artistic construction. However, Russian Formalism develops into structuralism. The structural method of investigation is evident in Roman Jakobson's investigation of two versions of W.B. Yeats' poem "The Sorrow of love" as involving a transformation of verbal material and a coupling of its phonetic and semantic aspects.

As for the New Critics they attempt an objective or internal investigation of the literary text as such. Cleanth Brooks' investigation of Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and Ernest Hemingway's short story "The Killers" are two examples of the New Critical practice. Brooks presents a contextual analysis of the two texts in which he argues that all the elements are functional to the structure in search for unity.

The New Critical practice attempts a partial investigation of the linguistic elements of the literary text. On the other hand, Russian Formalism ultimately attempts an integral investigation of literature. However, it reduces the study of the literary work to an investigation of signs while meaning acquires a secondary status.

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## **I Two Formalist Schools**

The New Critical movement could be classified under the trend known in modern literary criticism as the "new organicist formalism."<sup>(1)</sup> It had its precursors in critics like T.E. Hulme, T.S. Eliot and I.A. Richards in England. However, the movement itself did not emerge until the late 1930s and exercised a considerable influence on the European and American critical scene until the 1950s. The movement developed in the writings of a group of American critics from the south who had worked in close collaboration since the 1920s. Among these critics were John Crowe Ransom who gave the movement its name in his book The New Criticism (1941), Cleanth Brooks, W.K. Wimsatt and Allen Tate.<sup>(2)</sup>

One of the forerunners of organicist formalism was the Italian aesthetician Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) who conceived of the artefact as a form of "intuition-expression," the product of the fusion of sound and imagery. Croce emphasized the psychological effect and the subjective quality of the work of art.<sup>(3)</sup> The subject matter of poetry to him, was "the thoughts and action and emotions of life" which became in the creative act "simply passions and feelings, immediately assuaged and calmed and transfigured in imagery"<sup>(4)</sup>. He asserted that poetry had the power "to preserve or refresh man's superior nature in contest with his inferior."<sup>(5)</sup>

The word "aesthetic" according to Croce, was not a philosophy of art but of intuitive knowledge. "Success in the achievement, of



intuition-expression" implied the attainment of beauty which was absolute, formal, unified, perfect. He conceived of the act of artistic intuition-expression as the expression of "feeling"- feeling objectified, embodied and made knowable in the artistic act-in the linguistic act of the poem. Poetry was neither feeling nor imagery, but "contemplation of feeling." According to Croce, the function of criticism, was to point out where the poetical motive lay. He emphasized the literary work as a highly complex totality-and hence its parts should be studied in relation to the whole. In other words, he called for a contextual analysis of the literary elements leading to a synthetic view of the parts connected to the whole.<sup>(6)</sup> Therefore, Croce was an advocate of the intrinsic approach to literature.<sup>(7)</sup>

Influenced by Croce's aesthetic theory, Joel E. Spingarn, an American academic, wrote his article "The New Criticism"(1910). In this essay he declared that the work was neither a social nor a moral document. "It is not the inherent function of poetry," he wrote, "to further any moral or social cause." Literature could not replace religion and morality. He explained that: "The poet's only moral duty, as a poet, is to be true to his art, and to express his vision of reality as well as he can."<sup>(8)</sup> Spingarn objected to the discussion of literature in terms of impressionistic, historical, sociological, aesthetic or psychological criticism on the grounds that they all reduced the literary work to "history, politics, biography, erudition, metaphysics."<sup>(9)</sup> Consequently, criticism should focus on the study of the peculiar formal aspects of the art work.

A more direct influence on the New Critics was that of the British

writer, T.E. Hulme (1883-1917). Among his writings was the essay entitled "Romanticism and Clossicism" which was written before World war I and published posthumously in Speculations (1924).<sup>(10)</sup> The essay was a reaction against Romanticism and an argument in favour of Classicism. Hulme started the essay as follows:

I want to maintain that after a hundred years of romanticism, we are in for a classicl revival, and that the particular weapon of this new classical spirit, when it works in verse will be fancy.<sup>(11)</sup>

Hulme's conservatism and classicism were directly related. Romanticism was identified with French revolutionary thought. Classicism, on the other hand, was linked to a fixed order of things. The Romantics, he wrote:

... had been taught by Rosseau that man was by nature good, that it was only bad laws and customs that had suppressed him. Remove all these and the infinite possibilities of man would have a chance. This is what made them think that something positive could come out of disorder, this is what created the religious enthusiasm. Here is the root of all romanticism: that man, the individual, is an infinite reservoir of possibilities, and if you can so rearrange society by the destruction of oppressive order then these possibilities will have a chance and you will get progress.<sup>(12)</sup>

Hulme anticipated the advent of "a new period of dry hard, classical verse." He also recommended poetry of intuition which employed accurate

language that "would hand over sensations bodily."<sup>(13)</sup> As Ewa Thompson wrote, poetry for Hulme should "defamiliarize" the habitual and the common in human experience. It should present a description of finite objects-and hence provide the reader with true knowledge of the world.<sup>(14)</sup>

A similar sense of dissatisfaction with contemporary literature was shared by T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) who reacted against the social and economic ideology of capitalism which had destroyed coherence and harmony in modern society. Since the end of the 17th century, both the literary and the social history of England were characterized by a "dissociation of sensibility."<sup>(15)</sup> It was only in such a Metaphysical poet as Donne (as opposed to Victorian poets such as Tennyson and Browning) that one could find a unity and fusion of "thought and feeling" which was a sign of genuine poetry.<sup>(16)</sup>

A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility.

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.<sup>(17)</sup>

It was Eliot's view that modern society was "fragmentary" and "chaotic", and that it was only in such organic poetry that it could find a "new religion" to replace its lost faith.<sup>(18)</sup>

Like Hulme's "Romanticism and Classicism" (1924), Eliot's famous essay entitled "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) was an onslaught on the Romantic doctrine of the artist as a man of genius and

the concept of poetry as self-expression.<sup>(19)</sup> Poetry, in Eliot's terms, was "impersonal." The poet's mind was conceived of as a medium in which numberless impressions and experiences were stored up to the moment when they could unite to form a new whole. Therefore, "honest criticism" should focus on the poem rather than on the poet.<sup>(20)</sup> In such pronouncements, Eliot called for a formal as well as an aesthetic approach to literature. The "historical, moral, psychological, and sociological" approaches emphasized the extrinsic aspects of the literary work. However, the intrinsic analysis of literature could only be accomplished through a close reading of the text. In this sense, New Criticism earned its names as "aesthetic" and "textual" criticism.<sup>(21)</sup>

The major New Critical concepts reveal their indebtedness to Coleridge's concept of the creative mind as a synthetic power in which he was directly influenced by Kant's aesthetic theory of knowledge. The concepts of poetry of inclusion, texture, reconciliation of discordant elements, paradox, the heresy of paraphrase, and the cognitive value of poetry could all be traced back to Kant's pronouncements in The Critique of Judgement (1790) where he spoke of the knowledge rendered by art as superior to that attained by means of logical reasoning. Similarly, Coleridge's concept of imagination had its parallel in Kantian philosophy.<sup>(22)</sup>

According to Kant, the faculty of "productive imagination" was responsible for the higher forms of human cognition as it merged logic (forms of understanding) and intuition (perceptions). He also believed in

the "organic unity" of form and content.<sup>(23)</sup> In the Critique of Judgement, poetry occupied a primary position among other forms of art since it possessed the ability to liberate imagination and to raise itself to "ideas." Réne Wellek maintained that "Idea" was one of Kant's most difficult terms. An aesthetic idea was not identical with the general idea or concept. It was, according to Kant, a representation of the imagination for which no definite thought (e.i. concept) could be adequate. Ideas were representations of the imagination which had the semblance of reality. But what happened in art was precisely that "rational" or speculative ideas (i.e. those of invisible matters; of hell, eternity, creation, etc.) were made sensuous by the poet. In this sense, the term "idea" was very near to the latter term "symbol."<sup>(24)</sup>

Evidently Coleridge's concept of imagination which appeared in Biographia Literaria (1817) was derived from Kant's work. Coleridge wrote:

The imagination then I consider as primary, or secondary. The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I Am. The secondary I considered as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events; it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.<sup>(25)</sup>

Coleridge described that "synthetic and magical power" known as imagination in operation in the following :

This power, first put in action by the will and understanding ... reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities; of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order... (26)

As Murray Krieger remarked in The New Apologists for Poetry, in spite of the New Critics' hostility to Romanticism, they were greatly influenced by it. (27)

In his concept of poetry as a harmonization of discordant impulses in both the poet and the reader's mind, I.A. Richards (1893-1979) was indebted to Coleridge. To Richards, good poetry was that which could stand the test of irony. In the poetry of "inclusion" or "synthesis" as opposed to poetry of "exclusion," irony could work in such a way as to organize "the opposite and complementary impulses" so as to form the "resolution." (28) In this lies the value of poetry to the human psyche. The state of "equilibrium of opposed impulses" which could be reached through poetry of inclusion would lead the individual to "disinterestedness." In other words, the individual "ceases to be oriented in one direction because this 'balance' or 'reconciliation' sustains one state of mind" in which a great number of interests are involved. (29) In Kant's view aesthetic pleasure is

"disinterested satisfaction."<sup>(30)</sup> Kant emphasized that art was "purposiveness without purpose." In other words, a work of art did not direct its receiver towards action. Moreover, "pure" beauty is more "aesthetically" superior to "applied" one.<sup>(31)</sup>

As a positivist and pragmatist, Richards was familiar with the linguistic studies of the Vienna Circle in the 1920s. The distinction between poetry and science could be traced back to Kant who distinguished between the "aesthetic realm" and the scientific realm which was characterized by having a practical end.<sup>(32)</sup> In The Principles of Literary Criticism (1924), Richards distinguished between "two uses of language":

A statement may be used for the sake of the *reference*, true or false, which it causes. This is the *scientific* use of language. But it may also be used for the sake of the effects in emotion and attitudes .... This is the *emotive* use of language.<sup>(33)</sup>

According to Richards, poetry made "pseudo-statements" which did not refer to anything outside themselves. They were "poetically true." In other words, the "Truth" which such statements offered depended on "internal necessity" which should be in accordance with the whole poetic experience and was capable of arousing our "ordered response."<sup>(34)</sup> Generally speaking, Richards assigned a therapeutic value to literature in his discussion of the poem as a means through which the impulses of both poet and reader were harmonized.<sup>(35)</sup>

At a time when society was being swept over by scientific rationalism