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Teaching Literary Criticism to Iranian University Students: Some Cultural Obstacles

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Abstract

Literary criticism is one of the most challenging courses, if not the most problematic course, to teach on the curriculum of Literature in Iranian universities. This course has in fact been designed to familiarise students with a variety of critical approaches to literature. As such, faculty members who teach this course are required to cover a range of theories that often negate or dialectically complete each other. Each of these theories offers certain possibilities but also has some limitations in the critical reading of literary texts. In this paper I argue that teaching literary theory and criticism to Iranian students is often a disappointing and unsuccessful undertaking mainly because they cannot think of the critical reading of texts as an act that can be performed through various conflicting discourses. What our audience at Iranian universities seeks is the assurance of an "ultimate word" in literary theory and criticism, an approach which offers them a "complete" strategy for decoding every aspect of texts. Even when introduced to an easily applicable approach, students typically do not show much enthusiasm for engaging in a critical reading of texts but prefer their teachers to "reveal" to them the "secrets" of a text or its supposed "message". It is argued in this paper that the difficulty of teaching literary criticism at Iranian universities stems from an undemocratic mentality which believes in the authority of a single voice and, therefore, is unable to grasp the pluralism of critical approaches. I conclude that no significant improvement can be envisaged in the current condition of teaching literary criticism in Iranian universities unless there is a change of attitude towards criticism and cultural plurality, both on the part of students and faculty members.

Keywords: 1. Literary Theory 2. Critical Reading 3. Teacher Authority
4. Student Initiative

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1. Introduction

Literary Criticism is arguably one of the most challenging courses, if not the most problematic course, to teach on the curriculum of English Language and Literature at Iranian universities. This course has in fact been included in the curriculum to introduce to students a variety of critical approaches to literature. As such, faculty members who teach this course are required to cover a range of theories that often negate or dialectically complete each other. Each of these theories offers certain possibilities but also has some limitations in the critical reading of literary texts. Teaching literary theory and criticism to Iranian students is often a disappointing and unsuccessful undertaking mainly because our audience cannot think of the critical reading of texts as an act that can be performed through various conflicting discourses. What they seek is the assurance of a “last word” in literary theory and criticism, an approach which offers them a “complete” strategy for decoding every aspect of texts. Even when introduced to an easily applicable approach in literary criticism, students typically do not display much enthusiasm for engaging in critical reading but prefer their teachers to “reveal” to them the “secrets” of a text or its supposed “message”. As such, literary criticism classes are often conducted through the single and authoritative voice of a professor who, in the literal sense of the word, “professes” to his audience the moral or social “message” of the text with very little or no participation in the discussion by his/her students.

For those of us who have studied English literature at British or other Western universities, this situation is both unusual and discouraging. It inevitably highlights a striking contrast in terms of student participation. Contrary to our lived experiences in Western universities, where students prepare themselves for active class discussions by prior reading of not only the text but also a range of critical material on the text, Iranian students typically do not even read the short story or poem which is to be subjected to critical scrutiny in the class session. Instead, as a rule, they prefer to remain as silent observers who occasionally nod to indicate their passive agreement with the teacher but never dare to challenge him/her or present a different view or argument. Disagreement or even getting involved in a discussion initiated by the teacher seems to be an anathema to the majority of Iranian students studying English literature. Consequently, literary criticism classes are often uninteresting to both teachers and students: exhausting for the teachers and boring for the students.

A number of questions may be raised in this regard: Why do most Iranian students easily yield to, and actively seek, the authoritative readings of their teachers? Why do they seldom try to engage with the text using the critical concepts and methodologies taught to them in literary theory

courses? In order to try and answer these and similar questions concerning student passivity in literary criticism classes, it is perhaps necessary to probe the origins and essence of criticism. Such an enquiry could shed light on some cultural and political factors affecting student reactions and also demonstrate that the difficulty of teaching literary criticism at Iranian universities stems from an undemocratic mentality which tends to succumb to the authority of a single voice and, therefore, is unable to grasp the pluralism of critical approaches.

2. Discussion

Many historians of literary criticism consider Plato's theorisations about the function of literature and the social role of poets, particularly in his celebrated treatises *Republic* and *Ion*, as the first critical reflections of a philosopher. Charles Bressler, for example, states that "Plato's writings form the foundation upon which literary theory rests" (Bressler 2007: 21), and Mary Klages believes that "the ancient Greeks had literature, but not literary theory, until Plato came along" (Klages 2006: 12). M. A. R. Habib subtitles his book *A History of Literary Criticism* as "From Plato to the Present", thus highlighting Plato's importance as a literary theorist. He points out that "Plato's most systematic comments on poetry . . . occur in two texts, separated by several years. The first is *Ion* . . . the second [is] the *Republic*" (Habib 2005: 23). The subtitle of Habib's book is echoed, and somewhat modified, in the title that Richard Harland has chosen for his own book on the history of literary theory: *Literary Theory from Plato to Barthes*. By choosing this title, Harland, too, obviously intended to indicate that criticism of literature starts with this Greek philosopher, who considered *poiesis* as "just one of many areas to be examined in the light of his larger metaphysical and socio-political concerns" (Harland 1999: 6). The wide range of these concerns is indicated in Martin McQuillan's introduction to reader-response criticism, who traces this twentieth-century critical approach back to Plato: "Reader response has been a concern of criticism at least since Plato In *The Republic* Plato considers the ways in which the reader receives representations (or texts) in the famous parable of the cave in Book IX" (McQuillan 2001: 89).

Although there is unanimous agreement among historians of literary criticism that Plato initiated literary theory, the origin of practical literary criticism can perhaps be traced back to the fifth-century BC Athenian dramatist Aristophanes who in a famous play entitled *The Frogs* subjected the plays of fellow Greek playwrights Aeschylus and Euripides to a critical scrutiny on the basis of what his contemporaries considered to be superior drama and high morality (Davis and Finke 1989: 4). The protagonist of the

play (the God Dionysus) takes a journey to the underworld in order to find a distinguished tragedian able to bring poetry back to Athens. This quest prompts a contest amongst the poets and they engage in a lengthy wrangling about the proper criteria for judging a literary work. The most acrimonious debates take place between the rival dramatists Aeschylus and Euripides. The former defends the use of myths in drama while the latter rejects the mythical trend in favour of psychological realism. Although *The Frogs* is a comedy and not a piece of expository writing on literary theory, the issues brought up and discussed by its imaginary characters include some of the most fundamental aspects of literary criticism, ranging from such practical matters as metrics and elements of style to purely abstract reflections on the social status of poets.

Likewise, Plato puts forth his philosophical views on poetry in the form of a series of vigorous polemics with the greatest of all Greek poets, i.e., Homer. Plato expounds his ideas in imaginary dialogues with his mentor Socrates, in which the master generally acts as the mouthpiece of the pupil. Plato was an Athenian nobleman who aspired to be a politician. His voluminous *Republic* was intended as a plan for a political system which in his view guaranteed the preservation of the interests of the public. As Stephen Halliwell and Francis Sparshott point out, the idea that fictional works can vividly communicate images of human action and character is in the *Republic* “part of the description of an imaginary city constructed as a social model of ‘justice’ ” (Halliwell and Sparshott 2005: 745). Plato’s opposition to poets and accusing them of spreading falsehood may be understood in the context of his political vision of the ideal social order and cultural organisation of society. According to Plato, the undeniable power of literature to represent reality can lead to agitation and potentially dangerous convictions or dispositions in members of society. Hence the state must enforce certain criteria for the creation of literary works so that the public, and in particular the youth, would be protected from the perversions of the poets.

The Greeks’ fervent belief in the dialectical *modus operandi* is reasserted through the next towering figure in the history of literary criticism, i.e., Aristotle. In his *Poetics*, whose enormous influence extends from classical times to our postmodern period, Aristotle effectively refutes the fundamental ideas of his eminent tutor Plato, at whose Academy he had studied for eighteen years. He dismisses the main objection raised by his master (that “poets do not tell the truth”) by arguing that poetic truth is essentially different from the truth as understood in real life. The task of the poet is not to recreate actual realities, but rather to depict them as they ought to be. Accordingly, what distinguishes the poet from the historian is that the

latter would not go beyond recording the events which have already taken place, whereas the former explores probable events through his/her imagination. Countering Plato's view that by stirring up our emotions poets weaken our power of rational thinking and logical judgement, Aristotle replies that tragedy elicits pity and fear in the audience, thus purging them from potentially destructive drives which, if not curbed, might lead them to behaviour detrimental to their inner self and their relationships with others. Far from disseminating falsehood, then, dramatists make it possible for the audience to unconsciously identify themselves with the tragic hero and thus discharge overpowering emotions which in real life could lead to devastating catastrophes.

This sketchy account of Aristotle's confrontation with Plato, and in fact a disciple's refutation of his guru's theories about literature, was intended here to demonstrate the deeply democratic and pluralistic origins of literary criticism. As indicated above, Aristotle spent almost two decades studying at the Academy and Plato's ideas wielded a formative influence on his thinking. Only a profoundly democratic and scientific spirit could have prompted him to put forward his own unique ideas about the nature of literature and the critical methodology of examining literary texts in opposition to the influential views of Plato. Plato's is an approach that focuses on the content of literary texts; his purpose is to investigate the ideas suggested by the text and the effect of those ideas on readers. In other words, he intends to offer an answer to the question "What is the goal or value of literature?". In contrast, Aristotle adopts a formalistic approach and considers the elements which impart an aesthetic quality to literary texts. As Guerin, *et al* point out, adopting a formalistic terminology "Aristotle's *Poetics* recommends an 'orderly arrangement of parts' that form a beautiful whole or 'organism' " (Guerin, *et al* 2005: 97-98). The discrepancy between these two views is too obvious to require elucidation. It would perhaps suffice to point out that "Aristotle's reflections counter his teachers's two main arguments, the epistemological and the spiritual or psychological. The emotions that Plato fears will corrupt spectators are actually expelled by the actions of the play; and drama, rather than leading away from truth, can give us access to general knowledge" (Edmundson 1995: 8-9). But perhaps more important than this discrepancy is the context giving rise to it. Aristotle is famously quoted as saying that "Plato is dear to me; however, I love the truth even more than Plato". Apparently, centuries before the rise of poststructuralism and the array of post-1960s critical theories, ancient Greek philosophers had realised that every literary theory is no more than a discourse and a construct. In their view, these constructs could co-exist despite their essential incongruity, for the development of every construct

necessitated the negation of some or all of its components.

It is no accident that the earliest treatises in which a critical definition of literature and a set of criteria or important issues in the critical examination of literary texts have been discussed were in fact not books of literary criticism in the exact sense of the word but either philosophical explorations of art and literature written by ancient Greek philosophers, or literary works written by Greek men of letters. Regardless of whether or not we take Plato to be the first literary theorist or Aristophanes to be the first literary critic, it is clear that Greek thinkers and artists are to be credited with the inception of critical theory and practice in literature. As such, it can be argued that the seeds of literary theory and criticism were first planted in Greece, the cradle of democracy. The democratic mentality of Greek thinkers made it possible for literary theory and criticism to flourish because divergent and even disparate views could have an opportunity to be presented and evaluated.

The democratic context of and polemical tradition in literary theory and criticism clarifies the development of this field in the writings of the theorists who succeeded Plato and Aristotle. In *Ars Poetica*, the eminent Roman poet and literary theorist, Horace, whose influence extended to the Renaissance and Neoclassical period, laid emphasis on technique in literature, arguing that the poet should observe decorum and try to bring the form and style of his poems into harmony with their content. Longinus, in the famous treatise ascribed to him (*On the Sublime*), enters into a critical dialogue with Aristotle's theory about tragedy and catharsis. Aquinas, Dante and Boccaccio in the Middle Ages; Sir Philip Sidney, Ben Jonson, John Dryden, Aphra Behn and John Locke in the Renaissance and Restoration; Alexander Pope, Eliza Haywood, Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant and Samuel Johnson in the eighteenth century; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, Matthew Arnold, William Morris and Walter Pater in the nineteenth century – these are just some of the major theorists who contributed to the diversity of critical debates about literature. Each of these theorists' contribution could, in a sense, be conceived of as an attempt to modify and even subvert the viewpoints of the preceding thinkers. This subversion, however, is more akin to dialectical negation. In other words, the thoroughly democratic spirit which dominates this field of studies in the humanities requires that any theory should be considered meaningful insofar as it interacts with other theories and marks a change as a result of such interactions. Critical engagement with a theory in order to develop it into a more inclusive medium for contemplation is the guiding principle of literary criticism of all times.

The emergence of the New Criticism in the 1930s intensified this democratic process. The New Criticism was a refutation of all author-

centred theories as well as the approaches in the immediately preceding centuries which drew on history as an indispensable context for understating literature. John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, William K. Wimsatt, Monroe C. Beardsley and Cleanth Brooks drew our attention to the important but neglected fact that literary criticism had been preoccupied with extrinsic analysis. Giving priority to ontology over epistemology, these critics set a new course for literary criticism in which intra-textual considerations and the attempt to discover the internal logic of the structure of literary texts should take precedence over any extra-textual issue (whether it be history or philosophy or biography). In fact, the New Critics considered the text itself as the essential point of reference in the search for its meaning, relegating other considerations to the lower level of verifying what the critic finds through the “close reading” of the text. As Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle point out, the New Critics were “concerned with literary texts as artifacts which transcend the contingencies of any particular time or place and which resist what they see as a reduction of the aesthetic whole to a specific historical context” (Bennett and Royle 2004: 113). Although the new Criticism refuted the preceding critical theories, it borrowed the idea of “organic unity” from the Romantics. It may likewise be argued that the American formalists never denied the relation between the text and the historical context giving rise to it. In an essay entitled “The Formalist Critic”, Cleanth Brooks states unequivocally that every literary text is a “document” that “can be analysed in terms of the [social and historical] forces that have produced it”; he even adds that a literary work “mirrors the past” (Brooks 1988: 48). It should, thus, be clear that the New Criticism’s revolution in literary criticism did not involve a total rejection of the earlier critical discourses. The most valuable contribution that the New Critics made to literary theory was sustaining a critical dialogue with the earlier ideas and approaches in criticism. This dialogue was characteristically democratic; consequently, a kind of conceptual transaction was conducted between this approach and other critical schools or methodologies. As Donald J. Childs reminds us, “the New Criticism shares with deconstruction in particular and poststructuralism in general a determination to expose the falseness of the calm often presented by the surface of a text. Each is antipositivistic, happy to acknowledge the death of the author and alert to the play in literary language” (Childs 1997: 123). It was through this transaction that the New Criticism succeeded in both drawing on certain components of pre-modern critical practice at the same time as setting forth a modern paradigm of literary criticism.

Thus, it is no wonder that the New Criticism paved the way for the emergence in the ensuing decades of the twentieth century of a wide

spectrum of different critical approaches which, while running counter to pre-modern theories, also challenged the methodology and many of the assumptions of the New Criticism itself. Subverting the New Critical model, reader-response theorists in the 1960s proposed another paradigm for literary criticism which granted the possibilities of a range of interpretations of a single text. The contrast between reader-response theory and the New Criticism is too obvious to be missed: the New Critics believed that because criticism should be based on the formal qualities of the text, there is always no more than a single correct reading of it. Advocating the opposite view, reader-response critics insisted that the “single correct interpretation” is a both illusory and sterile: illusory because often a single text prompts readers to come up with differing interpretations; sterile because the singleness of the “correct” interpretation forecloses the possibility of critical diversity. Readers offer critical readings of a text according to their personal mindset or the horizon of expectations set up by their culture. These different readings are equally valid or “correct”. In the words of Lois Tyson, “a written text is not an object . . . but an event that occurs within the reader, whose response is of primary importance in creating the text” (Tyson 2006: 172). The complexity of this argument is further increased by yet another critical paradigm which is related to reader-response criticism but also draws on psychoanalytic theory. Theorists of this hybrid approach maintain that the response of a reader to a text reveals his/her unconscious fears, anxieties and unfulfilled desires. Norman Holland, who originally theorised this approach, argues that up to now a major form of psychoanalytic criticism has been the psychoanalysis of literary characters with the tacit assumption that they could be analysed more or less in the same manner that a real person is analysed on the psychoanalyst’s couch; however, it can now be claimed that the real psychoanalyst is the text and the analysand is the reader. As Jeremy Lane explains, the literary text is “the means for its reader to recreate him or herself through a unifying interpretation, a centripetal movement that brings text and self together in a movement of self-identification on the reader’s part” (Lane 2006: 467). Thus, one and the same text evokes diverse responses in different readers because each of those readers has his/her unique unconscious mind which can only indicate his/her individuality.

As is clear from the foregoing discussion, in all of the approaches which were mentioned as examples, various concepts were borrowed from other critical approaches. This democratic interaction reflects the essentially democratic spirit of literary criticism. Literary theory and criticism, by its very nature, is in favour of tolerating the expression of opposing voices and integrating the components of these voices in unprecedented combinations.

Marxist criticism, structuralist criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, feminist criticism, new historical criticism, deconstructive criticism, postcolonial criticism, mythical and archetypal criticism, phenomenological criticism, and semiotic criticism can all co-exist without excluding each other. At least in literary criticism, there is no ultimate truth. The truth is always proportional, always a construct. Hence anyone who appreciates the plural nature of literary criticism knows only too well that any interpretation of a text is open to dispute.

Genuine belief in pluralism is neither possible nor comprehensible in undemocratic cultures. The struggle to establish parliamentary democracy is a characteristic feature of Western history. Respecting the democratic principle that various political forces, despite pursuing different aims and policies, could play a role in the political life of their country and determine the future of their nation within the framework of parliamentary debates and decisions creates an appropriate context for understanding pluralism in literary criticism and in fact facilitates its teaching at universities. Democracy and literary criticism are twins.

3. Conclusion

The crucial correlation between literary criticism and democracy may help us understand the complications and hindrances to teaching this subject at Iranian universities. The original plans for academic literary studies in this country were laid with almost no attention to critical theory. Until a few years ago, literary criticism was an optional course that students of Persian Literature could evade by taking a second course in physical education. Even today literary theory and criticism is included neither in the core nor in the optional courses of postgraduate students reading for an M.A. or a Ph.D. in Persian Literature. In fact, literary criticism is taught to students of foreign literatures (such as English Literature), simply because the first professors who decided what courses these students needed to take were all educated at Western universities and tried to emulate their programmes. But anyone who is involved in the teaching of literary criticism at Iranian universities is aware of the serious difficulties with which they inevitably have to cope. The very fact that normally very few faculty members volunteer to teach literary criticism and amongst students it has gained notoriety as a very “demanding” course is indicative of some of these difficulties.

It may be argued that the problems we encounter in teaching criticism stem from the dominant undemocratic, and at times even antidemocratic, attitudes which are incompatible with the nature of literary criticism. Critical theory and practice cannot be possibly taught unless the teachers as

well as their students believe in pluralism and the co-existence of opposing voices in real life and in inter-personal interactions. There is perhaps no need here to prove the interdependence of culture and personal behaviour. What needs to be emphasised, however, is that anyone regarding his/her colleagues as an obstacle to personal achievements is unable to teach literary criticism. How can a monopolist, always on the lookout for grabbing “opportunities”, teach theories whose essence is discursive interaction? If those faculty members who were educated in democratic cultures assimilate into the reductive bureaucracy of the academia, they gradually lose their interest in literary criticism and teaching it. The core of literary criticism is to try to appreciate and explain what is not explicitly stated in the text, with a firm belief in the fact that the implied meaning of a text could be explored and examined from other perspectives too. It is not difficult to see that the same culture that deprecates democracy, advocates absolutism. Such a culture can have no affinity with literary criticism and is apt to hinder its dissemination.

A culture to which pluralism is alien also fosters students who constantly seek the “ultimate” in literary studies and, therefore, cannot make sense of divergent critical approaches. Teaching literary theory to such students is both a strange and a frustrating experience which is reproduced term after term. When, at the beginning of the term, the New Criticism is introduced to them, they are all fascinated by the possibilities of formalism. Next feminism is taught to them and they suddenly realise that they should disapprove of formalism because of its negligence towards the oppression of women. When psychoanalytic criticism is introduced to them, they assume that uncovering the unconscious mental processes in all humans, regardless of their gender, is the first and foremost object of literary studies and that, therefore, feminism has had too many “limitations”. Still later on, when postcolonial literary theory is taught to them, they conclude that the psychoanalytic discourse had blinded them to such crucial issues as oriental identity. Eventually, towards the end of the term, a student asks politely on behalf of his/her classmates that the professor stops perplexing them with endless and contradictory theories and just teach them the so-called *crème de la crème* of contemporary critical theory. This typical request indicates not only the reductionism and lack of mental sophistication that, thanks to professional teachers, prevails in our universities, but also a teleological pragmatism that originates from students’ unfamiliarity with the culture of pluralism and urges them to look for and yield to an ultimate, authoritative view. This tendency explains why in literary criticism classes, despite our repeated pleadings and despite rewarding students with bonus marks for participation in class discussions, the majority of our audience show no

interest in making comments and tend to remain silent. This situation also clarifies why students usually prefer their teachers to make an interpretation of the text under consideration and thus make the job easy for all of them. These students typically make exact and detailed notes of their teacher's lectures (so much so that they sometimes reproduce his/her catchphrases verbatim in their exam papers!), but are unable to offer a personal view which indicates that they have thought about the intricacies of the text and have tried to apply a systematic theory of criticism to it. Multiplicity of ideas and participation in group discussions cannot be expected from people who relinquish the act of thinking to the professor and consider his/her viewpoints to be final and just reproducible.

Teaching literary criticism to Iranian university students is a hard and often hopeless task because our audiences have not yet reached a high level of cultural and political self-consciousness so as to make democracy a structural element of their thinking. Domineering and submissive mindsets are equally unable to grasp or tolerate the pluralistic nature of literary theories. Those who conceive of thinking and reasoning as acts that can be performed by proxies will inevitably have a poor performance in a field where contemplation and argumentation are considered to be essential requirements. Literary criticism requires that we believe in democracy and that different and at times contradictory discourses could be involved in the critical reading of a text. Success in teaching literary criticism is inextricably bound up with cultural and political pluralism.

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