

*Literary Criticism
between
Subjectivity & Objectivity*

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Literary criticism may represent a reader's approach to literary text. This approach may be "subjective" or "objective". This challenge between 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity' may depict the history of modern literary criticism in Anglo-American tradition. It is Matthew Arnold who began the first step, since he discussed the relation between 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity'.

The aim of this study is to examine the development of literary criticism between subjectivity and objectivity during the first half of twentieth century. The researcher chooses representative critics beginning from the late nineteenth century (i.e. Arnold) to Patricia Waugh. Some of these critics wrote essays or books entitled "The Function of Criticism", and others stress on the relation between art and science (i.e. subjectivity and objectivity) in literary criticism. The methods of this study depend on the historical development of the critics' uses of these terms. The study does not pretend to study the contribution of all these critics, but it concentrates on the following essays only. One begins to examine the title of the essays and Winters' book to discover their semantic significances :

- Arnold's : "The Function of criticism at the Present Time".
- Eliot's : "The Function of Criticism".
- Tate's : "The Present Function of Criticism", is a chapter of his book Reason in Madness (1941).

- Winters : The Function of Criticism, is a book which includes four chapters.
- Frye's : "The Function of Criticism at the present time".
- Waugh : The Arts & Sciences of Criticism, is a book which is introduced by Waugh and Fuller, and includes a chapter by Waugh entitled "Revising the Two Cultures Debate : Science, Literature and Value".

The first five critics use one similar title, but the last one is different in the title but is similar in content. Waugh deals, directly, with the question of this study (subjectivity and objectivity). Waugh uses more direct terms: (arts and sciences) since subjectivity stands for art, and objectivity stands for science. The movement from subjectivity to objectivity is, really, the way from the art (of criticism) into the (science) of criticism.

When one comes close to these critics, one finds that Matthew Arnold is the one, who represents what is called traditional criticism. Being a Victorian, he belongs to the old attitudes of criticism more than the other five critics, who are considered modernist critics (Eliot, Tale, Winters and Frye) and postmodernist (Patricia Waugh), whatever the ideologies they belong to. To be more accurate, one should refer to the last point in Arnold's essay to be sure that he tried to be objective when he referred to what he called "disinterestedness". It is the same idea which Eliot developed to be "depersonalization". Both terms are considered the early steps of what is called "objectivity". Consequently, Arnold may be classified as the critic who shares the traditional and modern criticism. In other words, he represents a transition period, between traditional subjective and modern objective criticism. Most of Arnold's essay refers to some political and

social disturbance in England during the late Victorian age. He is the first English critic who called for a systematic method of criticism.

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It is better, to estimate these critics' views of criticism, and the development of these views. Did they consider criticism a science or an art?

The researcher may assume that all these critics asked for a theory of objectivity, a science of criticism. Some of them referred to the early steps of making criticism as a science (i.e. Arnold and Eliot). Really they did not use the noun science nor the adjective "scientific", but at the same time no one can deny nor belittle their active contribution in this field. Others referred to the terms "science", "scientific", "methods" or "systematic" (such as Tate and Winters). But Frye and Waugh are the only critics among them who adopt a very advanced and may be "realistic" and "practical" terms (science and art).

David Lodge believes that: "Matthew Arnold was perhaps the first to formulate in an influential way the idea of criticism having this high cultural mission". He adds "but he was not just concerned with policing the canon. He stressed the value of criticism in creating a climate conducive to the production of good new writing". (Fuller & Waugh, eds, 1999, p. 138.

Matthew Arnold is the one - it is mentioned - previously - who has put the foundations for a kind of "scientific" or rather "objective" criticism. That Arnold is a

Victorian , it means -again- that he is the representative of a transition period between what is traditional and non-traditional (new) in criticism.

In his essay "The Function of the Criticism at the Present Time" he discusses the relations between criticism and creativity of art saying:

"... criticism first ; a time of true creative activity ,perhaps -which as, I have said , must inevitably be preceded amongst us by a time of criticism , hereafter , when criticism has done its work".

(Rushy, ed., 1986, p. 20)

Arnold continues to consider criticism an important activity as well as creativity, and criticism -again- must precede the creativity process. Then, he refers to his point of view concerning the objectivity of criticism or at least what must be:

"It is of the last importance that English criticism should clearly discern what rules for its course, in order to avail itself of the field now opening to it, and to produce fruit for the future, it ought to take. The rules may be given in one word; by being disinterested".

(Rushy, ed., 1986, p. 20)

Arnold sums up the rules of objectivity or scientific methods of criticism in one word. But, he does not leave his

“word” ambiguous, so he asks a question and answers it directly to explain what he means by this “disinterestedness”. He adds:

*“And how is it to be disinterested?
....., by steadily refusing to lend
itself to any of these ulterior,
political , practical considerations
about ideas , which plenty of people
will be sure to attach to them”.*

(Rushy, ed., 1986, p. 20)

Then to avoid the ulterior, political, practical, considerations is the early step to avoid subjective criticism and to achieve “disinterestedness” which means by the words of Eliot, “depersonalization”. It is a serious step towards objectivity and scientific criticism.

The school of criticism which Arnold belongs to, is neo-classical one, and it is an expression of the urgent needs of his generation, so he defines “at the present time” because Arnold is considered one of social reformers of his age, he connects the social and political disasters of his time with the chaos permeated in the literary field. He assures that the criticism of his contemporaries is not the “disinterested one”:

*“For what is at present the bane of
criticism in this country? It is that,
practical, considerations cling to it
and stifle it; it subserves interests
not its own; our organs of criticism
are organs of men and parties
having ends to serve and with them
those practical ends is all that is
wanted .An organ like the Revue
Des Deux Mondes, having for its*

main function to understand and utter the best that is known and thought in the world, existing, it may be said, as Just an organ for a free play of the mind, we have not, but we have the Edinburgh Review. existing as an organ of the old Whigs , and we have the Quarterly Review, existing as an organ of the Tories, we have the British Quarterly Review, existing as an organ of the political Dissenters". (Rushy, ed., 1986, p. 21)

This long illustration by Arnold assures that criticism of the Victorian age was very weak, subjective, therefore he sums up the reformation of these weaknesses in one word "disinterested".

Commenting on Arnold's use of the terms "critical" and "creative" Eliot says:

"Matthew Arnold distinguishes far too fluently, it seems to me, between the two activities: he overlooks the capital importance of criticism in the work of creation itself probably, indeed, the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his works is critical labour; the labour of sifting, combining, constructing expunging, correcting, testing: this frightful toil is as much critical as creative". (Rushy, ed., 1986, p. 115)

Lodge discusses the concept of “disinterestedness” which pioneered by Arnold saying:

“For Arnold criticism was more or less synonymous with the pursuit of human knowledge. It was, he said a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world”.

(Fuller & Waugh, eds, 1999, p. 139)

David Lodge defines the critical attitudes of Eliot saying:

“Eliot (thus) gave his blessing to two different schools of academic criticism which have often been at war within each other – on the one hand, traditional historical scholarship, and on the other hand, the close reading of unattributed poems pioneered by I. A. Richards at Cambridge under the name of practical criticism, from which evolved the so-called new criticism in England and America. Both those schools claimed to be trying to make criticism more ‘scientific’: historical scholarship by focusing on hard empirical facts about the literary text, and the new criticism by focusing on the verbal structure of the literary text itself”.

(Fuller & Waugh, eds, 1999, p. 139)

Eliot defends the role of the writer to be more important than the critical one "I have assumed as axiomatic that a creation, a work of art, is autotelic that criticism, by definition, is about something other than itself".

(Rushy, ed., 1986, p. 119)

Eliot discusses these terms on other standard of thought. His interest is not social and political as Arnold, but more religious. The work of art is the essential text, one must depend on. And the creativity process includes a critical effort. So, the writer is a critic at the same time - at least - with his work of art. But these attitudes never neglect his view that "criticism and creation are co-operative labour...". (Rushy, ed., 1986, p. 112)

Eliot agrees with Arnold that criticism must avoid personal interests of the critic, he develops Arnold's view when he defines the work of the critic:

"The critic, one would suppose, if he is to justify his existence, should endeavour to discipline his personal prejudices and cranks- tares to which we are all subject - and compose his differences with as many of his fellows as possible, in the common pursuit of true judgment".

(Rushy, ed., 1986, p. 112)

Searching for "true judgment" is the same idea of impersonal criticism. But Eliot differs from Arnold in the sense of knowing that one belongs to his present society and the other belongs to the Catholicism, on one hand, and aesthetic criticism, on the other, one can differentiate the titles

of essays of both critics. Arnold, means his own time and generation but Eliot means what is eternal and general. Eliot goes on -on this basis- to assure his search for true judgment saying:

“..... And the most important qualification which I have been able to find, which accounts for the peculiar importance of the criticism of practitioners, is that a critic must have a very highly developed sense of fact the sense of fact is something very slow to develop , and its complete development means perhaps the very pinnacle of civilization”.

(Rushy, ed., 1986, p. 120)

To connect the sense of fact in criticism with the development of pinnacle of civilization, means that Eliot comes to conclusion; to achieve the scientific methods of criticism which realize -directly- the objectivity. It is not this essay by Eliot, that refers, directly, to his common term “depersonalization” which is considered the development of Arnold’s “disinterestedness”. It is “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that develops Arnold’s term and also Eliot’s (himself) the “sense of fact” and “true Judgment”. He discusses the effort which must be exerted by the artist to gain the sense of tradition. He adds:

“there remains to define this process of depersonalization and its relation to the sense of tradition . It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science”. *(Rushy, ed., 1986, p. 130)*

The artist for Eliot, represents both the author and critic. Here, he uses, for the first time, the word science, saying “the condition of science” and not pure science, and this seems more convincing because it is hardly to believe that human activity like art (i.e. creativity and criticism) becomes pure science but it may take the condition, or the colour of science.

It is better to use in this context, the adjective “scientific” instead of the noun “science”. Eliot gives an analogy with a chemical equation and the use of the neutral catalyst. He clarifies his attitude of “depersonalization” which is different to some extent, from the attitude of Arnold. Eliot shows the honest criticism which is “depersonalized” as follows:

“Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry”.

(Rushy, ed., 1986, p. 130)

It means that Eliot neglects the external effects of the work of art and prefers the textual reading and analysis, Unlike Arnold who wants to trace the social and political problems within the work of art. This idea will be clarified when the paper discusses Frye’s opinion of “background” and “foreground” criticism. Arnold belongs to neo-classical school of criticism which sees the work of art as an expression of society, but Eliot belongs to the aesthetics of the New criticism school which sees the work of art as a complete entity by itself.

Allen Tate writes a chapter in his book Reason in Madness 1941, entitled “The Present Function of Criticism”. This long essay is a kind of what is called severe “meta-criticism”. Tate makes a survey to the literary scene of his generation. He criticizes all the contemporary critics of his

own generation. Tate was not clear enough in this essay to present his point of view concerning the scientific approach of criticism. He begins his essay discussing certain scientific procedures and asks critics to follow them. (He did not define these certain procedures) then he criticizes I. A Richards for his use of scientific bases of criticism. He begins saying:

"This essay represents a point of view which means to have little in common with other points of view that are tolerated, and even applauded today. It can not be communicated at the level of the procedure and the program; the point of view here, then, is that historicism, scientificism, pshychologism, biologism, in general the confident use of the scientific vocabularies in the spiritual realm, has created, or at any rate is the expression of a spiritual disorder".

(Rushy, ed., 1986, p. 169)

It seems that Tate is against (what he calls) "scientificism", but he supports "knowledge, not historical documentation and information". (Rushy, ed., 1986, p. 174)

When he discusses the contribution of the critics of his generation, he criticizes them all, severally. Even I. A. Richards who is considered one of the pioneers who use psychological, semantic and stylistic approaches, is also criticized by Tate for his use of a scientific approach in criticism of poetry:

“when we think of the powerful semi-scientific method of studying poetry associated with the name of I.A. Richards, we may say that there is a certain ambiguity of critical focus.. The role I have in mind here is that of The Principles of Literary Criticism it is in a special way a kind of science; this particular variety in poetry is a kind of applied psychology”.

(Rushy, ed., 1986, Pp. 175-176)

Here, it is clear that Allen Tate refuses that scientific methods or approaches of criticism or the semi-scientific, he assures that “poems designate things that do not exist” (Rushy, ed., 1986, p. 177) if one follows the methods of Richards, which, in turn, the scientific one. Tate repeats that “Mr. Richards’s most famous invention is scientese; that is, false statements or just plain lies”. (Rushy, ed., 1986, p. 177) Then Tate is the only exception among the five critics (of this study) who takes different situation against scientific approaches of literary criticism. Consequently he couldn’t be classified as one who developed the scientific approaches even a step forward, but at the same time he never gives alternative, either to consider literary criticism a pure art or a mixture of science and art. He does not call for involving the literary work of art or the critical effort in the realistic life of social and political affairs like Arnold. What Tate adopts is that “the tradition of literature is a form of knowledge ; by looking at it as merely one among many forms of social and political expression” (Rushy, ed., 1986, p. 175). He criticizes the non-academic critics because they “have been obsessed by politics “and the social determinism” (Rushy, ed., 1986, p. 174). He also

criticizes “the academic scholars, who have demonstrated that literature does not exist, that it is merely history, which must be studied as history is studied, through certain scientific analogies” (Rushy, ed., 1986, pp. 174-175).

This situation of Tate necessitates a certain definition of the concept of the function of criticism. Although he entitles his chapter “The Present Function of Criticism”, one couldn’t define something specific by his “present” time.

Like Allen Tate, Winters criticizes the efforts of different critics:

“what have the critics done besides asking important questions propounding incomplete or untenable theories, attacking each other’s theories, and defending their preferences for particular works?

I think it is fair that we should ask more and I think that they have done very little more”.

(Winters., 1964, p. 15)

But unlike him, Winters prefers the use of scientific approaches in literary criticism to be systematic and more objective. He goes on forward to discuss this point asserting its importance in the literary field. He says:

“If we are to give any kind of critical guidance, we shall have to have some kind of critical method or

methods that are really applicable to the business in hand".

(Winters., 1964, p. 15)

Winters connects the critical "method" or "methods" with practice. It means that when he criticizes the critics of his time, he gives the ideal form that he believes in. It is the critical method which means scientific approach. Winters does not ask the critics to search for these "methods" to make pure theories, but to be used in practical criticism to be the tools of the critic to analyse the work of art. He adds:

"If we are to have any kind of critical method, we shall have to understand two topics with more or less clarity: the potentialities of different kinds of subject matter and the potentialities of various literary forms. Any understanding of these topics, in turn, will depend upon our view of the purpose, or final cause, of literature". (Winters., 1964, p. 15)

Winters asserts, again, that the critical method is not desired for its sake, nor any theory but to understand literature. Rather he makes the understanding of the purpose of literature will direct the different methods of criticism. Then one may abridge that Winters does not follow his predecessor; Tate, to neglect the scientific methods of literary criticism but he assures the importance of these methods.

When the study discusses the efforts exerted by Northrop Frye, in modern criticism, in general and to develop this point, in particular, then, it is important to have a long discussion. Frye has deep roots in modern criticism. "Frye considers it the responsibility of the critic to systematize the

previously unorganized study of literature” (Davis & Schkifer, eds., 1989, p. 541). Frye, asserts from the very beginning of his career as a critic, that the methods and systems of criticism must be followed. He begins his essay “The Function of Criticism at “The Present Time” by saying:

“To truly understand literature, requires seeing it as a system of word-symbols, not unlike mathematics, which must be considered as part of its greater structure, separate from the world that gave rise to the ideas it depicts”.
(Davis & Schkifer, eds., 1989, p.541)

One believes that Frye comes to a great maturity in understanding and evaluating the theories of literary criticism. Therefore the development of his conception of literary criticism as a science or non-science, which in turn, is connecting with his conception of the function of literary criticism at the present time is more clearer than others. He does not repeat what the predecessors said or believed. He is a critic only the other four names (of the study) are artists and critics as well. His panoramic vision of literary criticism may be more objective and logical than the others. What he believes in, is:

“What if criticism is a science as well as an art ? The writing of history is an art , but no one doubts that scientific principles are involved in the historian’s treatment of evidence , and that the presence of this scientific element is what

distinguishes history from legend”.
(Davis & Schkifer, eds., 1989, p.545)

Frye’s conception of criticism is a realistic and objective one. It is difficult to consider criticism a pure art like the different literary genres because it uses a minimum of rules and methods to judge or evaluate the work of art. It is difficult, also, to consider criticism a pure science because it deals with an art expresses human feelings and thoughts. This defect is what the preceding critics (of this paper) could not realize. Frye himself criticizes the critical approaches which depend on the stylistic, statistical procedures “I understand that there is a Ph.D. thesis somewhere that displays a list of Hardy’s novels in the order of the percentages of gloom that they contain, but one does not feel that that sort of procedure should be encouraged”. (Davis & Schkifer, eds., 1989, p. 545) “statistics” should not be an end in itself, but a means to another efforts, that critic should exert an effort to analyse the work of art. Frye criticizes the present scene of literary criticism saying:

“It occurs to me that literary criticism is now in such a state of naive induction as we find in a primitive science. Its materials, the masterpieces of literature, are not yet regarded as phenomena to be explained in terms of a conceptual framework which criticism alone possesses ...”

(Davis & Schkifer, eds., 1989, p.545)

At last Frye gives his opinion saying “I suggest that it is time for criticism to leap to new ground from which it can discover what the organizing or containing forms of its

conceptual framework are". (Davis & Schkifer, eds., 1989, p. 545)

Four critics agree that scientific approach is important for literary criticism, especially at the present time but Allen Tate's conception is ambiguous one he refuses the scientific approaches, and he gives no substitute. By scientific approach they mean a kind of "disinterestedness, depersonalization, objectivity, or systematic procedures". These terms mean to avoid the external environment of the artist and his art, to read the text itself and to discover its rules. It is not important to depend on biographical, historical, political (except Matthew Arnold who belong to a school of criticism neo-classical one, depends on the external affairs) religious or any external affairs. The first four critics tried to develop the idea of following scientific procedures in literary criticism depending on their own experiences, at their own times. But Frye who read, well, the past and the present, realizes what the present time needs, so when he asks for a necessity of scientific procedures, he knows well that he deals with a human science (literary criticism) which, in turn deals with works of art (literature). The final conception for what he adopts, is to make a kind of harmony and conformity between science and art. Is it the same idea which was adopted by Alexander Pope (during the eighteenth century) when he called for using both (Judgment and wit)? One may find a kind of similarity between Frye's and Pope's. In Pope's "An Essay on Criticism" Pope uses "Judgment" as a reference to "mind" and "wit" for faculty. It's the same purpose of the "mind" which we replace nowadays, by science, and replace "wit" or faculty by "art". If the scholars of literary criticism believe that the beginning of the English literary criticism is connecting by that Augustan age of Pope, and Johnson, one believes that the development of the identity of literary criticism did not change from the

early beginning. Pope and Frye adopt the same idea, with one different issue which is the change of the terms. At the time of Pope no one could think that the term "science" might be an adjective for criticism. It is the beginning of Pope that Frye advocates now, and this is what the researcher supports and believes in.

Patricia Waugh is a recent critic who represents what is called now post-modernism. She discusses the nature of literary criticism as a science. Really, she does not advocate this scientific nature of criticism, rather she discusses what the other critics; (i.e. the modernists in particular), pretend that criticism is a pure science. They (i.e. modernists) consider structuralism and the other linguistic approaches of criticism as scientific. With David Fuller, Patricia Waugh, choose this title for their recent book, *The Arts & Sciences of Criticism*. They prefer to consider criticism as an art and a science, as Northrop Frye said before. In the opening pages of their book, Fuller and Waugh comment on Lodge's opinion saying: "as a novelist and one of their first critics to introduce structuralism to the world of English letters, David Lodge is uniquely placed to consider literary criticism both as an art and a science" (Fuller & Waugh, 1999, p. 13). Waugh tries to find a compromise between both attitudes of "art and "science" of literary criticism. She believes that science itself depends on relativism, this may lead the concept of 'science' to the concept of criticism as 'an art'. She says:

"This assault on the certainty of scientific knowledge that led to current constructivist claims that objectivity and rationality are culturally produced systems, that science cannot arrive knowledge of a mid-independent natural reality,

that its methods are always relative to shifting and heterogeneous theoretical frameworks, and that the 'objects' of scientific knowledge are therefore as 'intentional' as those of literary text".

(Fuller & Waugh, eds., 1999, p. 40)

Waugh does not support the idea of considering literary criticism as an 'art' but she tries to make it objective not pure science. She says "whatever kind of a science literary criticism aspires to be, it can not engage at all with literary texts if this intentional dimension is ignored or dealt with merely as a 'principle of measurement', whether this is the play of the signifier, ideology, or any other impersonal vehicle". (Fuller & Waugh, eds., 1999, p. 47).

In their introduction, Fuller and Waugh present the steps and experience of modernist and post-modernist critics to make a kind of analogy between science and literary criticism, they say:

"Since 1960s, critiques of scientific method, counter-cultural oppositions to technologization and 'instrumental reason', and developments in science itself have drawn the arts and sciences closer together. Post-modernists speak of the 'aestheticization of science', rhetoricians have pointed out the metaphorical nature of scientific language".

(Fuller & Waugh, eds., 1999, p.2)

David Lodge adopts this view, but he refers to an extremist viewpoint of D.H. Lawrence, Lodge says:

"Inasmuch as it aspires to a scientific, or at least systematic, knowledge of its subject it can be seen as hostile to creativity itself. D. H. Lawrence took this view of the matter:

Criticism can never be a science; it is, in the first place, much too personal, and in the second, it is concerned with values which science ignores. The touchstone is emotion, not reason....."

(Fuller & Waugh, eds., 1999, p. 142)

Waugh never agrees with Lawrence of the impossibility of considering criticism as science. Waugh, rather "traces the history of some crucial twentieth century developments about the nature of scientific knowledge, and shows why these render it no longer satisfactory to see this debate in terms of a simple arts/sciences split". (Fuller & Waugh, eds., 1999, p.5)

Like Frye, Waugh can not agree that literary criticism is a mere science, because post-modernism thought predicts the relativism of science itself. The impact of post-modern relativism seems", Waugh adds: "however, to have produced a generally pragmatist orientation in literary criticism". (Fuller & Waugh, eds., 1999, P. 47)

Waugh develops Frye's concept towards the scientific approach of criticism Frye comes to conclusion that criticism is both an art and a science. But Waugh adds that literary criticism adopts a kind of science when science is an "inexactness" in its systems and facts. She says:

“Not surprising then, literary critics have welcomed the shift towards inexactness’ in science and have appropriated contemporary arguments and concepts as a way of reconciling their own institutional tension about the nature of literary critical practice”.
(Fuller & Waugh, eds., 1999, p. 46)

One may conclude that the challenge of literary criticism between ‘subjectivity’ and ‘objectivity’ or between ‘art’ and ‘science’ represents an important and kernel aspect in the theory of criticism and literary theory. Those six critics, who represent the different schools of Anglo-American criticism, have different viewpoints. Arnold began the first step towards the objectivity, Eliot developed Arnold’s view, Tate developed Eliot’s concept, but Ivor Winters did not give any contribution. Frye developed the concept by adding a new attitude of making a compromise between ‘subjectivity’ and ‘objectivity’ or ‘art’ and ‘science’.

Like Frye; Waugh agrees this reconciliation, between ‘art’ and ‘science’ as well as she adds and supports the idea of achieving objectivity of criticism through the relativity of science.

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