

What is in Literature ?

Rajnath

[The present essay is based on a chapter of my book entitled *The Identity of Literature, A Reply to Jacques Derrida* on which I am currently working. This is the fifth chapter which is coming out in the shape of an essay. It deals with what forms the content of literary work and what the reader gets out of it. It goes against the spirit of Derrida's writings which reduces all writings to literature and views literature as completely devoid of logic]

Another exclusive property of literature often mentioned by the critics both in the East and The West is its emotional quality. It is said that literature expresses emotion, while non-literature communicates thought. But this is not true. Emotion and thought are simultaneously present in literature with the predominance of the former.

Rasa is the fulcrum of Sanskrit poetics. Although it is difficult to find its exact equivalent in English, it can be translated as "aesthetic mood", or "aesthetic experience", or simply as "emotion", but it must be borne in mind that this is what is experienced by the reader in the course of his enjoyment of literature and not the emotion of the writer. It is interesting that Eliot has used the term "art emotion" while delineating different kinds of emotion in his celebrated essay on tradition:

It is not in his *personal emotion* evoked by particular events in his life, that the poet is in any way remarkable or great. (20, emphasis added).

This is so to speak the *structural emotion* [the balance of the contrasted emotions of beauty and ugliness in an extract cited] provided by the drama. But the whole effect, the dominant tone, is due to the fact that a number of *floating feelings*, having an affinity to this emotion by no means superficially evident, have combined with it to give us new *art emotion*, (57, emphasis added)

Here Eliot comes strikingly close to Sanskrit critics to whom what matters is the depersonalized emotion embodied in a work of art. Eliot is known for his impersonal theory of poetry and Sanskrit theorists have formulated the concept of *sadharanikaran* (generalization) of emotion in a work of art. Eliot has distinguished between three kinds of emotion in the above extracts but Sanskrit poetics divide it into eight or nine different kinds with *Shringar* (*erotic emotion*) taking the pride of place.

It is said that in Western criticism, the focus is on the writer whereas Sanskrit poetics is centered on the reader, the reader being a *Sahridaya* (a sensitive reader). But the fact of the matter is that the reader in Western criticism, though not always foregrounded, is always implied as critics like Plato Aristotle, Longinus, Horace, Sidney, Johnson, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Arnold as well as I.A. Richards and T.S. Eliot have the reader in mind while formulating their critical concepts. Of course, the reader is taken for granted and not subjected to scrutiny as in reader response criticism in the West, which emerged late in the twentieth century or Sanskrit poetics in India going back to Bharat of the 2nd century B.C. Whether the focus is on the writer or the reader, the problems relating to the identity of literature are more or less the same.

In both Western and Oriental criticism, literature is contrasted with what is non-literature which is designated by the term *Sastra* in Sanskrit poetics and science in Western criticism meaning by science not only disciplines of pure sciences but also those in humanities and social sciences which aim at scientific objectivity.

The watertight division between literature and other disciplines made in both Western and Oriental criticism is untenable, but at the same time the extreme position of Derrida and his followers, which dissolves all distinctions between literature and non-literature is not acceptable either. In fact, science is not without imagination and literature is not altogether devoid of logic. A certain element of subjectivity, imagination and literariness does inform science, law, philosophy, history, psychology, etc. and similarly the element of logic premised on the denotative property of language does find a place in literature. The emotion-reason dichotomy postulated by the critics of the past is not borne out by the actual practice of literary and non-literary writings. Approaching literature from the standpoint of *rasa theory*, V.K. Chari writes:

rasa theory asserts not simply that poetry expresses emotions but that the expression of emotions is the sole aim and the common denominator of all literary productions (9).

Sanskrit poetics is basically romantic criticism where an exclusive emphasis is laid on subjectivity and emotion. In Sanskrit poetics, there is a gap between the concept of language and the concept of literature. Denotative property of language is never denied in Sanskrit poetics and it is the denotation which is the vehicle of reason, logic and truth. What emerge from Sanskrit poetics is that denotation is the foundation on which the edifice of *lakshna* (indication) and *Vyanjana* (implication or suggestion) is built. If this is so, then literature can not be viewed as communicating emotion only, though literature is predominantly emotional. Coleridge is right when he distinguishes between science and poetry by saying that the immediate object of the former is truth, while the immediate object of the latter is pleasure. "A poem," writes Coleridge "is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its *immediate* object pleasure, not truth" (10) Pleasure in the former and truth in the latter can have and does have a secondary place. When science attains its goal, pleasure, and that of the highest kind results, says Coleridge, but it is not its immediate end and similarly truth or logic is not altogether absent from poetry, though it occupies a secondary place. The list of opposites which are brought to reconciliation by Coleridge's secondary or literary imagination includes the binaries of idea and image, order and emotion, and judgement and enthusiasm. Coleridge knows that even though pleasure, emotion, or sentiment is the immediate object of literature, it needs to be held in check by order and judgement exercised by logic and reason.

M.H. Abrams in his classic *The Mirror and the Lamp* makes a watertight division of criticism into romantic and classic. He believes that in romantic criticism, the poet's mind is viewed as a lamp which radiates light on external reality whereas in classical and neo-classical criticism, the poet's mind is compared to a mirror which imitates external reality.¹ M.H. Abrams's scholarship is beyond doubt and his book teems with brilliant critical insights. But when he examines English Romantic criticism in his Introductory chapter, he focuses on critics like Shelley, Keats and Mill whose

opinions support his thesis and leaves out such a perceptive critic like Coleridge presumably because his opinion goes contrary to Abrams's basic premises. When he cites Wordsworth's definition of poetry, he reproduces only the first part of the definition, where Wordsworth defines poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" and leaves out the second part where he says that "it is emotion recollected in tranquillity." Recollection is done through a thinking process, and the recollected emotion is not as spontaneous as the original emotion. Moreover, words like truth and knowledge occur frequently in Wordsworth's "Preface" where he discusses the nature and function of poetry:

Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. (Enright and Chickera, 165, emphasis added.)

Aristotle, I have been told, has said that poetry is the most philosophical of all writing: it is so: its object is *truth*, not individual and local but general, and operative, not standing upon external reality, but carried alive into the heart by passion. (Ibid, 173, emphasis added)

The Poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of *truth* as our visible friend and hourly companion. Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge. . . . (Ibid, 174, emphasis added).

The poet binds together by passion and *knowledge*. the vast empire of human society. (Ibid, 175, emphasis added)

Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge. . . . (Ibid, emphasis added).

The above extracts from Wordsworth's "'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*" leave us in no doubt that to Wordsworth poetry is not out and out subjective or emotional. Poetry to him combines passion and pleasure with truth and knowledge.

Coleridge and Wordsworth are the two pillars of Romantic criticism. The upshot of their views is that science aims at truth which it arrives at by using logic but poetry, and by extension literature is general, blends emotions and feelings with logic and truth. By postulating the presence of truth and knowledge (Wordsworth) as well as ideas, order, and judgement (Coleridge) in literature they run contrary to Derrida who believes that literature, or the language of literature, for that matter, does not and cannot, express truth.

Of the modern critics, T.S. Eliot was the first to question the Romantic concept of poetry, especially the one formulated by Wordsworth. In his essay on "Tradition and the Individual Talent" he rejects out of hand Wordsworth's definition of poetry:

We must believe that "emotion recollected in tranquility" is an inexact formula. For it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor without distortion of meaning, tranquillity (21)

Eliot's rejection of the Romantic emphasis on emotion may give one the impression that he veers round to the other extreme of thought and ratiocination in poetry. But, in fact, Eliot's criticism is best seen as combining the strands of Romanticism and Neo-classicism, which results in his blend of emotion and thought in poetry. This is borne out by his theory of the "unification of sensibility" which is premised on the union of

thought and emotion or what he calls “emotional equivalent of thought” Which he finds in the English Metaphysical poets of whom he writes:

It is to be observed that the language of these poets is as a rule simple and pure. . . .The structure of the sentences, on the other hand, is sometimes far from pure and simple, but this is not a vice; it is a fidelity to *thought and feeling*. (285, emphasis added)

The binary of thought and feeling unified by the poet’s imagination is emphasized by Eliot throughout his writings’, This marks him off from both the Romantics and the Neo-classicists. But there is another dimension of the thought-feeling combine: Eliot has something in common with both Romantics and the Neo-classicists. This also dissipates the general impression that Eliot rejects emotion and feeling in favour of thought and intellect.

Eliot does attempt to correct the excesses of emotion in some Romantic critics, particularly Shelley but neither Wordsworth nor Coleridge leave out the element of thought in their theories of poetry. Eliot wants thought and feeling to go simultaneously, and not by turn as in the poetry of Tennyson and Browning. He never completely denies emotion, feeling or personality. If he stresses the ratiocinative, the intellectual element in poetry, it is only because he finds it lacking in the poetry written after the Metaphysicals. In a significant utterance in his essay on “The Metaphysical Poets” Eliot says of Racine and Donne:

Racine or Donne looked into a great deal more than the heart. One must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts. (290)

That the poet has to look into “a great deal more than the heart” does not imply that he does not have to look into the heart at all. Had this been so, Eliot would not have talked so often about emotions and feelings as necessary ingredients of poetry. Thought element is ineluctably present in literature alongwith emotions and feelings.

Of the modern Western critics, Yvor Winters and J.C. Ransom have set maximum value on the logic in literature. Winters makes no bones about rationality in literature, as is evident from the title of his collected essay, *In Defence of Reason*. Even the subject that the writer seeks to express is rationally apprehended before it is emotionally felt. What gets finally expressed is the blend of thought and feeling :

The poet . . . understands his subject in rational terms and he so employs language that he communicates simultaneously that understanding and the feeling which it properly motivates. (503)

Poetry is thus the confluence of the rational and the emotional and not the one or the other exclusively.

Throughout his criticism Winters argues that the poet expresses concept as well as the emotion which the concept evokes and thus differs from the scientist whose sole concern as with the concept. Comparing the scientist with the poet he writes:

The scientist is interested in ideas, not in the feelings they motivate. . . . The subject matter of poetry, on the other hand, is human experience. (506)

The binary of idea and experience which are simultaneously present in literature flies in the face of Derrida's deconstructive view of idea which is annihilated by its opposite and experience which is indistinguishable from idea. For Winters the domain of science, and by extension of Philosophy, consists of ideas whereas poetry communicates experience alongwith ideas, as it is "the concept which evokes the feeling". (503) In fact, Winters is at the other extreme from Derrida. He finds logic strongly present in literature, whereas Derrida finds it absent from all disciplines including literature. Demonstrating how a poem is composed, Winters writes:

Now a poem is composed of words; that is, it is conceptual in its origin and it cannot escape from its origin. A poem about a tree is composed primarily of abstractions and secondarily of the feelings aroused by these abstractions: the tree, its leaves, its bark, its greenness, its brownness, its roughness, its smoothness, its strength, its motion, and all its other qualities, must be indicated in terms which are primarily conceptual. These terms, however, all suggest certain loose possibilities in the way of perception and feeling; and the poet's business is to relate them, or others similar to them, that a single and definite idea emerges, in company with a mental image of some aspect of a tree and in such a way that the feeling is communicated which is appropriate to the total idea-image both as a whole and with respect to each detail as one comes to it in reading (503)

Winters is highlighting the role of the concept in a literary composition and how an object like tree described in literature combines idea with image. The idea-image combine tells us precisely what obtains in the domain of literature and how a work of literature renders the idea of a worldly object in concrete form. This is reminiscent of Coleridge's secondary imagination which reconciles idea with image.

In his aesthetics John Crowe Ransom goes beyond Winters in his view that literature communicates knowledge of a particular kind, not emotions and feelings. He rejects the idea so often expressed by literary critics that literature and science are diametrically opposed to each other, the former imparting knowledge and the latter pleasure and sets forth his theory of literature as knowledge. He establishes a new relationship between science and literature, where they have the same objective, though they adopt different methods to achieve it.

Ransom argues that science communicates one kind of knowledge and literature another kind, but both the knowledges are equally valuable. Science provides the knowledge of the universals and literature the knowledge of the particulars and as such they complement each other. "The scientific and aesthetic ways of knowledge," Writes Ransom "should illuminate each other; perhaps; they are alternative knowledges and a preference for one knowledge over the other might indicate an elemental or primary bias in temperament." (1972, 13) Science and literature perform different tasks and therefore one cannot be judged by the standards of the other. Although Ransom believes that the two disciplines are not altogether exclusive, as literature is not without scientific logic and science is not completely devoid of artistic perception, the element of one discipline in the other is minimal. In his seminal essay "Poetry: A Note in Ontology" Ransom states:

Science gratifies a rational or practical impulse and exhibits the minimum of perception. Art gratifies a perceptual impulse and exhibits the minimum of reason. (1965,30)

Although Ransom discerns minimal reason or logic in literature, throughout his oeuvre he endeavours to defend logic in literature which is the source of a kind of knowledge that no other discipline can provide. Thus Ransom's theory runs counter to Derrida's deconstruction which denies logic in literature and since literature is made synonymous with language in all verbal constructs.

According to Ransom, structure and texture which are respectively "the logical meaning" and "the local meaning" go into the making of a poem or any literary work, for that matter. He employs the image of a living room to drive home the relationship that obtains between the two:

The walls of my room are obviously structural, the beams and the boards have a function, so does the plaster which in the visible aspect of the final wall. The plaster might have remained naked aspiring to no character and purely functional. But actually it has been painted receiving color, or it has been papered receiving color and design though these have no structural value and perhaps it has been hung with tapestry or with paintings for "decoration". The paint, the paper, the tapestry are texture. (1952,233)

It is obvious from this citation that to Ransom, texture which is considered synonymous with literariness cannot exist without the prop of structure. One may not see the boards, the beams or the plaster but they do act as the foundation for the decoration on the walls with the paint, the paper, the tapestry, or paintings, which constitute texture and without which a work of art will lack aesthetic appeal.

Texture which is generated by imagery plays a significant role in Ransom's criticism. Ransom calls texture "local" meaning, because it is texture which individualizes worldly phenomena and gives the kind of knowledge which to Ransom only literature can render. Ransom avers that "imagination is an organ of knowledge whose technique is images," (1968, 156) and that "art exists for knowledge" (1972, 197) Contrasting the scientist's treatment of worldly objects with that of the artist Ransom states that the former, by using universal signs, gives us "a man" while the latter by using images provides us with "this particular man". (1972, 6) with all the particularly that he possesses. This knowledge of the particulars can be provided only by literature as other disciplines can give us only the knowledge of the universals.

Though insufficiently recognised, Ransom has set forth a new aesthetics which centers on logic and knowledge by eliminating emotion from aesthetic experience. Ransom is not only challenging Western aesthetics going back to Plato and Aristotle but also Sanskrit poetics with its exclusive emphasis on emotive experience. Rejecting the focus on emotion in Western theories, Ransom writes:

Poetry becomes slightly disreputable when regarded as not having any special or definable content, and as identified only by its capacity for teasing some dormant affective states with some unusual activity. And it is impossible to talk definitively about the affections which are involved, so that affective criticism is highly indistinct. (1972, 12)

Even Though Ransom was not familiar with Sanskrit poetics, his pioneering statement above, brings to one's mind some of the central ideas in Sanskrit poetics which is primarily affective criticism. Ransom is radically different from all the Western

or Oriental critics who place emotion at the centre of their criticism. He rejects I.A. Richards view of aesthetic experience as completely shorn of logic. That Richards and Ransom are diametrically opposed to each other on logic in literature is evident from the following pronouncement of the former:

A poet may distort statement : he may make statements which have logically nothing to do with the subject under treatment; he may, by metaphor or otherwise, present objects for thought which are logically quite irrelevant, he may perpetrate logical *non-sense*, be as trivial or as silly logically, as it is possible to be (518, 5, emphasis added).

This statement of Richards brings him close to Derrida and takes him as far from Ransom as possible. For Ransom literature renders a kind of knowledge which science cannot. In his emphasis on logic in literature, Ransom is at the other extreme from Derrida. But it must be said that howsoever original Ransom's aesthetics may be, it cannot dissociate emotion altogether from aesthetic experience. The world which is provided by images is both emotionally felt and intellectually apprehended.

As has been said above, Sanskrit poetics excludes thought from aesthetic experience, which is out-and-out an emotional experience. In fact, in its emphasis on emotion Sanskrit poetics outstrips Western Romantic criticism. Emotionalism which Ransom decries is present in its extreme form in Sanskrit poetics. The crux of literature, according to Sanskrit critics, is not what goes into the making of it, or what is embodied in it, but what comes out of it to the reader. Hence so much emphasis on the sensitive reader (*sahridaya*) and his visceral response to literature. Expatiating on Anandavardhana's concept of poetry K. Krishna Moorthy writes:

In poetry language is used uniquely because the poet endeavours to convey emotions, moods and feelings in addition to mere facts and actions. Even such hard and dry things like stones and bones become associated with some mental feeling like anguish; and therefore even in seemingly *rasa*-less passages of poetry, a perceptive and sensitive reader will experience some shade or the other of *rasadi*. (XXX VI)

Facts and actions alongwith feelings and emotions are what the poet seeks to convey, but what the reader receives from his poetry is emotional experience. This is reinforced by V.K. Chari's comment on what goes into and what comes out of literature according to Sanskrit critics:

The basis assumption of the *rasa* theory is that the object of poetry is not to convey information about the world or simply to affirm facts but to exhibit the feeling responses produced in people by the objects and facts of the world (298).

This observation on Sanskrit poetics establishes that thought is absent from what the reader receives from literature as a result of his "feeling responses". But the fact of the matter is that what comes to the reader in the course of his aesthetic experience is not just emotion but a blend of thought and emotion with the preponderance of the latter. This is also the crux of Eliot's theory of the unification of sensibility.

At the other end of the spectrum, when the New Critics postulate literature as knowledge it is not the dry knowledge of science which results from abstract cogitation, but the knowledge which come out of the aesthetic experience. John Crowe Ransom

has already been discussed in detail. To Cleanth Brooks and Austin Warren, "poetry enables us to know what it 'feels like' to be alive in this world" (9). There is a difference between "feel" and "feel like". In the world we feel when we are face to face with worldly phenomenon, but in the domain of literature, we experience imaginatively created objects through imaginative enactment, which make us visualize them as they exist in the real world, though they are physically absent: we feel "as if" the objects were before us. Thus we experience in literature a much wider world than we are familiar with in real life.

As is evident from the foregoing discussion, literature is not without logic and, therefore, Derrida's argument that language is literature and as such there is no language which can convey logic or truth is untenable. Literature and non-literature have their distinct identities. The former is predominantly emotional with logic in the secondary place, while the latter is predominantly logical with emotion in the secondary place.

We have discussed what is in literature as its content and what the reader gets out of it. The arguments marshalled here run contrary to deconstructive postulates. Deconstructionists do not gainsay that thought, emotion, and aesthetic experience exist but their view of these terms in the literary context is radically different. As they do not distinguish between philosophy and literature, they discern thought in literature and emotion in philosophy. Both literature and philosophy or, to be more precise, "literary" and "philosophical" are placed by Derrida in quotation marks to give the impression that he views them differently from what has generally been assumed. Both thought and emotion are present in the two disciplines but thought is a-logical and emotion unbridled pleasure.

In literary criticism there are two distinct approaches to thought. At one end, we have Sidney and Richards who are of the opinion that thought in literature is not logical, at the other end, critics like Ransom and Winters who find in literature a logic which is essentially the same as logic outside literature. But none of the literary critics has said that logic in literature is countered by the contrary logic resulting in what Derrida calls *aporia* which is, in the words of M.H. Abrams, an "insuperable deadlock, a 'doublebind' of incompatible or contradictory meanings which are undecidable." (58). We cannot choose any one meaning as the right one as it is contradicted by the opposite meaning.

As regards emotion, "philosophic" emotion both in nature and scope, is not different from "literary" emotion. The term that Derrida has used for this pleasure is *jouissance* meaning ecstasy which has sexual connotations. Of deconstructive reading as distinct from conventional reading Derrida Writes:

Deconstruction perhaps has the effect, if not the mission, of liberating forbidden *jouissance*. . . . It is perhaps this *jouissance* which most irritates the all-out adversaries of "deconstruction". Who moreover, blame those they call the "deconstructionists" for depriving them of their habitual delectation in the reading of the great works or the rich treasures of tradition and simultaneously for being too playful, for taking too much pleasure, for saying what they like for their own pleasure, etc. (61).

The ecstasy which the reader experiences when completely united with the text is akin to the consummation of sexual pleasure. Roland Barthes has elaborated on this point in his *The pleasure of the Text* where he argues that the readerly text which has an object renders pleasure whereas the writerly text without an object provides ecstasy. As the latter is without an object, its meaning which is polysemous is not directed to a centre but disseminates in multiple directions which often clash with each other. Since the burden of a centre which imposes discipline is missing, the reader gets full freedom to enjoy the text the way he wants: it is like a sexual body which does not observe any norms when it comes to enjoyment.

Once we deny that the text, literary or otherwise, generates meanings which are uncontrolled and uncontrollable and that the aesthetic experience and the philosophic emotion are one and the same thing, Derrida's concept of both thought and emotion will be invalidated. This is what has been attempted here. A literary text is both similar to and different from other texts. It is similar in that the experience that goes into the making of a literary text is the experience of our life but its rendering in artistic form makes it different. Once rendered artistically it becomes everyone's experience which is generated without external stimuli. Logic in literature also has a double character. It cannot be subjected to questioning as it is not the dry logic of philosophy or science but its emotional equivalent but it is questioned when it becomes absurd and completely illogical as the "suspension of disbelief" breaks and the questioning faculty becomes operative. This explains why an eminent literary critic like F.R. Leavis questions the logic behind Shelley's imagery in the second stanza of "Ode to the West wind". (171-72)

There is a limit to which the distortion of logic can be permitted. If this is so, Derrida cannot use literature as a springboard to advocate the complete absence of logic in any verbal discourse.

Note

1. The title of M.H. Abrams's book is itself highly suggestive and points to the distinction that he makes between Classicism and Romanticism on the basis of the metaphors for the mind. For details see chapter II, "Imitation and the Mirror" and chapter III, "Romantic Analogues of Art and Mind" in *The mirror and the Lamp* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979).

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