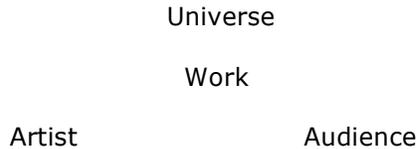


M.H.ABRAMS' ORIENTATION OF CRITICAL THEORIES – AN OVERVIEW –

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Till today, the chief tendency of modern criticism is to consider the aesthetic quality in terms of relation of art to the artist. M.H. Abrams in his essay "Orientation of critical Theories" tries to trace the growth of criticism in relation of art, artist, audience. Considering a whole work of art, there are four elements which are well distinguished and made important in almost all the theories. First, there is the work, the artistic product itself. Since this is a human product, the next common element is the artist. The work is directly or indirectly related to the universe inclusive of man, material things, events and ideas. The audiences come as the final element.

On this framework of artist, work, universe and audience, M.H. Abrams has spread out various theories for comparison. To make matters easier he has arranged the four elements in a convenient triangular pattern with the work of art, the thing to be explained in the center.



Any adequate theory takes some account of all the four elements but tends to derive from one of these his principal categories for defining, classifying and analyzing a work of art. Application of this analytical scheme will sort attempts to explain the nature and worth of a work of art into four broad classes. Three will explain the work of art principally by relating it to another thing: the universe, the audience, or the artist. The fourth will explain the work by considering it in isolation, as an autonomous whole, whose significance and value are determined without any reference beyond itself.

These four co-ordinates are not constants but variables. They differ in their importance according to the theory in which they occur. Let's take the universe as an example. In any one theory, when the artist is said to imitate the aspects of nature then it would be only the beautiful or moral aspects of the world. As Sidney rightly said that the actual world is brassen whereas the poetic world is golden. Consequently, theories which agree in assigning to the represented universe the primary control over a legitimate work of art may vary from recommending the most uncompromising realism to the most remote idealism. Each of the other terms also varies both in meaning and functioning according to the critical theory in which it occurs.

The explanation of art as essentially an imitation of the aspects of the universe was probably the most primitive aesthetic theory. Yet, since its appearance in the dialogues of Plato, mimesis was no more a simple concept. 'Imitation' is a relational term, signifying two items and some correspondence between them. But the philosopher in the Platonic dialogues characteristically operates with three categories. The first category is that of the eternal and unchanging Ideas; the

second, reflecting this is world of senses, natural or artificial; and the third category, in turn reflecting the second, comprises such things as shadows, images in water and mirrors, and the fine arts.

Aristotle also in defines poetry the Poetics as imitation. His interpretation of imitation is also his own. It is by no means an illusory copy of life or twice removed from reality as Plato believed. On the contrary, they reveal truths of a permanent or universal kind. To prove this Aristotle institutes a comparison between poetry and history. 'It is not the function of the poet', he says, "to relate what has happened, but what may happen, -- what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose.... The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen, Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history the particular. By the universe I mean how a person of certain type will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity. History records particular persons, places or things: poetry infuses a universal appeal into them by stressing what they have in common with all persons, all places, or all things in the same set of circumstances. The pictures of poetry therefore are not mere reproductions of facts but truths embedded in those facts that apply to all places and times. This is the meaning Aristotle gives to imitation.

"Imitation" continued to be a prominent item in the critical vocabulary for a long time after Aristotle – in fact, all the way through the eighteenth century. Particularly after the recovery of the Poetics and the great burst of aesthetic theory in sixteenth-century Italy, whenever a critic was to frame a comprehensive definition of art, he usually included the word "imitation", or one of those parallel terms which all faced in the same direction: reflection, "representation", "counterfeiting", "feigning", "copy" or "image".

Through most of the eighteenth century, the tenet that art is an imitation seemed almost too obvious to need any proof. As Richard Hurd said in his "Discourse on Poetic imitation", published in 1751, "All Poetry, to speak with Aristotle and the Greek critics is properly imitation".¹

The concept that art is an imitation, then, placed an important part in neo-classic aesthetics; but closer inspection shows that it did not, in most theories play the dominant part. It was commonly said that art was an imitation – but an imitation which is only instrumental towards producing effects upon an audience. The focus of interest had shifted and this later criticism is primarily oriented, not from work to universe, but from work to audience. The nature and consequences of this change of direction is clearly indicated in Sir Philip Sidney's The Apologie for Poetry.

To Sidney Poetry, by definition has a purpose – to achieve certain effects in an audience. It imitates "to teach and delight". Those who practice it are called makers and prophets, "for these indeed do merely make to imitate and imitate both to delight and teach and delight to move men to take that Goodness in hand, which without delight they would fly as from a stranger, and teach to make them know that Goodness where unto they are moved, which being the noblest scope to which ever any learning was directed, yet want there not idle tongues to bark at them".² As a result, throughout this essay the needs of the audience become the fertile grounds for critical distinctions and standards. The poet is distinguished from, and elevated above the moral philosopher and the historian by his capacity to move his audience

more forcefully to virtue since he couples "the general notion" of the philosopher with "the particular example" of the historian.

For convenience we may name criticism that, like Sidney's is ordered towards the audience, a "pragmatic theory" since it looks at the work of art chiefly as an instrument for getting something done. The central tendency of the pragmatic critic is to conceive a poem as something made in order to effect requisite responses in its readers; to consider the author from the point of view of the powers he must have in order to achieve this end.

The pragmatic orientation was characterized by far the greatest part of criticism from the time of Horace through the eighteenth century. In the course of time and particularly after the psychological contributions of Hobbes and Locke in the seventeenth century, increasing attention was given to the mental constitution of the poet, the quality and degree of his "genius". Gradually, the stress was shifted more and more to the poet's natural genius, creative imagination, and emotional spontaneity. As a result the audience gradually receded into the background, giving place to the poet himself, and his own mental powers and emotional needs and this led to the introduction of a new orientation into the theory of art.

"Poetry". Wordsworth announced in his preface to the Lyrical Ballads of 1800, "is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings". On this, the ground idea, he found his theory of the proper subjects, language, effects, and value of poetry. Almost all the major critics of the English romantic generation phrased definitions or key statements showing a parallel alignment from work to poet. M.H. Abrams calls this way of thinking, "in which the artist himself becomes the major element generating both the artistic product and the criteria by which it is to be judged",³ as the expressive theory of art.

In general terms, the central tendency of the expressive theory may be summarized in this way: a work of art is essentially the internal made external, resulting from a creative process operating under the impulse of feeling, and embodying the combined product of the poet's perceptions, thoughts and feelings. The primary source and subject matter of a poem, therefore, are the attributes and actions of the poet's own mind; or if aspects of the external world, then these only as they are converted from fact to poetry by the feelings and operations of the poet's mind. The paramount cause of poetry, is not, as in neoclassic criticism a final cause, the effect intended upon the audience; but instead an efficient cause – the impulse within the poet of feelings and desires seeking expression of the elements constituting a poem, the element of diction, especially figures of speech, becomes primary, and the burning question is, whether these are the natural utterance of emotion and imagination. The first test any poem must pass is no longer, "Is it true to nature?" or "Is it appropriate to the requirements either of the best judges or the generality of mankind?" but a criterion looking in a different direction, namely, 'Is it sincere? Is it genuine?' Does it match the intention, the feeling, and the actual state of mind of the poet which composing? The work ceases then to be regarded as primarily a reflection of nature, actual or improved; the mirror held up to nature becomes transparent and yields the reader insights into the mind and heart of the poet himself.

There is also a fourth procedure the objective orientation, which on principle regards the work of art in isolation from all these external points of reference. The objective orientation was just beginning to emerge in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The aim to consider a poem as Poe expressed it, as a "Poem per se

written solely for the poem's sake"4 in isolation from external causes came to constitute one element of the diverse doctrines usually huddled together by historians under the heading "Art for Arts Sake". T.S. Eliot's dictum of 1928, that when we are considering poetry we must consider it primarily as poetry and not another thing is widely approved, however Eliot's own criticism sometimes departs from this ideal; and it is often joined with Macheish's verse aphorism, "A poem should not mean but be". In sum, Abrams has analysed the growth of criticism thematically, chronologically, historically and critically. This wins a special place for him in the genre of criticism.

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