

Plurality of Meaning in Western Criticism

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Abstract

In his seminal book The Principals of Literary criticism I.A. Richards laid emphasis on twin functions of language i.e. emotive language and scientific language which is popularly known as dichotomy of meaning. He had to face stiff resistance from many detractors particularly the neo- Aristotelians who do not approve of a water tight compartment like emotive and scientific meaning and have reposed faith in continuity of meaning.

His ardent disciple Empson took the problem of plurality of meaning of its semantic possibilities. But before Empson came with the theory of ambiguity, E.M.W Tillyard had already given a hint of ambiguity in poetry. Though he used the word obliquity instead of the word ambiguity. In Tillyard's view it is the obliquity in poetry which makes it worth reading.

The American critics, J.C. Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, R.P. Blackmurr and Robert Penn Warren took the plurality of meaning to a surprising extent. They were called fugitives because they refused to move on beaten track. They had a liking for ambiguity and novelty.

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Introduction

There is lot of controversy amongst the modern critics on the issue of plurality of meaning. But watching their interest in the science of meaning it can be easily said that they have made headway towards a novel philosophy of meaning. J.C. Ransom took the initiative while making a thorough interpretation of four great critics of our times - Eliot, Richards, Empson and Leavis in his book *New Criticism* (1941). Later on critics like Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, R.P. Blackmurr, Kenneth Burke and Robert Penn Warren threw their weight behind it. In this way passing through Ransom it spread over various channels and finally culminated in the works of new Aristotelian critics like Elder Alson, W.R. Keast, R.S. Crane and Bernard Winsberg. There is a consensus among critics that the critics associated with this movement some way or the other throw ample light on language of poetry and reveal the mystery associated with the meaning of poetry, Ransom's theory of structure and texture, Tate's theory of extension, intention and tension between the two, Cleanth Brook's theory of paradox, Blackmurr's theory of language as gesture and Empson's theory of ambiguity try to forge out a new way of poetic assessment. In English, critics like I.A. Richards, T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis and William Empson lend support to this movement. The new critics have derived a lot from the theorizings of these critics.

The interest in plurality of meaning was a contribution of Dr. I.A. Richards who devoted a large part of his literary criticism to exploring the plurality of meaning. His pilgrimage from *Principles of Literary Criticism* to *The Philosophy of Rhetoric and Speculative Instruments* is a pilgrimage from bald or flat meaning to the subtle and ambiguous meaning. He was the first critic to use the word ambiguity in his book *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*.

Richards in early 20s came forward with a new critical apparatus and analyzed poetry in terms of psychology. He laid down the foundation of linguistic criticism language. His views on emotive language, scientific language, stock response, communication, poetic value, proper use of words are of paramount importance. All the New Critics in one way or the other derive inspiration from him.

In the *Principles of literary Criticism*,¹ he makes a dichotomy between emotive language and scientific language, the former is used in the realm of poetry while the later in the realm of intellectual discourse. While scientific language is flat or bald, emotive meaning is flexible. It is metaphorical in nature. In the words of Richards,

“The difference between scientific meaning and emotive meaning is not of degree but of kind”²

Richards' *Principles* was an attempt to study the nature and function of meaning as employed in poetry and outside the realm of poetry. In fact, all the

critical treatises of Richards beginning with *The Foundations of Aesthetics to Speculative Instruments* centre round the theory of meaning. But in the *Principles* emphasis was laid on the twin functions of language i.e. emotive function of language and scientific language which is popularly known as dichotomy of meaning. During the time this theory was propounded, it had universal acceptance. Even the linguists did not dare controvert this proposition. But later murmuring began and some linguists and critics came forward to point out its limitations. It is worth noting that modern linguists and semanticists had not given any credence to Richards' theory of meaning. Chicago critics particularly believe in the continuity of meaning in and outside poetry. But what attracted the notice of the readers was the criticism of Max Black who first pointed out that there was practical difficulty in drawing an inflexible demarcation between emotive and scientific uses of language. In his book *Speculative Instruments* Richard practically agreed to the view of Max Black and admitted that it has done more harm than good. He accepts that language is a continuous process. It goes unabated without causing any hindrance. Cognitive language can intrude into the arena of emotive language.

Still later J.C. Ransom who is considered the forerunner of new criticism, came forward with his cudgel and frankly contradicted Richards' critical pronouncement that emotive use of language is fundamentally different from scientific use of language.

Richards tries to resolve this contradiction in his *Speculative Instruments* where he meets the objections raised by Max Black. The development of Richards from *Meaning of Meaning* to *Speculative Instruments* shows that in his later writings he tries to make a compromise between emotion and cognition. But this does not in any way diminish the importance of his theory of twin functions of language i.e., its emotive function and its scientific function. He keeps emotive language reserved for poetry because he thinks that it is through emotive meaning that poetry achieves its objective.

Thomas Clark Pullock also attacks Richards' twin function of language as laid down in the *Principles of Literary Criticism* who finds Richards' emotive and scientific use of language deficient because it suffers from the defect of elementalism.⁴ Actually Pullock, like New Aristotelian Chicago critics, seems to believe in the continuity of linguistic process. Max Eastman has also made a scathing remark on Richards' *Principle of Literary Criticism* saying that reading of *Principles* is "like wading through a vastly important jungle of ideas."⁵

Of late, the Neo-Aristotelian called Chicago critics refused to admit Richards'

concept of categorization of meaning into emotive and scientific. They have come to believe that language cannot be so interpreted and there is a sufficient evidence to show that language maintains its continuity inside and outside poetry. Although this kind of refutation does not lessen the merit of Richards' theory of meaning and he is still held in high esteem.

Empson in his *Masterpiece* seven types of ambiguity has highlighted the importance of ambiguity. It is related to introduction of diversity of meaning. He was a disciple of Dr. Richards and taking a cue from Richards' theory of ambiguity put forward in the *Philosophy of Rhetoric* he studied the multiple shades of meaning of a text from his own standpoint ultimately supporting the theory of interaction of meaning which is called ambiguity. For him ambiguity is neither pun nor simple puzzling nor even ordinary ambivalence or multiplicity of meaning. It is the interaction or diversity of meaning which he calls ambiguity. He maintains that it is ambiguity which makes poetry readable. He defines ambiguity as, "any verbal nuance which gives alternative reactions to the same piece of language".

His first type of ambiguity occurs when "a detail is effective in several ways at once".⁶ This is his primordial or archetypal ambiguity at which he looks from six different angles in the other types. He took the problem of ambiguity to its semantic possibilities. His theory of ambiguity owes much to Richardsonian criticism. But before Empson came with the theory of ambiguity, E.M.W. Tillyard had already given a hint of ambiguity, though he used the word 'obliquity' instead of 'ambiguity'. In Tillyard's words it is the obliquity in poetry which makes it worth reading. Poetry is poetry because of its oblique meaning not direct meaning.

Empson's ambiguity is not free from controversy. It has been held by many critics that word has only one basic or primordial meaning and other meanings attached to it are simply its ramifications. If a word has several meanings; only one meaning can be accepted at a time according to the context and purport and other words should be subsidiary to the main meaning. The dominating meaning of a word will be one and other meanings will be automatically annulled. All the meaning of a word cannot be operative at one and the same time. M.C. Bradbook therefore, considers Empson's book on ambiguity as,

"no more than a game for the intelligent an Intellectual Shower bath".⁷

Empson's theory of ambiguity has given rise to heated discussion among many modern critics. Modern critics, James Jenson among one of them, found many logical errors in Empson's theory of ambiguity and his every objection was properly and adequately answered by Empson. Jenson's remark that, conclusions of Richards thought⁸

was vehemently opposed by the later branding it as inevitably a fiction'. William Righter in his book Logic and Criticism also finds basic errors in Empson's theory of ambiguity. But many new critics mostly belonging to Fugitive group in America derived inspiration from Empson's theory of ambiguity and regards him as one of the foundation stones of new criticism. F.R. Leavis is not pleased with Empsonian critical technique. He uncharitably remarks that Richards is responsible for Empsonian kind of irresponsibility.⁹

It appears from the entire critical output of Empson that his main focus is on the diversity of meaning stemming from ambiguity. His concern with language has associated him with the school of New Criticism. It is note-worthy that in Indian poetics critics like Anandaradhana, Mammata, Vishwanath and Jagannath, in one way or the other did the same thing. They gave more importance to linguistics trickery in poetry such as figure of speech, nuances of words, imagery, musical effect and verbal music and such other poetic qualities within the broad framework of poetry.

In America much work has been done on plurality of meaning Ransoms' concept of structure and texture, Allen Totes' concept of tension in poetry, R.P. Blackmurr's concept of gesture in poetry and Cleanth Brooks' concept of paradox – all-in-one way or the other are efforts to explore plurality of meaning in poetry. They focused their attention on how to add features of poetry, particularly language and such other kind of poetic qualities.

Of all the new critics J.C. Ransom is worthy of note. He is the first American critic to discuss the importance of texture in poetry. He holds that poetry has two aspects- structure and texture. Structure is the surface meaning of poetry. It emanates from the combination of words. But texture is something higher than structure. It indicates the intention of the poet. In poetry words are interwoven in such a manner that the latent intention of the poet is hidden in it. Word in itself is meaningless. It is impregnated with meaning when it is placed in the particular position. Word takes its meaning from the words coming before and after it. This is called interanimation of word. In The Words Body Ransom gives a detailed analysis of what structure and texture are. Ransom insists :

“The kind of poetry which interests us is not that of a child, or of the eternal youth which is in some manner, but the act of an adult mind”.¹⁰

Allen Tate is another new critic who has propounded the theory of tension in poetry. In poetry there is always a polarization of meaning several meanings come up at a time and the reader is dazzled as to which one should be taken for granted. Tension persists between intension and expression. The expression pulls the meaning towards itself and the intension pulls it towards itself. So automatically there is a tension

between the two. It is actually tension in poetry which determines the actual meaning of poetry. Tate has rightly suggested.,

“What I am saying of course, is that the meaning of poetry is its tension, the full organized body of all extension but intension that we can find in it.”¹¹

He further adds -

“All goods poetry is nothing but a unity of all the meanings from the farthest extreme of intension and extension.”¹²

In Indian poetics we come across such an idea in Mammata’s *Kavyaprakasa*. Mammata says that poetry is made up of several ingredients. It has music, figurative speech, suggestion, intension, ulterior motive and sonorousness. All these factors work at a time. One ingredient wants to win over the other and it is the tension between the different ingredients of poetry that determines the meaning of poetry. The third new critic of note is Cleanth Brooks. His theory of poetry is laid down in his book *The well wrought Urn*. Cleanth Brooks propounded the theory of paradox in poetry. In ordinary parlance ‘paradox’ means contradicting statement. In rhetoric, paradox is defined as statement which is self-contradictory. But Cleanth Brooks broadens the concept of paradox to mean anything with several shades of meanings. So Cleanth Brooks defines paradox as a statement which reflects the true intent of the poet. Brooks insists,

“Our prejudices force us to regard paradox as intellectual rather than emotional clever rather than profound, rational rather than divinely irrational.”¹³

The meaning of poetry is never flat. It is never simple either. It is always complex, otherwise there will be no difference between prose and poetry. It is a misnomer to take paradox as contradictory statement. *Paradox* is a statement which mirrors the true meaning of poetry. Thus paradox is a synonym of right meaning Brooks maintains,

“The same principle that ensures the presence of irony in so many of our great poems also accounts for the fact that many of our great poems also accounts for the fact that many of them seem to be built around paradox.”¹⁴

Of all the new critics R.P. Blackmurr came forward with a novel theory of language as gesture. No new critic has given so much weight to verbal nuances as R.P. Blackmur. According to Blackmurr every word has its gesticulation. it has its gesture. Blackmurr asserts that Language is made of words, and gesture is made of motion. Words are made of motion, mode of action or response. Gesture is made of language beneath or beyond or alongside of the language of’ words.

“When the language of word fails we resort to the language of gesture”.¹⁵

The language of poetry is essentially the language of symbolic action. Gesture is that meaningfulness, which is moving, what moves us He further says,

“Gesture is of great structural importance in poetry.”¹⁶

Sometimes we express our ideas not by words but by gestures and postures, by movements of hands, by rolling of eyes, by shaking of head. So word also, like human being, has its behaviour. The meaning of poetry much depends upon word-behaviour Blackmurr’s quotes Shakespear’s Othello in which it is said there is a fury in word. To understand the correct nature of word is to understand the meaning of poetry. In poetry word behaves differently. The reader who is endowed with the capability to understand the behaviour of word can have real grasp over the meaning of poetry.

Key Words:

Ambiguity, Obliquity, dichotomy of meaning, intellectual showerbath, tension, extension, intention, structure, texture, paradox, language as gesture.

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