The Implied Reader

in 18th Century Literary Criticism

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readers of the work, those who are addressed by the work and "to whose attention it becomes available."[1]

Abrams affirms that most theories exhibit "a felt orientation" toward one of the above elements and most critics concentrate on one of them as their major interest. In applying Abrams's view we could say that the bulk of 18th century literary theory focuses upon the reader of the literary work, though the concept of the reader is an implied one in it.

Studying Dennis's *Advancement of Reformation of Modern poetry* that belongs to the beginning of the century, we become aware of the magnitude of the affective critical approach and this fact stands true as we read the critics of the second half of the century. In fact, the concern with the perception of the artwork in explaining literature establishes a strong tradition that joins different literary views of the age from Neoclassical to those that cannot be termed as being in the compass of Neoclassicism. The major elements of the criticism of this century are obviously oriented toward the reader and are explained in the light of the current affective and emotive theories. It is of no little importance that the aesthetic discussion, defined by Wimsatt and Brooks in *Literary Criticism: A short History* as, the "poetics of sensational pleasure"[2], takes its inception from the beginning of the century and later on becomes a major line of critical inquiry.

Noting the significance of 18th century literary theory and practice, and its major orientation towards the reader component, this thesis is going to delineate the concept of the reader as implied in 18th century literary theory; based on the

study of the major reader-oriented elements of criticism of the age - taste, the sublime, and aesthetic pleasure - its aim is to explain what sort of reader is implied and what kind of response on the part of the reader is proposed in 18th century English literary theory and aesthetics.

As mentioned above, this study concerns the concept of the reader by studying some of the main elements of the literary theory of 18th century England; these elements are among those almost always discussed by major theorists and bear a great influence upon the practice of criticism in the 18th century. Hence to comprehend the concept of the reader intelligibly, it is best to trace the development of these elements through which problems of the perception of literary work are put forward in this period. While we read major critics of the century, it may surprise us that in spite of explaining essential principles of literary theory and criticism on affective grounds, these critics rarely turn to the "concept of the reader" directly. This fact calls for a thematic study of the elements in which questions of the proposed response to the work become the first concern and brought into critical discussion.

Studying the major elements of "the total situation of a work of art" and the ways of representation of these elements may help us understand the development of literary theory on the whole; and actually this could be Abrams's view in reducing the diversified world of critical thought into four major orientations. The reader, among the elements which have always exerted a great influence in the history of literary theory and criticism, has recently attracted great

attention. Modern literary theory is much concerned with the reader problem, and literary formulations, that are as different as possible, have viewed the reader from various perspectives so that it has provided a principle ground for the dialogue between these theories. Studying the modes of presence of the reader and the lines along which the reader has been imported into 18th century criticism not only helps us in better understading of 18th century criticism but it paves the way for a more comprehensive picture of modern literary theory that is so much concerned with the concept of the reader, for 18th century criticism and aesthetics, not just through its emphasis on problems of the perception of the literary work, functions as a major background for modern literary theory.

It should be noted that this thesis is not going to be a thorough study of the major elements of 18th century criticism. This task has been fulfiled in many cases in better ways, a fact that is proved by a brief review of the bibliographies of the field. What follows is a study of the major reader - oriented elements of 18th century literary theory as far as they can contribute to a better understanding of the concept of the reader in 18th century literary theory and criticism.

A brief account may here help us in observing how these elements are approached in the following chapters and how their relevance to the concept of the reader is established.

The sublime is a concept around which much of the emotive criticism of the age evolves. As Samuel Monk maintains, the concept of the sublime in the 18th

century is mostly represented in immediate concern with the psychology of the receiver of the literary work.[3] Towering literary figures of the age define the sublime as that which astonishes and causes reverence. As a result of the sublime and its being proposed by the critics of the century, the image of the reader bears a strong affinity with feelings of astonishment and surprise. The reader implied in the concept of the sublime is the reader of that which astonishes and yet remains indescribable and out of the scope of lucid understanding.

The other emotive elements of the literary theory of the age relate to the concept of the reader in different ways. As Austin Warren in his *Alexander Pope* quotes from Spingarn, taste originally meant "a mere instinct or sentiment of the mind, without order or authority, the product of the heart rather than the head, the sentiment rather than reason, it was a personal equation"[4]. At this stage taste becomes one of the main lines along which the notions of individual response developes. Yet there is a great disposition in this age toward harmonizing and reconciling opposite conceptions, hence taste becomes rationalized, being balanced by strong touch of "common sense". The effect of reason in harmonizing individual taste is specifically evident in the response that is implied in the critical output of Dr. Johnson.

The term "aesthetic pleasure" is carried to the critical debates of the age in many direct or indirect ways. Dennis in talking about "practical and enthusiastic passion" and Addison in discussing "aesthetic and practical pleasure" introduce

problems of perception of the literary work and illustrate what thay propose as the appropriate response of the reader. Yet, the "Pathetic" explanation of aesthetic pleasure is modified by the major rationalist tendency observed throughout the century. In this situation, questions rerelvant to the perception of the literary work, such as catharsis, are elaborately discussed with the hope of describing the emotional appeal of the literary work to the audience and discovering the mechanism of the appropriate response.

Notes

[1] Oxford Up. 1953. p.6

[2] Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970, p. 261

[3] *The Sublime*, Michigan Up. 1960, p.11

[4] Peter Smith, 1963, p.36

II. Taste

The Context

Reading Donne, Sir Thomas Browne and Milton, We notice that literature is being written for an aristocracy. Yet this social sense which has been established by the Tudors and exploited by the Stuarts comes to an and after the Revolution of 1688. Around the opening of the 18th century, there appears a literature written by the middle class, of the middle class, and for the middle class: the pamphleteers, the essayists, and soon Defoe and other novelists. Even the drama of the age, which has, up to this time, embodied the most courtly literature, changes with startling rapidity, with the anti - aristocratic satire of Farquhar, and the sentimental comedy of Steele. This situation reflects the social milieu; The rising middle class desires to share the relish and acquire the status of the aristocracy. It is from them that the impulse which underlies the foundation of the various societies for the improvement of manners and morals chiefly comes. Ordinary men with ordinary outlooks come into their own. Addison, Steele and Fielding, Richardson and Johnson, write about, if not always for, the commenplace and every day world. The heroes are gone or survive only in the mock heroism of Pope and Fielding.[1]

The growth of the reading public in the 18th century acts as a main social

factor in drawing attention to the needs of the recipient of the literary work and the rise of the concept of taste in critical inquiries. Long ago, Leslie Stephen suggested that "the gradual extension of the reading calss affected the development of the literature addressed to them."[2] Many 18th century critics consider their age as one of remarkable and increasing popular interest in reading; Dr. Johnnson calls the English as "the nation of readers."[3] The sale of the most popular books in this period suggests a book-buying public that gradually develops in size. A modern estimate of the average annual publication of new books, excluding pamphlets, suggests that an almost fourfold increase occurs during the century, from an annual of 100 in the opening to that of 372 in the closing years of the century.[4]

But, the main factor that characterizes the composition of the reading public is "the very limited distribution of literacy,"[5] that is, the capacity to read and write in the mother tongue. In consequence of this fact and the economic circumstances, "being able to read was a necessary accomplishment only for those destined to the middle class occupations - commerce, administration, and the professions."[6] These social changes place the middle class as a whole in a dominant position in the literary scene for the first time. The widening scope of readers is composed of those who favour the entertaining and easy reading, though being informative and improving is among the standards of their choice. The member of the new reading public does not mind so much his own individual way of reading and its correspondence with the Neoclassical code. The English reading public wants more

life in literature, and more variety and movement. Correctness is devoutly to be wished,"provided it does not cramp life."[7]

The growth of literary reviews and periodicals during the century shows the fulfilment of this trend; the writers need an audience with a general disposition to be addressed and persuaded and amused, and the reading public needs to be entertained and amused. Many writers from Addison to those at the end of the century turn to this issue in clear terms. Addison, writing on "the difference of taste", notes that:

> It may here be worth our while to examine how it comes to pass that several readers, who are all accquainted with the same language, and know the meaning of the words they read, should nevertheless have a different relish of the same description. We find one transported with a passage, which another runs over with coldness and indifference; or finding the representation extremely natural, where another can percieve nothing of likeness and conformity.[8]

The belief in the variety of dispositions and individual diversity contributes to the discussion of taste in the literary scene. Many critics declare their own end in writing as the exploitation of the sources of difference in taste and establishing the norms for refining the taste of the readers. Geroge Farquhar, after noting that the English are "a mixture of many nations" and have the most "unaccountable medley of humours among them," states that "these humours produce variety of follies, some of them unknown to former ages; these new distempers must have new remedies,

which are nothing but new counsels and instructions."[9]

Emergence of the Concept of Taste

Throughout the closing years of the 17th century and particularly as the rules dominating the literary scene become increasingly demanding and academic in application, the concept of taste frequently finds its keynote in the *je ne sais quoi.* The critical word, "taste" , which has been popularized in Spain, is in general used as synonymous with a subjective *je-ne-sais-quoi* sentiment by the middle of the 18th century. No one denies the existence of such a sentiment: Dryden speaks of his preference for Juvenal rather than Horace on the basis of his "own taste"[10] or Pope states that the occasional breaking of a rule may achieve a "grace beyond the reach of art", that is synonymous with *Je ne sais quoi,* "which, without passing through the judgement, / gains the heart, and all its end at once attains."[11]

At this stage the question is not whether such an emotional capacity exists but whether it is the final judge of aesthetic value; what is in question is the further problem of what faculty or means is to determine when the rules are to be broken and when not. The "graces beyond the reach of art" thus serves to render criticism more flexible and encourages the search for beauties in art and contributes to the rise of the individual response. Addison´s remark that "the taste was not to conform to the art but the art to the taste,"[12] indicates the

significance this discussion has acquired in contemporary criticism. However, the theoretical stimulation for the emergence of taste, that which beside contributing to its shaping explains the quality of concept, comes from the area of philosophical thought.

As the 18th century begins, the emotionalism towards which the "school of taste" (Spingarn´s term) inclines finds justification in a growing tendency of the moral philosophy called "voluntarism". The philosophy of voluntarism, which has been urged since the days of the Greek sophists, seeks to demontrate that the will is completely free of knowledge and able to direct to the good without mediation of reason. But with the will thus deprived of a rational guide, the followers of voluntarism are faced with the question of how the will is to know the good. From this uncertainty ultimately stems both the social and empirical determinism and the emotional individualism which tends to replace rationalism in European moral and aesthetic thought; the will is increaingly discovered to be determined by material circumstances, a tendency that becomes most evident in the writing of Thomas Hobbs. The determinism of the will is governed by the events and forces of the emprical world; intrinsic motive or intention can hardly be blamed or praised. Yet the thinkers in the 17th and 18th century who follow the voluntarist trend, in facing with the problem of how the will of itself is to know the good, reject determinism and attempt to prove the existence of an innate feeling or "sense" which is automatically directed to the good.[13]

The major motivation for the development of this belief is given at the

beginning of the 18th century by the Earl of Shaftesbury, who seeks to establish a cultivated taste as the basis of both art and morality. Shaftesbury´s understanding of taste is based on the innate feeling that gives rise to the idea of individual response.

The psychological criticism of the 18th century is the other contributing force in paying attention to the nature of the individual response and the problem of taste; the criticism of the century is strongly coloured by the doctrine of "the association of ideas". As Bate suggests:

> Associationism, in its simplest and most general sense, implies only that ideas which are similar, or which have repeatedly occured simultaneously or in succession, tend automatically to evoke one another.[14]

The British associationism, as it developes during the 18th century, endeavours to explain the entire mental and emotional existence of man. According to Locke, only "primary" qualities of matter can be proved to exist independent of the perceiving mind. By accepting, with Locke, the individual activity of the mind in receiving and combining "primary" ideas and virtually creating ideas which are "secondary" , the way is paved for considering the impressions of mind as shaping the whole individual taste and as basis of aesthetic judgement. Through association man develops step by step; activities, impressions, and thoughts become habitual, they are combined and enclosed into more complex and refined ideas and conceptions.[15] Thus the major lines of philosophical and psychological

thought in the 18th century help the emergence of the concept of taste in the area of inquiry commonly called aesthetics.

The Standard of Taste, the Ideal Reader

In trying to find out what 18th century critics mean by "taste", we encounter the problem that most historians of philosophical and critical thought faced. Every age has its own language and terminology. To understand the train of ideas in some age only based on the terminology made or used by the thinkers of that particular age, though an enterprising task, creates many difficulties.

This fact seems specially valid concerning the critical thought in the 18th century. The term "taste" sometimes becomes so restricted as to be assigned to the power of associating and perceiving in irrational manner, while it comes to constitute for most English Neoclassical critics the general capacity "to judge the bad from the good", broadened to include not only an unschooled and innate, trustworthy feeling but a far wider ability of judgement, which is augmented and directed by experience and learning. By the middle of the 18th century, the term is frequently employed in almost every sense, so that an anonymous writer concludes, "no idea at all" can be "allocated to the poor monosylabe TASTE".[16]

But fortunately this confusion in defining taste does not hamper us since we are chiefly concerned with conditions of taste and what it exerts upon the reader; and 18th century critical thought concentrates mainly on this aspect of the problem.