DISCUSSING POETRY AND 'FORM' THROUGH TERRY EAGLETON'S *HOW TO READ A POEM*

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The aim of this paper is to analyze Terry Eagleton's *How to Read a Poem*, in the light of changing perceptions on poetry in the Western tradition from the Classical Age to the Modern period with special attention to the notion of form and content and also the role of the poet in crafting poetry. Eagleton's *How to Read a Poem* is understood in the context of the continuous formulations and recoding of the idea of poetry. For this exercise, several seminal works which have attempted to define or defend poetry have been selected. They include works by Plato, Aristotle, Longinus, Sidney, Dr. Johnson, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot. As the central concern in this work by Eagleton is the notion of form in poetry, there is an attempt to situate the politics of form within the context of Eagleton's other works. The position of this work is interrogated and so is the intention of presenting it as a manual and its implications thereby.

The Changing Idea of Poetry

As it has been often observed that the idea of literature has had different meanings in different times and different contexts. And also that a single critical apparatus cannot explain the literature of all times, in the same vein the changing perception on poetry are discussed.

Plato in Book III of *Republic* makes a distinction between initiative (mimesis) poetry and narrative (diegesis) poetry. He states: "when any one of these pantomimic gentlemen, who are so clever that they can imitate anything . . . we must also inform him that in our State such as he are not permitted to exist;" (*Classic,* 14), Plato's suggested banishment of poets has been read as another instance of the contest between poetry and philosophy. Plato criticizes the presentation of popular morality as knowledge in imitative poetry. According to him, imitation appeals to man because it affects the soul which has both the rational part and the sensory part. Since, imitative poetry appeals to the sensory part it has no fruitful goals in the state and only embodies an "inferior degree of truth." And because of such consequences, imitative poetry is also accused of corrupting that which is already good. By no means, is it considered as that which helps in attaining the truth. Gadamer reads Plato's account of poetry and states: "For here poetry is given a burden which it cannot carry and does not need to carry. Its content is to be purified so that it might attain an educational effect of its own." (50). It is only viewed as a tool in a pedagogical

exercise in the establishment of an ideal state and this over rated expectation from poetry causes Plato to call for its banishment.

Aristotle in *The Poetics* concludes that poetry is better than history. He reasons that history is confined to representing events in the sequence of their occurrence while poetry goes beyond history in examining the pattern of these occurrences. He gives precedence to poetry by regarding it as greater in degree to philosophy and of additional importance which also lends it a universal nature.Another important contribution of Aristotle is his discussion on form and content, through he does not names them as such. He finds the plot of the play not as secondary but a formative principle. The opposition between form and content is alien to him; he considers form as inseparable from content. Form is almost the articulateness of content and he calls the articulate structure of human action as plot.

Longinus in his treatise *On the Sublime*delves into the issue of talent and technique in composing poetry. In this actively engaging text which is both documentation and prescriptive, there is a suggestion of encountering the sublime in order to understand it. The five sources of sublime are considered and the first two are regarded as natural and innate. There is an emphasis on the grandeur of conception for which the noble soul is the source of ideas. The selection from multifarious incidents and their association by bewitching language is also called an innate capacity of the poet capable of composing sublime poetry. The artifice of the poet includes the efficient rendition of the figures of speech, the manner of expression and the proper arrangement of the words. Undoubtedly he values talent more as he insists on the nobility of the mind or the soul and the author as moral subject.Another important aspect is the reading of *On the Sublime*in the light of classical rhetorical theory; rhetoric is a public function with elements based on human knowledge calling into plays both reason and judgment.

Sidney's "Defence of Poesy", makes a justification of poetry. He finds poetry better than history because history can only represent the imperfect world. Poetry is also illustrated as better than philosophy because it makes truth more palatable. His idea of poetry is also not confined to the domain of imitation. He credits the poet with improving on nature. In discussing the "fore-conceit" of the work, there is as argument for a separation between "idea" and "matter", almost as corollaries of "form" and "content". Sidney grants more importance to the idea of the work. Matter is considered as shapeless, it is idea which give sense, shape and meaning to this matter. S also argues that poetry can teach and move us to virtue.

Samuel Johnson expounds on the nature of poetry in *Rasselas* and states: "The business of a poet . . . is to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances" (33). The knowledge of the poet is hailed as an important requisite for the creation of poetry. The subjects all around the poet are considered worthy of being inspirations and sources of poetry. A poet is advised to embody a transcendental and universal quality in his poetry. The immediate context of poetry is subsumed by placing the appeal of poetry in its outliving the poet. To attain this state, the poet is also acknowledged as "interpreter of nature" and the "legislator of mankind." Both these titles accord a significant role to the poet in the society.

Wordsworth in the "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads"* posits poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity." (141) Poetry writing is treated as a craft and the preface is also about the difficulty of composing it. It is also considered as natural phenomenon where nature speaks to men. "Nature" is understood as not only external nature but also human nature. There is an explanation of the practice of poetry - both its making and its reading.The language of poetry receives special attention for he proposes

that the best part of human language is sourced from best objects in nature.Poetry is also addressed as not being distinct from prose. It takes into account the idea of form, as a register of usage and not about ordinary or extra ordinary language. There is a valorization of common life and the commonality of language. The elementary feelings coexist with simplicity devoid of affectations of the city. A meditative relationship between man and nature is emphasized. Language is almost considered as a response to stimulus. He criticizes poetic diction as being only a repertoire of mechanical devices. He also attempts to reconcile feelings and thought, as thoughts being the residue of all our past feelings. Wordsworth situates the poet as possessing extra-sensitive capacity to express these observations. The use of poetic diction's role in recognizing similaritiesis perceived as an idea which privileges the practice of discriminating taste.

InBiographiaLiteraria, Chapter XIII,Coleridge discusses the primary and secondary imagination. The faculty of secondary imagination is a more nuanced proponent of primary imagination and is considered a special ability of the poet. He calls the best language as emanating from the mind of the man and self-reflection opposed to Wordsworth's ideas on the same. He equates the notion of poetry to the notion of the poet and ascribes the distinction to 'poetic genius'. In differentiating poetry from prose, he finds their pattern of permutation as being different along with their modes of expression, construction and order of sentence. He argues that metre cannot be superadded but it is essential to the poetry. Metre is also considered as an organizing and connecting principle by Coleridge.

Both Wordsworth and Coleridge sharpened the issue of the role of the poet and the constitution of poetry. Shelley's "Defence of Poetry" is written in response to Peacock's "Four Ages of Poetry" to counter allegations on bad writing in general and bad poetry in specific. A world dominated by Benthamite Utilitarian Ethics considered poetry as writing that falsifies reality. Shelley provides a definition of poetry in non-quantifiable variables, as a chronicle of the development of emotion. It moves away from the Eighteenth century obsession with certitudes. Shelley also defines poetry in terms of the extent to which it can shape civil society and its achievements within the public sphere. Poetry also functions as an enabler of a particular kind of idealism. He makes significant investment in moral idealism by considering the business of poetry as bringing the world of everyday reality with the world of ideal. He perceives poetry not merely as a decorative art but as a critical instrument. He points to the radical potential of poetry as an agent to bring around political and cultural change. For this idealism to work the human condition is also required to change and for this purpose, poet is considered as the architect of civil society and also the 'conscience-keeper'. The title of 'legislator' is reminiscent of Johnson's idea of the poet but the evaluation of the primary aim of poetry is different in the two.

Arnold's interest goes beyond the vocation of the poet. It is a disciplinary interest in the study of poetry. Arnold writes in the high noon of Victorian Age when the political and the capitalistic success of empire are on an all-time high, an age not particularly sympathetic to poetry. There is a deliberate over statement of the case of poetry. Arnold is also a poet with interest in criticism.He takes into account both the creative activity and the critical faculty. His work is an important milestone on the road of study of literature as discipline. In "Study of Poetry", he claims that: "… since poetry, to be capable of fulfilling such high destinies, must be poetry of a high order of excellence" (464). Poetry is perceived as having a greater function in society. In ascribing "currency" and "supremacy" to the art of poetry, Arnold attempts at crediting it with a charged potential for not just the zeal for "self-preservation" but also as a relevant field of study.

T. S. Eliot in "Tradition and Individual Talent" emphasizes on the learning of the poet. The knowledge of the 'historical sense' comprises both a sense of the pastness of the past and its presence simultaneously. It combines two perceptions of time – both the complete past and the incomplete present. The co-presence of the temporal and the timeless makes a writer both contemporary and conscious of the tradition. He denounces the idea of regarding emotion as the primary substance of poetry, and finds Wordsworth's formula inadequate. He claims that "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion." (II, 112)

The Politics of 'Form'

Terry Eagleton in *How to Read a Poem* redefines the approach to study poetry. At the core of the book is his treatment of the idea of form in poetry.

Terry Eagleton in *Marxism and Literary Criticism* discusses form in general. He states that: "Forms are historically determined by the kind of 'content' they have to embody; they are changed, transformed, broken down and revolutionized as the content itself changes."(22) Through an intricate sequence of arguments, he states that form and content seem to be inextricably linked but only 'in practice.' (22) He emphasizes that they are "theoretically distinct." (22) And for precisely this reason, "we can talk of the varying relations between the two." (23). He continues with this line of argument in *How to read a Poem* too.

The core issue in the chapter on "Form and Content" in this work is his examination of the 'dialectical relation' between form and content. To further his argument, he quotes Ralph Fox from his *The Novel and the People*: "Form is produced by content, is identical and one with it, and though the primacy is on the side of content, form reacts on content and never remains passive."[1] Eagleton explains it as a counter–argument to the formalist school. The formalist school is also criticized by him in *Literary Theory,* where he states: "Far from seeing form as the expression of content, they stood the relationship on its head: content was merely the 'motivation' of form, an occasion or convenience for a particular kind of formal exercise" (3).

In*How to Read a Poem*, also he criticizes formalism as a "negative aesthetics" (50) because it seeks to define poetry "by its difference or deviation from something else." (50) His attention to the form of poetry may superficially seem as a restoration of formalism but it is far from the case here. Rather he makes an appeal only for 'close reading', he finds that the formalists perceived these poetic devices as being the means of 'estrangement', which generalized and unified their diverse functions.

He cites Fox's claim as an attack on the "vulgar Marxist" notion which considers form as "merely an artifice." (23) For him, form is regarded as an ideological category.

Leon Trotsky in *Literature and Revolution* states: "The relationship betweenform and content is determined by the fact that the new form is discovered, proclaimed and evolved under the pressure of an inner need, of a collective psychological demand which, like everything else . . . has its social roots."[2]

It is interesting to note that in granting importance to form, Trotsky takes into account the social apparatus as having an influence on the form and he takes into cognizance the effects of ideology. Eagleton summarizes the notion of form as a composite of ideology and constitutive of the relationship between the artist and the audience along with "the 'relatively autonomous' literary history of forms" (26).

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[1] Quoted by Eagleton in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, p. 23.
[2] Quoted by Eagleton in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, p. 24

In *How to Read a Poem*, Eagleton takes up the case of form in poetry specifically. He explains: "Roughly speaking, what we call content refers to what a poem says, while form refers to how it says it." (65).

Form in poetry has been variously described. For instance, a dictionary of poetics states: "Form in poetry, simply defined, is the manner in which a poem is composed as distinct from what the poem is about."[3] While W.H. Auden finds that: "The formal structure of a poem is not something distinct from its meaning but as intimately bound up with the latter as the body is with the soul."[4]

In the case of poetry, the usual reading has often consisted of considering form and content as a harmonious union or only giving precedence to content over form. Eagleton puts forward the argument that form and content may not necessarily work in unison with each other. If they tend to work in different directions, then it may be a part of the 'performative' aspect of the poem as a whole. They may work against each other to sharpen the problematics of the complete poem. The form may also be misaligned from the content, in order to comment on it. In suggesting these methods of assessing a poem, Eagleton reinforces his earlier idea of examining the 'dialectic relation' between form and content. The form is not only one of the ways of structuring a narrative but rather it brings its own set of framework to contribute in the meaning of the poem. The aim is to perceive form as not only a kind of 'container' of meaning but also as 'generator' of meaning. All the components of form, therefore, require a closer analysis. He proceeds to enlist these aspects of form: tone, mood, pitch, intensity, pace, texture, syntax, grammar, punctuation, ambiguity, rhyme, rhythm, metre, and imagery. It appears that the difficulty in analyzing the form stems also from a fluidity within these aspects and the difficulty of strictly categorizing each of these aspects. For instance, tone and mood are difficult to identify separately, they may be mistaken for each other because as Eagleton claims that many aspects of form are "bound to the sense" one makes of a poem. Ambiguity and ambivalence can be misunderstood as a single concept where two or more senses of the word come into play. A similar problem is posed by rhyme and rhythm which can also be erroneously conflated into a single concept. Imagery is wrongly assumed as pertaining to a 'visual' quality. To present a clearer picture, Eagleton considers each aspect and presents an illustration of the same.

Form of the Manual

> "In selecting a form, then, the writer finds his choice already ideologically circumscribed." (Eagleton *Marxism*, 26)

He addresses his book to 'students and general readers' (vii), and labelsit as a manual for reading poetry. The form of the manual is employed to almost dictate the way of identifying and deciphering the form of poetry. A latent program of specific instructions cannot be ruled out. The form's relationship with the artist and the audience is sought to be channelled in a certain manner. This book begins by claiming that the art of reading poetry is on the verge of extinction and then it dissolves into propagating a manner of reading poetry which involves a consideration of the form. Derek Furr also finds it as a: " 'how-to' book with an agenda" (203).

The larger commonplace issue is also of the discipline of literary criticism being intended almost as a guide to approach literature. This argument is countered by the claim that doing away with the theories to understand literature is also a theory in its own, however, flawed it may be.

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[3]   Quoted by Bengt Jangfeldt in "Form in Poetry", p. 187

[4]   Quoted by Bengt Jangfeldt in "Form in Poetry", p. 187

D. N. De Luna in a review of this book detects that: "Eagleton, in suggesting again the importance of effective political mobilization for the project of world socialism and its facilitation by means of the propagandistic workings of sensuous poetic detail, continues to act as a strategic thinker for the Left" (1189).Eagleton claims that poetry "by refraining from an immediate intervention in human affairs, it can allow truth and beauty to come about, in ways which may then make things happen" (*How to*, 90). Such a belief in the capability of poetry can be recalled as a longstanding one. However, Eagleton differs in that instead of putting the onus of social responsibility on only the poet, he involves the audience by pointing out that a poem is meant for public circulation. (32)

The neglect of form in studying poetry was also a neglect of the ideological aspect of poetry, the politics of choosing the form of poetry over others and also the choice of the form, for instance, between elegy and free verse. The exclusive attention bestowed on the content of poetry runs the danger of reducing poetry to a vapid and sentimentalized writing. He emphasizes that "poetry is not supposed to be just a bare record of experience…it is also expected to draw deeper or wider implications from what it observes" (98). The study of form is aimed to locate poetry within the political sphere by granting a "material reality" (164) to the form.

Eagleton redefines poetry as: "Poetry is language in which the signified or meaning is *the whole process of signification itself*"(21). The concern is with the language employed in poetry and the meaning it generates. Even though he keeps within his political parameters, he points out a different pattern for reading poetry. He also makes a case for the importance of literary criticism and promotes the treatment of poem as 'discourse' and not only as language. This is in compliance with the argument he constructed in *Literary Theory* where he stated:

> My own view is that it is most useful to see 'literature' as a name which people give from time to time for different reasons to certain kinds of writing within a whole field of what Michel Foucault has called 'discursive practices', and if anything is to be the object of study it is this whole field of practices rather than just those sometimes rather obscurely labelled 'literature'.(178).

Eagleton offers a definition of poetry to advance his argument on the required manner of approaching poetry. These definitions are used to reveal those facets of a poem which remain unobserved. Poetry has traditionally been considered as transcendental and universal. Such essentializing and generalizing tends to attribute an 'aura' to it. By declaring that poetry is "released to the public world" (32), he treats it as liberated from the confinement to its specific original context. The nature of the existence of the work of art is called into question. By intervening in the relationship of poetry and its readers, he seeks to bring about a new dimension to the perception of poetry.Walter Benjamin argues for the withering away of 'aura' in the mechanical age. He investigates both the production and the consumption of the art work. The usual claim of art's comparative inferiority to knowledge is challenged. Eagleton reads his essay as: "modern technology can be oppressive, it can also be emancipatory" (*How to*, 20). In this text, he aims to unravel the importance of form of poetry and its various aspects to engage with what he terms the "history of political cultures" (164) which, according to him, have a profound impact on the shaping of the form and its selection by a writer.

As it has been observed, that the notion of poetry is not static or consistent though there are familiar themes regarding the nature, function and effects of poetry running through the times, their importance has fluctuated constantly. Eagleton's notion about poetry is the one which gives considerable attention to the form. It is to further his larger idea regarding form in

general. His adoption of the form of the manual to propound his ideas is not detached from the parameters of his politics.

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