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Veracity in Poetry and Literary Criticism: Some Inter-disciplinary Musings

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Abstract

Truth is an inter-disciplinarily contested topic. And the first two disciplines to contest on it were poetry and philosophy. Rather, philosophical and critical commentaries began debating on truth while poetry assumed that its representation of the world whether religious, spiritual or secular was true. And yet poetry – short-hand term for literature – has been accused of pedalling lies on the grounds of non-correspondence with the real world or lacking any hard empirical evidence. Then there is of course the rhetoricity of truth in literature where the objections are – for example, with, say, a line like Wordsworth's 'It is a beauteous evening, calm and free' the only real communication would be that it is evening and not any other time of the day, the other attached adjectives forming mere extra baggage – that many literary expressions further only some sort of vague and subjective surplusage pandering as aestheticism. This working paper would attempt to look at the supposed impingement by poetry on other disciplines of knowledge, and how vis-à-vis disciplines of knowledge like science, poetry (rather, criticism, defending poetry) always had to offer explanations of its teleology.

Keywords: Truth, Correspondence, The real, Teleology

Although Brooks and Warren open their well-known text *Understanding Poetry* with the declaration that Poetry existed since the very beginning of the human race, it is interesting to note that the ancient Greeks neither had a word for poetry, nor for literature till the fifth century BC (Day 10). Poetry itself emerged from the art of singing when a new word – *poiein* meaning 'to create' – started being used, and singers started being mentioned as 'makers' and their 'made things' got referred to as 'poems' (ibid.). Thus, one can see poetry coming to have its own identity by crossing over from another discipline, albeit a near one. In fact, songs in ancient Greece were an integral part of both public (games, religious ceremonies and festivals, victory in a war etc.), and private occasions (like symposia, or drinking parties); and Gary Day concurs with Gregory Nagy's suggestion that the major metres of Greek poetry were all derived from the rhythms of different songs like *threnos* (lament in a funeral), *dithyrambs* (worship songs), and *iambos* (ritualized 'blame poetry') for example (idem. 15). It is relevant to note here that observations and discussions on the propriety of songs vis-à-vis the actual event were also the earliest occasions through which 'criticism' emerged, and hence a very thin line separates literature from criticism. We might usefully recollect the significance of songs in Athenian symposia in the fifth and the fourth centuries BCE that were mainly part of two major societal occasions, the first being a feast of merit to foster solidarity among the

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warriors where conversations were exchanged rather than songs sung (as singing was considered more of a feminine trait) and Hesiod is on record citing that in these symposia the warriors weighed their words carefully while describing their feats based upon which a small but powerful clique identified the brave; and the second were pleasant occasions of a gathering of men where apart from pleasantries, speeches, poems and songs were transacted the former being more temporal / occasional, while the latter two timeless (idem. 18). Thus, both art and criticism was not for their own sake but emerged out of and commensurately commented upon social, political, economic or cultural realities.

Concurrent to this phenomenon, one assumption that started making ground with poets being seen as 'creators' or 'makers' was that of 'truth' in the things made. And although philosophy threw a serious challenge about depiction of truth in poetry and the timespan of such attempts from Plato to Stephen Gosson is pretty long, and on each occasion there were defences through critical essays of various lengths from Philip Sidney's "Apology" in 1595 to Paul Fry's *A Defense of Poetry* in 1995, yet it is actually the rise of the discipline of the natural sciences that unseated poetry on ontological and teleological grounds. In the decades immediately after the industrial revolution and the rise of the urban spaces, whereas, on the one hand poetry began critiquing the large-scale exploitation of humans and natural resources – Blake is a good early example – on the other hand, those like Thomas Love Peacock advocated that in an age of industrial development and economic progress, poetry could be finally discarded since it "cannot claim the slightest share in any one of the comforts and utilities of life" (Day 225) that, again, nevertheless, provoked a spirited response from Shelley. But by this time, it was very well established that poetry had nothing to do with 'truth', nor, in the utilitarian sense, was it of any use. Plato's objections to poetry were largely ethical whereas those like that of Peacock were – coming in the post-Enlightenment and industrial era – regarding serviceability. Other kinds of 'truth', long-held till then, was turning into disbelief, with the emergence of new disciplines of knowledge, like that of the age of the earth as claimed by Christian theologians from their study of *The Bible* and refuted by geologists like Charles Lyell through his three volume work *Principles of Geology* published between 1830 and 1833. Further proof of the earth's loss of geocentric status in theological discourses were not only more works in astronomy in the 19th century which was truly turning into a multi-disciplinary domain of knowledge by applying developments in maths, physics, chemistry and geology to understand the universe (https://www.rmg.co.uk) but also treatises by naturalists like Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Alfred Russel Wallace and, finally Charles Darwin. In fact, the triumph of science became evidently clear in the 'Great Debate' (as it was later termed) at Oxford on 30th June 1860 between

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the biologist and a close associate of Darwin, Thomas Huxley, and the Bishop of Oxford Samuel Wilberforce over Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection attended by a noisy crowd of over five hundred people many of whom came to realize that increasingly it was science that was becoming the custodian of truth (https://www.oumnh.ox.co.uk). Matthew Arnold, a contemporary of Darwin and Huxley, would put off publishing his now famous poem 'Dover Beach' for nearly 20 years; in fact, he would stop writing poetry for nearly two decades overcome by doubts regarding the relevance of poetry in his time of cultural tumult. He believed that instead of the creative, his times demanded critical discourses from all disciplines of knowledge like theology, philosophy, history, art and science for the essential purpose of as he put it "to see the object as in itself it really is" (8). Only by 1880 would he gain enough confidence to come out strongly for poetry through his essay "The Study of Poetry" but that too by opening this essay against the backdrop of the turmoil generated through the cross currents of perspectives from the emerging new disciplines of knowledge threatening the very foundations of a Christian society when he mentions that "There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve" (Ramaswamy & Sethuraman 63). When facts were being challenged all around by the newly formed disciplines of knowledge, ideas, for Matthew Arnold served the key (and Arnold takes 'idea' in its etymological sense; i.e., the Gk. *idein* = 'to see'), and therefore – since "for poetry the idea is everything" (idem.), hence for him "More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us" (idem.). Matthew Arnold was also aware of the distinction made by another of his contemporary Thomas de Quincey between "Literature of Knowledge" exemplified by the essays of Newton, and "Literature of Power" exemplified by Milton (Guillory 201), which can be perceived as the binary of the discourses of science and literature, something that Wordsworth in his "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads* mentioned observing that poetry and prose are not the opposites but poetry and science are; and, more recent to our times, one is reminded of the rancorous 'Two Cultures' debate in the 1960s between F.R. Leavis and C.P. Snow, that despite the vituperative personal tone by Leavis was a vehement protest against the assumption in the British society and media that science was the true guardian of culture and the silence by the 'educated public' against this, as well as the linkage between science and material prosperity as the only indicators of societal progress; something we are all too familiar in our times of the pervasiveness of the STEM disciplines. Interestingly, just two decades later from Arnold, Sigmund Freud, developing a science of the human consciousness, would assign to literature a proximity closer to facts when in his attempts to understand dreams and individual behaviour, and in proposing theories like that of Oedipus Complex, Freud would treat works of literature like that of Sophocles and

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Shakespeare that have held the attention of viewers and readers since centuries as evidence of repression of human instincts – or, the pleasure principle termed as Id – by the morality principle, or the Superego (Leitch et al 810). And, roughly around the same time (two decades later to be precise) that psychology – a discipline that is part social science and part natural science –attempted explications with the help of literature, those in literature were attempting explanations through the empiricism of science. T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and Virginia Woolf's "Modern Fiction" were both published in 1919. Eliot in his essay attempts to explain creativity or the poet's mind through a chemical reaction; and, Woolf in her's attempts to make intelligible impressions on "an ordinary mind on an ordinary day" by comparing it with "an incessant shower of innumerable atoms" (Lodge 88).

So, the function of literature, though fluctuating – whether to preach or to please; to shape the individual or the society; whether a conduit for individual or communal expression; whether a psychological therapy, or repository of national culture etc. – has more or less been accepted; it is in the domain of truth and quantifiable usefulness that literature (and indeed all arts) has been questioned. In the twentieth century, often termed as the bloodiest era in human history, it has made poets like Auden ruefully acknowledge that 'poetry makes nothing happen' (although he might have meant his phrase to be interpreted in exactly the opposite way in the sense that poetry makes *even nothing* happen); it has made critics like Adorno strongly opine what is often translated as his maxim that: 'no poetry after Auschwitz' with a counter from the poet Paul Celan with: 'only poetry after Auschwitz'. And it also reminds us of Bertolt Brecht who mused on the question 'would there be songs in the dark times?' with his own immediate response that: 'Yes there would be songs in the dark times, about the dark times.' It is quite evident that the 'times' (whether 'dark' or transparent, epiphanous or utterly confounding) is the domain of so many disciplines to which literature or art in general also necessarily responds to, and yet art can still remain seemingly autotelic telling the truth, but telling it slant. A poem like Shakespeare's Sonnet 138 'When My Love Swears That She Is Made of Truth' can simply suggest without stating axiomatically that close relationships entail a permissible quantum of lies, yet it is evident that it won't be taken as a manual of human behaviour of people in love although there can be hardly any argument that manuals despite their utility cannot provide enjoyment equivalent to poetry. Speaking of manuals and catalogues of course, one needs to remember that there is a generic name for these: literature, and these useful booklets are followed because the information and instructions in them are considered to be 'true'. Thomas de Quincey, incidentally, and in the same vein of discussion had asked if anyone would consider parliamentary reports, "the main wellheads of all accurate information as to the

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Great Britain of this day" as literature (Guillory 201). Poetry, in that sense is thus a necessary record reminding us of the myriad goings-on of life, in the manner that Wordsworth had put in 'The Solitary Reaper':

> Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
>
> For old, unhappy, far-off things,
>
> And battles long ago:
>
> Or is it some more humble lay,
>
> Familiar matters of to-day?
>
> Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
>
> That has been, and may be again?

Allen Grossman uses the same poem to further an argument in an essay titled "Figuring the Real" that discussion on poetry in the West has always been conducted under the category of defense or apologia because the mediation of the myriad complexity of vital life through poetry seemed – as laid down often in neat little stanzas – to be apparently simple and therefore perceived to be simplistic and hence false. Another thread of discussion in the context of the poem 'The Solitary Reaper' takes place in the direction of explicating the title of the essay through a consideration of the question the speaker of the poem asks at the beginning of stanza three – Will no one tell me what she sings? – with Grossman's implication being that the poetic is an endeavour of making sense of the incomprehensible, of giving shape to a chaos comprising of, as he quotes Derrida: "When one does something poetic, one makes for sacredness, and in that sense one produces the untranslatable" (127).

And like Yeats in 'A Coat' it has perhaps always possessed the nonchalance, and the confidence to tell the original from the counterfeit:

> I made my song a coat
>
> Covered with embroideries

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Out of old mythologies

From heel to throat;

But the fools caught it,

Wore it in the world's eyes

As though they'd wrought it.

Song, let them take it

For there's more enterprise

In walking naked. (141)

Thus, it is criticism which has the clear mandate to study and explicate art (that represents life) that is more bothered both with its objectives and the question of 'truth'. And at no other time did it become more urgent than in the twentieth century when the discipline of criticism itself became institutionalized in the universities. This event happened almost following the footsteps of establishment of English Literature as an independent discipline in England and America riding the wave of a print culture from what used to be in the nineteenth century with a still strong influence of the classical languages: philology, rhetoric, and, in the schools, aiding basic literacy. From a concept of belles-lettres to having a curriculum for itself, the visibility of Literature as an independent discipline coincided with the establishment of the departments of Modern Languages carved out from the departments of Classical and Medieval Languages, like the one in Cambridge in 1917 when I A Richards came over from the disciplines of psychology and philosophy to teach English. English became a distinct Faculty only by 1926 when Richards was joined by William Empson and F R Leavis, and courses in Practical Criticism, Tragedy and Shakespeare became the core papers. It becomes evident that the meaning the discipline of Literature takes when it becomes institutionalized includes 'genres' and 'authors' – things that are retained even today besides the addition of – strictly speaking – inter-disciplinary subjects like race and gender studies, Postcolonialism, film studies, Ecocriticism, Digital Humanities among others getting included mainly over the last forty years, including 'new genres' of 'non-fiction' – biography, autobiography, memoir, letters, travel writing, science fiction, folk literature, children's literature, young adult literature etc. – getting accommodated under the umbrella term Literature. It also needs to be mentioned at this juncture that the 'standardization of English' project

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gradually gets merged with a national and commercial 'English industry' agenda through which the IELTS and TOEFL enterprises flourish even in obscure small towns all over the developing world. As regards the flourishing of 'literature' John Guillory, citing Raymond Williams and David Damrosch mentions that the concepts of 'National Literature' and 'World Literature' emerged with that of a "world market of intellectual good" or "general intellectual commerce" (201).

Returning to the topic of 'truth' – and this is where this paper would like to pause – the earliest two competing disciplines on Truth – before, it seems, science hijacked the issue altogether – were poetry and philosophy. Theoretical discussion on 'truth' in philosophy is always appended with the aspect of 'falsity', as A.J. Ayer and Saul Kripke concur in essays written twenty years apart. Both these essays are reminiscent of the 'correspondence theory' of truth going back in Western philosophy all the way to Plato and Aristotle, and since then also worked out – in case of non-physical concepts – in logic, philosophical semantics and philosophical mathematics. The key point here is the 'non-physical' or non-factual or anti-realistic aspects of truth ascriptions ('deflationary' theories of truth), or the truth-value of a proposition ('pragmatic' theory of truth) or the 'truthfulness' of an utterance (Kirkham 900). The term 'realism', as the historian of English criticism Gary Day notes "entered the language in the 1850s" (236) against the 'condition of England' question (first raised by Carlyle) gaining ground in the previous decade and, against the truth of both urban and rural poverty in England. Consequently, the realist novel like Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) set against the Gordon Riots of 1780, and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855) themed on relationship between mill workers and owners in the industrial towns of England, as well as critical discussions (mostly reviews and commentaries in magazines like *The Spectator*) on such realist novels started becoming noticeable. It was in such periodicals and magazines that a parallel discussion started on the rising popularity of the sensation novels like that of Wilkie Collins (*The Woman in White*, 1860) and Mary Braddon (*Lady Audley's Secret*, 1862) and the critical discussion on sensationalism gained visibility. Juxtaposed along with realism and sensationalism were two other much-parleyed aspects: idealism and falsism. The Victorian critic David Masson, arguably the first to write an essay on the British novel for university scholars categorized Thackeray as a realist novelist and Dickens as an idealist (ibid. 237). His contemporary G.H. Lewes was of the opinion that realism was not opposed to idealism but the two complemented each other; it was falsism – that which romanticized reality – that was the real antithesis to realism (ibid. 238). Discussion on 'truth' was thus punctuated in the late nineteenth century with issues on reality, and reality was assessed from the perspectives of economics, politics, human evolution, terrestrial

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and astronomical sciences, and the emerging discipline of Urban Sociology gradually becoming prominent through the works of Marx, Durkheim, Weber and others.

Truth, a concept which has always existed within the criss-cross of disciplines, was confronted in the twentieth century by criticism, when it itself became a discipline with its own identity, when it was discussed by I.A. Richards explicitly in his essay "The Two Uses of Language" where he trifurcated 'truth' into: a) the scientific, which is a reworking of the 'correspondence theory' of yore and becomes evident through (what has now become famous) a 'referential use' of language where "A reference is true when the things to which it refers are actually together in the way in which it refers to them. Otherwise it is false" (Lodge 112); b) the acceptable, where for Richards the sense of acceptability of Truth "is equivalent to 'internal necessity' or rightness" citing as an example of Thomas Rhymer's objection against *Othello* based on the 'external' historical fact that there never was a Moorish General in the service of the Venetian Republic, and how that does not harm the plot of the play (ibid. 113-4). This would be later worked out by philosophers like Ayer and Kripke in their concepts of 'truth ascriptions' or 'truth-value in propositions'; and the third sense of Truth for Richards is when "Truth may be equivalent to Sincerity" (ibid. 114). This point is not much elaborated in the essay, but 'sincerity' can be approximated with the other use of language – apart from the referential – Richards mentions, that is, the emotive. 'Sincerity' is also what the reader feels and how convinced s/he is by the authorial endeavour. Virginia Woolf for example in her essay "Modern Fiction" feels Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and the portions of *Ulysses* being serialized then in the *Little Review* to be works of "utmost sincerity" (ibid. 89).

It shall be an interesting workshop with the participants pondering over what truth exists in the poetic line by Wallace Stevens when the speaker of the poem 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream' proclaims twice that 'The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.' If the world – as it is often said – goes around by power, if the world is run by powerful, emperor-like men, then does this line – among many alternatives – mean the ephemerality of power, of its melting away before one settles down to have its taste? Or, does it signal the oracular power of the poet who, before his time, before geriatric studies became a proper discipline within medicine (the first properly researched book in this subject came out in 1975 written by Alexander Leaf, according to the Oxford UP article "A Brief History of Geriatrics" which mentions European, African and Indian myths and legends about immortal life and immortal youth besides a mention from *Genesis* about the 'tree of life': https://academic.oup.com/biomedgerontology/article/59/11/1132/589702) foretold the fact that the last sense to abandon human beings is the sense of taste? And thus the truth about literature – and indeed

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all arts – is the *rasa* or the flavour of life which seems to be so solid when one is experiencing it till, inevitably, one realizes its fleetingness. Time is infinite, and human presence within it a mere speck of dust. Prophetic were the lines in Eliot's *The Waste Land* 'I will show you fear in a handful of dust.' Or was the line actually from Joseph Conrad's short story "Youth"? Or was it even before that in one of the 'Meditations' by John Donne? Or was it not in the *Book of Genesis*? Was it not in the *Old Testament*? Or is it not from a pre-Judeo-Christian source, the Roman work of fiction *Satyricon* generally believed to be by Gaius Petronius Arbiter? The *Taitreya Upanishad* terms this infinite regress and progress of Time as 'Brahman' which is infinity (or *ananta*) as well as the ineffable truth (*satya*), as well as knowledge (*jnana*), and consciousness (*chitta*), and bliss (*ananda*). Brahman also denoted the 'power immanent in the sound, words, verses and formulas in the *Vedas.* What I find worth mentioning in this ancient wisdom is that there is no polarization of disciplines: words of discourse find their place alongside verses and those in turn are accommodated along with scientific or mathematical formulas. So, finally, in this age of the Anthropocene, if human records survive, so would words, verses, and formulas contingent upon any discipline that attempts to construct knowledge as, about literature Michael Wood says: "it sets out to encounter real knowledge along imaginary roads" (190).

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