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Editor's Note

Are the days of negative – picky, paranoid, politically correct – criticism over? Is criticism finally taking an aesthetic turn? Will the renaissance of style reform a discourse that has been notoriously – or famously, depending on where your feelings are – angry, moralising and jargon-packed? In a recent issue, *The Point Magazine* says, with guarded optimism, yes.

But what does an aesthetic turn, or return, mean today? Of course, the free tribe never succumbed to the temptations of angry, opaque writing that mushroomed under cover of criticism for decades (I can any day revisit Rita Felski, Amit Chaudhuri, James Wood, Peter Brooks, Joseph Epstein, Lydia Davis, Martin Amis, indeed anyone of the tribe, for pleasure and insight). And there are others who frequently off-roaded to write luminous essays, which were not always about books. But whenever they did criticism, they were producing literature.

But the story is not simple nor linear. Neither politics nor ethics have become redundant: indeed the world is in greater need of repair than ever before. Bullying, bullshit and carbon are piling up. Injustice and inequity haven't gone away. Freedom is precarious. Fear comes on a microchip.

If the moralising, politically inspired, angry criticism doesn't any longer draw many readers (except some academics who have a misplaced ideal of academic parlance), one reason is it has stagnated. It has become repetitive, formulaic and uninspiring – in short, unoriginal and beautyless. Its practitioners, including many hostile to the corporate production models, wear their fingers to the bone strumming away on the publication bandwagon. But they don't please, they don't even entertain. A few are read, but very few. And not with pleasure. And not for insight.

Politics doesn't have to be cold to beauty. Even the best of political tracts and manifestos have been written with elegance and power. Literary and art criticism cannot *not* be literary and artistic and yet remain criticism. Anger can be tastefully expressed, whatever the class associations of taste for a sociologist. And if elegance is felt to be constraining, let anger have a searing charm. Who is stopping? Art and literature have never seen pain, grief, rage and squalor as unsuitable for, or unworthy of, aesthetic treatment. The suicidal error of most negative criticism is it does not offer any enchantments except the consolations of self-righteous resentment. And a lot of that is programmed noise, which drowns, when it does not kill, innovation.

For criticism to be read, it has to mirror what it reads – literature. Literary criticism has to be literary: not merely as *pertaining to literature* but as *possessed of literariness*. Frank Kermode, Harold Bloom, Terry Eagleton, T.S. Eliot, Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, V.S. Pritchett, Toni Morrison, Christopher Hitchens, Franco Fortini, Norman Mailer, Susan Sontag, Stefan Zweig, Virginia Woolf, Oscar Wilde: the name-checking line – an achronological tangle of styles that resists evolutionary emplot-

ment – would keep running on and on, sometimes in loops. You have there not one pole star but a constellation of them, if only you would set sail to navigate the seas for adventures not to be forgotten.

The end of negative criticism has been coming for quite some time. The second golden age of the essay, through which we are happily living, is a historical articulation of expressive possibilities not available in a geography of divided and excessively determined genres. Between literature and criticism also, the essay does not see, as Samuel Johnson's and Matthew Arnold's did not, any wall. The post-genre literature, such as Annie Ernaux's, Philippe Jaccottet's and Pascal Quignard's, recasts the writerly logic as a playful adventure. Aristotle's rhetorical trio of logic, pathos and ethos no longer sounds archaic. As do not *rasa* and *dhvani*. Literature exceeds, life refuses containment.

The sensitive critic tries living in the writer's skin, flowing in his bloodstream, and aims to be what he studies. He seeks to gather his gaze to the point where it will self-destruct to illuminate from inside the life of what it contemplates. What Keats called 'negative capability' is a subtle re-creative force necessary as much for the critic and reader as for the writer. The loud moralising speakers who preach care for the other need to wake up to their self-contradiction: they blow up their darling project when they work up an implacable hostility to literary works and crave to tear them apart in a ritual of emancipation. But literary works are not just the ideological worlds they inhabit; they are not even ideologically one-dimensional.

The refusal of a work's complex life, with its peculiar aesthetic physiology – of which politics and ethics are natural parts – probably conceals a displaced ideological hostility. Perhaps this hostility masks a

sublime dread – a dread of the work’s overwhelming power. But literature does, it has to, overwhelm; after all, it works on the edge of language and consciousness. Which makes it inexhaustible – strangely able to never refuse another reading. It opens whirling abysses of light and music. But it takes courage and perseverance and a sort of secular reverence to descend into those abysses, to ascend those peaks. The easier way is to tag them and put them away, and bury oneself in chatter.

And so the smug critical gaze that judges and condemns the notoriously ‘objectifying’ gaze doesn’t put itself in the frame, but stands apart, claiming some godly aloofness. It keeps things simple, manageable. But Aristotle too, who fancied God as the supreme contemplator (and so the poet’s model), could not refrain from advising the aspiring poets to feel into the characters imagined and understand from inside how they lived and felt, suffered and celebrated. Yet the inclination among those who, knowingly or not, take their inspiration from Aristotle is to overlook this paradox – which he probably unpacked in his lectures – in which contemplation and participation, study and empathy meet.

A long Indian tradition, flowing through logic as well as poetics, emphasises the necessity of dialectical progression in which you move from the study of the object to that of the method to that of oneself, until the triangle of the three becomes a wheel. As for the objectifying gaze, Virginia Woolf knew better than most feminists that it sees only its owner (the subject of the gaze), turning the other into a mere mirror, so that the other is reduced to an instrument and extension. For Rajashekhara, the author of *Kāvya Mīmāṃsā* who lived more than ten centuries ago, a prerequisite for the writer is that he make his consciousness a mirror for the object of his attention, that he remove

himself to make space for it – for that way alone can the object live its life unhampered and uninvaded.

The aesthetic return cannot be just a return. The idea of beauty has evolved and become more complicated than it was a century or half ago. The aesthetic implies the political as well as the ethical. You cannot create beauty without freedom and love.

Criticism has to have, in our day, literature’s inclusiveness and expansiveness. It has to have its deviousness, candour and clarity, its starkness and flamboyancy, its wandering ascetic freedom, its faith in freedom and in scepticism, in the inexhaustible abundance that is life, in its reality and truth, in seeing and understanding, in imagining, in dreaming.

Criticism has to dream literature’s dream.

It has to be, if it is to be itself, literature.

Rajesh Sharma
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