

# POLITICS OF LITERARY CRITICISM TODAY

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## PART I

**D**uring the nineteen-thirties Lyn Ludowyk returned to Ceylon from Cambridge, bearing with him not only his Ph.D but also what were then the new critical gospels of Eliot, Richards and Leavis. Their first impact on the academic and literary worlds here was something in the nature of a cultural shock. Even a decade later, in the mid-forties, when students first had to face a qualifying exam before entering the university, the new literary valuations and critical techniques were still unfamiliar and difficult for many of them and for their teachers. I could relate a number of interesting anecdotes in this regard. For instance, when Eliot's 'Gerontion' was set as a text for the University Entrance exam, as it then was, a Ladies' College girl, bewildered by the poem, and getting no help from her equally baffled teacher, wrote to Eliot asking for an explanation. The poet replied expressing surprise that the poem had been prescribed, and all the explanation he offered was that it was about an old man looking back on his past. He added that if the examiners weren't satisfied with that, she could say it was all *he* could say about the poem, so there was no reason why she should say any more. At a time when the new literary ideas and critical methods were understood only by few people in this country, possession of them was a source of intellectual power, which, as always, carried with it other forms of power — greater access to teaching posts, higher performance in the Civil Service exam, prestige in the local cultural world, and so on. As time passed, however, graduates turned out by the English department went out into the schools, and succeeding generations of students grew up imbibing their critical language. With a certain time-lag it was transmitted even into the national languages, through certain bilinguals who acted as cultural middlemen in this transaction. English 'practical criticism' became Sinhala 'bhavita vicharaya'. By then what was originally strange and incomprehensible had become part of academic orthodoxy. What happened here paralleled similar developments that had already taken place in Britain. Eliot's poetry, at first repugnant to the literary establishment, was academically respectable by the end of the Second World War, Richards's practical criticism became a standard examination exercise, and Leavis, once marginalised in Cambridge, lived to see his pupils take over the seats of power in the literary academy.

I begin with this retrospect because another critical revolution is taking place in the Sri Lankan academic world today. As before, the revolution initially takes the form of the transmission of new ideas by academics returning home from Britain or the United States, so that there is necessarily a time-lag between the origination of these ideas in the West and their dissemination here. With a further time-lag they begin to influence Sinhala and Tamil writing through the medium of a group of bilingual intellectuals. It's still early times in Sri Lanka for the new revolution, so we haven't yet reached the stage

when it affects teaching of literature in the schools, but that will surely come. Meanwhile, however, the command over the new critical discourse constitutes, for that minority who so far have had access to it, a source of intellectual power, which now or in the future will be convertible into other forms of power too.

The revolution I am talking about comprises those critical theories and practices that are now often called 'post-modernist'. I am not very interested in the question of the accuracy or appropriateness of this term since I am using it only as a convenient label. Until a few years ago the term in vogue to describe the same tendencies was 'post-structuralist', but I see from books and journals coming out of the West that that term has largely fallen into disuse. In any case, 'post-structuralist' was never a very happy term. If it signifies those trends which come after, go beyond or run counter to structuralism, then we have to reckon with the fact that only a minority of literary critics, especially in Britain and the States, were ever structuralist. On the other hand, the progenitors of the earlier critical revolution — Eliot, Richards, Leavis — can be quite acceptably called 'modernist', and their ideas were closely linked with the creative movements of modernism.

However, there are post-modernisms *and* post-modernisms, and I shan't be concerned in this paper with all the critical trends that might be brought under this umbrella term. I am really going to discuss only those strands in post-modernist criticism that are oriented in a politically radical direction, because it is these currents of thought that have exerted influence on younger Sri Lankan academics. So when I speak of post-modernism here, I really mean politically radical post-modernism.

## PART II

**P**ost-modernist criticism in Sri Lanka, as much as the modernist criticism that preceded it, is a discourse derivative from and dependent on the West, and in Sinhala or Tamil it exists at a further level of dependence. To say this, however, is not to pronounce a judgment that is finally damning because that phenomenon is inherent in the intellectual relations between the metropolis and the periphery and the inequality of resources between them. And within the periphery itself there are further inequalities — also at present ineluctable — between elites educated in an international language or languages and others. However, it's desirable that radical post-modernists should recognise that they are themselves part of the power structures they criticise. They are no doubt a dissenting group within those structures, but they are nevertheless part of them: firstly, by virtue of their high proficiency in the English language, which carries with it in our society a position of intellectual privilege; secondly, through their acquaintance with and ability to deploy with competence and skill a new body of ideas and a novel critical language that are still

unfamiliar to the majority even of the Sri Lankan English-speaking intelligentsia; thirdly, through the positions they occupy in the university establishment, several of them being in fact members of English departments. All these are indubitable sources of power.

Yet there's a paradox here, because power is actually what post-modernist criticism, or those trends within it on which I am focussing, claims to be subverting. Relations of power — whether class, ethnicity or gender — as articulated in literature are the main concern of post-modernist criticism. But articulated, not necessarily overtly, because much of the endeavour of post-modernist criticism consists of teasing out of literary texts those unspoken, or even unconscious, pre-conceptions and assumptions that reinforce class, race or gender hierarchies.

Post-modernist critics are thus very fond of diagnosing contradictions in the writing of poets, novelists, playwrights, which they see as a manifestation of the writer's failure to recognise or resolve the oppositions springing from his or her position in the class, ethnic or gender hierarchy. If you look, for instance, at the collection of essays on Sri Lankan poets writing in English that has recently been edited by Neloufer de Mel, you will find in the contributions of the younger critics several comments on the contradictions arising out of the class or gender identity of this or that poet. There are two observations I want to make about this. Firstly, I am not so sure that unresolved contradictions are such a bad thing for the creative writer. Consider one of the most politically committed of writers — Bertolt Brecht. Would he have been so powerful a writer but for his awareness of the contradictions within and outside himself — contradictions out of which he created figures such as Azdak, Shen Te, Mother Courage, Galileo and Mr. K? Without this he would have been a flat party propagandist, like so many Stalinist hacks. Secondly, creative writers are vulnerable because they find themselves caught in one of two situations. Either, in the quest of honesty and sincerity, they display their inner contradictions for all to see and for the critic to diagnose. Or, they suppress or conceal those contradictions in the service of a unified and harmonious ideological position, and that false consciousness betrays itself in failures of artistic realisation, evasions, artificialities of rhetoric, emotional hollowness. But what about the critic? I see no reason why the critic should be exempt from a scrutiny of the effects of class, ethnic or gender identity on his or her work. The post-modernist critic who detects unresolved contradictions in the work of the creative writer may himself or herself suffer from similar disharmonies. In fact, in the case of a Sri Lankan post-modernist critic writing in English, occupying a privileged social position but taking a radical political view, it's very likely that such contradictions will exist. Perhaps between political commitment and life-style, or between intellectually held ideology and emotional self, or between public personality and personal relations. But in the case of the critic, these contradictions may more easily be papered over in the more impersonal discourse in which he or she engages. Logical contradictions, when they exist, may be detected in it, but existential ones may never surface. I know nothing about the private lives of the radical critics contributing to Neloufer de Mel's symposium, but it would be interesting to ask how they live out their dismissal of the personal as unimportant. Arjuna Parakrama, for instance, uses the phrase 'the petty and the

personal' as if to imply that they are equivalent. But since the critic doesn't have to lay bare his or her personal existence, the appearance that is maintained is of the unified, integral, consistent discourse of the critic as contrasted with the divided, flawed and conflict-ridden creations of the artist.

There has been in the last few decades in the West an enormous growth in the volume of radical cultural and literary criticism. To some extent, this is welcome as a movement away from the heavily economic thrust of classical Marxism and as a recognition of the importance of activities and social functions that were once dismissed as merely 'superstructural'. But we can't ignore the fact that the proliferation of cultural criticism in the contemporary West is also, as Perry Anderson pointed out several years ago, a manifestation of the impotence and marginalisation of the left in the day-to-day business of the contestation for political power. Where the radical intelligentsia have ceased to be an effective force in the politics of power, they withdraw into the realm, more accessible to them, of cultural and literary criticism. But what I am interested in here is the impact of this situation on intellectuals from countries such as Sri Lanka — that is, countries outside the over-developed world — who return to their homelands after a temporary sojourn in the western academy. For them too, as a result of the education and intellectual shaping they have acquired there, cultural criticism may come to have a greater attraction than the more traditional forms of social and political action. I am all the more confirmed in this view by the fact that I know some Sri Lankan intellectuals who, brought up in impeccably upper middle-class families, and innocent of any involvement in politics while they were here originally, went abroad to study, were then exposed to the cultural radicalism of a literature department in Britain or the United States, and returned talking a new politico-cultural language. Of course, it's possible that, like Saul on the road to Damascus, they genuinely saw the light, but it's also possible that the process of conversion was different. When I was a student reading English at the University of Ceylon, it would have required extraordinary independence and courage to maintain that Milton was a better poet than Donne, or Shelley a better poet than Keats, since the orthodoxy of the department followed the Leavisian valuations. But today, perhaps, in some literature departments in Western universities one acquires certain radical positions in much the same way as a matter of acclimatisation to the environment. A radicalism adopted in this way as an intellectual stance may not necessarily be founded on any deep-going commitment, or lead to anything more politically substantial than the writing of academic literary papers in radical phraseology.

I used to know a Sri Lankan economist who was a Marxist, and though I could not judge because of my ignorance of economics, all my knowledgeable friends said he was marvellous. But though he could apparently analyse all the contradictions of capitalism, he had not the slightest interest in any form of political action. I wonder whether a cultural radicalism engaged in as an intellectual exercise isn't likely to promote the same kind of split between words and actions. For that matter, it's possible to discern in the symposium I have mentioned that intellectual post-modernism can co-exist with quite reactionary ideas on Sri Lankan political issues. In one of the essays in that book, Lilamani de Silva, a Peradeniya academic,

discusses the poetry of Yasmine Gooneratne, but in the context of an onslaught on the English-educated elite. That elite is, of course, a safe political target, but when the critic refers to the ethnic riots of 1958, she is careful to speak of them as 'allegedly' unleashed by the forces of Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism'. (My emphasis). Although she is writing after not merely 1958 but 1977, 1981, 1983 and a subsequent decade of war, she takes no notice at all of the hegemony of politicised Sinhala Buddhism. The only hegemony she is concerned to attack is that of the English-educated elite, who, in the struggle to retain their privileged position, saw the majority, according to her, as the 'abhorred Sinhala Chauvinist "Other"'. What, I would ask, is the difference, except in the post-modernist language, between this analysis and that of, say, Nalin de Silva and Gunadasa Amarasekera, for whom also the English-educated elite are the root of all evil? Again, when Ms. de Silva writes about the post-independence language conflicts, she speaks of the nationalists' 'insistence on the primacy of the Swabasha(s), attempts to depose English from its position of dominance'. I lived through the period and I believe Ms. de Silva didn't, and I can tell her that her reference to 'Swabasha', with an intrusive *s* added in parenthesis, is completely unhistorical. 'Swabasha' was the term used in the late 'forties and early 'fifties as long as the issue was the replacement of English, in administration and education, by Sinhala and Tamil. But by 1955 the term had been submerged by the Sinhala nationalists' demand for 'Sinhala only' and the Tamil resistance to it. With a single word Ms. de Silva has wiped out decades of debate, agitation and violent conflict. In setting out her method, she states:

It is, then, in search of the texts 'unconscious' or of their 'Others', at times as inquiry into ideological and historical influences and 'conjunctures' determining the 'not-saids' of texts that some of the writings of Yasmine Gooneratne are here confronted.

I am sorry if any reader has lost their way in the thicket of post-modernist language there. But if one applies her method to her own writing, then the 'not-said' of her essay is the drive of majority Sinhala nationalism for political and cultural dominance and the Tamil resistance it provoked, with the ensuing tragedies that are familiar to all of us. As for the 'ideological and historical influences' determining that 'not-said', I can think of nothing but the pressure of Sinhala nationalist ideology even on a sophisticated, post-modernist, English department literary academic.

I have already suggested that post-modernist critics who are so acutely concerned with critiquing power relations are themselves engaged in an exercise of power. At one time critics saw themselves as humble servants of the creative work. They may have fiercely assailed certain writers or certain of their works, but somewhere, sometime, nearly every critic would discover some masterpieces before which to bend the knee. I am not saying that this attitude was healthy, only that it existed. But no longer with post-modernism. Now that every literary text has been discovered to have its silences and absences, those lacunae which it is incapable even of recognising, idolisation of any creative writer or work is excluded. I have no objection to that. But the fallen idol and deposed authority of the creative writer have been displaced by those of the critic, who is the

master figure, not creating but deconstructing. Power and authority have not been demolished in the literary academy; it's only that their centre has been displaced.

It's interesting to see how this shift in power between creativity and criticism relates to the affirmation by post-modernists that a literary text can have no single fixed and defined meaning. Meaning, it's stated, isn't passively transmitted from author to reader but actively constructed by the reader in the act of reading. Hence authorial meaning isn't final and definitive: it's possible for the same text to be read in different ways by different readers in varying social and historical contexts. The dethronement of the author as the final arbiter over the text is very evident here. But what replaces him or her? It would at first sight appear that every reader is empowered to interpret the text in their own way. But can a post-modernist criticism that is dedicated to a political project really promote a pluralism of interpretation? Here again the power of critical authority preferring some readings to others intervenes, so that ultimately the authorised meaning that the writer may have intended is displaced by the meaning authorised by the critic.

I once heard Neloufer de Mel and Arjuna Parakrama give a joint paper, part of which was devoted to a reading of *The Tempest* foregrounding the colonial relationship between Prospero and Caliban. It was a brilliant paper, and I said so at the time from the chair I happened to occupy on the occasion. But what, I wonder, would Neloufer and Arjuna have said to a very different reading of the play — for instance, that of Auden re-presenting it in *The Sea and the Mirror*? In Auden's version the colonial relationship disappears from sight, and the silence of Antonio in the last scene of reconciliation is used to present him as the self-centred, intractable element in the human world. On what basis could Neloufer and Arjuna have maintained that their reading was to be preferred? Surely not on the ground that it was 'truer to Shakespeare' since that is excluded by the post-modernist premise, but probably on the basis that it was more interesting or more useful to us as post-colonials. Here, therefore, an ideological purpose would become the arbiter between two rival readings.

All critical discourse, to my mind, takes place within an explicitly or tacitly agreed framework of pre-conceptions and assumptions. But the more committed the critic to a particular world-view, the more binding that framework is likely to be. There is a famous remark of Leavis that critical dialogue takes the form of a question, 'This is so, isn't it?' to which the expected answer is 'Yes, but...'. Such a dialogue could take place only between interlocutors who shared a certain mutual ground, as is evident from the fact that the response, 'No, not at all', is excluded. Post-modernist critical dialogue takes essentially the same form, and when post-modernists speak of legitimating a plurality of readings, it must be recognised that that plurality is limited within a certain range set by the critic's ideological commitments. I am not suggesting that there's any reading that's completely neutral ideologically. What I am saying is that the post-modernist critic's championship of pluralism in reading is disingenuous because the strict ideological constraints on such a critic delimit the possibilities of acceptable interpretation.

### PART III

My most serious discontent with the exercise of critical power by post-modernists, however, concerns the arcane language through which it is wielded. Somebody once quoted a Welsh miner as having thrown this question at a Marxist theoretician: 'If Lenin could explain dialectics from a glass of water, why the fuck can't you?' I have sometimes been tempted to say something equally earthy to post-modernist critics. No doubt I will be told that every intellectual discipline has its technical language, that the difficulty and obscurity of post-modernist criticism are due merely to unfamiliarity which can be remedied by a little assiduous reading, and that modernist criticism was at one time as forbidding to those who hadn't been initiated into it. I shall also be told, probably, that new ideas require a new language in which alone they can be articulated.

None of these possible answers satisfies me. Should literary criticism be like molecular biology or nuclear physics with its own specialised vocabulary? Should it, in other words, be a discipline intelligible and accessible only to trained experts? The material on which criticism works — fiction, poems, plays — are of broad human interest. And the special skills of the professional critic are only an extension of the faculties of judgment that every person possesses. So should not criticism be written in such a way that any intelligent and generally educated person can understand it? And should not it be open to such a person to practise criticism, if he or she is seriously interested in literature, without the licence conferred by a training in a university literature department?

I have said that literary criticism should not be like specialist writing on the hard sciences, but actually there are some admirable books by distinguished scientists which challenge the distinction between specialist and popular communication. Let me cite the example of Stephen Jay Gould, Professor of Zoology at Harvard and one of the most eminent of American palaeontologists. This is what he writes in the preface to his book *Wonderful Life* (and the book is on what might be supposed to be a highly technical subject — the relation of the Burgess Shale Fossils to the theory of evolution — but the title of the book is from a Frank Capra movie):

I have fiercely maintained one rule in all my so-called 'popular' writing. (The word is admirable in its literal sense, but has been debased to mean simplified or adulterated for easy listening without effort in return.) I believe — as Galileo did when he wrote his two greatest works in dialogues in Italian rather than didactic treatises in Latin, as Thomas Henry Huxley did when he composed his masterful prose free from jargon, as Darwin did when he published all his books for general audiences — that we can still have a genre of scientific books suitable for and accessible alike to professionals and interested laypeople. The concepts of science, in all their richness and ambiguity, can be presented without any compromise, without any simplification counting as distortion, in language accessible to all intelligent people. Words, of course, must be varied, if only to eliminate a jargon and phraseology that would mystify anyone outside the priesthood, but conceptual depth should not vary at all between

professional publication and general exposition. I hope that this book can be read with profit both in seminars for graduate students and — if the movie stinks and you forget your sleeping pills — on the businessman's special to Tokyo.

If Gould can put across the ideas of palaeontology to the ordinary intelligent reader without loss of 'conceptual depth', why should this be impossible with literary criticism?

When Haig Karunaratne directed my play *The Blinding*, we followed each performance with a discussion in which we invited the audience to express their responses, comments and criticisms — something that has not infrequently been done elsewhere but is unusual in Sri Lanka. There are practical reasons why it may not be possible to do this with every play. But there are so many other ways in which criticism can be democratised. Actually, Sinhala cultural groups have often conducted discussions on new plays, novels or films at which it was open to the general audience to participate. I believe that when there was free cultural life in Jaffna, such discussions in Tamil were also not uncommon. Of course, if one writes or talks in English, one is addressing a minority anyway, and if one deals with literature in English, that minority becomes still smaller. But when one uses the special language of post-modernism, the minority becomes miniscule. Look through the volume edited by Neloufer de Mel, and you will find on almost every page of the essays by the younger academics a critical vocabulary that has been borrowed from post-modernist theorising and criticism in the West — 'subject position', 'inter-textuality', 'over-determination', 'imbrications' and so on. This vocabulary will be unintelligible even to the majority of readers actively interested in literature, unless they have had a recent academic training abroad, or have had the good fortune to be pupils of Arjuna Parakrama or Neloufer de Mel, or have taken special pains to undergo a strenuous course of reading in contemporary Western academic criticism. So one has to ask: For whom are these people writing? With whom do they intend to communicate? The only answer possible is that they are writing just for that tiny group who have one of the three qualifications I listed.

Perhaps it may be argued that the intellectual transactions of the English-speaking minority are of no general significance anyway. On the contrary, I think that they still hold a great deal of intellectual power in their hands and will continue to do so, that the standards they set and the ideas they disseminate do trickle down to the Sinhala and Tamil-speaking intelligentsia, as I demonstrated at the beginning of this paper. That's why it's important to combat the practice of mandarin critical speech in English not only in the interests of criticism in that language but in those of Sinhala and Tamil criticism as well.

As for the possible argument that anybody can understand post-modernist criticism with some application and that it doesn't differ in this respect from its modernist predecessors, my reply would be that I have spent half a lifetime sloughing off the *Scrutiny* idiom acquired at the university and I don't want to learn another equally or more occult language. But there's a contradiction in the practice of radical post-modernists which did not affect the modernists.

Eliot, Richards or Leavis made no bones about the fact that they were addressing an elite minority of readers. In fact, Leavis's entire educational project was directed towards the training of such an elite. But the post-modernists claim to be talking on behalf of subaltern classes and oppressed groups, and yet they speak a language that is unintelligible to the people they are professedly concerned to liberate. 'Elitist' is one of their favourite terms of condemnation, yet who is more elitist than they in their critical language? The ultimate effect of their work has been to tie criticism more firmly than ever to the learned journal and the academic seminar.

To the contention that the new ideas of post-modernism can be stated only in a new critical language, I would dare to reply that I have shown this to be untrue. Let me return to *The Blinding*. Those of you who have seen it will know that part of the play turns on the argument about whether Ajith, the theatre director, is entitled to cut some of the dialogue and action in a scene from *King Lear*, whether his cut, as one of the characters claims, 'changes the whole meaning of the scene'. We had on stage one character, Premila, who was introduced as a lecturer in English at Peradeniya, recently returned with a doctorate from a foreign university. She was in fact meant to appear as one of the missionaries I have been talking about transmitting new critical doctrines from the West. Into her mouth I put those post-modernist ideas that were relevant to the argument — that a text has no single meaning, that the author's intention isn't the last word, that the same text can be and has been interpreted in varying ways by different people and at different times. Some post-modernist ideas, yes, but not post-modernist language, because if I had put *that* into Premila's mouth, the audience would have gone home. As it was, nobody complained of incomprehension, and I was gratified to be told by a very unsophisticated member of the audience — a complete stranger — that she could never understand Shakespeare because it wasn't 'normal English' but that she enjoyed *The Blinding*.

There's a related matter on which I feel strongly, and that's the damage done by post-modernism to the quality of critical prose. As far as English criticism is concerned, before it became a specialised subject taught at universities and practised by dons, it produced, in the hands of gentlemen amateurs, a lot of emotive gush; but, at its best, it was an art that combined trenchancy with elegance, insight with pleasure in the quality of good critical prose. The rise of practical criticism — or, as Eliot called it, 'the lemon-squeezer school of criticism' — in the first half of the twentieth century dealt the initial blow to this tradition. Whatever its limited usefulness as a pedagogical technique, it made for clotted critical prose, and post-modernism with its rebarbative writing has carried this decline further. No doubt I shall be challenged to say what my standards of good critical prose are. Let me offer you seven examples, each of them only one sentence long. These aren't examples obtained by laborious search in a library, they have been casually recalled from years of reading because they are so memorable. Here they are:

Dr. Johnson on Gray's odes:

'He has a kind of strutting dignity, and is tall by walking on tiptoe.'

William Blake on *Paradise Lost*:

'The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels and God, and at liberty when of Devils and Hell is because he was a true Poet, and of the Devil's party without knowing it.'

Oscar Wilde on Dickens's sentimentality:

'One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing.'

Lord David Cecil describing Jane Austen's view of marriage:

'It is wrong to marry for money, but it is foolish to marry without it.'

T.S. Eliot on minor eighteenth-century poets:

'...what the writers have to say always appears surprised at the way in which they choose to say it.'

F.R. Leavis (who usually wrote a tortuous, parenthesis-ridden prose) in one of his rare moments of lucid directness, writing of *Gulliver's Travels*:

'Swift did his best for the Houyhnhnms, and they may have all the reason, but the Yahoos have all the life.'

George Orwell on boys' weeklies:

'All boys' literature today is sodden with the worst illusions of 1914.'

What's the nature of such critical writing? It's witty, vivid, sharp, lucid, and in spite of its brevity, each of these sentences carries a critical perception that goes to the heart of its particular matter. Who's there today among post-modernists who writes like that, or wants to? Only perhaps Terry Eagleton and Terence Hawkes when they are on holiday. For the rest, post-modernist critical prose too often gives me (to borrow a phrase that was used to describe something quite different) 'the feeling of choking on chopped-up bristles'. Reading the symposium of essays on Sri Lankan poetry to which I have already referred, one is often stopped short by sentences that stick in the throat. Like these:

The problematicity of post-colonial theory derives from its essentialist stance on what constitutes post-coloniality in its theory and practice. I have used post-coloniality as praxis to show that, particularly in regard to hybridity and syncretism, on the surface Gooneratne's poem *The Lizard's Cry* seems tailor made to fit the theoretical model. But the fault lines in the model itself destabilize it.

Not only is that ugly writing but it's self-defeating in relation to its own declared purposes. If you are making a political point and if you hope to influence anybody outside your intellectually incestuous circle, is it better to write like that or like George Orwell in my last quotation?

I remember coming across Orwell's essay on 'Boys' Weeklies' in my first year as a university student in a journal in the library. I knew nothing about him, I hadn't even heard his name, but the essay came to me with the effect of a revelation. Nobody before had treated popular culture seriously but without highbrow condescension, yet looking searchingly at its social role and meanings. And the essay was written so that any literate person could understand it. That was true of all his criticism, whether it was about gangster thrillers and comic postcards, or about Swift and Dickens. Orwell didn't come to

literary criticism with an academic degree, and a good deal of his criticism was written for popular newspapers. There can be no better model than Orwell for the critic who wants to break out of the hermetic world of the literary academy.

#### PART IV

I said at an earlier point in this paper that critical writing of the kind represented by my seven examples belongs to criticism as an art, that it gives pleasure, and that's enough to mark me as an old fogey. For today in post-modernist criticism it's not only of criticism but of literature too that the fact that it gives, or can give, pleasure is largely forgotten. Yet is there any reason why one should read literature if one does not get pleasure out of it, any more than there is any reason why one should listen to music or look at paintings if these activities are not pleasurable? If all you want of literature is political illumination, wouldn't you be using your time more profitably if you spent it on political theory or sociology or economics? Actually, post-modernists are puritans, just as Leavis was; only where Leavis demanded that literature should give evidence of moral earnestness, post-modernists look for political virtue. But part of the life of literature lies outside both of these. All interesting literature offers the satisfaction to be derived from watching a craft skilfully exercised, and some of the most interesting criticism has been directed towards deepening and enhancing that satisfaction. One of the most striking things about post-modernist criticism, however, is its obsessive concern with meaning and interpretation and the rarity within it of critical comments on literary skill or craft. Never before perhaps has it been possible to have a whole book of essays on Shakespeare — I'm thinking of the symposium titled *Political Shakespeare* — in which from cover to cover there isn't an indication that any of the contributors has got any pleasure out of a single line or a single scene of Shakespeare. Perhaps it may be argued that getting pleasure from literary art is an illegitimate luxury in a world in which people are dying violent deaths or starving. I am sorry, but there is no getting away from the fact that inherent in literature, as in music or painting, is the

possibility of it being enjoyable. It may be immoral to enjoy the craft of a poem while people are being killed in Jaffna and elsewhere, but it's no more immoral than sitting down to a well-cooked, delicious and nourishing dinner, which I am sure many radical post-modernists would do without any pangs of conscience. Even when the material of a literary work concerns horrors or atrocities, it's still possible that it may induce pleasure in the writer's control of her form or craft, as with Anne Ranasinghe's Holocaust poetry or some of Jean Arasanayagam's poems of July '83. Anybody who is uncomfortable with this fact would do well to stop reading creative literature. And how, I wonder, would those who insist that art must always be judged politically cope with music? Either they should reject music as a waste of time, or limit their listening only to protest songs and revolutionary marches.

Since literature, unlike music, carries identifiable meanings, one of the problems it presents is that there are works whose ideology you may find unacceptable but which are marked by great literary skill or power. How one negotiates this problem is a question that affords no simple and universal answer. It would be easy enough if it involved making a straight choice between objectionable content and pleasing form. But take a complex case — take Byron's *Don Juan*. The material in it is sometimes sexist, even on occasion outrageously so; and that, of course, has to be criticised. But there's a great deal in it that's liberating: it is anti-puritan, it is impelled by a generous indignation against hypocrisy and moral cant and tyranny, it is animated by an enormous comic gusto and love of life, and the brilliance of Byron's verbal and metrical craft is an endless delight. Of course, if you don't get any enjoyment out of these latter qualities, then you have no problem. With some post-modernist critics, I have indeed wondered whether they enjoy literature or whether they really hate it and only want to disinfect it. But I would want to say to such critics the line from *Twelfth Night* that Byron uses as an epigraph to *Don Juan*: 'Dost thou think because thou art virtuous there shall be no more cakes and ale?'

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සුරෝගාමී බර්ගර් වෛද්‍යවරියෝ  
වෙළෙඳුන් බ්‍රෝහිසර්.

ශ්‍රී ලාංකීය කාන්තාවන්ගේ  
ඉතිහාසය පර්යේෂණය කිරීම.