REVISITING THE MARGINS OF LITERARY CRITICISM: *MEDUSA* REPLICATED

EDEBİ ELEŞTİRİ SINIRLARINA YOLCULUK: *MEDUSA* YENİDEN

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Abstract: Literary criticism's deep-rooted history, effortlessly traceable back to Plato, might be challenging to grasp without comparing the historical sequence of distinctive periods along with frequently shifting or diversifying perspectives. Several scholarly studies tend to elaborate on the distinct historical periods, aiming to conduct in-depth analyses for literary criticism. This practical albeit conventional approach carries the potential risk of overlooking the idea of revisiting earlier critical accounts to unveil novel insights. A classical understanding of historiography can also complicate the interconnection and flow of the various movements of literary criticism's already broad history. As such, this particular research aims to revisit seminal representatives of the literary criticism throughout various epochs, constructing a chronological and intersecting narrative in a progressive sequence. The narrative originating from the artwork titled "The Raft of the Medusa" shall serve as the foundational basis for this research to further explore the interconnection existing between literary criticism and visual representations. This paper intends to narrate the historical journey of literary criticism by following the footsteps of several prominent figures and analysing the ways in which they intersect or conflict; while remaining committed to the chronological sequence of literary criticism. The fact that the article provides a discourse of that nature serves a consequential introduction to the history of literary criticism.

Keywords: Literary Criticism, Comparative Analysis, *The Raft of the Medusa*, Historiographical Approach

Öz: Edebiyat eleştirisinin hâlihazırda Platon'a kadar takip edilebilen köklü tarihi, farklı dönemlerin tarihsel gelişimleri ile sıklıkla değişen ya da çeşitlenen perspektifleri karşılaştırılmaksızın anlaşılması zor olabilir. Birçok akademik çalışma, edebiyat eleştirisi için derinlemesine analizler yapmayı amaçlayarak, farklı tarihsel dönemler üzerinde durma eğilimindedir. Bu pratik ancak geleneksel yaklaşım, yeni kavrayışları ortaya çıkarma amacıyla daha önceki eleştirel anlatıları yeniden gözden geçirme fikrini göz ardı etme riskini taşır. Klasik bir tarih yazını anlayışı da edebiyat eleştirisinin zaten geniş olan tarihindeki çeşitli akımların birbiriyle bağlantısını ve bunların akışını ele almayı daha da güçleştirebilir. Bu nedenle, söz konusu araştırma, edebiyat eleştirisinin çeşitli dönemlerindeki önemli temsilcilerini yeniden ele almayı, kronolojik ve kesişen bir anlatıyı aşamalı olarak kurgulamayı amaçlamaktadır. "Medusa'nın Salı" adlı sanat eserinden yola çıkan bu çalışma, edebiyat eleştirisi ile görsel temsiller arasında var olan bağlantıyı derinlemesine keşfetmek için bahsedilen eseri bu araştırmanın başında ve sonunda temel dayanağı olarak kullanacaktır. Bu makale, kronolojik anlatıya sadık kalmasının yanı sıra edebiyat eleştirisinin tarihsel yolculuğunu bazı önemli düşünürlerin zaman zaman kesişen ya da çatışan fikirlerini analiz ederek aktarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Makalenin bu yönde bir söylem sunması, edebiyat eleştirisi tarihinin temellerine yeniden bir giriş niteliği taşımaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Edebiyat Eleştirisi, Karşılaştırmalı Analiz, *Medusa'nın Salı*, Tarihyazımsal Yaklaşım

Revisiting the Margins of Literary Criticism: *Medusa* Replicated

The Raft of the Medusa painting in the Louvre Museum embodies an extremely heartrending story. In 1816, a ship crashed and drifted into a disaster. Only 10 of the 150 people on board survived. Something even more tragic came to light later: The captain had left the others to die to save the first-class passengers. And just like *the Raft of Medusa*, lost in the brutal nature of human corruption and the obscure boundaries of reality, literary criticism constitutes a history whose course cannot be charted but can solely be traced. This paper intends to guide the emerging literary criticism enthusiasts like a lighthouse through the painting of Medusa's Raft and to craft a vibrant portrayal of the fundamental landmarks within the sphere of literary criticism, taking the shared traits of art history and literary criticism as a foundational basis.

Géricault, Théodore. "Le Radeau de La Méduse." The Raft of the Medusa, 1818. The Louvre Museum. Paris, France, https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010059199

Théodore Géricault's (1791-1824) *The Raft of the Medusa* strives to depict this grim and tragic moment in history that is still difficult and necessary to confront. He used his art to show the truth, but it stayed as a mere imitation of reality. As Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c. 4 BCE – 65 CE) simply puts it "all art is but imitation of nature."[1] But how truthful is the ship *Medusa* herself? Could she be an imitation herself, just like Théodore Géricault's painting? More than 2000 years before this tragic accident, Plato (c 427/428 BCE – c. 348/347 BCE) had already answered that question, laying the foundations of literary criticism. According to him, everything was a replica, a representation, an imitation, or a reflection of its ideal. Plato named his notion *The One*. His reasoning consists of "ideal" forms or absolutes, existing whether or not any mind asserts their existence or reflects their qualities. In his well-known cave

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[1] Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic* (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 118.

allegory, Plato exquisitely illustrates his theory of forms. Prisoners chained in a cave can only look at a wall without being able to turn their heads. Only the shadows of the life flowing outside are cast on this wall. Then Glaucon asks the narrator Socrates this striking question: "how could they see anything but the shadows if they were never allowed to move their heads?"[2] Plato's unconventional ideas questioning the nature of reality become the first example of a systematic approach to literary theory and criticism. The ancient Greek poets of oral tradition, widely accepted as the carriers of cultural transmission, rose as navigators who steered the path of knowledge and poetry, ensuring their efforts reached their intended destinations within the society's collective understanding. Outside of our modern perceptions, however, how did their contemporary Plato reckon them? For him, the poets were the evil imitators of the material world as they exposed humans and gods stealing, lying, deceiving, and hating alike. Therefore, the poets could easily lead the public astray with their work and should have consequently be forbidden. This indoctrination with an explicit censorship was a major blow to poetry, yet it was not sustainable given the relative scarcity of public recreational activities. In other words, a society needed poetry not only for entertainment but also for cultural transmission, a fact that Plato could not ignore for too long. In a later writing, he offered a slightly refreshed idea that suggested the manipulation could be reversed and the poets who promoted good virtues might be tolerated. Hereafter, poetry would become a tool that could be used to channel society for goodness and moral improvement as Plato anticipated.

Plato's idea that even the source of real suffering has an ideal could not be pleasing to everyone, neither today nor in the past. The vanguard of this disgruntled mass was Plato's own student, Aristotle (384 BCE – 322 BCE). Although he shared Plato's view that all art forms are imitations, he also had the idea that they were the actual world of reality itself. He thought of poetry as a mediation through which man could discharge himself through a catharsis and gain a better sense of himself and his world.[3] For that reaction to be possible, he defined the limits and requirements of art in his work, *Poetics*. He deduced that the purpose of art was not to create a chronicle of what happened, but to pursue philosophical endeavours that would further improve a given society. He thus distanced his view of art from Plato's ideas and transformed it into a philosophical reflection of the real world.

Parallel to the poetry, the tragedy should similarly have particular characteristics like leaving an emotional impact on the audience and being closer to truth and perfection. Aristotle desired to give tragedy a space to thrive by outlining the margins of it, just like he did for the poetry which Plato had already denounced based on his metaphysical expectations. In *Poetics*, Aristoteles meticulously inspected how a play could produce that sentimental value. With a teleological pursuit, he listed the elements of tragedy in descending importance; plot structure, characterization, thought, style, lyric poetry, and spectacle.[4] He placed the plot structure in the beginning as it was the most striking element that reflected the purpose and the impact of the play. As a result, a common ground originated where poetry and tragedy could be the subjects of discussion, interpretation, and improvement.

The Roman poet, Horace (65 BCE – 8 BCE) expanded upon Aristotle's classical doctrines by introducing a fresh dimension to his approach of setting boundaries to exercise the poem's pragmatic effects. He believed that the key to the success of poetry could be achieved through expertise in vocabulary, word choice, subject matter, and so on.[5] These skills naturally required a lot of reading. So, to whom else could a would-be writer turn but to the poets of Ancient Greece? Horace, who wrote poetry himself, regarded the works of the classical period as instructive materials based on his own experiences.[6] In a sense, it was an acknowledgment of the superiority of works such as *Homer and the Iliad* and an endeavour to imitate them.

With Plato, Aristotle, and Horace paving the path, literary criticism grew into a dynamic aspect of either imitation or the nature of reality. With the framework set out, they sought to guide writers and define the essence

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[2] Plato, *The Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 220.

[3] Aristotle, *Poetics* (Massachusetts: Focus Publishing / R. Pullins Company, 2006), 19.

[4] Stephen Halliwell, *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 165-174.

[5] Charles E. Bressler, *Literary Criticism An Introduction to Theory and Practice* (Pearson, 2011), 25.

[6] Harry Blamires, *A History of Literary Criticism* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 1991), 12-14.

of art. Longinus (First Century CE), the successor of the acclaimed philosophers above, made a significant step forward for literary criticism by introducing revolutionary ideas to the development of literary theory. In his work, *The Sublime*, he emphasized that the purpose of literary work was to excite the reader. So, the reader became an integral part of the literary work for the first time.[7] His reference to the potential of the readers would be considered a shift if not a development into the journey of literary criticism. The wings lent to the reader for the first time allowed literary criticism to sprout in a variety of ways while providing critics with a platform for further experimentation and innovation. This perspective, in a sense could be considered an invitation, encouraging readers to actively participate in the genesis of literary creations for the following decades.

A poet exiled for opposing papal interference in Florentine political affairs broke the long silence that followed the Classical period. With Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), the allegorical interpretation of literary works became applicable to all literary works and not just exclusive to religious texts. He indicated this by writing prophetic and divinely inspired works such as *Divina Commedia*.[8] That would be signalling a further diversity in the contextual interpretation of the literary texts. By celebrating semiotic interpretation, he believed that the value of a literary work should be scrutinized through wider lenses that would go beyond a mere understanding of the context. He also argued that the common language or the vernacular could be used to support literary works for the first time in history.[9] His ultimate goal with this was a united Italy under the Holy Roman Emperor, using Italian as the touchpoint of the dialects in the Italian peninsula.[10] Through his remarkable perspectives, Dante advocated for a profound transformation in the prevailing approach to literary criticism, urging a departure from the exclusivity of elevated language in contrast to the Classical age, embracing a more accessible and inclusive vernacular in line with the spirit of Renaissance.

Dante's voice echoed in the mind of Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) and continued to shape the Renaissance. Like Dante, Boccaccio preferred to write in the vernacular and advocated that allegorical reading reveals the true meaning of the work.[11] For him, poets would help their readers to reach the Truth or God through the allegoric elements in their own terms. Then, the poetry gained an ontological thrust with the aims such as deepening the understanding of the world around and fostering emotional engagement with the text. Hence, the process that began with Plato's hostile attitude towards poetry took on a more humanist nature in tone and content. Aristotle's voice was getting louder and louder as Plato's was getting muted, with a quest to discover the limits and purposes of the literature or predominantly the poetry.

Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586), while adopting a compromise of his predecessors, generally remained committed to Aristotle. He shared Aristotle's ideas on the structure of tragedy and the superiority of poetry. In addition, he repeatedly elaborated the functions of poetry, such as educating, giving pleasure, and teaching morality[12], and in this respect, he likened it to religion. The ethical expectations of Aristotle thus made the transformative effect of poetry for Sidney no less than an intentional agent of a religious narrative. Despite being under the profound influence of Aristotle, he was able to synthesise the ideas of his predecessors.

John Dryden (1631-1700), representing the very essence of the English Restoration era, undertook the construction of literary criticism in its full sense to incorporate the intellectual efforts of the past and draft redevelopments. In his attempt to harmonise the collective wisdom of the poetry's all attributes from ancient Greece to his day, he adopted an objective method to some extent by supporting his analysis with concrete

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[7] Aristotle, Longinus and Demetrius, *Aristotle: Poetics; Longinus: On the Sublime; Demetrius: On Style* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 163.

[8] John Freccero, *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 173.

[9] Dante Alighieri, *De vulgari eloquentia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2-5.

[10] Vernon Hall, *A Short History of Literary Criticism* (London: Merlin Press, 1964), 23.

[11] Martin Eisner, "Boccaccio between Dante and Petrarch" in *Boccaccio and the Invention of Italian Literature: Dante, Petrarch, Cavalcanti, and the Authority of the Vernacular* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 5-9.

[12] Wesley Trimpi, "Sir Philip Sidney's An apology for poetry" in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 192.

examples from the preceding time periods. In his work, *The Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, he blended his ideas alongside those of Monsieur Hedelin, Menardiere, and Corneille. Although The English poet Martin Clifford (1624-1677) accused him of plagiarising these ideas, Dryden had thought the conclusion needed to be drawn predominantly by the readers.[13] He experimented to steer the direction of literary criticism from the purposive competence of the writers by emphasising the reader's engagement with the text. Dryden assumed it was better to evaluate literature in its own context instead of focusing on theological evaluations of poetry. The reader-response criticism proved what an accomplished architect he was, and inspired many masons to join the challenge of this construction.

Dryden's contemporary Joseph Addison (1672-1719) similarly made the reader a central aspect of the literary work by giving priority to the reader's engagement. According to him, the purpose of literary criticism is to offer a contribution to the average man in the street.[14] This is also why he used straightforward language in his critiques. For Addison, the purpose of literary criticism was not to scrutinize the work, but to make sense of it by looking at it from a broader perspective. Recognising the reader's pivotal role in interpreting and attributing meaning to the text was crucial to the greatness of literature, reflecting a holistic approach that fully embraced their active participation.

The influence of Ancient Greece was once again on the rise with the Enlightenment, attracting such an esteemed poet as Alexander Pope (1688-1744). He embraced the classical approach that the finest form of imitation was the closest to the truth and, thus, the most appreciated, consequently feeling that Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *Ars Poetica* provided a guide for emerging poets.[15] The greatness of literature was in imitating the classical period works since the ancient philosophers had already investigated the nature and revealed the gateway to achieve beautiful, meaningful, and sophisticated literary works in elegant harmony.[16] Pope's approach to literary criticism benefited both writers by offering a benchmark for creations of higher quality and readers by establishing a guideline for deeper insights into the literary works.

The ongoing preoccupation of analysing literary works through the lens of imitation and ancient principles was severely disrupted by the upheaval of the American (1765-1791) and French (1789-1799) revolutions. The revolutions lead English romantic William Wordsworth (1770-1850) to challenge the norms of literature with the idea of poetry being a platform for the poets and the readers to share the same emotions. The poets were no longer trapped between the particular rules and found a new ground where they could express themselves unrestrained.[17] This liberation in poet's expression, also known as expressive theory, made Wordsworth's individualistic and emotional approach a pillar of Romanticism. The Romantic period marked a new chapter in history, in which writers could freely express their inner experiences and the literary critics highly respected the artistic vision. This perspective could be interpreted as a nuanced challenge to the enduring legacy of Plato, as well as an exploration of how artistic depictions of nature can serve as potent wellsprings of inspiration for poets.

Romantic Period (1798-1837), in which the Aristotelian approach still dominated the literary theory and criticism, carries a sense of nostalgia in which Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) emerged as a repercussion of Plato's thoughts. Shelley adapted Plato's theory of forms or The One and thought that poetry was a medium that could lead to these ideals. Shelley used the shadow in Plato's cave as a metaphor for the author's imagination.[18] Like Wordsworth, he moved away from the reason and prescriptivism of the neoclassical period and praised individualism and imagination. As a manifestation of the poet's imagination, poetry enabled people to view the beauty surrounding them. On the road to The One, the poet was a guide, while poetry was a spiritual journey.

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[13] John M. Aden, "Dryden, Corneille, and the Essay of Dramatic Poesy" in *The Review of English Studies* (Oxford University Press, 1955), 147-148.

[14] M. A. R. Habib, *A History of Literary Criticism and Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 324-328.

[15] Paul Baines, *The Complete Critical Guide to Alexander Pope* (London: Routledge, 2000), 12.

[16] Howard D. Weinbrot, "Pope and the classics" in *The Cambridge Companion to Alexander Pope* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 86-87.

[17] Emma Mason, *The Cambridge Introduction to William Wordsworth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 44-46.

[18] Harold Bloom, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: Comprehensive Research and Study Guide* (New York: Chelsea House Publications, 2001), 99.

Following Alexander Pope's neoclassical approach, Wordsworth and Shelley turned to the romantic movement and deepened as well as broadened it both content and form wise. However, romanticism lost its momentum with the Galapagos Conqueror Charles Darwin's systematic evolutionary theory of humankind's origin. It was highly unlikely for this phenomenon, profoundly affecting society, to bypass the arts. At the dawn of Darwin's revolution, Hippolyte Adolphe Taine (1828-1893) adapted Victorian scientific enthusiasm to literary criticism. He embraced both a structuralist formula for the precision of literary criticism and exactness in history.[19] For Taine, therefore, art is "the result of given causes" from a historical perspective. Just as natural selection determined the fate of species, so did their race, environment, personal experiences and the period of their lives determined what would become of their works.

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), too, was deeply impressed by Charles Darwin's discovery of humanity's greatest mystery. He favoured the conservative style of the classical period rather than the exuberant style of the Romantic period. As in the classical period, he concentrated on the close relationship between literature and society and argued that literature reflected the realities, values, and interests of society. The critic's task was to apply the concepts of previous thinkers to new literary works to establish objective and unified principles.[20] But beyond the very diverse thinkers of the Victorian era, even in Ancient Greece philosophers had radically different ideas. Nevertheless, Arnold took the classical period as a touchstone and his ideas about the classical period became known as the touchstone method. Using this method, Arnold essentially sought to offer a procedure to the readers whom he regarded as a chief constituent of literary criticism, and eventually, the readers could reach a common ground and draw the outlines of a precise poem.[21] The rules would no longer exist to guide the poets but rather to open the doors to insightful analysis and interpretation for the readers. Given clear guidance by the critic, the reader's role in literary criticism appeared to be strengthening.

The American-British author Henry James (1843-1916) strived to bring even more fresh air to literary criticism. One of his most influential contributions was to examine the reader's role in addition to the author's creative process.[22] For him, a literary work should have been comprehensible to the reader and close to his experiences. However, this resemblance should have revealed the flow of life to the reader rather than being something like a scientific explanation. Ultimately, the reader would deliver the ultimate criticism of the work.

Following Henry James, it is well worth mentioning Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), who attributed even greater roles to the readers and the writers, along with the concepts he introduced to literary criticism. One such prominent concept is dialogism, in which he characterises communication between two interlocutors as a mechanism for mutual understanding. Dialogue requires that the participants in a conversation are able to establish a common understanding in spite of the differences in their respective languages generated by their entire experiences.[23] Through this concept, Bakhtin defines language as a dialog, regardless of its context. He discredited the concept of monologue because he reasoned that even when we speak to ourselves through our inner voices and call it consciousness, we utilise a language that is an apparatus to communicate between the two, independent of any reasoning or underlying conditions. The implication of this for literary criticism is that it applies not only to flesh and blood but also to the characters that reach us through books.[24] Each of these characters uses language and creates a chorus with multiple voices by giving clues about themselves. Bakhtin called this polyphony a carnival for its potential to harbour various uses of language, thus separated the worlds of thoughts.[25] In a novel like this, an author would allow the characters to express themselves without foreseeing the end of it, making that kind of

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[19] Patrizia Lombardo, "Hippolyte Taine between Art and Science" in *Yale French Studies* (Yale University Press, 1990), 124.

[20] Ludwig Lewisohn, "A Study of Matthew Arnold. III. Arnold's Critical Method" in *The Sewanee Review* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1902), 305-306.

[21] Clinton Machan, *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 436.

[22] Stephen Arata, "Henry James, "The Art of Fiction" in *Victorian Review* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 53-55.

[23] Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World* (London: Routledge, 2002), 39-41.

[24] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 5-8.

[25] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 285-286.

language use polyphonic as all the characters would pursue their own agendas rather than trying to bring the novel to a certain conclusion. The sort of interaction between the author, the reader, and the characters was the actual requirement for the novel to conclude.

Conclusion

The era of questioning the reader's prominence in literary criticism concluded with Bakhtin and his forerunners, and the reader ceased to appear as a single, unified object on the ground set by them. The approaches extending from modern literary criticism such as formalism, structuralism, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, feminism, and post-colonialism have broadened the scope of literary criticism that is more complicated to trace by following just the footsteps of the philosophers. However, the diversification is not an obstacle for them to bear unifying aspects such as being reader-centred, interdisciplinary, multifaceted, and intercultural. Yet, the irony that even this diversity has a shared spirit is quite thought-proving and worth exploring.

This study has shown that the entire voyage of literary criticism, from Plato to Bakhtin and on to the present day, has witnessed many captains hoping to bring their passengers safely to the shores of insightful interpretation. Nevertheless, the geoid shape of the earth has always brought them back to where they were at the beginning. What could *The Raft of the Medusa*'s tragic story suggest in the crowd of the vast oceans? What does it sound like in this polyphony? An imitation, a critique, a history, perhaps repressed emotions. Maybe just the sound of freely expressed opinions may break this cycle and function as a lighthouse to get closer to the ultimate interpretation of literary criticism. And only by creating their own route can a passenger reach the final destination of their journey. As such, this study has offered a historical map into the margins of literary criticism, bringing distinctive and intersecting epochs alongside their seminal representatives into the sight. This study would help future researchers explore the fundamental aspects of literary criticism as well as establish a link between the functions of criticism and its representations. In essence, this paper has attempted to give as an insightful introduction to the vast and fascinating history of literary criticism, offering readers an interconnected account of its evolution. By embracing a comprehensive and comparative approach that combine historical contexts, diverse perspectives, and artistic representations, this research hopes to contribute to an appreciation and nuanced understanding of the enduring legacy of literary criticism.

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