Chapter 1
Introduction

Discourses addressing the question ‘What is literature?’ have traditionally been called “poetics”. Aristotle’s Poetics, Horace’s Arts Poetica and Longinus’s On the Sublime are the earliest critical treatises in Western Europe. Perhaps the most profitable critical discussion has been Aristotle’s Poetics, which may be regarded as an exposition of the principles of literary criticism. Criticism is the debate by which literature survives. Literary criticism has established itself as the main activity associated with the academic study of literature, and it employs terms and categories such as ‘author’, ‘character’ or ‘reader’. Generally speaking, we can say that literary criticism involves the reading, interpretation and commentary on a specific text or texts which have been designated as literature. This tends to be the predominant activity associated with literary study.

Webster’s New International Dictionary defines criticism as “the art of judging or evaluation with knowledge and propriety the beauties and faults of works of art or literature”. Shipley in his Dictionary of World Literature defines criticism as “the conscious evaluation or appreciation of a work of art, either according to the critics personal taste or according to some accepted aesthetic ideas”. In Encyclopaedia Britannica Edmund Gosse defines criticism as the art of judging the qualities and values of an aesthetic object, whether in literature or the fine arts. To Walter Pater, “Criticism is the art of interpreting art. It serves as intermediary between the author and the reader by explaining the one to the other”. To Mathew Arnold, “Criticism is a disinterested endeavour to learn and
propagate the best that is known and thought in the world”. Criticism, says T.S. Eliot, is the “Commentation and exposition of works of art by means of written words”. He adds that the end of criticism is the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste.

Criticism is a very broad umbrella term which covers various approaches to literature, but no single approach can enlighten us on all the aspects of a literary work. The moral approach, the psychological approach, the sociological approach, the formalistic approach and the archetypal approach are the five major approaches of criticism. Anyhow, the primary function of criticism is the interpretation of art and literature with its endeavour to enlighten the masses and to create an ideal atmosphere for the development and nourishment of culture.

The first chapter of this thesis traces the growth of modernistic trends in twentieth century British criticism. This will help us to assess the role and position of Marxist Criticism and see how it stood apart from other critical methods.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century a number of trends were visible in British criticism including the humanism of Mathew Arnold, the aestheticism of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde and the socialist criticism of George Bernard Shaw. The first notable group of British critics in the twentieth century were associated with the universities. During the nineteenth century, relatively few critics were professors and wrote primarily for journals and magazines. In the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, with the establishment of English literature as a separate discipline, the situation changed rapidly. In 1895 the influential literary historian and critic,
George Saintsbury, was appointed professor of rhetoric at Edinburgh, and the renowned Shakespeare scholar A.C. Bradley assumed an academic post in 1882. Walter Raleigh and Arthur Quiller-Couch took up important professorships of English literature at Oxford and Cambridge respectively. Raleigh and Quiller-Couch did not consider themselves critics and in fact showed considerable scorn for academic criticism. Their own approaches to texts and authors were empirical, unsystematic, impressionistic and sometimes idealistic in the philosophical sense.

Another group of critics, who might loosely be called Neo-Romantic, included D.H. Lawrence, Wilson Knight, John Middleton Murry and Herbert Read. D.H. Lawrence was an avowed irrationalist, reacting against both the mainstream rationalist tradition in Western thinking, as well as against the modern industrial world, which he saw as sexually repressive and as having stunted human potential. Lawrence’s literary criticism was expressed in several reviews and in his *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), as well as in essays on sexuality and the unconscious. In both these works and in his fiction, Lawrence advocated a vitalism and individualism that often has parallels in the views of Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud. He attempted to revalue various writers in the light of his libidinal and primitivist ideology. In his own highly idiosyncratic way, Lawrence anticipates certain aspects of late twentieth century criticism, notably the stress on the unconscious and the irrational. Of the other Neo-Romantic critics mentioned above, John Middleton Murry (1889-1957) attempted to reinstate a Romantic belief in Pantheism and the organic unity of the world. According to him, genuine poetry was not amenable to paraphrase and that
it expressed truth inaccessible to reason or concepts. Herbert Read began as an advocate of imagism and classicism and eventually expressed an allegiance to Romanticism, viewing poetry as transcending reason. G. Wilson Knight (1897-1985) a Shakespearean scholar, is best known for his *The Wheel of Fire* (1930) Drawing on the findings of anthropologists such as Sir James Frazer concerning myths, rituals and symbols, Wilson Knight interprets William Shakespeare’s play in terms of certain recurring symbols and motifs. As a critic, he distinguishes interpretation, which aims empathetically to reconstruct an author’s vision, from criticism, which he sees as evaluative. Somewhat like the New Critics, Wilson Knight wished to subordinate conclusion drawn from intention or biography or morality to artistic concerns. Another significant critic in this broad Romantic religious tradition was C.S. Lewis, whose major critical work, *The Allegory of Love* (1936), along with his other works, contributed to his mission of promoting the understanding of the formality and didacticism of the literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Another generation of professional critics tried to rejuvenate the study of English literature and to pave the way for the New Criticism. The most prominent of these associated with the New English curriculum at Cambridge University, were I.A. Richards and his student, William Empson. In his *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) and his *Science and Poetry* (1926), Richards attempted to establish a systematic basis for the study of literature, an approach that became known as Practical Criticism. He distinguished, most fundamentally, the emotive language of poetry from the referential language of nonliterary disciplines. In
1929 he published a book, Practical Criticism (1929) whose profound pervasive influence still endures. Using samples of students’ often erratic attempts to analyse poetry, he aimed to foster the skills and techniques necessary for the close reading of literature. The practice of close reading as established by Richards, at Cambridge and Harvard later, had a profound impact on the New Critics. While William Empson was not himself a New Critic, he produced a book, Seven Types of Ambiguity (1930) which had an impact on the New Criticism by virtue of the close attention it paid to literary texts and its stress on ambiguity as an essential characteristic of poetry.

A convenient starting point for tracing the growth of modernistic trends in twentieth century British criticism is the development of symbolism as prominently manifested in the work of the Irish poet and critic William Butler Yeats. Symbolism had roots in the English-speaking world in the theory and practice of literary figures such as William Blake Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, Shelley and Edgar Allan Poe. The symbolism of Yeats and subsequent writers was also influenced by French Symbolism as developed in the works of Charles Baudelaire, Stephane Mallarme, Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud. French Symbolism was introduced to English and American audiences largely through Arthur Symons’s book The Symbolist Movement in Literature (1899). In this book Symons explained the history and rationale of French Symbolism, which he saw as a reaction against nineteenth century materialism. Recoiling from materialism and pragmatism, French Symbolism saw literature as affirming the reality of a higher spiritual realm which could be divided not only
by rational thought but also by glimpses through a pure poetic language. Symon’s book had a profound influence on major British poet critics such as T.S. Eliot. It was actually dedicated to Yeats whom Symons saw as the chief exponent of Symbolism in Britain.

Another group of art-critics associated with modernism was the highly iconoclastic Bloomsbury Group. This circle included Virginia Wool and her sister Vanessa, daughters of the critic and agnostic philosopher Leslie Stephen, the art critics Roger Fry and Clive Bell, the economist John Maynard Keynes the biographer Lytton Strachey, and the novelist E.M. Forster. While each of these personalities had his or her own highly idiosyncratic artistic disposition, most members of the group fell under the influence of the Cambridge philosopher G.E. Moore’s Principia Ethica (1903). They saw this text as affirming an “aesthetic” approach to life in as much as it stressed the value of allegedly timeless states of consciousness which facilitated the enjoyment of beauty. In literary-critical terms, the most influential figure in this circle was Virginia Woolf, who had read Moore’s text closely. Woolf’s critical contributions spanned two broad areas – a modernistic redefinition of the novel that anticipated some of the more recent trends of literary theory, and a broadly feminist approach to literature and literary history. The nature of Woolf’s critical modernism is complex, and her connections with Moore’s philosophical realism and his commonsense philosophical perspective are ambivalent. While Woolf may have taken from Moore a realist distinction between consciousness and its objects, she indicts the mechanical realism of some of her contemporaries such as Arnold Bennett and John
Galsworthy. In the place of this, she advocates not any form of idealism but a more refined version of realism, in line with “reality” as conceived dynamically by Henri Bergson and Marcel Proust.

A central figure in English literary criticism was F.R, Leavis, who might be placed in the moralistic and humanistic tradition of Mathew Arnold. Leavis stood aloof from both the Bloomsbury Group and the New Criticism, though he was influenced by I.A. Richard’s Practical Criticism courses, which he attended. Leavis assumed both educational and critical roles. In the academy he attempted to foster an elite which might safeguard English culture against the technological and populist vulgarities of an industrial society. As a critic he attempted to foster rigorous intellectual standards informed by a sense of the moral and cultural importance of literature, as well as to revaluate the English literary tradition. His major works *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932), *Revaluation* (1936), and *The Great Tradition* (1948) sought to increase general appreciation of Eliot, Yeats and Pound; Leavis argued that the mainstream English poetry flowed through John Donne, Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson and Eliot. He also traced the main tradition of fiction from Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad.

Leavis shared with Eliot and the New Critics the idea that literary criticism should be a separate and serious discipline. While he rejected any theory or system, he called for “a living critical inwardness with literature, and a mind trained in dealing analytically with it”. He repeatedly insisted that literature should be approached as literature and not as a social, historical or political
document. What separated him from the New Critics, however, was an equally forceful counter-insistence that literary study cannot be confirmed to isolated works of art or to a realm of purely literary values. Leavis invokes Eliot’s notion of tradition as representing “a new emphasis on the social nature of artistic achievement”. This social nature, for Leavis, is grounded in what he calls an “inherent human nature”. Hence the study of literature is a study of “the complexities, potentialities and essential conditions of human nature”. In his essay “Sociology and Literature” (1952) he affirms that “a real literary interest is an interest in man, society and civilization, and its boundaries cannot be drawn”.

The two remaining fields in which British critics have made substantial contributions are Socialist-Marxist criticism and feminist studies. The somewhat discontinuous tradition of socialist and Marxist criticism in Britain goes back, through the nineteenth century, to the sporadic literary insights of Karl Marx’s friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels and to William Morris who first applied Marxist perspective of the theory of labour and alienation to artistic production. In 1884 the Fabian society was formed with the aim of substituting for Marxist revolutionary action a Fabian policy of gradually introducing Socialism through influencing government policy and circulating pamphlets to raise awareness of economic and class inequalities. The dramatist and critic George Bernard Shaw was a member of this society and produced one of its first pamphlets ‘A Mainfesto’ (1884). Shaw edited Fabian Essays in Socialism (1899) and advocated women’s rights, economic equality and the abolition of private property. Mention might also be made of George Orwell (1903-1950) who in his later
career saw himself as a political writer and democratic socialist but who, however, became disillusioned with communism as shown in his political satire Animal Farm (1945).

The nineteen thirties witnessed a significant change in British literary critical scene. It was the re-entry of the Marxist discourse into the British intellectual scene. British Marxist discourse had been almost barren since William Morris (1834-96). Though Morris is considered to be a pioneer in British Marxian aesthetics, he was not a literary critic. Novelist and painter, Morris was a socialist who embraced Marxism and criticized industrial capitalism. Therefore the re-entry of Marxist discourse in the form of literary criticism in the writings of Christopher Caudwell and Ralph Fox can be described as the real beginning of British Marxist literary criticism. The success of anti-fascist movements in the nineteen thirties in the international political arena had its impact on the British political and cultural life also.

Marxist works and official communist writings acquired popularity and recognition in the British intellectual life. Poets like Stephen Spender and W.H. Auden declared their solidarity with communist movement. All these developments contributed to the inauguration of Marxist literary criticism in Britian. Christopher Caudwell’s Illusion and Reality and Ralph Fox’s The Novel and the People were the two important books that British Marxist criticism obtained in the nineteen thirties. But the Marxist criticism during the thirties was theoretically shallow and it engaged in mechanical interpretation of literature.
British Communists did not produce any substantial works until the mid-1930’s. With the menace of Fascism and the threat of war, several writers began to show interest in Marxist criticism. These included the art historian Anthony Blunt and the economist John Strachey who produced two influential books, *The Coming Struggle for Power* (1933) and *Literature and Dialectical Materialism* (1934). A group of Marxist thinkers became attached to ‘The Left Review’ (1934-1938). The poets W.H, Auden, Stephen Spender and C. Day Lewis at various times espoused and propagated left-wing views. The most significant Marxist theorist of this generation was Christopher Caudwell (1907-1937) who died in Spain fighting in the International Brigade. Caudwell’s best known work is his *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry* (1937). Here Caudwell offers a Marxist analysis of the development of English poetry, somewhat crudely correlating the stages of this development with economic phases such as primitive accumulation, the Industrial Revolution and the decline of capitalism. In this wide-ranging book, Caudwell addressed the origins of poetry, the connection of poetry to mythology and the future role of poetry in the struggle for socialism. Caudwell’s subsequent writing included *Studies in a Dying Culture* (1938) and *Further Studies in a Dying Culture* (1949). Caudwell made an earnest attempt at establishing correspondence between the society at the state of transition from feudalism to capitalism (described as “period of primitive accumulation”). He says:

> Intemperate will, bloody, bold, resolute, without norm or measure, is the spirit of this era of primitive accumulation.
The absolute individual will overriding all other wills is therefore the principle of life for the Elizabethan age. Marlowe’s Faust and Tamburlaine express this principle in its naivest form (IR 69)

Tracing the course of development of English poetry, Caudwell says that the poems of Blake, Byron, Keats, Wordsworth and Shelley express the ideological revolution of the bourgeois at the next stage, the Industrial Revolution, in the development of capitalism. He observes:

Byron is an aristocrat—— but he is one who is conscious of the break-up of his class as a force, and the necessity to go over to the bourgeois. Hence his mixture of cynicism and romanticism (IR 87)

Caudwell’s interpretation of literature was reductive and mechanistic. His Illusion and Reality exemplifies the crudities of Marxist criticism prevalent in the nineteen thirties. In this work he adopts the orthodox Marxist view in discussing the growth and development of poetry. Terry Eagleton summarizes Caudwell’s theoretical position in the following way:

Insulated from much of Europe, intellectually isolated even within his own society, permitted by Stalinism and idealism, bereft of a ‘theory of superstructures’, Caudwell nonetheless preserved in the historically hopeless task of producing from those unpropitious conditions fully-fledged Marxist aesthetic.
His work bears all the scars of that self-contradictory enterprise: speculative and erratic, studded with random insights, punctuated by hectic forays into and out of alien territories and strewn with hair-raising theoretical vulgarities. (CI 21)

The theoretical vacuum in British Marxist criticism which preceded Caudwell opened up again after him and endured until the emergence of the two major British Marxist critics of the twentieth century, Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton. The revolutionary fervour of the 1960s gave Marxist criticism a revived impetus. A group of Marxist critics was centred around the ‘New Left Review’ founded in 1960 and edited first by Stuart Hall and then by Perry Anderson. Its contributors included L.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams. Williams’s central project, which he would later term “Cultural Materialism”, was to furnish a historical and materialist re-reading of the English cultural tradition, as in Culture and Society (1958), which stressed that culture was a process. In The Long Revolution (1961) he continued his project using categories such as dominant, residual and emergent cultures mediated by what Williams called “structures of feeling”. Williams’s work became overtly Marxist with the publication of Marxism and Literature (1977). In this work Williams undertook a critical review of earlier Marxist theories and offered his own analyses of fundamental Marxist notions such as ideology, hegemony, base and superstructure. His own cultural materialism as set forth here attempts to integrate
a Marxist conception of language and literature. *Keywords* (1976) examines the history of fundamental concepts and categories.

Terry Eagleton’s work initially undertook a critique of commonplace liberal-bourgeois notions about literature as well as some of William’s categories such as “structure of feeling”. In his earlier work, most articulately in *Criticism and Ideology* (1976), Eagleton was influenced by Louis Althusser’s attempt to divest Marxism of Hegelian elements and to promote its scientific status. Eagleton argued that criticism must assume a scientific position beyond the domain of ideology. In this text Eagleton formulated the fundamental categories of a Marxist criticism, and insisted that the text is a producer of ideology. Eagleton’s later work turned somewhat away from Althusser and was inspired instead by Walter Benjamin’s revolutionary thought. It also engaged in a sustained dialogue with many branches of recent literary theory, including feminism, deconstruction and psychoanalysis. Eagleton skilfully situated these currents within their historical and political contexts, revealing the ways in which they were subversive of liberal humanism in its manifold guises. Eagleton’s *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983) has commanded a wide audience in both Britain and America, and he is undoubtedly the most widely read Marxist critic now living. His work as a whole clarified the relationship of Marxism to other discourses; it has revalued the tradition of Marxist criticism itself. It has also articulated Marxist model of aesthetics both theoretically and in its application in several studies of individual authors.
Works Cited


2. --- --- ---. *Illusion and Reality*.