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Literature and Linguistics: of roots and origins, a comparative study of Chomsky's universalism and English new criticism

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ABSTRACT

Much has been said about the Universalism of Chomsky and his so-called revolutionary theories in the field of Modern Linguistics, but little has been done in the way of bringing in line the roots, origins and the historical bases of such a bundle of theories with Modern Western Literary Movements and the way they go back to their historical, cultural and literary tradition in describing their philosophy and assumptions. To be more specific, the present study intends to carry out a comparative study between New Criticism- as the first modern Anglo-American school of criticism- and Chomsky's Universalism, by going to deeper levels of their priori and structure in an attempt to find a common background, as they both owe much to the heritage from which they emerge: the Old Western Tradition of Philosophy.

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Introduction

"Human language appears to be a unique phenomenon, without significant analogue in the animal world."

Noam Chomsky

An English student with little knowledge of linguistics may get dazzled when facing for the first time with Chomsky and his somehow contradictory theories in case of generative grammar or Universalism. Expressions like "recursiveness", "mentalism", "rationalism", "performance" and "competence", (Lyons 228-235) not only bring his struggles for making out a clear vision of the whole to a level of despair, but also cause him to lose the track-as he is not conscious enough about the fact that he is not to memorize them all or to digest a bundle of unfamiliar assumptions in hope of perception. In fact, an English literature student must know that the only important thing for him in studying linguistics is to find the inter-relations or what makes for the interdependence of literature and linguistics and what they have in common. The same should be done in case of Chomsky, though it may seem in the first steps a little bit complex or far-fetched.

In order to search for such associations, one should first of all study the theories of Chomsky in case of language and find the sources, or better to say the schools of thought or theories upon the basis of which he has constructed his body of linguistic theories-or to be more specific his theories in case of Generative Grammar and Language Acquisition. In doing so, the existing contradictions on the above layers – that would make the matter complicated – would get resolved and the understanding of the origins of Chomsky's theories would become more facile; that is the inter-relations with literature – that come from their overlapping in historical, cultural and ideological background – would emerge automatically, as the existing associations are to be highlighted through that act of investigation. Therefore, some of the most important theories of Chomsky would be elaborated below.

Chomsky is known to be a Rationalist. What does this mean? Rationalism is one of the trends of philosophy which deals with the way one acquires knowledge. It owes much to Plato and Descartes who emphasize much on the role of man's reasoning in the way of acquisition of knowledge (Lyons 242). Plato believes man's psyche to be the possessor of a faculty which connects man to the world of metaphysics or the World of Idea; what contains "the most real reality" of existence or "the reality of underlying abstraction" (Gholamhossein Zaade14). In fact, by such a view toward the acquisition of knowledge, Plato claim man's reasoning to be the only channel capable of connecting him to the eternal truth and by implication denies the validity of the sensory data that man may grasp through his terrestrial existence or experience. Similarly, Descartes the famous mathematician and philosopher of the seventeenth Century in Europe, puts emphasis on the power of man's reasoning by his famous philosophical phrase: "Cogito Ergo Sum"- that means "I think, therefore I am". By such a phrase Descartes highlights man's reasoning first of all and secondly its unequal power in dealing with the truth of existence without the need of any object of experience as the mediator – belonging to deductive methods or sense-data – involved to fill the distance between man and reality by acting as a catalyst in the process of mental synthesis. The Rationalists and their ideas are usually considered to be in sharp contrast with Empiricism, which came to existence by the revolution that occurred in case of the theory of knowledge in the seventeenth century. The forerunners of this trend are John Locke and David Hume, who emphasize on the importance of sense-data and experiment. In fact, Empiricists differ from rationalists, because they believe not merely that some of our knowledge about the nature of reality derives from experience, but that all of it does" (Murphy 36). All of the issues discussed above was to define Chomsky's viewpoint in case of Generativism and language Acquisition. In fact Chomsky chooses to be a Rationalist in reaction to two main currents of

thought at his time: Structuralism and Behaviorism. In order to elaborate the matter and define Chomsky's viewpoint, each trend shall be discussed first of all.

Structuralism is the movement that came into being in reaction to traditional grammar by Saussure, Bloomfield and some other linguists to introduce an alternative for the dogmas and the prescriptive methods and rules applied to language and language learning process. By the time of the publication of Saussure's *Course de Linguistique Generale* in 1916, it was claimed that the order of universe and man's reasoning is manifest in human language and gives order to it. But Saussure inverted this theory and claimed language to be a system on its own internal roles, "*en elle meme et pour elle-meme*"- in itself and for itself (Lyons 220); an order- producing system of relations that gives order to the world of man.

Behaviorism is another movement that emerged in America to be mixed with the theories of structuralism, making the issue more and more complicated. According to Douglas Brown in his book, "a behaviorist might consider effective language behavior to be the production of correct responses to stimuli and that "one learns to comprehend an utterance by responding appropriately to it and by being reinforced for that response (26). In fact, from the viewpoint of Behaviorist, one acquires a language in result of a force from outside; the force of nature that causes the biological faculty in him to produce a response that is significance and inline both with that outside phenomenon and the inside faculty. To clarify the issue, the reasoning faculty in man is considered secondary and only a property at service of the biological or the physical origins of language.

At this point, an important question shall be answered: Why Chomsky chooses to be a rationalist? Based on what was said up to this point, the ambiguity is somehow resolved. By the time of Chomsky, because of the fast development of science and the popularity of scientific approaches in scholarly studies and investigations, the field of linguistics was obsessed with the theories of structuralism, behaviorism, and empiricism; and a kind of radical deviation from traditional viewpoints in the field of grammar and rationalism had occurred. In this atmosphere Chomsky was to stand against the bias of this new currents that would even question the positive aspects of rationalism and what would change man into a mere conditioned animal devoid of high reason, with limited response models-language sentences- in his mind, applying them by analogy to the recurrent identical situations as the stimuli from outside would demand. That is why Chomsky deviates from Structuralism, Behaviorism and Empiricism by giving his revolutionary theories in case of Generative Grammar and Language Acquisition. Here it has become transparent that his theories are founded upon a kind of rationalism, anti-behaviorism and anti-empiricism. Some of the contradictory terms coined by Chomsky would be elaborated here based on these assumptions, then the origins and the roots of them would be connected to some schools and trends in Anglo-American Criticism which enjoy the same weight as their linguistic counterpart, since they overlap with each other at some point in their origin.

As the initial quotation of this paper demonstrates, Chomsky considers human language to be "a unique phenomenon"; something which other animals lack. According to George Yule, in his book, this is Chomsky's "Innateness Hypothesis" (5) that would discredit the possibility of animal language acquisition, the way human being would do; as it relates this property to human genetics and the result of something beyond a mere

physical adaptation. Actually this theory of him resulted in the justification of the fact that the "acquisition of even the barest rudiment of language is quite beyond the capacities of an otherwise intelligent ape" (qtd. in Yule 16-17). To put in another term, this viewpoint acquired by Chomsky is a reaction to what a series of narrow experiments in a struggle for teaching apes human language – based on the assumption of language to be a simple behavioral response common among men and other animals – had brought about. Chomsky needed to discredit all of these studies, so he adopts a kind of rational approach in describing human language and the way this acquisition occurs. One of the chief accomplishments of him according to Lyons is then the "species-specificity" (245) of human language and "the interdependence of thought and language" and the fact that "traditional logic", "philosophy of language" and reasoning, has more to contribute to the study of language mechanism than the empiricist struggles based on behaviorism and the limited system of relations in its Saussurian term (239).

By elaborating the above term, it becomes clear that why Chomsky's theories are against behaviorism and empiricism. But there are yet some important terms that their elaboration is necessary as they can illuminate his viewpoint: Rule- Governed Creativity, Structure-Dependence, Performance and Competence.

According to Chomsky the process of language acquisition in children is based on a kind of creativity that would result in using the potentials of the language system and the relations established between the signifier and the signified - in terms of Saussure- in order to produce new structures; structures never produced before and not shaped through analogy by the imitation of other structures digested, prior to that time. In fact Chomsky sees the structure-dependence of that system not a limitation, but a property that would help the children to gain a mastery of their language by being in control of that system in all its integrity. A good example of such creativity in children at the early stages of language acquisition is phrases like "baby food" to stand for each meal time or using the word "ball" to refer to anything round in their environment.

After giving the above examples, it is very easy to speak about performance and Competence according to Chomsky. Competence is one's knowledge of language system that makes him able to produce infinite number of language sentences that would make for his performance. According to the example given above the child possesses the linguistic competence to refer to notions like meal or round objects, but the process for gaining the mastery of performance has not yet been acquired completely. That is why he uses his creativity – mentioned just in above paragraphs- to find a solution for self-expression. By all these elaborations, it is now good to give a definition of Chomsky's Generativism: Language consists of a bundle of finite number of sentences each finite in length and shaped out of a finite number of elements which make for a system, by the mastery of which each man is able to express his mentality; as the system is governed by a set of rules, laws and potentials associated with logic, reasoning and creativity.

Now that the ambiguities of Chomsky's theories in case of Generativism and language acquisition have been somehow resolved, it is the time to relate the roots and origins of his theory -or better to say the philosophical, cultural and historical elements forming Chomsky's, or American, intellectual background- and relate it with Anglo-American Literature. It is New Criticism that the author of this paper finds in close

relation with Chomsky and his linguistic theories at some levels. In result of suggesting such a commonality or series of associations it is then appropriate to have a brief introduction to New Criticism and the way its relation with Anglo-American Literature can show the route to the roots and origins that are the very constitutional factors in formation of Chomsky's linguistic theories.

New Criticism which is called the first modern school of Anglo-American Criticism has been dominant in Britain and America from 1930s to 1950s. This school considers all "extrinsic" criteria-historical, biographical, as well as social and political aspects- to be invalid in an act of criticism and believes a work of literature to be of "autonomy" in essence (Bressler 53) - or better to say of a "verbal and Iconic" value (Wimsatt and Bredsdley). Being autonomous, a literary work possesses an objective existence, and demands in response an objective form of criticism - having the ultimate purpose of the portrayal of the intrinsic values of a text. Additionally, this school focuses on the notion of the 'Organic Unity' (Brooks 26), of a literary text and claims a work of literature - or 'the poem' as they call- to be the product of a series of dynamic relations established between the constructional elements, finally bringing about the interdependence of the form and meaning of that work. To a larger extent, United States has provided the ground for the flourishing of New Criticism; that is why all important Critics of this school are all American and their theories will be the focus of attention here. Some of the most outstanding American Critics of this school whose theories are to be related to that of Chomsky are then: Ransom, Tate, Davidson and Warren.

By reviewing the above paragraph, the readers will find that this is just an elaboration of the principles of a school of literary criticism that can by no means be related to Chomsky. So there will be the question that how it will be possible to approach the issue in a way that finding a common ground between them is possible. To be honest, the very ambiguities and contradictions had filled the mind of the author of this paper before finding the clue; and the enigma was solved by figuring out that the most significant thing for New Critics is not the way they define criticism, but the definition of Literature upon the basis of which, they view criticism. To be more specific, that mentioned commonality or series of associations between Chomsky and New Criticism shall be traced in that area.

Ransom, Tate, Davidson and Warren all belong to the so-called South Agrarian School. In the preface to his book, Cowan tries to describe the roots and reasons for the establishment of this school in south of America. He believes that the southerner is the inheritor of an agrarian culture, someone who has inherited an old tradition based on agriculture, communal values and Christianity- a faith as basic as the Christianity of those early immigrants to the new land in hope of finding a New-Israel. Cowan adds that by the beginning of twentieth century suddenly these southerners faced a kind of rapid change by the development of industry and new scientific movements, all a threat to their southern dreams (Cowan 9). That is why it becomes the major concern of the poets, critics and the poet-critics of this region to be more active than other parts of America in defending their heritage and religion against the changes with having their tradition in center and showing their opposition to scientific movements as the major rule of their Literary criticism.

Now that the viewpoint of these critics is revealed, it is better to return to the main issue -as mentioned above-to look for the way they define literature based on the tradition and culture they have been nurtured by. The Following paragraphs contain a brief viewpoint of each of them and the way each of them finds the ideal literature. It should be reminded that these critics use the word "poem" to address literature in general, so the probable misunderstanding may come to being, if the word is taken in its narrow significance-to stand for that piece of literature usually accompanied by meter and rhyme.

Speaking about Ransom, the best thing would be focusing on his religious viewpoints: He believes that "the fall of Adam came into being by his scientific knowledge and the attempt for controlling nature; before that he was living in a world of aestheticism which was the emanation of the truth and the reality of creation". But by his fall Man "felt a kind of loss and a new desire came to him to put that eternal beauty into description through transmitting it into the language of this world" (q.t.d. in Cowan), that is the reason for creation of poetry. Based on the notion of "transmitting", Ransom then introduces the "poetry of Idea" and the "poetry of Physics" and describes the latter as of more validity, because he believes the language of this world to be capable of a more physical description of objects and things or the concretization of abstract ideas rather than just speaking about them in Platonic manner.

Now it is better to focus on some quotations from Ransom about the definition of poetry (or a work of literature):

"There is a reality outside mind and the poet's submission to it at the moment of creation results in poetry" (The Future of Poetry 1).

"Poetry deals with life, that for the serious poet, life embraces morality and religion" (Stauffer 108).

"World's Value is heightened through a poem, which being an icon capable of representing that value metaphorically, enhances man's appreciation of world and its complexities, thus this icon poses a religious function"(Asher 293).

Having summed up what Ransom has said about poetry (literature) up to here, this definition of literature from his viewpoint can be given:

Literature is the result of the struggle of a poet to put into concrete what he can revive of the primary abstract truth of the aesthetic order of creation, through his ontology. This is done by the inserting of the author's creativity and wisdom into the realm of language of this world. The poem, as the result has the likeness of the primary world of order before Adam's fall, and in a smaller scale portrays the complexities and paradoxes of human existence: a paradox felt only when he sees the structure of the world of existence an equilibrium came off by coexistence of contraries.

Tate asserts that "by the development of science, the [notion of] southern community of people has become fragmented and people are no more like each other in their thoughts, ideas, belief and the way of life as the science has removed that notion of tradition, religion and community" (Cowan 49), and he sees it the job of a poet to recover that community. In Tate's viewpoint, that recovery is to be done, only when the poet is able to express his 'vision' of the world, putting it in a special form; For Tate 'Form' is a special knowledge about the structure of the world which-through analogy and symbolism- is to portray a meaning also specific, not to be found in scientific mode of expression. (q.t.d. in Cowan 52).

"Tension in poetry" is the name of a famous work by Tate; in this work he asserts that two opposite poles are to be found in a work of literature: "Extension" and "Intension". "Extension" is the tendency toward simple abstraction of the objects into the universal, and "Intension" is merging the object in pure feeling. In viewpoint of Tate, each poet is to compromise between these two opposite poles in order to win a unique form of expression.

By Summarizing What Tate has said in case of poetry, criticism and aestheticism the following definition of literature may come to mind:

Literature is the struggle of a writer to portray his knowledge of the world in a special form or construction, which is unique and the result of chaining two opposite desires together: the desire to portray what is true or high in an abstract way and the desire for getting fused into the core of the objects of this world. As the due portrayal is done by establishment of a series of analogies and a kind of symbolic imagination, it results in full comprehension of the readers, something which the language of science is unable to do. For Tate Literature has a moral and religious and social function, as the writer is to recover the fragmented community of people in a world fragmented by new science and secularization.

Among Southern Critics, Davidson is the one whose criticism is much based on the definition tradition, so for finding the definition of literature in his viewpoint, one must first check the definition of tradition. Cowan quotes the former definition from him and infers the latter:

"Tradition consists of something quiet real within men themselves when they have lived together as a community" (49). "Poetry is of a tradition, expressive of the experience of a community; something necessary for keeping guard of their identity and finally survival" (49-50).

In fact Davidson believes that one of the major concerns of poetry (literature) is saving the tradition of south in the modern world, because man is not living in a Utopia: literature is not for pleasure and time-passing and has a strong social function that is to keep the community and religion safe from the attack of scientific superficial movements.

Davidson in another place asserts that "each society at any point needs to know what his people truly are and what they are urged to become, and this is literature which has the duty to bring these people to consciousness on the basis of tradition" (q.t.d. in Cowan 56).

As it was mentioned above Davidson has a special view point of literature and tradition, which can be likened to that of T.s Eliot in "Tradition and Individual talent". The following definition of literature can be given in conclusion as that of Davidson:

Literature is one of the means a tradition can adopt in order to bring consciousness to its people about what they are and what they ought to become, by the celebration of the virtues and specific way of conduct, accepted as that community's basic laws through history.

Warren is different from other Southern Critics in the way that he does not focus much on the region of the south. In fact he rejects too much local color and regionalism in a work of literature and believes that the important thing is not the superficial portrayal of the tradition of a southern community and the way they are living; what is of significant in his viewpoint is the ideology, system of thought and religion on the basis of which the ancestors of a community have founded a tradition.

Based on his basic viewpoint of the significance of the reality beyond the surface of tradition, Warren defines poetry so:

"Literature reflects the conflict between the "World" and "Idea". The World is the set of tough conditions which man encounters in his brute experience of the actual. And Idea is the dream or the vision of a man about how things ought to be" (Cowan 64).

Warren believes that the "Idea" which is going to be expressed in poetry is pure, but the means of expression of it which is man's experience of life, is inevitably impure, so poetry (literature) is impure in result, an impurity not in negative sense, but something of positive quality which reflects the complexity of the world of existence in its mirror (Pure and Impure Poetry 1943).

By considering what Warren has claimed in his works, this definition of literature may be investigated at the end:

Literature is the connection between what one has in mind, of his experiences of the world and the notion of the 'Ideal' which he has known. This connection can only be established through the portrayal of impure (complex) and partial images that come from the experiences of him; though partial and impure, these images are what make the format of his life and the base of his thinking system.

At this point, it is necessary to find the common ground between these members of the South Agrarian School. To do that, one should look for the ground from which they have flourished – and this will consequently be the beginning of the comparison with Chomsky's Theories.

It is interesting that all of them – Ransom, Tate, Davidson and Warren – owe much to Plato and his classification of universe into two: the World of Physics and the World of Metaphysics (or the World of Idea). Plato considers the second one, of the premier significance and claims man's power of reason to be his only guide to make out the truth of creation that is beyond terrestrial senses. By looking at the descriptions provided, it is manifest how these critics took the notion of platonic world and applied it to literature: ideal literature is what reflects man's reasoning, what makes him to use his potentials to connect himself to the truth of creation, in the way of transmitting it into the worldly medium of expression; that is human language.

This Platonism and its popularity among these critics has a strong cultural and historical background. And its connection with Neo-Platonism and Transcendentalism in America shall be traced. Plotinus is the pioneer of the school of Neo-Platonism. "This is a school of platonic philosophers of the third to the fifth century A.D [which] developed the view that all beauty in the sensible world as well as all goodness and truth- is an 'emanation' (radiation) from one or Absolute ,which is the source of all being and value" (Abrams 232). In fact this group of Philosopher somehow Christianized the viewpoints of Plato and reflected the fact that the truth of the existence comes from God and a Gnostic search for truth can be accomplished only through the pure reasoning of the spirit of man that is a tiny fragment- once united with the holy ghost in eternity, resurrecting with it in the other eternity for the second time. By summing up what was said up to this point, it can become clear that a South Agrarian critic is to redefine his puritan heritage that directly goes back to neo-platonic culture.

Transcendentalism is another school of thought or philosophy that has affected the South Agrarian philosophy very much. "Transcendentalism, was a philosophy that become

influential during the late 1700's and 1800's. It was based on the belief that knowledge is not limited to experience and observation" (Yeganeh 1). And it was a reaction against the movement of Empiricism – as mentioned at the beginning of this article in case of Chomsky. Because of Puritanism, this movement has strongly influence America rather than any other part of the world, in a way that J.A Saxton asserts that "the very existence of the united States is 'Transcendental'", (qtd. in Gura xi). Philip F. Gura, a professor of American Literature and Culture, believes that this movement is strongly based on the opposition with British Empiricism-that of Lock and Hume- and a kind of alliance with German Idealism and the viewpoints of Kant in case of aestheticism(6).

Having related Plato, Neo-Platonism and Transcendentalism in America, the reader is to find the way the South Agrarian philosophy is constructed. Literature is to re-verbalize what in eternity Adam was blessed with: The Word. Then it was his fall into the world of physical senses that somehow shattered his view of truth and his repository of tongue was locked by that shock. So it is only a poet-prophet who can connect himself to the world of reality, because of his moral and intellectual perfection that has come to him in result of an endeavor to revive that divine power of language or self-expression in pure sense.

Now at the termination, the turn goes to the major concern of this paper; that is to relate whatever has been said and discussed up to this point about New Criticism, to the theories of Chomsky in case of Generativism and Language Acquisition. The first thing, is the fact that Chomsky also owes much to Plato, Neo-Platonism and Transcendentalism, as he is grown in the atmosphere of America- bearing that very heritage that had come to the Southern Critics. In fact Chomsky's emphasis on anti-empiricism comes from his love for that transcendentalism that would uplift humanity's power of language by rescuing him from being considered as a conditioned animal, only ready to give response to the stimulus from outside. This viewpoint that is somehow very close to a kind of mentalism, helps Chomsky to get rid of the theories popular and makes him able to focus more on the philosophy of language and what would reflect its mechanism, in grammatical rules or the process of language acquisition, as the faculty in mind which is in control of language cannot yet be fully traced by scientific developments till this age.

The other relation that can be found is the similarity between Competence-Performance Theory and New Critics viewpoints in relation with Platonism and Neo-Platonism. Chomsky believes that man has the ability or the competence to acquire language; and if the situation is appropriate, at certain age he would start speaking automatically. The Process of first language acquisition explained by Chomsky is then very close to what New Critics give for a poet's task at the moment of artistic creation. The Child has been blessed with the competence for language learning. And as he grows up, he puts that knowledge in practice based on what he acquires from his environment- that should be nothing but the specific language of that region with all its potentials, values and specifications - and what he has of creativity. This dynamic process which results in language production is in fact what Chomsky titles performance. The same would happen in the viewpoint of New Critics for a poet – or the one who crafts literature. In eternity he has been blessed with the ability to see the truth of existence and the power to

revive the likeness of that in his earthly life in the frame of a language- a verbalization of the reflection or the manifestation of that truth, in the way that it is reflected in his environment. As each poet possesses different talents, he is then able to reconstruct that image by manipulating his language and its potentials in a different way. Each man is a poet in disguise and has his own way of expression and it is a property that no other creature has been blessed with. Undoubtedly, it is what Chomsky and New Critics have arrived at, in their hard but holy labor to revive the harmonious tone of eternity as a poet, the builder of the dome of truth:

Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That Sunny dome! those cave of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Wave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honeydew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of paradise. ¹

1. From "Kubla Khan" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge(1772-1834)

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