

The Spirit of Scholarship from *The Art of Literary Research* by Richard D. Altick: A Critical Summary

Firdous Nazir

*PhD Scholar, Maulana Azad National Urdu University
Gachibowli, Hyderabad, Telangana, India, 500032*

The chapter “The Spirit of Scholarship” discusses the dedication to the intellectual pursuit, learning, and pursuit of knowledge. In this chapter of the book, a scholar learns certain traits of true scholarship, such as not relying on information without verification, scrutinising the original sources, and making precise arguments. Altick argues at the outset of the chapter, “There is little use in talking about any topics associated with the circumstances or the result of literary creation if we do not have our facts straight” (18). He supports his arguments with examples, pieces of evidence, and facts. The first example he gives is about the intellectual background of *Dr Faustus* (1604), quoting Douglas Bush, who has quoted an “able critic” asking, “Had not the Harriot seen the satellites of Jupiter, and had not Raleigh come back from Guinana with reports [of a fabulous country]? To this professor Bush replies, “if these questions are not merely rhetorical, the answer is ‘No, they hadn’t’ (19). He writes that Raleigh set off for Guiana two years after Marlowe’s death and there is no proper evidence that Harriot had made any major observations until the later years. It implies either the intellectual background sketched by the “able critic” does not have any reliability or Marlow had the supernatural quality of foreshadowing, which scientifically is troublesome for a scholar. The next example is from F. R. Leavis’ *The Great Tradition* wherein he has praised *Roderick Hudson* the first work of Henry James by arguing that James had the “formidable intellectual edge” at the earliest stage. He has scrutinised the passages from the extensively revised edition by the author himself. It suggests Leavis made a claim which is not reliable and objective Altick says the scholars’ job is constructive and constructively deconstructive, in the latter pursuit a scholar uses collateral pieces of evidence to peel off the labels assigned to a writer for example “sensuous Keats”, “waspyish Pope”, “ethereal Shelly” and shows how complex it is to categorise the artist and his art.

Altick talks about the error, its prevalence, progress, and persistence. He says a good researcher is always sceptical about the truth, he should always have a low opinion about the “human capacity for truth”. Altick gives us an example of the Bronte sisters’ letter wherein they mentioned a “thunderstorm” which throughout the years has been taken as a “snowstorm” because of one man’s error Clement in his shorter biographical edition of Bronte has replaced “thunderstorm” as “snowstorm” to give some aesthetic notions. Altick says a true scholar should rely on original sources. Further on, Altick says, we are humans and we can not escape mistakes but we as scholars should minimise the occurrence of mistakes, since we can not be perfect. Our aim as scholars should be to eliminate the mistakes we can find throughout our research pursuit. According to Altick, historical accounts are contaminated by different sources and a scholar can with his labour and critical intelligence make it reliable. He mentions the possibility of error occurrence via different sources such as error in copying a document, moralistic, political, or personal bias on the part of an early witness. He says this list is long and the histories are contaminated. He acknowledges that many good books provide a sort of treatise on the critical examination of evidence. He provides various case studies that exemplify the lurking of misinformation coming down from our predecessors. While going through these case studies we shall have a spirit of vigilance, says Altick.

Altick says the chronicles of literary scholarship are filled with stories that can be termed “Five Little Half-Truths (or Non-Facts) and How They Grew.” He claims that if a mistake is left it will not only get firm ground but it becomes more hospitable and extends its protective colouration over additional mistakes. He gives the example of R. L. Steveson and says that during the 1920s and 1930s, there were many discussions and debates about the identity of Claire whom Steveson has alluded to in his poetry.

Some scholars said that she was an early sweetheart of Stevenson and some went to the extent of saying she was some prostitute who he wanted to free from the brothel. Later on, it was cleared that it was none other than Mrs. Sitwell a woman confidant of Stevenson, J. C. Furnas showed it conclusively through the *Voyage to Windward* (1951). The myths persist rather than prosaic truths because of their picturesque nature, argues Altick. The case of Florence Nightingale's biography and a line "one fight more the best and the last" from Robert Browning's poem *Prospice* is discussed in much detail to show how an error occurs, progresses, and persists. The case study concludes "Wood intended as merely an inlaid phrase. . . that began as a small artistic effect ended up as a putative quotation from a document which in all probability never existed" (24). The other example he gives about wrong generalisations is by referring to Arther Aspinall a modern historian who has laid down the claim that "at no time were the newspapers beyond the reach of town workers" (30). Aspinall considers the account of Montesquieu who by chance once had seen a slater on the rooftop with a newspaper. When facts and other collateral pieces of evidence were scrutinised that showed us at that time literacy among the working class was not common, so the conclusion is that the generalisation was not reliable because of the evidence and traits of the people that are opposing this generalisation. In this case Altick writes, "In evaluating any piece of historical information, especially when it occurs in a primary source, a good working knowledge of human nature is one of the most effective pieces of equipment a scholar can possess" (31).

In the middle part of the chapter Altick talks about the examination of the evidence, he says if scholars want to erase the mistakes which have occurred during the process of historical transmission. They must go "back to documents, back to the people with whom our information began, back to the collateral evidence" (31). He briefly discusses autobiographies and argues that we can not take them at face value, for the unreliability of specific dates, places, and other historical facts since these are artistic imaginations and a writer can exaggerate and colour the facts for self-justification. He mentions some of the famous writers who have not been truthful about their lives in their autobiographies such as Whitman, Mark Twain, Shaw, Yeats, Sherwood Anderson, J. M. Barrie, Thomas Wolfe, etc.

The example of Shelly's expulsion from Oxford, who has given various accounts of that event at different times, makes the scholars' job difficult to find out which account is true. The different accounts about the composition of *The Vicar of Wakefield*; Boswell's account, Thrall's account, Richard Cumberland's account, Sir John Hawkins's account, William Cook's account, and George Stevens' account make it difficult to say about the real or true history of the composition. After scrutinising the various accounts Altick concludes by asking very important questions about *The Vicar of Wakefield* such as, "Did the episode happen at all? How much did Goldsmith collect for *The Vicar of Wakefield*? Where was Goldsmith at the time the manuscript was sold?" (36) After the various accounts, Altick says that it is like a fracas of a class which is a famous annals of psychology. People perceive events and individuals differently, leading to varying accounts of the same incident. Those proven wrong on other points do not automatically disqualify as a witness but evidence from such sources should be scrutinised with extra care. Scholars should assess the accuracy of facts that a witness claims by considering factors like presence, attention, sobriety, eyesight and hearing. Scholars should be aware that stories may change as they are passed from person to person, potentially distorting the original event.

Altick emphasises the challenges and complexity faced by biographers when dealing with biased testimony and polemical sources in the study of English writers embroiled in controversies. Even when the witnesses have firsthand knowledge, their testimony can still be biased, which is a challenge for biographers. Biographers researching English writers embroiled in religious and political controversies must navigate the polemical nature of their sources. These sources including pamphlets, newspaper attacks, and personal letters, often vehemently denounce the personal character and deeds of their subjects. Writers like Dryden, Defoe, and Fielding faced difficulties as their personal lives were often obscured by the controversial nature of their times. An example of bias is given with Defoe, where accusations of keeping a mistress were based on an extremist source seeking to "tarnish a fellow pamphleteer who supported reform and religious tolerance". The study of writer Pope involves sorting through a "morass of attack and counter-attack" making it challenging to uncover the truth about events and individuals. Uncovering the truth in such

situations demands years of patient analysis of personalities, motives, and public issues that fuel animosity and biased accounts.

Altick highlights the challenges in deciphering the truth in historical accounts about writers, emphasising the need for objective analysis and understanding of human psychology. The accuracy of contemporary accounts about writers can be questioned for various reasons, beyond ideological bias. Personal motivations can heavily influence the nature of such accounts, whether from the outset or introduced later by individuals seeking to protect a writer's reputation. Writers like Byron, Shelly, Poe, Joyce, and D. H. Lawrence had complex personalities and relationships, making it challenging to discern motivations behind the surviving accounts of their lives. Accounts of writers can span the entire spectrum of human partiality, from vindictive to adulatory, making it difficult to separate fact from bias. Filtering out prejudices requires not only expertise in the facts but also a keen understanding of human psychology. Amid complex emotions, including jealousy and desires for self-justification, it's often impossible to be certain about all the relevant facts or true motives of individuals long deceased. When assessing such accounts, the goal is to view them as objectively as possible, especially since the influence of the writer's presence no longer affects judgment.

Altick highlights the complexities surrounding Byron's and Shelly's lives and the intriguing character of Edward John Trelawny, whose accounts add layers of uncertainty to their stories. Byron's character and career present complex continuous debates over more than 150 years in English literary studies. His life story is closely intertwined with that of Shelly, particularly in its later phase. Edward John Trelawny plays an important role in this narrative. He has provided a detailed account (around 10 narratives) of the burning of Shelly's body on the beach of Pisa, each differing to some extent from all the rest. Trelawny is viewed as a liar by his contemporaries that complicates the truth about Byron's and Shelly's life stories. Biographers exploring the lives of Byron and Shelly faced an enduring and pressing question; could Trelawny be trusted for accurate accounts of their lives? Two investigators; Leslie Marchand and Lady Anne Hill, conducted a fresh examination of Trelawny's narratives. Lady Anne Hill took an inspired approach

by cross-referencing Trelawny's claims in *Adventures of a Younger Son* with unimpeachable/standard British Admiralty documents in the public record office. Through meticulous investigation, she found that the ratio of truth to fiction in Trelawny's autobiography was remarkably low, estimated at just one-tenth. This portion represented his accurate childhood memories, highlighting the fabrications in his accounts. She proposed that Trelawny's love/desire for spinning outrageous tales stemmed from a sense of inferiority surrounded by well-educated individuals like Byron and Shelly. It suggests Trelawny's tendency to embellish his life story to compensate for feelings of inadequacy in the company of literary giants, says Lady Hill. The question arises: Did Trelawny's tendency to embellish his adventures affect his truthfulness when describing the last days of Byron and Shelly? Leslie Marchand, after examining multiple versions of the seaside cremation, found those written closest to the event and the most credible and consistent in detail, which is typical of such accounts. Trelawny's accounts written thirty to fifty years after the event are viewed with suspicion, like memory lapse, fact check, etc.

In the last part of the chapter, Altick stresses the importance of a rigorous and accurate chronology when conducting research, as it often serves as a key to solving questions of relationship and authenticity. Throughout the chapter, the emphasis is on the importance of being certain about the facts. Even when there is no doubt, the advice is to recheck the information. Before delving into various fields of research, two common problems are introduced i.e. chronology and critical examination of a document's authenticity. The chronological order of events and their causal relationships is vital in literary history and many other fields. It can offer decisive answers when other evidence is unclear or nonexistent. A sharp sense of time allows scholars to accurately place events in their chronological sequence, which can either confirm or refute doubtful statements.

Altick gives an example of A. C. Swinburne's poem "The Triumph of Time" and says, it is widely accepted that the poem was his unrequited love for Jane Faulkner, known as Boo, the adopted daughter of a respected London pathologist. According to Edmund Gosse, Swinburne extravagantly proposed to her, which she found preposterous and burst into laughter. Their interaction ended on unfavourable

terms. After this Swineburne travelled to Northumberland and expressed his embittered feelings through the poem. The story though moving has a critical flaw. John S. Mayfield found the official record of Jane's birth i.e. 1852, while the incident occurred in 1862. This suggests that Jane was just ten years old at the time of the proposal. Given the significant age difference (15 years), it is unlikely that Swinburne would have proposed a ten-year-old girl when he was 25. Consequently, Jane Faulkner has been discredited as the inspiration behind the poem. It is generally agreed that the poem resulted from a deeply traumatic experience, the identity of the woman or girl who caused this pain has not been positively determined. The other example he gives is from the case of Lord Byron's widow's account, which also has problems with the dates and biases about the facts.

Altick discusses the problems and challenges posed by undated letters, undated books, and manuscripts. He says that we can fix the dates by some pragmatic methods such as physical evidence for dates, Postmarks, paper watermark years, and handwriting. Dating letters from contents finding allusions to contemporary events, newspapers, dairies, and other primary sources. Reference to the writer's personal life can help to determine the date when supplemented by other biographical materials. Sometimes letters can be dated by fitting them into a sequence of correspondence. Chronograms are the specific letters counted Roman numerals to reveal the hidden dates within titles, some books, especially incunabula and 16th-17th century books may not have clear dates. Some books are fictitious imprints that may contain false information about their place and publication, often to hide sensitive content. Researchers need to uncover the true origin of such works. Details like paper type, watermarks, typography, ornaments, and illustrations can provide clues about a book's age. The techniques, such as chronograms, uncovering fictitious imprints, and analysing physical characteristics are essential for determining the probable dates of undated books, especially those from earlier centuries. The message is the need for caution and scrutiny when dealing literary artifacts and documents. Literary forgeries are most often associated with authors who are popular among collectors and whose handwritten manuscripts command high prices like, Burns, Shelly, and Byron. While literary forgeries are not encountered frequently, they do exist e.g unauthentic

letters attributed to Burns and fake Shelly manuscripts from 1920s have surfaced. Maintaining a healthy level of skepticism and exercising vigilance are essential for preserving the integrity of literary research and preventing the spread of forgeries.

WORK CITED

- [1] Altick, Richard Daniel. *The Art of Literary Research*. Norton, 1975.