

to focus on the novel. If you want scope, the novel has more to offer than lyrical poetry. So, somewhat belatedly, Leavis brought the novel into the amazing professionalization of the study of English as it had started in the 1920s (drama, and in particular Shakespeare, many of whose plays lent themselves to an approach in poetic terms, had already been embraced in the 1930s). This is not to say that novels had been completely ignored. But Leavis elevated this interest into a programme. Moreover, he significantly expanded its scope, arguing that literary criticism, and in particular criticism of the novel, provided the best imaginable basis for criticizing contemporary culture. As we will see in the later chapters of this book, literary studies – far broader defined than Leavis ever imagined, or would have accepted – is still very strongly engaged in social and cultural critique, albeit in ways that Leavis would not necessarily approve of.

MEANING IN THE UNITED STATES

In the 1930s, the work of Eliot, Richards, and Leavis found a warm welcome on the other side of the Atlantic among a group of poets, including John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Cleanth Brooks, who in the mid-1930s initiated a professionalization of American literary studies comparable to the developments in England.

These *New Critics*, as they came to be called (the label derives from the title of Ransom's 1941 book *The New Criticism*), shared the misgivings of their English colleagues about the contemporary world. They, too, saw around them a world driven by a desire for profit in which the so-called triumphs of modern science, in combination with capitalistic greed, threatened to destroy tradition and everything that was not immediately useful – including poetry. Like their English mentors, they turned to an idealized past in which organic unity and social harmony had not yet been destroyed by the industrialization and commercialization of the contemporary world.

The New Critics, then, saw poetry as a means of resisting commodification and superficiality. Because of its internal organization – its formal structure – a poem created harmony out of opposites and tension and thereby presented a vital alternative. In creating coherent wholes out of the full variety and contradictory complexity of life,

poetry halted and transcended the chaotic flux of actual experience. As John Crowe Ransom (1888–1974) put it in a 1937 essay called ‘Criticism, Inc.’: ‘The poet perpetuates in his poem an order of existence which in actual life is constantly crumbling beneath his touch’ (Ransom [1937] 1972: 238). In perpetuating such fleeting orders, one of the poet’s main strategies was the use of paradox with, as Cleanth Brooks (1906–94) said, ‘its twin concomitants of irony and wonder’. By means of paradoxes ‘the creative imagination’ achieves ‘union’. That ‘fusion is not logical’, Brooks continues, ‘it apparently violates science and common sense; it welds together the discordant and the contradictory’ (Brooks [1942] 1972: 300–301).

In this emphasis on paradox – a statement containing contradictory aspects – and irony the New Critics clearly follow Eliot and Richards. They, too, see poems as storehouses of authentic values and as expressing important truths about the complexities of life that no other medium can convey nearly as effectively. (This is so, Brooks suggests, because ‘apparently the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox’ [292].) In some ways, however, they follow their own course. Richards had been seriously interested in the effects of poetry upon its readers. The New Critics exclude both the poet – as Richards had also done – and the reader from their approach to poetry. As a result, they focus more on the actual *form* of literary works than their English counterparts. In fact, within the context of English and American criticism their approach to literature might well be considered *formalist* and it does indeed often go by that label. However, compared to the European formalists that I will discuss in the next chapters, their interest in form is relatively limited. They are not interested in form for its own sake, but in form as contributing to a text’s meaning.

The New Critics’ lack of interest in the effects of poems does not mean that they denied the special character of poetic language. As Brooks tells us, ‘the poet’s language . . . is a language in which the connotations play as great a part as the denotations’ (295). Moreover, for the New Critics, too, a poem had to be fully experienced in order to be effective. ‘A poem should not mean, but be’, as they said, meaning that the ‘message’ that we can extract from a poem cannot possibly do justice to its complexity. Anything but the entirety of its paradoxes, opposites, and reconciling ironies is

reductive and damaging. 'Close reading', that is, the focus on the text that Richards and Leavis had promoted so vigorously in England, in the hands of the New Critics became closer than ever. With the author's intentions and the reader's response removed from the scene, the study of literature restricted itself to analysing the techniques and strategies that poems used to deliver their paradoxical effects: the system of checks and balances that creates the diversity in unity that we experience. Although it probably seems counterintuitive, from this perspective it is not the poet – about whose intentions we usually know next to nothing – but indeed the poem itself that does the delivering. What organizes the poem – brings its diverse elements together – is not so much authorial intention as an abstract principle, the principle of *coherence*, which the New Critics assumed present and active in any 'good' poem. In good poetry, and, by extension, all good literature, the principle of coherence keeps the text's paradoxes and possible contradictions in check. Some may object that this does not make much sense because literary texts do not spring up overnight and all by themselves in remote and mysterious areas, so that it might seem a bit perverse to exclude the author from the discussion of a text. But it makes a good deal of practical sense. In some cases we do not even know who the author is and in many cases we can only guess at the author's intentions because we have no information. Moreover, when we have that information it does not necessarily illuminate the poem, at least not from the perspective that I am discussing here. As we have seen, these critics assume that good literature is not bound by time and place. It transcends the limitations of its place of origin (including the author) and addresses the complexities of an essentially unchanging human condition. The concrete intentions of the author, or the circumstances that triggered the poem, are therefore mostly or even wholly irrelevant. What does it matter if we know that poet X wrote this particular poem because he was hopelessly in love with the undeserving Lady Y? The poem in question will only be worthwhile if it does *not* give us all the details but focuses on scorned love in general. In this sense, information about authorial intention or the direct occasion for a work of literature may be damaging rather than helpful. For humanist critics such as Eliot, Richards, Leavis, and the New Critics, human nature and the

human condition have not changed over time and are essentially the same the world over. Human nature is not black, or white, or brown; it does not speak English or Tagalog; it is not prehistoric, medieval, or postmodern; it does not lean towards deep-sea fishing, pig farming, or business administration. Such details will inevitably feature in a literary work, but they are secondary to what a good poem, novel, or play has to offer.

THE REIGN OF THE CRITICS AND ITS LIMITATIONS

In his 1937 essay 'Criticism, Inc.' the New Critic John Crowe Ransom tells us that criticism 'might be seriously taken in hand by professionals' (Ransom [1937] 1972: 229). Aware that he is perhaps using 'a distasteful figure', he nonetheless has 'the idea that what we need is Criticism, Inc., or Criticism, Ltd.' The essay catches the new professionalism that literary academics on both sides of the Atlantic were not unreasonably proud of and invites us to look at the role that Ransom had in mind for himself and his fellow professionals. One part of their self-appointed task stands out. As we have seen, for the New Critics and their English colleagues literature, and in particular poetry, constituted a defensive line against the world of vulgar commerce and amoral capitalist entrepreneurialism that they held responsible for the moral decline of Western culture. But who was to decide which works of literature among the plenitude that the past has left us (and to which the present keeps on adding) actually contain 'the best that has been thought and said in the world', to use Arnold's words again? Who was to expose the at-first-sight-attractive poems that because of their limited view and superficial emotions ultimately, even if unintentionally, undermined Arnold's 'culture'?

If literature takes the place of religion, as Arnold had prophesied, then critics are the defenders of the faith. For a period of fifty years the large majority of literary academics on both sides of the Atlantic saw themselves as the elect, as an intellectual and moral elite that had as its central task to safeguard 'life', the fullness of human experience. In the minds of especially the Leavisites, but also the others who partly or wholly shared their views, criticism and social critique were so intimately interwoven that they could not be separated from each other. As I have already suggested, the

interrelatedness of criticism – even if it now usually goes under other names – and social critique is still a hallmark of English and American literary studies.

But let me return to the specific view of literature that we find among the first generations of literary academics. With hindsight, we can easily see the intimate relationship between their discussions of structure, irony, and so on and a good many indisputably important literary works of the period: Eliot's 'The Waste Land' (1922), Ezra Pound's *Cantos* (1925–60), Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and countless other poems, novels, and plays. What was essentially an early twentieth-century view of literature, formed under the influence of specific historical circumstances, became a prescription for all ages. Predictably, the large numbers of writers who for one reason or another had operated in a different mode (Walt Whitman, for instance, with his long descriptive passages) fell from grace. Literary history was reshaped in the image of the early twentieth century. Whereas we can see the 'irony' that the writers and the critics of the period valued so highly as a defensive strategy in a confusing world of rapid social and technological change, they themselves genuinely believed it to be an infallible sign of 'maturity' and proceeded to demote all texts (and writers) that did not meet the required standard.

We can also see now that the required standard is heavily *gendered*. (This anticipates a much fuller discussion of 'gender' in a later chapter, but it must be mentioned here.) Eliot's 'wit', the 'irony' of Richards and the New Critics, and the 'maturity' of Leavis all serve to underline a shared masculinist perspective. This is not to say that they have no place for female writers – in its first instalment Leavis's 'great tradition' of English novelists includes two male and two female writers. But in a period in which self-discipline (the self-discipline of the poet who refuses to personalize the poem), wit, a controlling irony, and related qualities are all seen as typically male, whereas overt emotions and a refusal to intellectualize experience are seen as typically female, the female writers elected for inclusion in the literary pantheon were admitted because they met a male standard.

Practical criticism and New Criticism have had a lasting influence. Their preoccupation with the text and nothing but the text

would live on after their demise. Even now its textual orientation is still a force to reckon with, although always tempered by other considerations and usually – but not necessarily – stripped of its prejudices. It is of course only natural that texts, and not for instance landscaping, should play a central role in literary studies. It is less obvious, however – counterintuitive as it may seem – that *meaning* should be so prominent. In the next two chapters we will look at approaches to literature in which the meaning of individual texts, which in England and America provided the major drive for literary studies, is of at best secondary importance.

Summary

English and American literary studies traditionally focus on the *meaning* of literary texts. Practical criticism (the United Kingdom) and New Criticism (the United States) first of all provide *interpretations*, with the New Critics paying particular attention to the formal aspects of literature, which for them also contribute directly to a text's meaning. Within this Anglo-American tradition, literature is thought to be of great importance because in poems, novels, and plays we find 'the best that has been thought and said'. Literature offers the most profound insights into human nature and the human condition that are available to us. Because of its profundity and its authenticity it offers us a vantage point from which to criticize the superficial, rationalized, and commercialized world we live in. Literary criticism, which seeks out and preserves the very best of what millennia of writing have to offer, thus functions simultaneously as social critique. Finally, in this traditional form literary studies takes *liberal humanism* and its assumptions for granted. It sees the individual – the subject, in technical terms – as not determined and defined by social and economic circumstances, but as fundamentally free. We create ourselves, and our destiny, through the choices we make.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

There is no shortage of books on the English and American literary-critical heritage. Two very accessible and even-handed studies are Chris Baldick's *The Social Mission of English Criticism, 1848–1932* (1983), which has chapters on Arnold, Eliot, Richards, and Leavis, and his more recent *Criticism and Literary Theory 1890 to the Present*

(1996), which covers some of the same ground, but also discusses the New Criticism and later developments. Mark Jancovich's *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* (1993) is especially interested in what the New Critics saw as their social mission.

Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (1987) maps the institutionalization of literary studies in the United States while *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (1989) by Gauri Viswanathan offers a fascinating account of 'English' in colonial India.

Eliot's early essays – 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', 'Hamlet', 'The Metaphysical Poets' – are still worthwhile reading. Those who would like to see the New Criticism in action, can also still go directly to the source. Cleanth Brooks's *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* ([1947] 1968) contains a number of now classic essays while Brooks's collaboration with Robert Penn Warren in *Understanding Poetry* ([1939] 1976) led to an enormously influential textbook on New Critical interpretation. Leavis's approach to poetry and the poetic tradition comes through vividly in his *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932) and *Revaluation* (1936); *The Great Tradition* ([1948] 1962) is a good example of his equally uncompromising criticism of the novel.

Finally, English Studies featured every now and then in especially British fiction. For those who want to have a look behind the scenes I can recommend David Lodge's three novels dealing with 'English' in both England and the United States (*Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses* [1975], *Small World: An Academic Romance* [1984], and *Nice Work* [1989]) and A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990).