

New Criticism

The New Criticism is an Anglo-American variety of Formalism that emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century and dominated teaching and scholarship until the early 1960s. It is less a coherent literary theory than a congeries of critical and theoretical approaches all of which agree that the literary work is *AUTONOMOUS*, that its unity and meaning are constituted primarily by formal and rhetorical features, and that it is free from any burden of reflection on the social world in which it is produced or from any connection to the author who produces it. New Critical practice strongly favors poetic texts, in large part because they exemplify to a greater degree the ambiguity, irony, and *PARADOX* considered by New Critics to be crucial elements of poetic form. As T. S. Eliot, the poet and critic who had a significant effect on the New Critics, wrote, “poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*” (248). It was this difficulty that New Criticism privileged through the development of strategies of explication that remain relevant, not only in the classroom, where they have an undeniable pedagogical value, but also in critical practice, where they are often informed by social and cultural contexts that had, for the New Critics themselves, been bracketed off as extraneous to the meaning of the literary text.

Decades of biographical and *belle lettristic* criticism, which focused on the author’s intentions or on aesthetics in the most general sense, had reduced the study of poetry to what Eliot called “opinion or fancy” unconnected to technical and rhetorical accomplishments. In part, this was the legacy of Matthew Arnold’s criticism, which emphasized tradition and high seriousness and tended to treat literature as a means for conveying normative moral and ethical ideals. By the end of the First World War, a new generation of poets were experimenting with form and language, and their work could no longer be judged according to the biographical and aesthetic criteria used by traditional critics. Moreover, these poets were publishing their own criticism, and it was this work, especially Eliot’s, that created a theoretical foundation for the New Criticism. According to Eliot, the critic’s task was to understand and explain the “new combinations” of feeling that poetry was capable of expressing. The only legitimate context in which to judge a literary work was the tradition in which it emerged, the “organic wholes” of literature

itself, “systems in relation to which, and only in relation to which, individual works of literary art, and the works of individual artists, have their significance.” This does not mean that literature cannot serve ends outside of itself, only that “art is not required to be aware of these ends, and indeed performs its function, whatever that may be, according to various theories of value, much better by indifference to them” (12–13). Though art is best understood as existing autonomously (or, to use Eliot’s word, “autotelically”), criticism must rely on shared principles. Eliot decries the state of criticism in the early 1920s, which consisted “in reconciling, in hushing up, in patting down, in squeezing in, in glozing over, in concocting pleasant sedatives” (14) – in doing everything but agreeing on the aim of criticism. Instead of “narcotic fancies” and “nebulous” appreciation, Eliot advocated a form of practical criticism that could transform the apparently nebulous into “something precise, tractable, under control.” The practical critic “is dealing with facts, and he can help us do the same” (20).

The first generation of New Critics set about forming the “various theories of value” according to which literature best performed its functions. In *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924), the English critic I. A. Richards put forward a psychological theory of practical criticism that emphasized an essentially phenomenological approach that valued above all the “capacity for satisfying feeling and desire in various ways” (47). He does not have in mind the vague sort of sentiments that earlier critics substituted for analysis, but a scientific approach to the “mental events” that governed the act of reading a literary work. He is most interested in the attitudes that emotional responses signal, the “imaginal and incipient activities or tendencies to action” that come into play whenever one is aroused by a work of art (112). The value of criticism, therefore, lies in the “total mental effect” produced by the relations of elements within the work of art (174). For Richards, the “standard experience” against which a poem is judged is that of the poet “when contemplating the completed composition,” and the most effective critics are those “whose experience approximates in this degree to the standard experience” (226–27). Like Eliot’s depersonalized poet, Richards’ ideal reader must be disinterested and detached, open to many “channels of interest,” a standpoint that paradoxically increases the reader’s involvement in the text, for “to say that we are *impersonal* is merely a curious way of saying that our personality is more *completely* involved” (251–52).

In Richards' view the formal unity of a literary text is a function of the subjectivity of the critic, who must not ascribe "peculiar, unique and mystic virtues to forms in themselves," since the effects of form are bound up with the mental effects that literary works excite (173). Subsequent theorists, especially in the US, downplayed the psychological dimension of the reader and stressed the verbal and rhetorical dimensions of the literary work. The Agrarian-Fugitive movement, centered at Vanderbilt University, was dominated by Cleanth Brooks and poet-critics like John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren. Brooks's studies of English and US poetry set the tone for a new kind of Formalist criticism that emphasized PARADOX as a constitutive feature of poetic language. Paradoxes are not "some sort of frill or trimming" external to the work; they "spring from the very nature of the poet's language: it is a language in which the connotations play as great a part as the denotations" (8). Our greatest poems are "built around paradoxes" (194). Where previous critics might have detected only "mere decoration" or "sensuous pictures," the New Critic finds "meaningful symbolism," purposeful ironies and ambiguities (142). Though Brooks agrees with Richards that the poem is an "organic thing," he does not believe that poetry serves primarily to communicate an emotional experience. "The poem, if it be a true poem is a simulacrum of reality – in this sense, at least, it is an 'imitation' – by *being* an experience rather than any mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction from experience" (194). Poems are created objects that contain within themselves a unity of rhetorical effects, quite different from the unity of responses that Richards describes. Like the "well-wrought urn" in John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the poem is entirely self-contained and irreducible to any meaning not located in the poem's structure. The "principle of unity" that informs poetry "seems to be one of balancing and harmonizing connotations, attitudes and meanings" which are all "subordinated to a total and governing attitude" (178, 189). Any attempt to capture this attitude by means of a summary interpretation constitutes what Brooks calls the "heresy of paraphrase."

Irony, ambiguity, and paradox are also the predominant elements in the English critic William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Empson echoes Brooks in his insistence that ambiguity is a constitutive feature of the work and also a significant element of the work's unity. *Ambiguity* is itself an ambiguous term, one that can lead the critic in a number of

directions: it “can mean an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings” (5–6). Ambiguity constitutes the literary work as a situational unity or TOTALITY. Though the “forces” that hold such a unity together may originate “in the poet’s mind,” they can be discerned only in the context of specific rhetorical contradictions and tensions. “An ambiguity, then, is not satisfying in itself, nor is it, considered as a device on its own, a thing to be attempted; it must in each case arise from, and be justified by, the peculiar requirements of the situation” (235). The only way for a writer to impress upon the reader a conception of unity is to present a “total meaning” in the form of a “compound,” “to arrange that [the reader] can only feel satisfied if he is bearing all the elements in mind at the movement of conviction” (238–39). The influence of Richards’ practical criticism is apparent in Empson’s emphasis on the reader’s role in constructing meaning and in his willingness to attribute ambiguity to the author’s intentions, as opposed to the inevitable effects of literary language.

The Chicago school critics, particularly R. S. Crane, were less interested in celebrating ambiguity and paradox than in creating the rhetorical tools necessary for a rigorous formalist critical method. In this sense, Chicago school Aristotelianism offered an alternative to the New Critics, though there were some salient similarities between the two movements. Crane envisioned “a general critique of literary criticism” that would “yield objective criteria for interpreting the diversities and oppositions among critics and for judging the comparative merits of rival critical schools.” For Crane, as for the Chicago school at large, pluralism is a reassertion of the Aristotelian notion that “poetry exhibits a multiplicity of structures not capable of reduction to any single type” (*Critics* 5). His own theory of “practical criticism” – “a pluralistic view of critical languages” (*Languages* 27) – is echoed in a somewhat idiosyncratic fashion in the work of Kenneth Burke, whose approach to literature borrows insights from anthropology, sociology, semantics, and other areas of study. According to Burke, poetic meanings “cannot be disposed of on the true-or-false basis,” which is the case with what he calls “semantic meanings.” “Rather, they are related to one another like a set of concentric circles, of wider and wider scope. Those of wider diameter do not categorically eliminate those of narrower diameter. There is, rather, a

progressive *encompassment*" (144). Where Burke departs from the New Criticism is in his insistence that literature is an expression of human motives and desire, a form of "symbolic action" that extends beyond the confines of the literary work's formal structure to touch upon the experiences of writing and reading. In his theory of "dramatism," he elaborates on this essentially rhetorical idea by defining the five levels of meaning production in literary works: act, agent, scene, agency, and purpose. Though Burke's emphasis on rhetoric and the special role of poetic language situates him within a tradition of Structuralism and Formalism, his interest in human behavior and motivation and his desire to see human actions as essentially symbolic are rooted in sociology and psychology.

All of the theories discussed above share some common assumptions, chiefly the importance of form and the AUTONOMY of the literary work. With the exception of Burke, they also share a common reluctance to admit moral or ethical considerations into their interpretative methodologies. This is not the case with F. R. Leavis, a literary and cultural critic and editor of the journal *Scrutiny* (1932–53), who combined New Critical Formalism with the Arnoldian belief that literature concerns itself with moral and ethical ideas. Unlike Richards, Brooks, and others who wrote extensively about Modernist poetry, Leavis focused on the novel, specifically a closed system of CANONICAL "great" works in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In *The Great Tradition* he notes that the "great novelists" are "very much concerned with 'form'; they are all very original technically, having turned their genius to the working out of their own appropriate methods and procedures" (7). While Gustave Flaubert and the aesthetic writers of the late nineteenth century who sought to emulate him elevated formalism above all else, English writers were concerned with a "formal perfection" that did not come at the expense of "the moral preoccupations that characterize the novelist's peculiar interest in life" (8). James Joyce does not qualify as "great" in part because his work possesses "no organic principle determining, informing, and controlling into a vital whole . . . the extraordinary variety of technical devices"; it is rather a "pointer to disintegration" (25–26).

The different and often conflicting strands of the New Criticism are considered in Wimsatt and Beardsley's *The Verbal Icon* (1954). The authors are critical of romantic idealism and the sort of "practical affective rheto-

ric” found in Richards and some of the Chicago school critics (201–202). They expose two fundamental errors in contemporary theory: the *intentional fallacy* and the *affective fallacy*. The intentional fallacy, a form of the genetic fallacy found in philosophy, refers to the common assumption that the meaning of a work corresponds with the author’s intentions. “The design or intention of the author is neither available or desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art” (3). Only objective criticism can arrive at a sense of a work’s value, “which enables us to distinguish between a skillful murder and a skillful poem” (6). And even if we could gain access to the author’s intentions, through archival sources or personal communication, the results would be of no use for criticism, for “[c]ritical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle” (18). The affective fallacy refers to a category mistake, “a confusion between the poem and its results” (21). Poetry does not acquire its meaning by producing a particular kind of result in the reader, but rather by simply existing as a verbal object: “A poem should not mean but be” (81). For Wimsatt and Beardsley, a poem exists by virtue of its linguistic and rhetorical materiality; it is a *thing*, and it is this physical character that is the sole object of criticism. The only value the critic need uphold is the autonomy of a dynamic and self-regulating “verbal icon,” a “positive and structural complexity, the varied fabric of organic unity” (269). If poetry is also “a fusion of ideas with material” (115), it is not because it is somehow less than verbal, nor because it bears an intimate relation to its referents in the external world, but because of its very “hyperverbal” “counter-logical” nature. The New Critic, who must always be aware of “the ambiguous or polysemous nature of verbal discourse” (268) ironically anticipates the poststructuralist, whose vision of language and literature is often regarded as the antithesis of New Critical Formalism.

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