
UNIT 6 CONCLUSION

Structure

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall attempt a general appraisal of the New Critics. You have studied the work of Richards, Eliot, Leavis, Ransom, Brooks, and Wimsatt. We shall take a look at other critics of the period who contributed to this movement: Allen Tate, R.P.Blackmur, Kenneth Burke and Yvor Winters. After comparing New Criticism with other schools of criticism like Russian Formalism and structuralism, we shall sum up the achievement of the New Critics.

6.1 OTHER NEW CRITICS

You have familiarized yourself with the writings of Ransom, Brooks, and Wimsatt in America and the *Scrutiny* group in England. There are a number of other critics who played an important part in the movement in America. Under the influence of T.S.Eliot (*The Sacred Wood* was published in 1920) and Richards' *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924), poet-critics like Allen Tate, R.P.Blackmur, Robert Penn Warren and Yvor Winters wrote articles and books with a new approach to literary criticism.

Allen Tate (1879-1979) was born in Winchester, Kentucky. He was educated at Vanderbilt University, where he joined John Crowe Ransom's literary discussion group, and co-founded and edited its journal, *The Fugitive*, a poetry magazine which published nineteen issues between 1922 and 1925. He made his name as a poet with *Mr Pope and Other Poems* (1928), and *Three Poems* (1930), and was poet in residence at Princeton in the early nineteen-forties. He continued to publish volumes of poetry, such as *Poems* (1960) and *The Swimmers* (1970). He started teaching in Tennessee in 1934, and published his first book of criticism, *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas* in 1936. From 1951 he was professor of English at the University of Minnesota. He was editor of the *Sewanee Review* from 1944 to 1946. *Reason in Madness* (1941) and *On the Limits of Poetry* (1948) established his reputation as a critic.

His criticism reveals the influence of T.S.Eliot. In one of his early letters, he refers to him as "a greater critic than poet" whom he considers "the most intelligent man alive". Eliot said that poetry was impersonal, Tate declares that poetry is not a vehicle for imprecise feeling but an autonomous structure, an objective frame for tension between themes. A poem has its own integrity, it is a whole in which the parts corroborate and modify each other. He says that a poem is not a statement like a sermon. Poetry is removed from the "domain of practicality", "it is neither true nor false: it is an object

that exists." Yet he believed in the social relevance of poetry. According to Tate, it provides "special, unique and complete knowledge." Tate always said that he owed a lot to John Crowe Ransom. Like Ransom, who said that poetry provides "the world's body", the particularity of the real world in contrast to the abstractions of science, Tate believed that the "knowledge" provided by poetry was superior to that found in science or historical documents. His "knowledge" denoted a kind of union of intellect and feeling, like Eliot's "unified sensibility". He said that poetry was "tension", a term he formed by "lopping the prefixes off the logical terms extension and intension". "Good poetry is a unity of all the meanings from the furthest extremes of extension and intension."

Like the other New Critics, Tate rejected the genetic bias, and laid stress on the poem as an independent object: "What is the poem after it is written? That is the question. Not where it came from and why." In a witty early lecture, "Miss Emily and the Bibliographer" he attacks scholars who trace influences or apply psychology, economics or sociology to give their literary criticism a scientific air. He said that they avoided "the moral obligation to judge." Tate's theoretical pronouncements are generally backed by analyses of texts. His empirical work recognizes the importance of a poem's cultural and biographical context.

Yvor Winters (1900-1968) took an M.A. in Romance languages from the University of Colorado, and taught French and Spanish at the University of Idaho. In 1927 he enrolled as a doctoral student at Stanford University, California, where he later took up teaching. He became professor of English in 1949. He was a poet whose career falls into two distinct phases. His early poems, *The Immobile Wind* (1921), *The Magpie's Shadow* (1922) and *The Bare Hills* (1927) were written in free verse, under the influence of the Imagists. But in the early nineteen-thirties Winters rejected modernist innovations, and turned to the conventional prosody found in Dryden and Pope. He published many volumes of neoclassical poetry, and defended his revised poetic practice in his essays. His critical output was not large; *Primitivism and Decadence* (1937), *Maule's Curse* (1938) and *The Anatomy of Nonsense* (1943) were short books later published in a single volume, under the title *In Defence of Reason* (1947). *Forms of Discovery: Critical and Historical Essays on the Form of the Short Poem in English* (1967) presents a highly idiosyncratic view of English and American poetry.

Winters believed that poetry is "a statement in words about a human experience." He believed that poetry should be a clear statement, using traditional metres, since they alone could exploit the full emotional potential of language to convey feeling informed by understanding. He rejects all emotionalism or mysticism. The language should be charged with emotion adequate to the idea.

Winters shares the New Critics' concern with value judgments, but insists that ethics is important: "ethical interest is the only poetic interest, for the reason that all poetry deals with one kind or another of human experience and is valuable in proportion to the justice with which it evaluates that experience." Winters believes that the primary function of criticism is evaluation. Even within the canon, the critic should lay down rankings. Winters himself was notorious for his value judgements: he ranked Robert Bridges above T.S.Eliot, and Edith Wharton above Henry James. Perhaps he was deliberately provocative: even those who did not agree with him found his forthright criticism quite stimulating.

Richard Palmer Blackmur (1904-1965) was born in Springfield, Massachusetts. He had no formal academic education: he worked in a bookshop, instead of going to university. From 1928 to 1940 he was a free-lance literary critic and poet. Then Allen Tate, who admired his "vigorous, tough-minded criticism" appointed him to assist in the newly established course on creative writing at Princeton. He remained at

Princeton for the rest of his life: first as resident fellow, then as Professor from 1948. He earned a reputation as a poet with volumes like *From Jordan's Delight* (1937), *The Second World* (1942) and *The Good European and Other Poems* (1947).

His first books of literary essays, *The Double Agent: Essays in Craft and Elucidation* (1935) and *The Expense of Greatness* (1940) advocate a "technical approach", and provide brilliant analyses of many modern poets like Yeats, Wallace Stevens and e.e.cummings. He admired T.S.Eliot, as critic and poet, and wrote widely on his poetry. The best of his critical essays appear in *Language as Gesture* (1952) and *The Lion and the Honeycomb* (1955). He was one of the few New Critics to analyse fiction: he wrote on English novelists like Henry James and D.H.Lawrence, as well as on European and American novelists, but his critical studies are not as well argued and convincing as those of Leavis. He believed, especially as he grew older, that criticism has a strictly limited use: its function is to remove obstacles between text and reader. He felt that "no amount of linguistic analysis can explain the *feeling* or existence of a poem". He shares the New Critics' belief in the autonomy of the text. He declared, "Criticism must be concerned, first and last--whatever comes between--with the poem as it is read and as what it represents is felt." He rejects extrinsic methods of criticism based on biography, psychology, history or Marxism. He valued impersonality, objectivity and concreteness. This insistence on impersonality (probably inspired by Eliot) made him place a very low value on Emily Dickinson's poetry.

His most famous essay of theoretical formulation is "Language as Gesture". Blackmur says, "Gesture in language is the outward and dramatic play of inward and imaged meaning" (p.6). He says that meaning is born out of the complex interrelationship between words: by making his written words sound in the inward ear of his reader, and so play upon each other by concert and opposition and pattern that they not only drag after them the gestures of life but produce a new gesture of their own." (p.13). "The soul of a composition is in the *dhvani*" says the opening section of *Dhvanyaloka*, and Blackmur's concept of gesture closely parallels the Sanskrit concept of *dhvani* (suggestion). Blackmur uses the term "gesture" very broadly to include rhythm and cadence and all the devices such as symbols "which we use to express meaningfulness in a permanent way which cannot be expressed in direct words or formulas of words with any completeness." (p.16)

Robert Penn Warren (1905-1988) was born in Guthrie, Kentucky. Like Cleanth Brooks, he was a student of John Crowe Ransom at Vanderbilt University. He wrote a number of novels and two volumes of short stories, but his claim to literary fame lies primarily with his poetry. His later poems are marked by a brooding violence, and there is a sense of guilt akin to that expressed in Faulkner's fiction. For him, criticism was secondary to his creative writing. With Cleanth Brooks, he started teaching at Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge; together they founded and edited *The Southern Review* in 1935 till it ceased publication in 1942. They collaborated in a series of anthologies for American college students: *Understanding Poetry* (1938), *Understanding Fiction* (1943) and *Modern Rhetoric* (1949). He was interested primarily in teaching, and told an interviewer, in 1972, that criticism "is an extension of teaching, even conversation."

Like Leavis, Warren tended to stay away from theory. He does not believe in a fixed methodology, and repeatedly emphasized that the New Critics had no consistent doctrine. His main contribution to criticism was his empirical work. In addition to criticism of poetry, He has written studies of novelists like Faulkner (whom he admired), Henry James, Melville, Hemingway, and Conrad. Two early essays on poetry have attracted a lot of attention and provoked debate: a theoretical essay, and a study of Coleridge. "Pure and Impure Poetry" (1942) is a paradoxical study of "impure poetry". (George Moore and his group in London had published an anthology

of poems called *Pure Poetry*). Warren said that poetry should be neither effusion of sentiment nor propaganda for an ideology. He pleaded for a kind of inclusive poetry which would make use of irony and juxtapose contrasting moods: he employs close reading of Landor's "Rose Aylmer" and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to illustrate his point. "A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment in Reading" is a detailed study of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Coleridge. He rightly rejects psychoanalytical and biographical readings, and presents a fine analysis of the main action of the poem. But his argument that "imagination" is the theme of the poem, and that the sun and the moon are image clusters, is not equally convincing.

6.2 OTHER SCHOOLS OF CRITICISM

New Criticism developed independently of the Russian Formalist or the Prague and Paris structuralist theories. It is possible that the New Critics did not know about these theories: *Literary Criticism: A Short History* by Wimsatt and Brooks, published in 1957, does not mention the Formalists or Structuralists, though it deals with Northrop Frye and myth criticism. There are some affinities between the New Critics and the Formalists, though the differences are equally important. Both rejected positivist literary scholarship and called for a renewed attention to literature as literature, and insisted on the difference between literature and other kinds of statements. They emphasized structure and interrelatedness, and looked at the text as an object independent of its author or the historical context.

The New Critics came very close to the Russian Formalists and the Prague School in the importance they give to the objective character of criticism, and the distinction of the text from the author ("intentional fallacy") or the reader ("affective fallacy"). Both schools emphasize the concept of structure and interrelatedness. But the New Critics' idea of structure was different from the Prague school, for whom the concept of structure included all the different levels of the text, not just its meaning. The New Critics were not interested in the ideas of difference, defamiliarization or deviance which were important to the Formalists and structuralists. Nor are they interested in the business of 'foregrounding' and 'deformation' that the Prague School make so much of. The New Critics pay little attention to the form of a poem. They do pay attention to meter and stanzaic forms, and Winter has an essay on "The Audible Reading of Poetry". But the New Critics reject the distinction between form and content. They believe in the organicity of poetry. In practice, there are some differences: Ransom's distinction between structure and texture roughly corresponds to the old dichotomy of content and form. But the New Critics never concentrated on the form, they were overwhelmingly concerned with the meaning of a work of art, the tone, the feelings, and the implied world view conveyed. For them, the technical devices too were part of this overall meaning.

"The Intentional Fallacy" insisted that the author's intentions were not important. This did not lead to the disappearance of the author from literary study, the New Critics simply shifted the author from the outside to the inside of the text. Instead of an author based on biography, history and psychology, we had an author based on the words on the page. The Formalists went much further in abolishing the author. In the words of Osip Brik, "There are no poets or literary figures, there is poetry and literature". The New Critics were concerned with meaning and the vision expressed in the words on the page, but the Formalists were not interested in vision or authorial meaning. For them, the author is nothing more than a craftsman, the means whereby literature is brought into being. The vision of the author, or his real or imaginative experiences transmuted into art, do not enter into Russian Formalism.

The New Critics' attitude to meaning and language differs from that of Saussure and his school. They recognized the importance of convention and culture in fixing the meaning of a word, but they never believed that the meaning of words is purely conventional. For them, art and language always pointed to reality. So they did not believe, as the structuralists do, that literature is a closed system, or that language is a prison house that shuts us away from reality. The structuralists have some affinities with the New Critics in their concern for a detailed analysis of the text. But there is a major difference: the structuralists do not believe in judgement or ranking, nor do they believe in language as an autonomous entity.

In one respect, Eliot anticipates later schools, in recognizing the importance of the reader. Eliot's skepticism about interpretation implies a concept of the meaning of a work of art as something indeterminate. He said, "A poem may appear to mean different things to different readers, and all of these meanings may be different from what the author thought he meant. . . The reader's interpretation may differ from the author's and be equally valid—it may even be better" (*Of Poets and Poetry*, p.30). He believes that a work of art is an artifact in the public sphere, detached from the author, and the author's intentions are irrelevant, as the New Critics insist. But the suggestion that meaning may be something dependent on the reader is the central concept of the schools of reader-oriented theories. The hermeneuticians have fully investigated the difficulties of interpretation.

6.3 THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE NEW CRITICS

In his essay, "The Frontiers of Criticism", T.S.Eliot gives a good account of the diversity and unity of New Criticism:

The term "*The New Criticism*" is often employed by people without realizing what a variety it comprehends; but its currency does, I think, recognize the fact that the more distinguished critics of today, however widely they differ from each other, all differ in some significant way from the critics of a previous generation.

In their protest against Romantic, impressionistic and positivist criticism, the New Critics shared some basic assumptions. They all believed that a literary work was primarily a linguistic artifact, a verbal structure. It was a mode of communication between the artist and the reader. The primary function of the critic, they believed, is to understand and judge the poem, unaffected by the intentional fallacy or the affective fallacy. They believed in the supremacy and autonomy of the words on the page, the text. They believed that a work of art has an independent existence, but art is not divorced from life, they did not subscribe to the beliefs of the "Art for Art's sake school". Most of the New Critics were concerned with man and civilization, though their interpretation of "value" is not identical. For them, the exploration of literature was an exploration of life: whether it is Eliot in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, Leavis in *The Common Pursuit*, J.C.Ransom in *The World's Body*, I.A.Richards in *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Allan Tate in *On the Limits of Poetry*, or R.P.Blackmur in *Language as Gesture*, they all agreed with Leavis's formulation that "Literature matters because life matters." The American and English critics shared an acceptance of the tenets of Matthew Arnold's essay, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864). Arnold considered the study of literature a great civilizing force, a substitute for religion in the approaching age when people were losing faith in religion. Arnold said that literary study should be "disinterested", it should encourage the "free play of the mind". The function of criticism is to see "the object as in itself it really is."

They were concerned with the ontology of poetry, and looked at it as an organism. They might have been influenced by the scientific temper of the early twentieth century in finding a biological metaphor, but the debt to Coleridge is significant. Coleridge propounded the theory of the "esemplastic power" of the imagination, which has the creative capacity to reconcile opposites. They were all concerned with the structure of the work of literature as part of its total meaning, for they do not accept any dichotomy between content and form. Cleanth Brooks expresses this concept clearly when he talks about the "heresy of paraphrase": the paraphrasable content of a poem cannot be equated with its meaning. He objects to reducing a work of art to a statement of abstract propositions, or to a moral message, or to any verifiable truth.

For Richards, meaning grew out of the interplay of sense, feeling, tone and attitude. Ransom conceives of the structure of a poem as incorporating its logical or prose content and its local texture. Tate finds the significance of a poem in the complex relationship between the extension (the denotative sense) and "intention" (the connotative sense or emotive charge). Brooks and Robert Penn Warren regard wit and irony as principles of structure. In his book, *The Well Wrought Urn*, Brooks takes representative poems of different ages as illustrations of the operation of paradox. Empson values ambiguity as a device which adds to the complexity and density of the meaning of a poem.

The New Critics considered judgement a very important element of literary criticism. Through textual analysis, these critics have illuminated and judged literary works, and discussed the established canon. Allen Tate, for instance, declared that criticism involved "the moral obligation to judge." Yvor Winger argues that literary history involves value judgements: "Every writer that the scholar studies comes to him as a result of a critical judgement". They judged literature from a new perspective. This has resulted in a process of reevaluation. The Metaphysical poets have gained in reputation, while Milton, Spenser, Shelley and the Victorian poets like Tennyson have been revalued downward. Shakespeare has profited from the approach of the New Critics, and has confirmed his place as the pre-eminent poet and dramatist.

The American New Critics and Leavis had much in common, though there were differences. Both had been influenced by T.S. Eliot's poetry and critical formulations. They believed that content and form cannot be separated, and viewed modern technological society in negative terms. They looked back to a more unified society (Leavis's "organic society") which supposedly existed in the past. They share a common emphasis on practical engagement with literary texts. But there is a difference in their methods of close reading. Leavis refused to make any distinction between formal and moral values. He always talked in terms of "completeness of possession" of the text.

The technique of the New Critics is most suitable for the classroom, and continues to dominate the academic teaching of literature in the English speaking world. Eliot gives a witty description of this methodology, which he calls "the lemon-squeezer school of criticism":

The method is to take a poem . . . without reference to the author or to his other work, analyse it stanza by stanza and line by line, and extract, squeeze, tease, press every drop of meaning out of it that one can. It might be called the lemon-squeezer school of criticism. . .

There are a few inherent drawbacks in the methodology of the New Critics. It is not very conducive to the study of fiction. The New Critics have produced many brilliant critical essays on poetry, but fiction studies lag behind. The exception is Leavis, whose criticism of fiction is as good as, if not better than, his studies of poetry.

The New Critics pay insufficient attention to the problems of interpretations and audience response. They assume that a literary work has just one meaning for all time. As Eliot puts it:

The first danger is that of assuming that there must be just one interpretation of the poem as a whole, that must be right. . . the meaning of the poem as a whole is not exhausted by any explanation, for the meaning is what the poem means to different sensitive readers.

Critics of the school of interpretation (hermeneutics) and "Reader Oriented Theories" have analysed these problems with great subtlety.

As was the case with Romantic literary theory or Positivism, a reaction set in against New Criticism; after holding sway for more than four decades, it has been displaced by approaches like structuralism, deconstruction, Marxism, new historicism and audience-oriented criticism which lay stress on linguistics, the context or the reader rather than on the text itself in isolation. Yet the New Critics cannot be considered outmoded. Their work still has considerable validity, for their theories reflect the feelings of many common readers: theories like formalism and structuralism tend to be elitist. While they emphasized the special qualities of literature, the New Critics insisted on the links between literature and the real world. New Criticism is humanistic and empiricist, and provides useful tools for the practical criticism of literature. It constitutes the English-speaking world's major contribution to modern literary theory.

6.4 QUESTIONS

1. Write about any two American New Critics, and their contribution to literary theory and practice.
2. Give an estimate of the achievement of New Criticism.
3. Do you agree with the view that the New Critics do not form a coherent school of criticism?

6.5 READING LIST

Part I

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-----*The Lion and the Honeycomb*. 1955.

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----- *Reason in Madness*. 1941.

Part II

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Part III

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NOTES