

THE NEW CRITICISM

Dr. Jayanta Kar Sharma

Associate Professor

Sushilavati Govt. Women's College,

Rourkela, Odisha

India

Owen Barfield published *Poetic Diction* (1928), a revision of his B. Litt. Thesis at Oxford and much has happened since in the field of literary theory: new criticism, Marxist criticism, existentialism, phenomenology, structuralism, semiotics, deconstructionism and many more. The New Criticism is an American and Trans-Atlantic movement of literary criticism existed roughly between 1920s and 1960s with tremendous success. Its adherents were emphatic in their advocacy of close reading and attention to texts themselves, and their rejection of criticism based on extra-textual sources, especially biography. The name 'New Criticism' was coined by John Crowe Ransom, popularly known as the 'philosopher General of the New Criticism' (Jancovich,11). His book *The New Criticism* (1941) argued that 'students of the future must be permitted to study literature, and not merely about literature' (Lodge, 230). Its initial purpose was to refine standards of taste and to liberate them by explaining the experience of poetry as aesthetic expression. However, over years, New Criticism developed its own conventions which eliminated from consideration of emotion, author's creativity, reader's response and even the mimetic relevance of poetic experience to the real world. The New Critics wanted to avoid impressionistic criticism, which risked being shallow and arbitrary, and social/ historical approaches which might easily be subsumed by other disciplines. Thus, they attempted to systematize the study of literature, to develop an approach which was centered on the rigorous study of the text itself. Critics like Ransom, Brooks, Warren etc. established a movement known as "The Fugitives" that gave New Criticism its philosophical motivation in seeking refuge from 1940s-50s post-war cultural materialism in a kind aesthetic-religious embrace of literature as a source of cultural integrity. For a while, New Criticism was very much in vogue. Though, like Russian Formalism it was different from the former because according to New Criticism the content

of an art is not ignored, the coherence of the content was considered by New Critics to be an important element in a work of art.

The New Criticism was a reaction against historical- biographical criticism. The New critics thought, they were breaking completely new grounds in literary criticism. Hence, they called themselves New Critics. The New Critics emphasized the formal structure of literary works, isolating the work from the author's personality and social influences. The foundations of the New Criticism were laid in books and essays written during the 1920s and 1930s by I. A. Richards (*Practical Criticism* [1929]), William Empson (*Seven Types of Ambiguity* [1930]), and T. S. Eliot ("The Function of Criticism" [1933]). In England, at Cambridge, I. A. Richards and his student, William Empson developed the importance of ambiguity and other rhetorical 'tropes' for packing additional meanings into literary language. The New Critics emphasized the formal structure of literary works, isolating the work from the author's personality and social influences. Though critics like Richards, Eliot, Leavis, and Empson's view points were common with New Critics, but they had their independent approaches. According to Selden, T.S. Eliot was the single most influential figure behind New Criticism. His essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, written in 1919 was a building block for much Anglo-American criticism. In his essay, Eliot argues that writers must have 'the historical sense,' which can be seen as a sense of tradition (Selden 14). Tradition to Eliot is the presence of the past. Eliot says that whenever a new work is written it will be compared to the past and that the value of existing works will be readjusted to accommodate the new work: this is conformity between the old and the new" (Eliot 5). Therefore, a poet should be aware that they will be judged by the standards of the past and compared to works that are thought to be 'good.' Certain elements of the works of I. A. Richards were essential to the development of the New Criticism movement. Richards' approach to poetry is a psychological one. The purpose of poetry is psychological rather than cognitive. Well-known works by Richards include *The Meaning of Meaning*, *Principles of Literary Criticism and Practical Criticism*. One of the essential elements found in these works is Richards' concept that poetry is psychological and not cognitive. Richards also pays a great deal of attention to the use of language in poetry. According to Richards: 'It has to be recognised that all our natural turns of speech are misleading, especially those we use in discussing works of art. We become so accustomed to them that even when we are aware that they are ellipses, it is easy to forget the fact' (Richards, 20). F. R. Leavis was not entirely a New Critic, but his close analysis of the poem itself (the words on the page) and his belief that a poem should be

self-sustaining (its reason for being should exist only inside its text and meaning), make him important to New Criticism. Leavis's criticism did not have a clearly defined theory, (in fact he refused to define his theories at all), but it was based on a 'common sense' approach which dealt closely with the text of the poem. However, the focus of Leavis's criticism was always on the text in terms of words and how they related to one another.

New Criticism has been considered a school of the formalist movement and both are closely associated with modernism of which focused mainly on the literary form of a text. It occurred as a revolutionary movement of poets and iconoclasts against the aestheticism. Before the New Criticism became dominant, English professors in America focused their writings and teaching on historical and/or linguistic scholarship surrounding literature rather than analysing the literary text itself. New Criticism is distinctly formalist in character. It stresses close attention to the internal characteristics of the text itself, and it discourages the use of external evidence to explain the work. New Criticism is quite well connected with the term "close reading", which means the careful analysis of a text with paying attention to its structure, syntax, figures of speech, and so on. In this way, a New Critic tries to examine the "formal elements" of the text, such as characterization, setting of time and place, point of view, plot, images, metaphors and symbols to interpret the text and find the theme. New Criticism searches for meaning within the structure of the text, and finds it by examining the text though the close reading and analysing the formal elements (elements that form the text) within the text. These formal elements, as well as linguistic elements (i.e., ambiguity, paradox, irony and tension) are the critic's references to interpret and support the theme of a literary work. In New Criticism, one may examine "all the evidence provided by the language of the text itself: its images, symbols, metaphors, rhyme, meter, point of view, setting, characterization, plot and so forth" (Tyson 119), to find their relationship with the theme, in a way that confirms the single best interpretation of the text, because New Criticism believes that there is such a single complete interpretation, which is timeless and is not related to individual readers or social events. The interpretation of a text shows that these aspects serve to support the structure of meaning within the text. It rejects old historicism's attention to biographical and sociological matters. Instead, the objective determination as to 'how a piece works can be found through close focus and analysis, rather than through extraneous and erudite special knowledge. Also, at that time, this kind of close reading (or *explication de texte*) was considered the work of non-academic 'critics' (or book reviewers) and not the work of serious scholars. But the New Criticism changed this. New Critics are primarily

concerned with the language (verbal meaning) and the organisation (overall structure) of a text. New Criticism, incorporating Formalism, examines the relationships between a text's ideas and its form, between what a text says and the way it says it. New Critics 'may find tension, irony, or paradox in this relation, but they usually resolve it into unity and coherence of meaning' (Biddle 100).

The New Critics privileged poetry over other forms of literary expression because they saw the poem as the purest exemplification of the literary values which they upheld. New Critical methods can work with any work of literature, but they are especially effective at explaining works like lyric poems in which meaning is very densely packed in elliptical sentences or phrases, i.e., sentences in which words are simply left out for economy and to force readers to supply them. For this reason, many New Critics call all literature 'poems' including works in prose. However, the techniques of close reading and structural analysis of texts have also been applied to fiction, drama, and other literary forms. But, New Critics solely focused on poetry and not fiction. T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) was among the first ones who claimed that poetry stands for its own, and in his essays asked critics to pay attention to the poem, rather than the poet. He believed that 'the poet does not influence the poem with his or her personality and emotions, but uses language in such a way as to incorporate within the poem the impersonal feelings and emotions common to all humankind' (Bressler- 57). The aesthetic qualities praised by the New Critics were largely inherited from the critical writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Coleridge was the first to elaborate on a concept of the poem as a unified, organic whole which reconciled its internal conflicts and achieved some final balance or harmony.

Though their interest in textual study initially met with heavy resistance from the establishment, the practice eventually gained a foothold and soon became one of the central methods of literary scholarship in American universities until it fell out of favor in the 1970s as post-structuralism, deconstructionist theory, and a whole plethora of competing theoretical models. It is a purely text-oriented approach to a literary work. New Critics claimed that the text itself is the only source or evidence that a critic should focus on. As a result, New Criticism stated that the text is our sole evidence or reference, not the author's claim and the only important materials are the printed words on the page. New Criticism dealt with how a work can be read objectively and accurately by examining the structure and form. New Criticism is not concerned with external circumstances like the historical context, social conditions at the time of production, effects on the reader and biography of the author.

Therefore, New Critics conclude that there is one single or correct interpretation of a text. Its focus was mainly on the autonomy, anatomy, ontology, and organicity of poem and wit, irony, paradox, symbol, metaphor, conceit and dramatic attitude are its nerves and organs leading an organic growth of the poetic form. It lays emphasis on internal organism, ambiguity, complex and nuances of work. They have a minimal interest in the content of the text. New Criticism attempts to be a science of literature, with a technical vocabulary, patterns of sound, imagery, narrative structure, point of view, and other techniques discernible on close reading of the text, they seek to determine the function and appropriateness of these to the self-contained work. Critics like Ransom, W.K. Wimsatt, Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, Monroe Beardsley and R.P. Blackmur to name some of them are regarded as pure New Critics. Here, my focus is on the view points of the New Critics such as Cleanth Brooks, Richard P. Blackmur and W. K. Wimsatt.

Cleanth Brooks (1906-1994), the founder of the *Southern Review* and one of the foremost American literary critics of the twentieth century, spent fifteen years as a professor in the English Department at Louisiana State University. He was the central architect of the New Criticism. His best-known works, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947) and *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939), *Understanding Poetry* (1938) argue for the centrality of ambiguity and paradox as a way of understanding poetry. With his writing, Brooks helped to formulate formalist criticism, emphasizing “the interior life of a poem” (Leitch 2001) and codifying the principles of close reading. His *Understanding Poetry* is a revelation and a classic statement on the on the exact method of reading and teaching of a poem in the classroom. It is a text book of a group of selected individual poems with detail introduction and a glossary of literary terms. In this book Brooks condemns the three long established notions: poetry is the best realization of the best mind, poetry is not a substitute for an actual emotional experience and poetry is a beautiful statement of some high truth. But Brooks brushes aside all these approaches and argues that the true function of literary criticism is neither message-hunting, emotion-catching, nor explaining the beauty in terms of the characteristics of poetry. (Munir, 134) He profounds the concept of ‘organic nature of poetry’. *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939) is an outcome of the synthesis of various ideas about poetry and here Brooks appears as an advocate of modern poetry. His tradition of poetry is in terms of the poetic language which is special and characterized by paradox, irony, wit, ambiguity, dramatization of experience, organic interrelationship and complexity. He considers a poem an independent structure. All poems possess some common structural

properties- such as metaphor, paradox, irony, tone and attitude. Structure and form are not same thing in poetry. Form (elegy, ode, ballad, sonnet etc.) is just like envelopes in which content is contained. Brooks considers examining a poem in terms of structure, not of content or subject matter. He rejects Ransom's dualistic theory of structure and texture. He argues in favour of an organic unity of structure. This unity is achieved through psychological, imaginative and dramatic process, logic and reason have no place in the unity of the poem. The essence of poetry is metaphor and metaphor is ontological not logical. Since a poem is an organic whole like a plant or human body, it can't be paraphrased. By paraphrasing we demolish the parts and the whole poem as well. Its metaphor, irony, ambiguity, tone, attitude and the total experience of the poet embodied in the poem get disintegrated and subsequently lost meaning. They do not convey meaning outside the poem or in isolation. Brooks three very important essays *The language of paradox*, *The Heresy of paraphrase*, and *Irony as the principle of structure* are considered the main marrow of the language and structure of his poetic theory.

Richard Palmer Blackmur (1904-1965) was one of America's foremost literary critics. He is in many ways the paradigmatic New Critic as essayist. Blackmur in particular reflect an increasing degree of sophisticated concentration on matters of poetic form, technique, and value. His criticism; like his poetry reflects his conviction that literature is the bearer of all the modes of understanding of which *words* are capable. In 1935 the publication of his first volume of essays, *The Double Agent*, marked the beginning of what was to become known as the New Criticism. He approached criticism as the necessary expression of the man of letters contemplating the modes of words and their value. Blackmur has a sense of penetrating vision. He has an approach to appreciate both literature and criticism. He is a poet in his criticism because every sentence of his prose struggles to be poetry and in his essays criticism has become a part of literature or literature has become a part of criticism. (Munir-168). To him both creation and criticism are works of art which present an organic expression of culture because art and culture are interrelated to each other, he says. He is concerned with the power and precise use of language and its structure of poem. To Blackmur, the poet can get control over his material by employing most appropriate words and good poets always use words faithfully and avoid the blending and warping of words. Words encounter with each other by producing tension among them and generate a new kind of language. In view of Blackmur, language goes beyond the denotative and connotative activity and takes the reader into the season of myth, dream, history, religion and even silence. Blackmour has been

commented by a number of critics by calling him a botanist of the stanza, verse, phrase, even of the single word and he has a surgical skill and make his criticism ‘a demonstration of poetic dissection by a master anatomist’, ‘criticism so driven to a sensibility machine-test, conscience, and mind working as gears, levers and wheels’(Alfred Kazin). ‘a great master of explication of text’(Allen Tate), ‘without rival the critic as taxonomist’(Russel Fraser). However, he is not free form criticism and he fails to achieve a due recognition because of various charges leveled on him.

Blackmur’s theory of creativity is based on the two faculties of mind-reason and imagination which should be balanced and integrated to express felt experience of the poet. He advocates that the artist should synthesize his experience in to an organic whole. Through imagination, the artist perceives his felt experience in images and symbols, whereas through reason he controls, orders, and patterns them in an organic and artistic design. This unified sensibility makes sense experience of the artist intelligible and communicable’ (Munir-170).

Blackmur is more than a new critic because he is quite conscious of the empty methodology of the new criticism. Further, the spiritual health of society plays an important role in his criticism of poetry. Blackmur’s criticism of poetry reveals that the poem cannot exist in isolation because poetry is not a self-contained autonomous entity but has a serious social nexus between the poet and his society and reader. In a nut-shell Blackmur is a balanced critic, incorporating neo-classical, romantic and modern elements in the whole body of literary criticism. His critical insights are distilled in his essays particularly in essays titled ‘*A Critic’s Job of Work*’, ‘*language as gesture*’, ‘*A Burden for Critics*’ and ‘*A Featherbed for critics.*”

William K. Wimsatt, Jr. (1907–1975) Professor of English at Yale University, a leading apologist and theoretician of formalist criticism. He formulates his theory by drawing inspiration from both the ancient critics (Aristotle and Longinus) and the contemporary (T.S. Eliot and Chicago School). He lays stress on the objective approach to criticism decrying affective theory as ‘less a scientific view of literature than a prerogative’ because affective theory is purely a psychological method interested in exploring the mind and the intention of the poet, the poem, and the reader. He argues to disregard these factors while evaluating a poem because ‘since the poet and the reader both are outside the poem, their implications will be an importation of meaning from outside’. So, this type of interpretation is quite irrelevant. Only the words on the page are relevant for interpretation. Wimsatt produced important books- *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the meaning of poetry* (1954), *Hateful Contraries* (1965),

and *Literary Criticism: A Short History (1957)* in collaboration with Cleanth Brooks. The 'Grammar of Criticism' is discussed in his *Hateful Contraries* on the basis of diction, imagery, metaphor, paradox, ambiguity, irony, myth, theme, and genre. Wimsatt's *The Verbal Icon (1954)* contains seventeen critical essays in four sections which is regarded as the milestone in the history of objective literary criticism in America. Two of the important essays- *The Intentional Fallacy* and *The Affective Fallacy* co-authored by his young philosopher friend Monroe Beardsley (1915–1985) reflect the organicity, autonomy of poem and how it should be interpreted. A fallacy is an invalid mode of reasoning, and Wimsatt and Beardsley claimed that it is fallacious to base a critical judgment about the meaning or value of a literary work on 'external evidence' concerning the author's intentions. Aimed at biographical and impressionistic criticism, the former dismissed attempts to gauge the poet's intentions through examination of historical context, whereas the latter argued that the poem is not to be judged based upon its emotional impact on the reader. Its target was a certain kind of Romanticism (a concept that crops up several times in the original article) along with an assortment of associated notions, including 'sincerity', 'fidelity', 'spontaneity', 'authenticity', 'genuineness', 'originality'. The dispute between intentionalists and anti-Intentionalists has been the basic issue of New Criticism; as the former believe in pure linguistic artifact. Here is a clash not only between styles of criticism but between fundamentally different conceptions of literature: the Romantic conception which sees literature as a vehicle of personal expression and the Modernist conception which sees Literature as pure Linguistic artifact or, in Wimsatt's terms, as 'verbal icon'. It has been a vogue to explore the mind of the poet to judge or evaluate his performance or quality. Critics determine the meaning of a work in the origin of the poet's mind or his intention. The main thing according to the authors in a poem is not a product of inspiration nor a fit, it is related to the intellect not with the heart. The key words of the intentional school are: sincerity, fidelity, spontaneity, authenticity, genuineness, originality. The authors suggest replacing these words with 'integrity, relevance, unity, function, maturity, subtlety, adequacy' because the latter are concerned with the aesthetic aspect of work. The authors also explain the difference between the external and internal evidence for the meaning of a poem. Finally, the authors discuss the question of the poetic use of allusions and notes which should be studied within the framework of the verbal expression, not the oracle of the poet. The Affective Fallacy is a critical document of affective psychology. Both the fallacies go side by side and are the long cherished obstacles to objective approach of criticism. In author's view, the affective fallacy is an erroneous way

of analyzing a work because the critic or reader lays emphasis on his personal, emotional and psychological bias influencing the interpretation of the work. The affective fallacy is confusion between the poem and result meaning what it is and what it does. Both the fallacies undermined poetry and criticism as an art.

The downfall in the history of literary movements and critical approaches, there is almost always another opposite reaction for every critical approach, and New Criticism faced the same trouble. Jancovich implies that two major controversial issues of New Criticism were its fully dependence on the text, and its rejection of extra-text materials, which went to extreme. According to Graff this text-isolation was not acceptable for some who thought that New Criticism have “trivialized literature and literary study by turning critical interpretation into an over-intellectualized game whose object was the solution of interpretive puzzles. Because this way of viewing literature tended to ignore or destroy the moral, political, and personal impact that literature might possess”(72).New Criticism is frequently seen as uninterested in the human meaning, the social function and effect of literature and as unhistorical, for ‘it isolates the work of art from its past and its context.’ When New Critics considered a poem an objective work of art, they ceased unrelated interpretations to exist, but on the other hand, they ignored all other areas as well. They ignored external influences to be studied, such as gender, race or the social class. There were reactions against New Criticism very soon by Ronald S. Crane of the Chicago School of Neo- Aristotelians who pleaded for a more liberal approach. Because New Criticism is such a rigid and structured program for the study of literature, it is open to criticism on many fronts. They charged, New Criticism is too restrictive, dogmatic and narrow. It is too arbitrary in its emphasis on complexity, excessive, preoccupation with individual word, image, irony, paradox and metaphor. In its insistence on excluding external evidence, New Criticism disqualifies many possibly fruitful perspectives for understanding texts, such as historicism, psychoanalysis, and Marxism. Since New Criticism aims at finding one "correct" reading, it also ignores the ambiguity of language and the active nature of the perception of meaning described by poststructuralists. Finally, it can even be perceived as elitist, because it excludes those readers who lack the background for arriving at the ‘correct’ interpretation.

So, The New Criticism practically lost its importance after the 1960s. There was not much New about it so far as the method is concerned. It was treated as a limited and inadequate approach. When New Criticism evolved, it was a historical necessity however, having served its purpose, it faded out. Of course, the New Criticism has certain limitations, but this

movement offers a number of techniques and methods to read and teach poetry at a time when there was a complete chaos in critical approaches. However, New Criticism reminds us that this approach is meant to deal with the poem on its own terms. While New Criticism may not offer us a wide range of perspectives on texts, it does attempt to deal with the text as a work of literary art. But it had a great influence on its following literary theories, and still is useful in order to explore a text and interpret its elements for a better understanding. Litz believes that comparing to modernism, New Criticism is ‘a more systematic, more philosophical or more academic articulation of formalist undercurrents within modernism’ (3). Close reading or close analysis of a text is what New Criticism introduced and is a fundamental tool in today’s modern literary criticism. Some of the New Criticism’s “most important concepts, concerning the nature and importance of textual evidence-the use of concrete, specific examples from the text itself to validate our interpretations-have been incorporated into the way most literary critics today, regardless of their theoretical persuasion, support their readings of literature” (Tyson, 117). The main credit of New Criticism is that it shifts the importance from the author to text and it leaves an indelible mark on the evolution of modern literary criticism in America. It opened a doorway through which the upcoming Structuralists, Poststructuralists and Deconstructionists were all too eager to run--by rejecting the New Critical principle but keeping many of its implications and practices. New Criticism has left a permanent mark on the history of literary criticism, and is worthy not only of serious study, but also deep respect.

References

- Barfield, Owen. *History in English Words*. London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1926. Print
- Biddle, Arthur W., and Toby Fulwiler. *Reading, Writing, and the Study of Literature*. NY: Random House, 1989. Print
- Bressler, Charles E. *Literary Criticism: an Introduction to Theory and Practice*. New Jersey: Upper Saddle River, 2007, Print.
- Eliot, T.S. *Selected Essays 1919-1932*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1964. Print
- Glenn W. Butler. New Criticism: The Challenger, the Winner, and the Lasting Legacy. *Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal*. 2006. Volume 1 Number 1. Print
- Jancovich, Mark. *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Print
- Leitch, Vincent. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Norton, 2001 Print
- Litz, A. Walton, Louis Menand, Lawrence Rainey. "Modernism and the New Criticism" *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* (No. 7) Princeton University, New Jersey. Print
- Lodge, David. *20th Century Literary Criticism*. London: Longman, 1972. Print
- _____. *Poetic Diction*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1976. Print
- Munir. *The New Criticism*. Adhyayan. New Delhi. 2011, Print
- Pati, P.K. *The Evolution of Literary Criticism*. Salem. Oregon. USA. 2001, Print
- Richards, I. A. *Principles of Literary Criticism*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd, London. 1959, Print
- Selden, Raman. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. London: PrenticeHall, 1997. Print
- Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today*. USA: Garland Publishing, 1999. Print

FURTHER READING

Brooks, Cleanth. *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947. Print

Cowan, Louise. *The Fugitive Group: A Literary History*. Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1959. Print

Lynn, Steven. *Texts and Contexts: Writing About Literature with Critical Theory*. 2nd ed. NY: Longman, 1998. Print

Ransom, John Crowe. *The World's Body*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938. Print

Ransom, J. C. *The New Criticism*. New Directions, Norfolk, Connecticut, 1941, Print

Simpson, Lewis. *The Possibilities of Order: Cleanth Brooks and His Work*. Baton
Rogue: Louisiana State University, 1976. Print

Tate, Allen. *Essays of Four Decades*. 3rd ed. Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 1999. Print

Wellek, Rene. *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950*. New Haven:

Yale University Press, 1986, Print

Web References

<http://flash.lakeheadu.ca/~engl4904/newcriticism.htm>