
British and American New Criticism

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For much of the twentieth century, the New Criticism was the dominant method of textual interpretation. Most critics and teachers of literature in college and universities, both in Great Britain and the United States, were committed to “close reading”—the intensive study of the words on the page, the careful examination of the poem in itself, which was the theory and practice that the New Criticism described and promoted. The New Critics were different in important respects from one another, but, as one of their leaders, Cleanth Brooks, observed: “The one common element that I can discern among those loosely grouped together as New Critics was the special concern they exhibited for the rhetorical structure of the literary text” (Brooks 1984: 42).

Few today would claim to be or would aspire to become a New Critic. The movement expired, it is generally agreed, decades ago. Yet when it arose and established itself, the New Criticism was viewed not only as significantly “new” but also as superior to everything that had preceded it. In the mid-1950s, Hyatt H. Waggoner identified the New Criticism as “the best criticism we have or are likely to have for a long time. Certainly, it is the chief reason why it is perfectly correct to characterize our age as, whatever its other failings, a brilliant age for criticism.” In Waggoner’s judgment, “the greatest contribution” that the New Criticism had made was “its creation and demonstration of a way of talking about literature at once objective and literary ... There are no extrinsic or irrelevant standards applied, there is no subjectivism, and there is no mystique. We can look at what is being pointed at and agree or disagree with the interpretation” (Waggoner 1957: 224). The poet-critic William Logan has referred to this text-focused era of the New Criticism from the 1920s to the 1960s as “the golden age of modern literary criticism” (Logan 2008: 255).

We can connect the rise and institutionalization of the New Criticism and its emphasis on the close reading of literary texts to a series of major works of literary criticism:

- T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1920); *Selected Essays, 1917–1932* (1932)
- I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924); *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (1929)
- William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930)
- Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (1931); *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (1941)
- Ezra Pound, *How to Read* (1931); *Make It New: Essays* (1934)
- F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (1936)
- R. P. Blackmur, *The Double Agent: Essays in Craft and Elucidation* (1935)
- Yvor Winters, *Primitivism and Decadence: A Study of American Experimental Poetry* (1937)
- John Crowe Ransom, *The World's Body* (1938); *The New Criticism* (1941)
- Cleanth Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939); *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947)
- Allen Tate, *Reason in Madness: Critical Essays* (1941)

Except for Leavis and Brooks, all of these critics were poets. Their literary criticism was crucially linked to their creative writing—to their own poetry (Burke and Tate also wrote fiction) and its relationship to the poetry produced by their contemporaries. “The greatest age of poetry criticism,” the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, was also “one of the great ages of poetry in English” (G. Davis 2008: xxiii).

Ransom’s book gave the movement its name, but the term was not a new one. Joel E. Spingarn, a professor of comparative literature at Columbia, had called for a “New Criticism” in a lecture he delivered in 1910 on the “aesthetic judgment” of literature; and Edwin Berry Burgum edited an anthology of literary critical essays with this title in 1930. Nor was “close reading” a phrase that the New Critics invented. We can find it early in the century in essays, for example, by the literary historians J. L. Lowes (1911: 208) and Ruth Wallerstein (1927: 496). As for the New Critics themselves, sometimes they used this phrase, as when I. A. Richards remarks, “all respectable poetry invites close reading” (Richards 1929: 203), and when R. P. Blackmur refers to the “close reading” of Henry James (Blackmur 1948: 317). But these are exceptions: rarely do the New Critics speak of “close reading” as the interpretive activity they perform. The phrase became more common among their followers, especially those committed to defining the skills that students in literature courses should be taught. Related terms include: explication, explanation, analysis, exegesis, interpretation, elucidation, exposition, and clarification (Gudas 1993). Each of these terms was intended to convey a preoccupation with the details of a poem’s language, its structure and texture, its tone, its formal organization. As Blackmur said, literary critics should seek a “sense of intimacy by inner contact” with the literary work itself (1935: 285).

We therefore should connect the New Critics with close reading as a procedure but realize that the term is not one that many (or even any) of them embraced. Only some of them (e.g., Brooks) produced close readings of specific texts. Eliot and Pound; Richards, Ransom, and Tate: they insisted on rigorous attention to literary language but rarely did they undertake close reading (see Hyman 1948: 272). This helps us to understand why the term New Criticism is both accurate and unhelpful as a designation. It is “exasperatingly inexact” (Poirier 1992: 184), and it blurs significant distinctions between, say, a

poet/critic/novelist such as Allen Tate and a British literary academic such as F. R. Leavis, an advocate for close reading and a practical critic who engaged in it. As Robert Penn Warren noted—he was a poet, critic, biographer, novelist, short-story writer, and historian: “Let’s name some of them—Richards, Eliot, Tate, Blackmur, Brooks, Leavis (I guess). How in God’s name can you get that gang into the same bed? There is no bed big enough and no blanket would stay tucked” (qtd. Wellek 1986: 214).

Still, these very different figures do hold in common the belief that the critic should be vigilantly attentive to the poem—and it was always poetry, concentrated in its language and limited in length, that the New Critics emphasized. Criticism, says Eliot, “is the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste,” and “the chief tools of the critic are “comparison and analysis” (Eliot 1923: 24, 32–3). He stated too that what made his literary essays “coherent” as a group was their concern with “the problem of the integrity of poetry, with the repeated assertion that when we are considering poetry we must consider it primarily as poetry and not another thing” (Eliot 1928: viii). Ezra Pound proclaimed: “The proper METHOD for studying poetry and good letters is the method of contemporary biologists, that is careful first-hand examination of the matter, and continual COMPARISON of one ‘slide’ or specimen with another” (Pound 1934: 17).

Influenced by Eliot and Pound, Leavis asserted: “In dealing with individual poets the rule of the critic is, or should (I think) be, to work as much as possible in terms of particular analysis—analysis of poems or passages, and to say nothing that cannot be related immediately to judgments about producible texts” (Leavis 1936: 2–3). Allen Tate states the point this way: “The question in the end comes down to this: What as literary critics are we to judge? As literary critics we must first of all decide in what respect the literary work has a specific objectivity ... From my point of view the formal qualities of a poem are the focus of the specifically critical judgment because they partake of an objectivity that the subject matter, abstracted from the form, wholly lacks” (Tate 1940: 110).

To understand why this commitment to the text, to the writer’s words, was perceived to be “new,” we need to remember what literary criticism was like in the first decades of the twentieth century, especially in colleges and universities. It is not an exaggeration to say that there was little to no literary criticism. On the graduate level and to a large extent on the undergraduate level, the emphasis was on “facts” about literature, an emphasis that drew its inspiration from the lessons and models that philology and positivist scholarship furnished. Philological, textual, and other kinds of scholarship, anchored in ancient and medieval languages, gave English studies, it was believed, the prestige of a hard science, with a compelling discipline and a comparable sense of progress. When on the occasions that literature as literature was discussed, teachers spoke in vague, rapturous terms. The “criticism” on display was impressionistic and appreciative, highly generalized, often nostalgic, even sentimental.

At Harvard, for example, the 275 students who enrolled every year in the eminent scholar G. L. Kittredge’s undergraduate course on Shakespeare sat in a lecture hall and listened to his commentaries on etymologies and meanings of words, allusions, and references. It is said that he spent fifteen minutes on the “seacoast of Bohemia” in *The Winter’s Tale*. There was next to nothing in this course on Shakespeare’s “poetry, themes, and dramatic values” (Bush 1981: 598). The literary theorist René Wellek recalled that when he began as an instructor at Princeton in the 1920s, “no course in American literature,

none in modern literature, and none in criticism was offered." It was nearly impossible to find a teacher who had "any interest in aesthetics or even ideas." Here, as at other colleges and universities, someone who wanted to study literature had to work "in an environment hostile to any and all criticism" (Wellek 1978: 614).

It would be misleading, though, to suggest that English departments consisted entirely of complacent professors who were content with their fact-gathering labors and pious pronouncements about great authors. A number of important scholars were dismayed by the approach to, and ethos of, graduate and undergraduate study in literature. They maintained that it was time to reorient the discipline, and proposals for reform started to issue from their ranks.

In the mid-1920s, for instance, the Renaissance literature scholar Albert Feuillerat, a professor at Yale, stated:

There is no end of dissecting the literary works, submitting them to the lens of our microscopes, making statistics, cataloguing, indexing, tabulating, drawing diagrams, curves, angles (all the figures used in geometry), adding facts, still more facts, weighing data, accumulating an enormous mass of *materialien*. And so exciting has been this sort of labor that we have practically forgotten that the reason why literary works are written is that they may be enjoyed by all those who read them, critics included. In fact, we no longer suppose that they can be enjoyed, or, at least, we refrain from enjoying them.

"We write cards, we sort them, we argue, we demonstrate about, above, and around books," Feuillerat concluded, "but the books have ceased to have interest in themselves" (1925: 314).

The New Critical reformation of English studies and the development of a new conception of literary criticism were "revolutionary," as Ransom said (1947: 436). Indeed, "the influence of the New Critics," noted a scholar in 1962, "has been strong and widespread enough to mark their cause as perhaps the most extraordinarily successful of all consciously waged literary revolutions" (Foster 1962: 221–2). But, again, this change was not really so revolutionary after all. The New Critics' achievement was to seize upon the terms already present in the widespread discourse of complaint about the teaching of literature and brilliantly and repeatedly stress that the focus should therefore be on the poem as poem, the words on the page, the structure and texture of the work itself.

In this context, an essential reference point is Ransom's essay, "Criticism, Inc.," included in his collection *The World's Body*. This essay is Ransom's attempt to define "the proper business of criticism"—what it is not and what it should be (Ransom 1938: 327). "It is really atrocious policy," he says, "for a department to abdicate its own self-respecting identity. The department of English is charged with the understanding and the communication of literature, an art, yet it has usually forgotten to inquire into the peculiar constitution and structure of its product" (1938: 335). Ransom lists a number of false or misleading types of current criticism (e.g., Marxism), but he focuses on the teaching of literature in colleges and universities by literary historians and scholars who gather backgrounds, sources, and influences rather than scrutinize poems. Historical study, he contends, has come to rule at the expense of a truly "critical" approach, preventing students from acquiring the skills needed for them to understand the "technical effects" of literary works. As a result, they cannot respond directly, deliberately, to a literary text.

Ransom urges teachers and students to concentrate on “technical studies of poetry.” By this, he means studies of imagery, metaphor, and meter—the stylistic devices through which the poet differentiates the language of his or her text from that of prose. Ransom calls for a revitalized department of English that will make literary history, scholarship, and linguistics secondary to criticism. In his view, criticism must be rescued from book reviewers and amateurs who focus on feelings, not the artistic object itself, and who reduce texts to paraphrases with a moral message. A crusader for disciplinary coherence and integrity, Ransom called for the professionalization of literary criticism, a trend that intensified in the later decades of the century as higher education in the humanities expanded and the numbers of professors of English rapidly grew.

The best practical guide to, and illustration of, “close reading” came a decade later, in Brooks’s *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*, which includes analyses of poems by Donne, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, and others. For Brooks, who in the mid-1920s had been one of Ransom’s students at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, “the readings represent an honest attempt to work close to specific texts ... the closest possible examination of what the poem says as a poem ... The question of form, of rhetorical structure, simply has to be faced somewhere. It is the primary problem of the critic. Even if it is postponed it cannot ultimately be evaded. If there is such a thing as poetry, we are compelled to deal with it” (Brooks 1947: v, vii, xi, 202). Brooks, too, emphasized that the meaning of a poem is not equivalent to its prose content. This, he said, is the “heresy of paraphrase” (1947: 176–96).

Other New Critics also decried this “heresy” and, furthermore, made arguments against both the author and the reader as relevant to interpretation. Here, the key documents are “The Intentional Fallacy” (1946) and “The Affective Fallacy” (1949), co-authored by William K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley. In the first, they contend that even when we possess information about the author’s intention, we cannot use it to judge a literary work; the work is a public utterance, not a private one that depends for its meaning on the intention or design of its author (see also Wellek 1941). In the second, they aver that the meaning of a literary work is not equivalent to its effect, its emotional impact on the reader. Literary analysis must center on the text itself: the critic’s task is to examine its linguistic structure and its aesthetic unity as an autonomous object (see Richards 1925: 78). As Brooks concisely put it: the New Critics placed their “emphasis on the literary work as distinguished from an emphasis on the writer or the reader” (1984: 47).

There are, however, interpretive risks to setting to the side the writer and the reader. As E. D. Hirsch cogently explained in *Validity in Interpretation* (1967) and *The Aims of Interpretation* (1976), when we eliminate the author’s intention, we have little to no way to determine which interpretation of a poem is correct. The words on the page, says Hirsch, can sustain interpretations that conflict with one another, and this is why for him the only principled means through which to resolve such disagreements is by recourse to the meaning that the author originally intended. Another theorist, Stanley Fish, in “Literature and the Reader” (1970) and related essays, challenged the New Critical devaluation of the reader. It is the reader who makes meaning, not the text, he maintained. Criticism hence should be concerned with “the analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time” (1980: 42).

The New Critics were dedicated to doing one important thing at the expense of (that is, in opposition to) other things. In addition to the writer and the reader, they excluded biography, history, other fields and disciplines, and political, social, and cultural issues, crises, and controversies. What mattered, what was crucial for an authentically *literary* criticism, was the close reading of the text, the verbal icon, the literary artifact.

We might ask why the close reading of a poem mandated so many exclusions. For literary criticism to achieve an identity, was it necessary to leave out so much? Could not the close reading of a literary text illuminate its connections to biography and history? Why not see close reading as a pathway, rather than as a closed field?

In some ways, these questions about the New Criticism, pointing to its narrowness, its pattern of exclusions, its boundaries, are misleading. Most of the New Critics had a wide range of inter-disciplinary and cultural interests and political concerns, and they were very interested in the humanities, in liberal arts education, and the value of literature for society and culture. During the 1930s, Ransom was the central spokesperson for the Agrarian movement; he wrote the introduction and a chapter for the Agrarian manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, by *Twelve Southerners* (1930), a spirited attack on science and industrialization and a defense of Southern tradition and an agricultural economy. Tate and Warren contributed chapters to it as well.

The Agrarian cause never won widespread support among Southerners, and by the late 1930s, Ransom was directing his attention to literary criticism. In 1937, he left Vanderbilt for a position at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, and this move from south to north coincided with his campaign to conceptualize and develop a new form of literary criticism, giving it precision and clarity as an academic discipline. Ransom now was committed to the reform of literary criticism and literary studies and did not believe that social, political, and historical concerns were relevant to these urgent disciplinary and departmental tasks. They would get in the way, they would interfere with good strategy and definition—for articulating the nature of the work that literary critics and teachers should perform.

It is striking to read the letters from the late 1930s that Ransom wrote to colleagues and friends as he prepared to leave for Kenyon and then as he reoriented his literary identity in the department there and through the journal he edited, *The Kenyon Review*. To Edwin Mims, June 8, 1937, he noted that he had ceased writing about regionalism and agrarianism: "I have about contributed all I have to those movements, and I have of late gone almost entirely into pure literary work." "It seems to me," he wrote to Allen Tate, November 4, 1937, "that our cue would be to stick to literature entirely . . . In the severe field of letters there is vocation enough for us: in criticism, in poetry, in fiction." Again to Tate, January 1, 1938: "I've just come back from the Modern Language Association at Chicago. The Professors are in an awful dither, trying to reform themselves, and there's a big stroke possible for a small group that knows what it wants in giving them ideas and definitions and showing the way." The president of Kenyon had in mind a journal that would examine philosophy, public affairs, and a range of other topics (Stewart 1965: 188–9). But, as Ransom said forcefully to Tate, May 28, 1938, "We will get out 100-page issues and devote the pages exclusively to literature and the arts" (Ransom 1985: 223, 233, 236, 243).

From the late 1930s to the early 1950s, Ransom and Brooks reiterated this central point. Ransom: "In strictness, the business of the literary critic is exclusively with an esthetic criticism" (1941, "Criticism": 102); Brooks: "The critic's concern is finally with

the poem as a poem" (1950: 18); Brooks: "The formalist critic is concerned primarily with the work itself" (Brooks 1951a: 74). All the while, however, there was much strident opposition to the New Critics—a "frightful uproar" against their arguments and claims (Embry 2004: 102). From the beginning, the New Criticism was attacked, denounced, derided. It remedied a serious problem that many had identified—the lack of attention to literature as literature—but it also triggered a new round of objections and complaints.

As early as 1942, Alfred Kazin blasted Ransom and other "new critics" as "a race of conscientious fanatics, working in fragmentary elucidations, stifling in their narrow zeal" (Kazin 1942: 406). He singled out the New Critical close reader R. P. Blackmur as the proponent of "a criticism that displayed so devouring an intensity of mind, so voracious a passion for the critical process in itself, that it became monstrous ... a criticism so *driven* to technical insights that it virtually conceived the literary mind as a sensibility machine—taste, conscience, and mind working as gears, levers, and wheels" (Kazin 1942: 440). Also in 1942, Lionel Trilling criticized the New Critics for their failure "to take critical account of the historicity of a work": "It is only if we are aware of the reality of the past as past that we can feel it as alive and present. If, for example, we try to make Shakespeare literally contemporaneous, we make him monstrous. He is contemporaneous only if we know how much a man of his own age he was; he is relevant to us only if we see his distance from us" (Trilling 1942: 186).

The steady emergence of the New Criticism thus occurred alongside impassioned indictments of it. Operating within a different conception of formalism influenced by Aristotle, the scholar R. S. Crane found in the New Criticism a "tendency toward a monistic reduction of critical concepts," one that to him was so disquieting that it prompted "doubts about the general state of critical learning" (Crane 1952: 84). David Daiches weighed in: the New Criticism "leads to a drastic oversimplification of what in fact a work of literary art is, what kind of pleasure it gives, and why it is valuable. It is the invention of ardent but inelastic minds and, too often, of minds that are really happier talking about literature than reading and enjoying it" (Daiches 1950: 71–2). Another formidable scholar and literary historian, Douglas Bush, with sarcastic bite, commended the New Criticism for having supplied a "large number of literary students" with "an advanced course in remedial reading." He rebuked the New Critics for their "contempt for scholarship" and for an "approach to poetry" that was "narrow and dogmatic and also erratic"; in their analyses of texts, they "give the impression that they are looking, not at human beings, but at specimens mounted on slides" (Bush 1949: 13, 20). Pound had deployed this "specimen" image approvingly, but for Bush it dramatized the New Critics' grotesque misconception of the nature and purpose of literary criticism.

The New Critics were discontented too. In the journals they edited, they published critiques by other scholars and critics of New Critical theory and practice. They also found fault with the views and close reading practices that they themselves had established in literary criticism and in the teaching of literature. Ransom said in 1947 that the New Criticism had supplied "a kind of literary criticism more intensive than a language has ever known," but he added, "a revulsion is setting in against it." He made this statement in a review of his former student Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn*, about which he expressed serious reservations: "The new critics, careless of the theoretical constitution of poetry,

have contrived to create a sense of its disorder. But at last this has become embarrassing. We have grown familiar with many exciting turns of poetic language, but we begin to wonder if we are able to define a poem" (1947: 436).

New Critical "stock" was low, said Ransom the following year, having taken a "dip in the market"; he noted that it was time for a revaluation (Ransom 1948: 682). Brooks also called for a "general stock-taking," for the New Criticism "has come to fruition, or has arrived at a turning point, or, as some writers now hint, has now exhausted its energies" (Brooks 1949: "Foreword," xv-xvi). A strong ally, Austin Warren, stated as a "commonplace" that the New Critical movement "had come to an end, or at any event to a moment of consolidation and pedagogic simplification as well as a moment for assessment" (Austin 1951: 239).

In *The Well Wrought Urn*, Brooks had highlighted ambiguity, double meaning, irony, and paradox in the language of poetry, and it is tempting to follow this cue and say that the state of literary criticism by the mid-1950s was itself a paradoxical one. On the one hand, the New Criticism had triumphed. "Literary analysis," commented John Holloway, "close reading, 'taking a poem to pieces', talk about imagery, ambiguities, associations, poetic texture—this is the new critical establishment" (Holloway 1956: 204). In a survey of critical approaches, Wilbur Scott stated that "without question," the New Criticism was "the most influential critical method of our time ... the method one almost automatically thinks of when speaking of contemporary criticism" (Scott 1962: 179). On the other hand, John Henry Raleigh said that "the era of the New Criticism, everyone agrees, is over" (Raleigh 1959: 21). Somehow, New Criticism was timely and out of date, firmly entrenched and obsolete. It had made criticism better than it had ever been before, and simultaneously, it had deformed, even ruined, criticism, and needed to be replaced.

Both those who were trained in the New Criticism and those who from the outset were hostile to it took note of the New Criticism's flaws and bad consequences. Reporting on the state of literary criticism in the early 1950s, Randall Jarrell—a close friend of Ransom, Tate, and Warren—declared that while some contemporary critical writing was first rate, "a great deal of this criticism might just as well have been written by a syndicate of encyclopedias for an audience of International Business Machines. It is not only bad or mediocre, it is *dull*; it is, often, an astonishingly graceless, joyless, humorless, long-winded, niggling, blinkered, methodical, self-important, cliché-ridden prestige-obsessed, almost-autonomous criticism" (Jarrell 1953: 65, 66). The New York intellectual Irving Howe reached a similar verdict. Literary criticism was an "appalling" spectacle, marked by a crazy over-emphasis on criticism as an activity, an "astonishing indifference to the ideas that occupy the serious modern mind" (e.g., Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, Frazer, Dewey), an obsessive interest in the opinions of critics about other critics, and a narrow-minded desire among graduate students to become the disciple of some leading critical figure. The result, in Howe's estimation, was that "in the literary world" there is a "bureaucratization of opinion and taste," with literature serving as "raw material which critics work up into schemes of structure and symbol" (1954: 43). Business and bureaucracy: to many, Ransom's vision of "Criticism, Inc." had been fulfilled in a nightmarish form.

In the mid-1950s, the New Critics' godfather, T. S. Eliot, offered this appraisal of a book of New Critical/close reading essays:

The method is to take a well-known poem ... without reference to the author or to his other work, analyze 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 ... For nearly all the poems in the volume were poems that I had known and loved for many years; and after reading the analyses, I found I was slow to recover my previous feeling about the poems. It was as if someone had taken a machine to pieces and left me with the task of reassembling the parts. (1956: 537, 539)

Despite all of the criticisms to which it was subjected, from outside and inside the movement, the New Criticism nevertheless prospered because it worked terrifically well in the classroom.

In *Practical Criticism*, I. A. Richards had examined the responses of Cambridge University students in the 1920s to poems that he distributed to them without authors' names or dates. He found that even well-educated and competent readers of poetry could not understand the texts before them. "The most disturbing and impressive fact brought out by this experiment is that a large proportion of average-to-good (and in some cases, certainly, devoted) readers of poetry frequently and repeatedly *fail to understand it*, both as a statement and as an expression. They fail to make out its prose sense, its plain, overt meaning, as a set of ordinary, intelligible, English sentences, taken quite apart from any further poetic significance. And equally, they misapprehend its feeling, its tone, and its intention. They would travesty it in a paraphrase" (Richards 1929: 12).

Brooks and Warren read Richards's book with great interest, and it shaped their work as young instructors at Louisiana State University in the 1930s. Assigned to teach introductory courses, they encountered, as had Richards, "a practical problem": their students did not know how to interpret literary works, poems in particular. Brooks recalled that "some had not been taught how to do so at all; many had been thoroughly mistaught. Some actually approached Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' in the same spirit and with the same expectations with which they approached an editorial in the local county newspaper or an advertisement in the current Sears, Roebuck catalogue" (Brooks 1979: 593). For spring semester 1935, Warren prepared a thirty-page handout on metrics and imagery, and then, for the following year's courses, aided by Brooks and J. T. Purser (a student assistant), he included coverage of fiction, drama, and prose. Louisiana State University printed the full text with the title *An Approach to Literature*, and soon it was picked up by a commercial publisher.

Brooks and Warren turned next to the task of putting together a comprehensive introduction to the study of poetry, a two-in-one textbook of instruction in close reading and anthology of poems. They intended to title it *Reading Poetry*, but at the publisher's insistence they agreed to a change: the term *understanding* was felt to make a stronger claim than *reading*. Brooks and Warren omitted nearly all biographical and historical contexts in order to concentrate the attention of the teacher and students on the words on the page and the specific skills needed to respond to and analyze them. In their "Letter to the Teacher," they affirmed: "The poem in itself, if literature is to be studied as literature, remains finally the object for study" (1938: xi).

Other textbooks followed: *Understanding Fiction* (1943), *Understanding Drama* (with Robert Heilman, 1945), and *Modern Rhetoric* (1949). *Understanding Poetry* was the most successful; by 1950, some 250 college and university teachers were using it in courses. For many of them and their students, Brooks and Warren's account of reading poetry, enriched by forty detailed close readings, was a revelation: "No one brought up on Brooks and Warren can ever forget the excitement of following the editors through their close analyses of individual poems, or the even greater excitement of using their models as a basis for new readings" (Litz 1979: 56). *Understanding Fiction* won a wide readership too. Among college and university teachers, few works of the twentieth century were as significant and influential as these poetry and fiction textbooks: "they revolutionized the teaching of literature in thousands of classrooms for 25 years" (McSween 1998: 175). As the scholar M. H. Abrams has said, "what the New Criticism dominated was the pedagogy of courses designed to introduce undergraduates to the reading of poems, plays, and novels" (1997: 109).

The literary theorist Paul de Man taught in the 1950s in a New Critical-style course at Harvard—an "experiment in critical reading"—that was led and organized by Reuben A. Brower, whose mentors included I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis. Students "were not to say anything that was not derived from the text they were considering," de Man recalled: "They were not to make any statements that they could not support by a specific use of language that actually occurred in the text. They were asked, in other words, to begin by reading texts closely as texts and not to move at once into the general context of human experience or history" (de Man 1982: 23).

Brower's colleague Perry Miller mockingly referred to the course as "Remedial Reading," and others said that its title should have been "How to Talk About Literature Without Actually Knowing Anything" (Pritchard 1985: 243). But this training in close reading (Brower preferred "slow reading") was transformative for many students. It is said of Brower and other gifted New Critical teachers that "under their spell, the classroom became something like a Quaker meeting, not so much a place of compulsory recitation as of open invitation for students to contribute toward the goal of building, collectively, new insights into the work under discussion" (Delbanco 1999: 36).

Did New Critical close reading change the classroom study of literature for the better? It did (as in Brower's course), and it did not. New Critical explication sensitized students to uses of language in texts, and, in the process, it made their essay-writing more careful and rigorous. But the New Criticism's exclusions limited the ability of students to connect their literary studies to other fields of inquiry and to perceive the relationship of literature to the contexts of "human experience" and "history." Not everyone was a New Critical purist, and surely some teachers of close reading were more adept than others and sought to move beyond the text at hand. The success or failure of close reading ultimately depended on the teacher, and still does: he or she makes the intensive study of a poem inspiring and profound, or tedious and claustrophobic.

Does, then, the New Criticism matter now? Courses in literary theory and criticism often devote a week or two to it, but just as often they do not. A teacher has only so much space on the syllabus, and there are structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, new historicism, feminism, queer theory, race and ethnicity, eco-criticism, disability studies, and much more. There are pockets of interest too in "distant reading" (e.g., Moretti 2013),

a form of interpretation that relies on massive amounts of data gathered through computer studies and quantitative research; and in “surface reading,” the study not of what is deep, concealed, or hidden in a text but, rather, of “what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible” on a text’s surface (Best and Marcus 2009: 9). In the midst of all of this, the New Criticism does not seem urgent or special. Empson, Leavis, Brooks: what claim do they have on our attention? To younger scholars and to students, these names may feel as antiquated and dusty as Dryden and Johnson.

The truth, however, hidden in plain sight, is that the New Criticism is no longer special, distinct, or attention-seizing as an approach because long ago it became equivalent to literary criticism at its most fundamental, the set of interpretive reading and writing skills that everything else is built upon. The New Criticism is criticism, the work that teachers and students perform in classrooms and that students seek to exemplify in analytical essays in their literature courses. Close reading is at the forefront of the mission statement of every department of English and is central to foreign language and literature departments as well. It is impossible to imagine what literary study would look like—what its practitioners would say that they do—without this core commitment to close reading.

In an essay published in 1962, Cleanth Brooks reiterated that the literary critic and teacher should consider “the structure of the poem as poem. And with this kind of examination the so-called ‘new criticism’ is concerned. I should be happy to drop the adjective ‘new’ and simply say: with this kind of judgment, literary criticism is concerned” (1962: 103). By the middle of the century, the New Criticism had “absorbed” its adversaries, making it “almost impossible to identify the individual species New Critic as something distinct from the general run of competent literary academics” (Foster 1962: 13–14). As René Wellek observed, “much of what the New Criticism taught is valid and will be valid as long as people think about the nature and function of literature and poetry” (1978: 611). “In ceasing to be New,” concluded Louis D. Rubin Jr., “it has not thereby become Old Criticism. Instead, it has become simply criticism” (1991: 204). Today there is no New Criticism. No one is a New Critic because everyone is.

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