

Of Course There is a Need to Go Against the Grain: Social Context of New Criticism

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In this paper¹ I would like to focus on the New Critics and see them in relation to the work of Eliot, Richards and Leavis. I would more specifically wish to look at the social context of New Criticism. The paper will also try to link up some issues of New Criticism with issues in contemporary critical theory.

How should I begin to talk about “New Criticism” which has become so old that hardly anyone mentions it these days? How should I introduce “New Criticism” to an academic community today that hears at best of cultural studies, poststructuralism and posthumanism? What do we, teachers, at any rate, do in our classrooms when we need to discuss such “strange” objects as poems, plays and novels? Do texts still matter to us as objects to be discussed in detail, or do we feel that texts are just there on the syllabus and the course outline as pretexts to talk about anything other than the texts? In what sense does context matter while reading texts and literary movements? I hope at least some of these questions will be addressed, if not satisfactorily answered, during the course of the paper.

New Criticism which became very popular as a movement in literary criticism in the 1950s and the 1960s has had its origins in the 1920s. In America, it traces its roots to the Fugitive Circle of the 1920s and the Agrarian Movement of the 1930s. It also draws on the work of critics like I. A. Richards, T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis and William Empson who were writing around the same in England. Critics associated with New Criticism are² John Crow Ransom (1888-74), Donald Davidson (1893-1968), Allen Tate (1899-1979), and Robert Perm Warren (1905-1989), known as the “Fugitives” and an overlapping group of writers called “Southern Agrarians,” Rene Wellek (1903-1995) and Austin Warren (1899-1986). Except for Wellek, an immigrant and Austin Warren from the North, the rest of them are from the agrarian South. The movement brought to the fore the concerns of the South against the domination of the industrial North. While the work of Richards, Eliot and Leavis is regarded in England as having contributed to the establishment of English Literature as a discipline in the university, the work of the New Critics may be considered as having provided a viable model for the teaching of literature. The word “fugitive” instantly suggests romantic concerns and a withdrawal from society that reminds us of the concepts of “dissociation of sensibility” and “organic community” both Eliot and Leavis bring into the discussion of English literature of the 17th century.

For the New Critics the poem itself becomes a symbol of an “organic unity,” and provides the necessary escape from the harsh realities of life. They emphasise a return to the Southern culture based on the small farm and wish to recover the values associated with the old South prior to the Civil War, much like Eliot and

Leavis who stressed on the loss of the organic community and its possible recovery through literature. The traditional values having been destroyed by science and the process of industrialisation is a theme common to both the parties. However, one sees in the work of Richards in England and the New Critics in America an ambivalent relationship towards science. They are not against the methods of science. They draw on its "objective" methods. Richards is well known for bringing poems to his class with the names of the poets erased to make his students respond objectively to "the words on the page." The New Critics seem to have developed their own critical methods following Richards' models of "close reading" and "practical criticism." One cannot ignore the economic conditions of the period of Depression that were favourable for the development of ideas of romantic escape the critics advocate. While one may see economic depression as an immediate cause for such attitudes, one cannot forget the fact that there had been a long tradition of such thinking from Matthew Arnold who had talked about the role of poetry in society and who had also emphasized considering "the object as in itself it really is" in the critical examination of literary texts. While we see Arnold and Eliot after him advocating the replacement of religion by poetry, we see the New Critics working towards defending the cause of what they perceived as vanishing standards in literature through their almost missionary role in teaching criticism on a mass scale to ensure that it becomes a discipline in the universities.

Ransom emphasises the need for professionalisation of criticism. He says: "Rather than occasional criticism by amateurs, I should think the whole enterprise might be seriously taken in hand by professionals. Perhaps I use a distasteful figure, but I have the idea that what we need is Criticism, Inc., or Criticism, Ltd.," (Ransom 229). Mark the irony of the use of the industrial metaphor that suggests the need for the production of critical output on a mass scale. As against the historical, moral, personal, linguistic aspects of the study of a poem, he suggests that "[t]he critic should regard the poem as nothing short of a desperate ontological or metaphysical manoeuvre" (Ransom 238). That a poem ought not to be approached from the personal angle of the poet's biography, a principle that has its obvious resonances with Eliot's theory of the impersonality of poetry, was advanced by Eliot in his famous essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" in 1919. The essay is significant in not only establishing the view that "the progress of an artist is a continual self sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality," but also in maintaining that in this act of "depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science" (Eliot 73). And we are all too familiar with the metaphor Eliot draws from Chemistry to demonstrate his point of view. Add to this, his proposition regarding "dissociation of sensibility" from his essay, "The Metaphysical Poets":

The poets of the seventeenth century, the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience. They are simple, artificial, difficult, or fantastic, as their predecessors were; no less nor more than Dante, Guido Cavalcanti, Guinicelli, or Cino. In the seventeenth century a dissociation

of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered; and this dissociation, as is natural, was aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden.

(Eliot)

Leavis in his turn had also discussed the loss of what he termed “organic community” of a rural, agricultural England and its gradual replacement by an urban, industrial and organised modern state. What characterised the values of organic community were community awareness and a certain sharing of common interests, goals and beliefs. As against this, the machine represented mass production, standardization and a certain levelling down of standards. As it was not possible to retrieve the organic community which had been irrecoverably lost, he and his collaborator, Denys Thompson proposed building up a civilized community through a conscious effort in training people to “discriminate and resist” via the English school in a University. This becomes the basis for Leavis’s entire critical endeavour and the efforts of *Scrutiny*, the influential critical journal edited by him. Leavis and Thompson had been influenced by Richards who suggested that since other vehicles of tradition like the family and community had dissolved, one had to rely solely on language to recover the loss of the values of the organic community.

If Leavis had been responsible for establishing criticism as a discipline in the English School at Cambridge, the New Critics ran a programmatic campaign to install New Criticism as a tool for the analysis of literature in various universities in the U. S.³ Ransom founded the Kenyon School of English and edited the *Kenyan Review* from 1939. Warren and Brooks used the platform of the *Southern Review* for the spread of New Criticism and edited it from 1934. In 1942 the *Kenyan Review* got merged with the *Southern Review*. On his part, Allen Tate edited the *Sewanee Review*. Brooks and Warren championed the cause of the New Critical movement through a series of books – *An Approach to Literature* (1936), *Understanding Poetry* (1938) and *Understanding Fiction* (1943). Brooks joined Robert Heilman to write *Understanding Drama* (1946). Each of these books had addressed a letter to the teacher, who was to champion the cause of the critical movement. The letter appealed to them by referring to the ill effects of popular writing on the young, much like Leavis and Thompson’s book *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness* did in 1933, a few years prior to the publication of these books.

Let us turn now to a statement made by the twelve Agrarians represented by Ransom in the introduction to *I’ll Take My Stand* in 1930:

Nobody now proposes for the South, or for any other community in this country, an independent political destiny. That idea is thought to have been finished in 1805. But how far shall the South surrender its moral, social, and economic autonomy to the victorious principle of Union? That question remains open. The South is a minority section that has hitherto been jealous of its minority right to live its own kind of life. The South scarcely hopes to determine the other sections, but it does propose to determine itself, within the utmost limits of legal

action.... The younger Southerners, who are being converted frequently to the industrial gospel, must come back to the support of the Southern tradition. They must be persuaded to look very critically at the advantages of becoming a "new South" which will be only an undistinguished replica of the usual industrial community.

(Ransom)

This extract from the "Introduction: A Statement of Principles," an introduction to an anthology the New Critics edited makes their stance against the industrial North very clear. Nor is their stand against Communism less explicit, as is evident from another statement from the "Introduction":

Even the apologists of industrialism have been obliged to admit that some economic evils follow in the wake of the machines. These are such as overproduction, unemployment, and a growing inequality in the distribution of wealth. But the remedies proposed by the apologists are always homeopathic. They expect the evils to disappear when we have bigger and better machines, and more of them.... Sometimes they see the system righting itself spontaneously and without direction: they are Optimists. Sometimes they rely on the benevolence of capital, or the militancy of labor, to bring about a fairer division of the spoils: they are Cooperationists or Socialists. And sometimes they expect to find super-engineers, in the shape of Boards of Control, who will adapt production to consumption and regulate prices and guarantee business against fluctuations: they are Sovietists. With respect to these last it must be insisted that the true Sovietists or Communists—if the term may be used here in the European sense—are the Industrialists themselves. They would have the government set up an economic super-organization, which in turn would become the government. We therefore look upon the Communist menace as a menace indeed, but not as a Red one; because it is simply according to the blind drift of our industrial development to expect in America at last much the same economic system as that imposed by violence upon Russia in 1917.

(Ransom)

This collective volume by twelve Southerners was originally titled "A Tract Against Communism" that makes their stand very clear. As has been pointed out earlier, the New Critics clearly see a role for themselves to protect society and culture from the onslaught of the economic determinants. The task of criticism was therefore to develop a critical credo that would simultaneously counter the mechanistic attitudes in ideological terms as well as uphold the scientific methods in practical-critical terms. No wonder then that in "Criticism, Inc.," that may be termed a manifesto of New Criticism, Ransom directly opposes the biographical, historical, moral and linguistic approaches to the study of literature. In this context, one cannot forget the contribution of W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and M. C. Beardsley who through their path breaking essays "Intentional Fallacy" (1946) and "Affective Fallacy" (1949), both published in the *Sewanee Review*, an organ of the New Critical movement, argued that judging a work on the basis of the

stated or implied intentions of the writer or the effect a literary work may have had on the readers was to commit a fallacy in critical interpretation.

The poem therefore is nothing but the words on the page. The task of the critic is to unravel the secrets of the emotional and intellectual complex which the poem represents. The New Critics have each invented a host of new critical terms like "irony," "paradox," "ambiguity," "image," "symbol," "metaphor," "tension" etc., to study poems in all their complexity. William Empson becomes dear to them precisely because he talks about "Seven Types of Ambiguity." The terminology invented by them goes hand in hand with the "Modernist" poetry that was being written in the Anglo-American literary world. It is necessary for us to remind ourselves that Eliot, their presiding deity, had reflected on what a good poem ought to be in the "modernist" phase in his essay "The Metaphysical Poets" in 1921:

We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.... Hence we get something which looks very much like the conceit – we get, in fact, a method curiously similar to that of the 'metaphysical poets' similar also in its use of obscure words and of simple phrasing.

(Eliot) Even as the New Critics were ideologically close to the Romantics, they opposed it for its individualism. The emotional component of the poem was therefore to be evenly balanced by its intellectual conceit. It is thus that they praise Keats, but denounce Shelley. The denouncement of Shelley must also be seen in the light of his sympathies with the "Left" cause. The various components of a poem must be integrated into an "organic" whole. A critical paradigm constructed on these lines goes on to rearrange the literary canon to determine "great" and "minor" literary traditions wherein Shakespeare, the seventeenth century and Metaphysical poets are extolled, the eighteenth century ignored, the Romantics selectively approved and so on. A major lacuna of New Criticism lies in the fact that it has largely confined itself to the criticism of poetry, succumbing perhaps to the logic of its own critical terminology that emphasised aspects such as unity, structure, texture etc. Critical analysis had to confine itself to self referentiality though the entire critical movement was necessitated by the cold war between Capitalism and Communism.

In the light of the above argument, I wish to conclude by saying that there is of course a need to go against the grain of what the New Critics may have stated, given the socio-political and literary contexts in which they produced their work, and it is only by situating them in such a context that we arrive at a better understanding of their concerns.

Endnotes

¹This paper is a reworking of a presentation made on “New Criticism” as part of the invited talks at the International College of Girls, Jaipur on 29th January 2010. I wish to thank Prof. N. K. Jain and Ms. Rimika Singhvi and the authorities of the ICG, Jaipur for this honour,

²I am aware of a recent essay by Edward D. Pickering titled “The Roots of New Criticism” published in *The Southern Literary Journal*, (41.1, 2008) which warns us against collapsing the Agrarians and the New Critics under a single umbrella. While I agree with him that the plurality several dozens of these men represent with their “distinct aims and opinions” “frustrates generalization”, I argue that his contention that “the two fundamental ideas” of “the superiority of a life lived in contact with the land and opposition to science” the two groups shared too needs to be revised in the larger literary and socio-political contexts that connect them to developments outside America.

³Facts related to the institutionalisation of criticism in the U.S., by the New Critics are mainly drawn from Rick Rylance, “The New Criticism,” *Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism*, ed., Martin Coyle et al, London: Routledge, 1990, 721-734.

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