

The Legacy of New Criticism

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(This paper is based on the plenary lecture delivered by Dr. Nagarajan at the
International Conference on English Literature held on 21-23 September, 2012 at
Kilakarai, Ramand District, Tamilnadu, India.)

ABSTRACT

Though literary criticism is as old as literature itself, it was only in the twentieth century its manifestation was observable in diverse forms. Among these the most noteworthy movement that effected a total transformation of the discipline of English Studies goes by the name of New Criticism. Its origin and growth could be seen running parallel to Modernism in the arts. By mid 1930s or so, it got entrenched in the universities in the English speaking world. And in the post-war years, theories about the language of poetry—poetry as ontology, for instance—favouring close textual analysis helped in strengthening its claims, buttressed by learned journals. As matters stand now in the second decade of the twenty-first century, its assumptions stand discredited, outdated. For example, Structuralism opposes its focus on individual works in isolation. Deconstruction's emphasis on the elusiveness of language which undermines itself is in direct contrast to the New critical theory on the primacy of language. New Historicism/Cultural Materialism too, with its faith in the principle of negotiation and appropriation among parallel texts does not accommodate its view. The major charges levelled against New Criticism are: it shows little concern with the social function of literature; it is unhistorical, since it isolates a work from its origins and context, concerning itself with only the two elements which constitute a work—the subject, and the words in which it is expressed, rejecting any continuity with the experiences of its creator and its reader; and, its method of reasoning deductive..

Be that as it may, New Criticism plays a significant role in English Studies even now. The habit of reading it promoted during the 40s and 50s of the last century is prevalent everywhere as can be evidenced in the very institution of literary education, not to speak of reviews, review articles and scholarly presentations. Some important concepts it taught us are now absorbed in all theories today. Concrete evidences from the text are shown to validate the interpretations. The 'close reading' of texts that New Criticism taught us is now practised as a regular pedagogical method in teaching and learning. It was only after the arrival of New Criticism, such other disciplines as women's studies, Black studies, and comparative literature, creative writing programmes began to establish themselves. In this sense, New Criticism paved the way for widening the scope of the discipline of English studies in various directions.

The one movement that has had the total impact on the English studies the world over in the twentieth century goes by the name of New Criticism. Perhaps the emphasis laid on criticism for the first time in the history of literary study earned for it its title 'New.' Around the twenties of the last century, this movement took its roots on both sides of the Atlantic: England and the United States. The reason should have been some discontent with the way English studies had been carried on till then. Literary art had not kept pace with the growth of Science and Industry. In the discussions that went around, the problem was where to lay the emphasis: on the author, or the work itself or the history behind the creation. Hence the full nomenclature for it is Anglo-American New Criticism or aesthetic Formalism or simply Formalism as distinguished from Russian Formalism.

Joel Spingarn, the American Renaissance scholar and historian wrote a short booklet in 1911 titled "New Criticism" in which he discussed the writings of Benedetto Croce, the Italian philosopher. Thirty years later, in 1941, John Crowe Ransom, the founder of the journal *Kenyon Review* wrote a book reviewing the criticism of I.A. Richards, T.S. Eliot and Yvor Winters, rather unfavourably to which he gave the caption New Criticism. In a chapter in that book "Wanted an Ontological Critic" he pleads for an establishment of an intellectual movement that rightly deserves to be called "New Criticism." But even before it gained this title, the movement had entrenched itself in the academia. It started as a reaction against the prevailing modes noticeable in the following trends: mere subjective impressionism broadly known as appreciation, vague philosophic humanism, vulgar Marxism. The imagist movement in poetry spearheaded by Ezra Pound offered the necessary stimulus. T.S. Eliot's *Sacred Wood* (1920) showed clearly that he favoured some sort of technical

criticism as against glib moralism. The twin essays "The Perfect Critic" and "The Imperfect Critic" amply prove his stand that to be a good critic one has to be a being of a higher order. And for such a person, technical and aesthetic analyses are necessary, but not sufficient conditions for sound criticism. His essay "Religion and Literature" confirms his position that non-literary considerations should be taken into account for a fuller and comprehensive treatment of a work.

First and foremost, New Criticism was a reactionary movement against historical criticism. Its anti-historicism is seen when it spread to the establishment with very workmanlike anthologies such as *Understanding Poetry* (1938) and *Understanding Fiction* (1943). This stance changed the whole approach to criticism; one has only to witness the works of Ransom, Allen Tate, R.P. Blackmur, Kenneth Burke, Yvor Winters, and later Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren and William Wimsatt.

The closest probable date when things got settled to a core of agreement would be 1923. On the English side I.A. Richards' *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) and *Practical Criticism* (1922) were influential factors. Besides the founding father Richards, William Empson, the *Scrutiny* critics F.R. Leavis, L.C. Knights and Derek Traversi may be cited as those who preferred and practised such critical approaches. Birds of the same feather flock together. We ought not to run away with the idea that all these critics formed a guild subscribing to the same notions. Though they shared similar attitudes, there was no desert uniformity in their beliefs. New Criticism does not form a coterie. What brought them together was their opposition to the system of academic scholarship prevalent in their time. Scholarship was equated with historical scholarship and philological methods of study for understanding. These were dismissed as 'extrinsic' criticism.

Thus we see that New Criticism began as a movement replacing the biocritical and historical methods that dominated English studies in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The life and times of the author may interest a historian but not a critic; the text ought not to be confused with its origins (intentional fallacy) or its effects upon the readers (affective fallacy). It is the text that provides all the evidences we require which can be examined through the formal elements that make up the text: image, simile, metaphor and other such forms of figurative language. The literary object is a timeless, autonomous, verbal object. It is the same for all people at all times. Its meaning is objective meant to be realised by anyone who analyses it with close examination. Its complex meaning cannot be explained by just paraphrasing it.

Literary language is different from scientific language or everyday language. While scientific language points to some world outside without calling attention to itself, everyday language, on the other hand, is denotative depending on a one-to-one correspondence between words and the objects they stand for. Literary language organises all linguistic resources into some special kind of arrangement into a complex and unique unity in order to create an aesthetic experience. And the form in which this experience is clothed is inseparable from its content and meaning. In other words what a text means and how it means are one and the same. And the work, the verbal icon, possess an ideal, organic unity (the world's body) in which all elements contribute to create an indivisible whole. This organic unity makes for the complexity of the work and this achievement of an organic whole is the criterion for evaluating a literary work. By explaining its unity, its inclusiveness, its coherence, its value is judged.

The complexity of a work is often the result of multiple and conflicting meanings that are produced by such

devices as irony, paradox, ambiguity, tension and so on. Should a work achieve its unity, its order, these devices should help resolve the conflicts and tensions in the work leading to its harmony. This critical practice goes by the name 'intrinsic' criticism which means that criticism exists within the confines of the text and does not go outside the text for the tools they require to interpret the text. The text is an autotelic artefact. It is complete and wholesome in itself, and it exists for its own sake. Its relationship with the world beyond is not much of an interest for the New Critic.

New Criticism is a realisation of the assumptions drawn from Aristotle, Kant, and Coleridge, recreated and fused together culminating in the modernist literary tradition. We had better recall a few notions which are central to the philosophy of the movement.

- The notion of deviationism which holds the view that the language of a poem is the aesthetic medium (like painting) that is manipulated into a form. The language of poetry is different from the usual language used in everyday communication.
- The notion of totalisation that holds the view that the poem is an organism like the body. It is an organised whole in which every part is related to every other part, and these stand in harmony with one another.
- The principle of closure which is a notion related to the previous one that a poem is a system of language which is a self-justified and autonomous entity.
- The poem is a special object which is ontologically present (principle of presence).
- The work is a sacred object (verbal icon). The critic is the adorer and the work is the idol.

Two full accounts of New Critical manifesto appeared as "The Intentional Fallacy," and "The Affective Fallacy," authored jointly by Wimsatt and Beardsley. The twin essays constitute the most uncompromising theoretical statement of the manifesto that objective criticism is that in which attention is focussed upon the meaning of a work itself without being distracted by enquiries into the origins of works in personal experiences. New Criticism is pragmatic in its concerns and ought not to be construed as a doctrine.

Rene Wellek's essay "The New Criticism: Pro and Contra" weighs the merits of New Criticism after the movement has grown out-of-date. He levelled four charges against it: Its 'esoteric aestheticism' shows no concern with the social function of literature, and it is like the revival of the 'art for art's sake movement'; the New Critics are often called 'formalists' to expose their lack of social concerns; it is unhistorical because it isolates a work from its origins, and context; It aims to make criticism 'scientific'; it is just a pedagogical tool like the French explication de texte, useful only the level of trying to learn to read literary texts, and poetry in particular. Here is Geoffrey Hartman in his essay "Beyond Formalism": Our present explication-centred criticism is indeed puerile, or utmost pedagogic: we forget its merely pedagogic function, that it stands to a mature criticism as pastoral to the epic.

The objections to New Criticism also came from other sources, before the final rejection came from the continental critics. The Chicago Critics referred to the New Critics as 'the radical reformers of literary study,' inspired by the 'Hellenistic-Roman-Romantic-Rhetorical' tradition. They termed the movement as 'reactionary and obscurantist,' and repudiated it mainly for the following reason: It is unsound in its principles, and incompatible with enquiry, for it concerns itself with only two

elements which constitute a work—the subject, and the words in which it is expressed. The material cause of a work is just one of the several factors governing its being.

The myth critics too attacked the New Critics. The myth critics identified myth with literature; myth is the handmaid of literature. They discussed myth as part of the content apart from the poem itself whereas for the New Critics myth is a system of symbols or metaphors and it is a device. To quote Rene Wellek, "The New Criticism has become a victim of the general attack on literature and art, of the 'deconstruction' of literary texts, of the new anarchy that allows a complete liberty of interpretation, and even of a self-confessed nihilism."

It is true that New Criticism has somehow proved to be rather restricted in its area of operation to the English and provincial literature, not showing a broader occupation with the wealth of the literatures of the world at large. By way of defending them it should be said to their credit that they were not averse to historical knowledge (as so often they are charged), but they felt it should stand in subordination to the interpretation of the poem. Many New Critics such as Brooks and Winters were sound historical scholars and in their attempts at a revisionary literary history, they have based their faith on a historical scheme, and have used history as a basic standard for judgement and interpretation. They are called 'formalists' which does not mean that they pay attention to the outward form only in the traditional sense. For them form and content exist inseparably. They stand for the organicity of the poem. They are formalists because they see the poem not only as an act of communication but as an artefact endowed with a certain shaping principle of organisation. It is an object of knowledge, sui generis. It has a special ontological status. This knowledge required for a better understanding of the

world can be acquired only by a union of feeling and intellect. Such union is nowhere better achieved than in poetry. Close reading is not a sterile activity, but leads to judgment and discrimination between good and bad poems. Unless a work of art is set off from all its antecedents, it cannot be fully approached as a coherent body of knowledge. The critic's job is to see the work 'as a totality, a configuration, a gestalt, a whole.

There are many home truths New Criticism has taught us and these can, in no way, be ignored by the succeeding generations of critics. A work of art is a structure with norms; it has coherence and unity and it is not dependent upon its origins or effects. It does not yield abstract knowledge. It has taught us how to discriminate between good and vulgar art. To quote yet again from the same essay of Rene Wellek:

The humanities would abdicate their function in society if they surrendered to a neutral scientism and indifferent relativism or if they succumbed to the imposition of alien norms required by political indoctrination. Particularly on these two fronts the New Critics have waged a valiant fight, which, I am afraid, must be fought over and over again, in the future (103).

By the early forties of the last century this movement established itself in the universities, and the younger scholars were in favour of this school in the post-war years. Close textual analysis came to replace arid historical scholarship, and theories about the language of poetry helped in strengthening the claims of the New Critics. Learned literary journals, The Southern Review, The Kenyon Review, The Sewanee Review and later even the conventional journals accepted, and espoused their mode of critical writings. The position that New Criticism occupies now in the area of literary studies is rather

strange. For one thing it is not strictly speaking contemporary but the habit of reading it promoted during the early forties through the sixties is prevalent even now. Some important concepts it taught us are now absorbed in all theories today. Concrete evidences from the text are shown to validate the interpretations. The 'close reading' of texts that New Criticism taught us is now practised as a regular pedagogical method in teaching and learning. In this sense New Criticism is never to be invalidated. On all other grounds, it seems dated, and even outdated. Structuralism opposes its focus on individual works in isolation. Deconstruction's view of language rejects New Criticism's assumptions. New Historicism's view of objectivity is different from that of New Criticism. That which was its major source of strength when it first appeared on the scene, later proved its downfall! It dominated critical discourse for well over four decades. In the late sixties, its hegemony and influence began to wane when there was a growing interest in the ideological content of literary texts. New theories are emerging today, extending the narrow limits of its formal concepts, such as connecting the author formally with his works, rather than historically or biographically. The works of E.D. Hirsch, and the more recent works of the structuralists, and phenomenologists are a positive contribution in this direction. There can be no pure 'innocent' reader, for there is a whole array of presuppositions, beliefs, etc., to a work. In this sense there can be no sanctified and objective texts storing a wealth of content in them. What matters is the process by which the content is formulated and realised in limitless ways.

The New Critics underemphasised the reader and the poet by overemphasising the object (poem). The under emphasis or the banishment of the poet has led to the countermovement hermeneutics, and the banishment of the

reader has led to the reader-response theories and reception aesthetics. Structuralists and Poststructuralists emphasise the flow of textuality. There is no way of separating the text from the intertextual swing. There is no special form of language for poetry. Language is one monolith, and we just have to face it. Rejecting positivistic literary scholarship, the New Criticism with its empiricism, exercised its influence on the institution of English studies for four decades—and still plays a significant role—and later with the entry of European literary theory its prestige has been on the decline.

One may say New Criticism stands eclipsed—almost. The dinosaur of New

Criticism is killed. It died of its own success. In a sense, yes! However one cannot hide the truth that only after the arrival of the New Critics, such other related disciplines as Women's studies, Black studies and Comparative Literature began to establish themselves. Our whole examination system, reviewing of books and review articles, publication of research essays and, what not, are monumental evidences that prove that New Criticism is alive and kicking. In instances such as these, New Criticism has paved the way for widening the scope of the discipline of English studies in various directions. This, then, is the legacy of the movement.