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NEW CRITICISM[1]

New Criticism is a name applied to a varied and extremely energetic effort among Anglo-American writers to focus critical attention on literature itself. Like RUSSIAN FORMALISM, following Boris Eikhenbaum and Victor Shklovskii, the New Critics developed speculative positions on techniques of reading that provide a vital complement to the literary and artistic emergence of modernism. In the specific context of Anglo-American literary study, however, the New Criticism appears, in retrospect, as part of an epochal project to create the curricular and pedagogical institutions by which the study of literature moved from the genteel cultivation of taste to an emerging professional academic discipline. In this respect, the New Criticism exhibits many similarities to STRUCTURALISM, just as it had an impact on the development of the French *nouvelle critique* and later, structuralist literary criticism as exemplified in the early work of ROLAND BARTHES.

In general, the far-reaching influence of New Criticism stems less from theoretical or programmatic coherence than from the practical (and pedagogical) appeal of a characteristic way of reading and its pervasive influence on the academic culture of Anglophone literary study. The theoretical differences among the critics commonly described as New Critics (not necessarily by themselves)- I. A. RICHARDS, WILLIAM EMPSON, F. R. LEAVIS, KENNETH BURKE, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, YVOR WINTERS, Cleanth Brooks, R. P. BLACKMUR, W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., RENÉ WELLEK-are sometimes so great as to leave little apparent ground for agreement. The New Critics tended to be eclectic on matters of theory, concentrating instead on what Blackmur called the critic's "job of work."

For most of the New Critics that job was PRACTICAL CRITICISM or "close reading," in which the poem or literary text is treated as a self-sufficient verbal artifact. In this general orientation, the literary text as such was generally viewed as a privileged site for shaping and disseminating cultural values held to be essential attribute of the aesthetic specificity of poetry. By careful attention to language, the text is presumed to be a unique source of meaning and value, sharply distinguished from other texts or other uses of language (particularly scientific language). Accordingly, the meaning of the poem is not conveyed by any prose paraphrase and is valued as the source of an experience (for the reader) available in no other way. For this among other reasons, opponents of the New Critics have frequently charged that they ignore history, ideology, politics, philosophy, or other factors that shape literary experience. While such charges are not entirely fair, they arise because New Criticism in practice came to focus almost exclusively on problems of interpreting individual texts.

Partly for this reason, New Criticism can still be considered a movement, beginning after World War I with the critical work of modern poets and critics, especially T. S. ELIOT, Richards, and somewhat later John Crowe Ransom, culminating some 30 years later in the work of explicitly academic critics, such as Wellek, Wimsatt, and Brooks. The institutional dimension of the New Criticism is particularly clear in this respect, in the creation of

[1] From second edition of *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, & Imre Szeman, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), pp. 691-698

enormously influential textbooks, the writing of histories not merely of literature but of criticism itself, and the practical working out of paradigmatic models for publishing literary criticism which could readily be taught to graduate students, and adapted to professional purposes, including (but not limited to) the granting of tenure and promotion. More explicitly, however, the force of the New Criticism as a movement is evident in the pervasive sense that literary study was strongly implicated in the formation and continuation of cultural values, precisely at a time when those values were perceived to be in peril. This, as one of the major unifying motifs of diverse modernisms, provides a kind of background for the importance of a critical agenda carried out in professional, reasoned terms, not in what might otherwise seem the high-energy ranting of partisans—as, for example, in the emergence of the New Humanism under the leadership of Irving Babbitt, or other similar polemical attempts to re-argue the distinction between Romanticism and Classicisism. It is of interest that the first use of the term, "The New Criticism" was in an essay of that title in *Creative Criticism* (1917) by Joel Spingarn, specifically as an antidote to the excesses of the New Humanist debates of that era.

The debt of the New Critics to T.S. Eliot was pervasive, but two germinal ideas from his essays shaped both New Critical theory and practice. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1917), Eliot argued that the literature of Western Europe could be viewed as a "simultaneous order" of works (3), where the value of any new work depended on its relation to the order of the tradition. Thus, the work of the "individual talent" does not so much express a personality as it affects and is affected by the literature of the past. Eliot was responding in part to complaints that modem poetry was too hard to understand, too austere, metaphysical, or unfamiliar. Eliot's essay asserts that difficult language reflects an equally difficult modern historical and psychological predicament. The point, however, is general: poetry as an historical process and a response to human predicaments is difficult, especially as the literature of any age is also a response to previous literature as a whole.

In "Hamlet and His Problems" (1919) Eliot further proposed that the effects of poetry stem from a relation between the words of the text and events, states of mind, or experiences that offer an "objective correlative" (124). Eliot suggests that there is a unique experience to which the language of the poem corresponds: the poem means just what it says, but it is the "objective correlative" in experience that makes the intellectual and emotional value of the poem intelligible. Ironically, Eliot propounds this idea while arguing that *Hamlet is* a less than satisfactory play because no sufficient correlative (or too many correlatives) can be found. A more encompassing irony is that both the origin and the collapse of New Criticism are contained in this point, where the precision of language demanded of the poem cannot be shown to determine a correlative meaning, "objective" or otherwise.

In suggesting that literature could be treated as a simultaneous order, a system, Eliot opened the way to more explicitly speculative and theoretical studies of literature, while in focusing attention on the fundamental operations by which literary works create intelligible structure, he provided an analytical example for critics that went well beyond traditional protocols for assigning critical praise or blame. While Eliot himself evinces no strong inclination to pursue either explicit theory or critical technique, Richards pursued both, partly in an attempt to appraise the value of modem poets such as Eliot in explicitly theoretical terms and quite explicitly to advance the cause of English Studies, first at Cambridge and later, at other universities as far removed as China. Other critics, notably Leavis, pursued the questions as opportunities to reevaluate literary history, explicitly as a

"great tradition," continuing into the modem age, though far less in terms of the establishment of university departments and programs than in a kind of stubborn, amateur pursuit of issues of taste.

I. A. Richards's *Principles of Literary Criticism (1924)* is arguably the first book in English that attempted to develop a comprehensive theory of criticism, a view Richards himself took in describing all previous speculation about literature as a "chaos" consisting of "random aperçues" and "brilliant guesses" (6). According to Richards, a theory in criticism must offer both a theory of value and a theory of communication, on the assumption that poems communicate value, grounded on the reconciliation of conflicting "impulses" in the experience of the poet.

In *Science and Poetry (1926)* Richards elaborated his theory as it applied to the modem crisis of values. Following MATTHEW ARNOLD, Richards presumed that poetry could be an intellectually respectable substitute for religion in an emerging age of science. As an advocate for such a substitution, Richards urged that poetry; should be regarded as presenting, not statements, but rather "pseudo-statements" valued for an "emotive" meaning *(58-59)* that could change our attitudes without requiring us to believe in what he called the "Magical View" (50 ff.) as found in myth or traditional religion.

For the New Critics, however, Richards's most influential book was *Practical Criticism* (1929). The book reports in detail an experiment in critical reading in which students were presented with the texts of poems without their titles or the names of their authors. Put simply, this experiment represents a severe complication for Richards's theory of poetic communication, which he had assumed in his previous work to be relatively unproblematic and based almost entirely on "emotive" effects. In the experiment, students were given the texts of the poems and asked to write brief commentaries on them. For the most part, the experiment showed that poetry (as typically read or misread) did not reconcile conflicts but induced them, that instead of communicating valuable experience it provoked confusion and incomprehension. The student responses, or "protocols," show a wide, sometimes bewildering range of irrelevant associations, "doctrinal adhesions," and confusions or uncertainties about sense, feeling, tone, and intent. *Practical Criticism* turned attention to the importance of teaching as it disclosed a problem that had largely escaped critical investigation: how do readers actually read? What do they actually understand, or fail to understand, and why?

This work also crystallized what would become, for the New Critics, the central problems of poetic language and form. One of Richards's students, the poet William Empson, pursued these problems with stunning effect in *Seven Types of Ambiguity (1930),* introducing many of the techniques of close reading that later became the hallmark of New Criticism. The book does not develop a systematic taxonomy of "types" but, rather, gives seven illustrations of increasingly complex ways in which poetry can be ambiguous or polysemous. In sometimes uncanny readings, Empson points out semantic relationships that a reader might miss habitually or systematically.

In the United States, Richards's work prior to *Practical Criticism* (and prior to Empson's *Seven Types)* had relatively little effect. But as Allen Tate later remarked in (*Essays o f Four Decades,* 1970), "Nobody who read I. A. Richards' *Practical Criticism* when it appeared in *1929* could read any poem as he had read it before" (xi). For a group of critics generally associated with the Agrarian Revival in the southern United States, many of whom taught at the University of the South, Vanderbilt Univer-

sity, and later Kenyon College, *Practical Criticism* offered a technical example that could be adapted to a quite different concern with the value of poetry in the modem world.

Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and other agrarians viewed science not as a way out of mystification but as a direct threat to human values. While Richards saw poetry as a way to reconcile us to a brave new world, these critics recommended a conservative return to religion and, more particularly, a return to an agrarian style of life that set itself in deliberate opposition to industrialization. Similar concerns were expressed by critics who did not share the ideological views of the agrarians, critics whom MURRAY KRIEGER has called "apologists for poetry" *(New Apologists for Poetry, 1956).* Yvor Winters, for example, argued for reading poetry as moral statement (especially in *In Defense of Reason, 1949)* while Kenneth Burke, in some ways following Richards, viewed literature as "equipment for living" *(The Philosophy of Literary Form, 1941).*

In one of his most influential essays, "Poetry: A Note in Ontology" (in *The World's Body, 1934),* Ransom insisted on the priority in poetry of attention to the concrete image as natural object, in opposition to what he called "Platonism," or the impulse to render the world in terms of abstract ideas. This Platonism, for Ransom, is "always sciencing and devouring" and thereby represents both the force of scientific reason and the threat of industrialism. While this distinction recalls Richards's distinction between scientific and emotive uses of language, the difference of attitude is profound. Where Richards viewed the rise of science and "modernity" as generally beneficial, it represented for Ransom and many of his associates (especially Allen Tate) a form of oppression to be vigorously opposed. Tate, however, insisted that the field of knowledge must not be so easily surrendered—as it appears to be in the work of both Richards and Ransom (Tate 72-105). To see poetry as a form of knowledge, however, requires renewed attention to the meaning of poetry and its relation to poetic language, generally treated as if it were merely technical problem.

In later essays, Ransom modified his position so far as to admit that poetic language was the union of "logical structure" and "local texture," without compromising his insistence on the "rich contingent materiality" of poetry (Stauffer 92 ff.). As he later said in his essay "The Literary Criticism of Aristotle," "the critic never ceases to be impressed with his fine object" and, as a literary man himself, "starts with a spontaneous surge of piety, and is inducted by the contagion of art into a composition of his own" (Coleman 17). But Ransom also saw the value of academic criticism and the virtues of more precise abstract argument and literary scholarship. Increasingly, he moved away from the conservative ideology of his earlier essays to a position of mediation and acceptance of a wider range of critical practice by other critics who did not share his political or cultural views but were nevertheless encouraged by him and published in journals with which he was associated, such as the *Southern Review,* the *Sewanee Review,* and the *Kenyon Review.*

An important factor in the reputation of New Criticism as a movement is that it was, especially in the period just before and after World War II, a phenomenon of periodical journals, such as those just mentioned, together with Leavis's *Scrutiny* in England. Thriving in a climate of vitality for "little magazines," prevalent in the cultural scene in both America and England since the 1920s, New Criticism attracted younger critics by the example of distinctive essays with at least a rhetorical and thematic family resemblance, in which a concentration on literary form made a wide range of cultural and aesthetic topics available for treatment in shorter critical articles. While the

variations are as rich as the literature examined, the New Critical essay is generally characterized by a close attention to the language of the text, to show a pattern of formal and thematic features that the critic commonly argues are fundamental to understanding the meaning of the work as a whole but that are expressed in terms that foreground the formal unity or balance of the work.

Essays by Blackmur in particular reflect an increasing degree of sophisticated concentration on matters of poetic form, technique, and value. Blackmur's criticism (like his poetry) reflects his conviction that "literature is the bearer ... of all the modes of understanding of which *words* are capable; and not only that: it also bears, sets *in* motion or life, certain modes which words merely initiate and symbolize." In this respect, literature was "always specific and unique; never general and repeated" and thus not really amenable to formal theoretical explanation. (*The Lion and the Honeycomb: Essays in Solicitude and Critique,* 1955, 213). Although resolutely independent, and not a follower of any group, Blackmur is in many ways the paradigmatic New Critic as essayist. He approached criticism as the necessary expression of the man of letters contemplating the modes of words and their value.

In contrast, the impact of one of Ransom's later students, Cleanth Brooks, on academic criticism has been a good deal more specific, both in practice and in theory. Brooks's influential textbook *Understanding Poetry* (1939), written with Robert Penn Warren, provided practical and teachable examples. *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947) presented both exemplary instances of New Critical practice and a central account of New Critical doctrines that in many ways appears as a synthesis of ideas from Ransom, Eliot, Richards, and Empson. Following arguments begun in *Modern Poetry and the Tradition (1939),* Brooks set out to demonstrate that the tension, paradox, and ambiguity of much modern (and metaphysical) poetry--of just the sort exemplified by Eliot's poetry and explicated by Empson--was fundamental to the nature of poetry. In *The Well Wrought Urn* Brooks showed that in every age, in diverse styles, a quality of dramatic tension or paradox was essential to poetic meaning, so much so as to warrant the claim that poetry and paradox are all but identical. Like Blackmur, however, Brooks's persuasiveness lay in the essays on individual texts and authors, while explicit theoretical speculation tended to take a secondary role.

For Brooks, the term "paradox" calls attention to the finding that no easy distinction between "form" and "content" can be maintained without distorting the overall meaning of the poem: the form of the poem uniquely embodies its meaning, which may itself seem "paradoxical" within a commonsense notion of literal or referential "meaning". More particularly, Brooks asserted that the language of the poem itself effects the reconciliation of opposites or contraries and that the result is the meaning of the poem. In this way, Brooks replaced the psychologism of Richards's theory of reconciling and balancing experiential "impulses" by claiming that the effect was embodied in poetic language itself.

Brooks concluded *The Well Wrought Urn* by describing what he called the "Heresy of Paraphrase," arguing that any attempt to reduce poetic meaning to a prose statement of a theme or a description of a plot was a betrayal of the poem as a poem. By using the term "heresy" when in truth there was no proper orthodoxy of interpretation from which to depart, Brooks virtually guaranteed polemical replies to his position, just as he called attention to a pervasive perplexity about how to construct a viable theory—which may seem to the individual theorist to be a direct description of a literary reality, but appears to others as saturated with an incompletely

examined ideology or system of values. While critics such as Blackmur had regarded explicit theory as either redundant or irrelevant, the increasingly vigorous practice of critical interpretation led to frequently irresolvable conflicts over rival interpretations that seemed mutually exclusive. Thus, the very success of New Critical practice called attention to theoretical problems that had never been adequately addressed, just as its practical strength in producing intelligible readings is the source of a persistent anomaly of incompatible readings that no available postulates appear able to resolve.

A similar mixture of theory and polemic is evident in two influential essays by W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Monroe Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy" (Wimsatt, 3-39), which argued, respectively, that reports of an author's original intention are not germane to judging a work of art, which either succeeds or fails according to what is actually expressed in its words, and that the meaning of a poem cannot be equated with how it affects a reader. A "heresy" may be more damning than a "fallacy," but both imply that there is a correct position and that it is in some way securely sanctioned. In this case, however, the supposition that one could accurately interpret texts without reference to authorial intention presents so severe a test of the reader that a strict avoidance of the intentional fallacy almost forces the reader into the affective fallacy, since the reader of the text is, by default, the only judge-as post-New Critical theorists, such as Norman Holland, David Bleich, or STANLEY FISH, advocating different versions of READERRESPONSE THEORY AND CRITICISM, have not hesitated to assert (see PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY AND CRITICISM: 2. RECONCEPTUALIZING FREUD). In perhaps the most ambitious (and least polemical) attempt to articulate a theory for New Criticism, *Theory of Literature* (1949), René Wellek and Austin Warren distinguish between the "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" study of literature. The former concentrates on the work as a "stratified system of norms," whereas the latter relegates literary biography, history, psychology, and sociology to the "extrinsic" domain, a move that incurred the ire of literary historians, scholars, sociologists, and so on.

In all of these major postwar efforts to consolidate theoretical gains, the same general problem persists: there is no well-grounded way to ascertain the validity of any particular interpretation. Thus, E. D. Hirsch argued in *Validity in Interpretation (1967)* that the proliferation of incommensurable interpretations required a return to historical evidence ("extrinsic," according to Wellek and Warren) to buttress appeals to the author's intention (pronounced a "fallacy" by Wimsatt and Beardsley). Unfortunately, the historical documents from which Hirsch presumed authorial intention could be ascertained are themselves subject to a similar interpretive dilemma.

While most of the early New Critics were no strangers to controversy, one of the most serious attacks came from R. S. Crane, who had earlier been welcomed by John Crowe Ransom as one of the most important "new critics." In the late 1940s, Crane and his colleagues at the University of Chicago had been included in Robert Stallman's very influential anthology, *Critiques and Essays in Criticism* (1949) which defined New Criticism by default as what contemporary critics were actually doing. Crane and his colleagues at Chicago had also argued strenuously for making criticism central in the English curriculum, and with Ransom, Tate, and Brooks, they had emphasized the issue of poetic form, but the CHICAGO CRITICS followed ARISTOTLE and Richard McKeon instead of SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, Arnold, Eliot, and Richards. Crane edited a collection of essays by various hands, *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern (1952),* which, like Brooks's *The Well*

Wrought Urn, sought to demonstrate the coherence of an approach to poetic form across a broad range of periods and styles. But included within the volume were a series of highly polemical attacks on Richards, Empson, and Brooks, who had, according to the Chicago critics, impoverished criticism by concentrating on only one element of form, its language, or "diction."

In "The Critical Monism of Cleanth Brooks" Crane argues that Brooks and other New Critics impoverish theory by making irony or paradox a unique principle of structure, and he points out with sharp effect that the balancing and reconciliation of opposites that Brooks ' held to be the sole differentia of "poetic" language was in fact the characteristic of all connected discourse. By Brooks's own criteria, the best example of a modern "ironic" poem was Einstein's formula E = mc2, asserting the paradoxical identity of matter and energy (104). Crane, however, treated this result as *a reductio ad absurdum,* deriving from the New Critics' "morbid obsession" with trying differentiate poetry from science by looking merely at its language—which Crane reduces, after Aristotle, to poetic "diction", the least important "element" in defining poetry. In Crane's view, the proper place to start was with "concrete poetic wholes of various kinds" (105), ignoring the fact that a poetic whole is not in any meaningful way "concrete," but verbal, and that any idea of its wholeness required some interpretation of its language.

Perhaps inadvertently, however, Crane's polemic locates a fundamental problem in formalism and structuralism of all varieties, including his own and that of the logical positivists, whom the New Critics since Ransom had regarded as irreconcilable enemies. In this sense, what might have been a family quarrel among American academic critics turns out to be especially helpful for understanding the demise of New Criticism as well as its genetic relation to the archetypal structuralism of NORTHROP FRYE and to later, poststructuralist criticism.

The central premise in this dispute is that literature ought to be definable (and thereby differentiated from science) by reference to formal properties of its language, an assumption shared by all parties to this dispute, including the logical positivists (who may have thought they had already won this battle) and by other theorists and critics for whom form and structure were decisive concerns. In a striking example of Coleridge's favorite maxim, "Extremes meet," the New Critics and the logical positivists, appearing as opposites, are so only because of a common commitment to the proposition that there must be some fundamental opposition between the referential language of science and the expressive, which I. A. Richards had decisively characterized as the "emotive" language of poetry.

Rudolph Carnap embraced this distinction in his first English publication, *Philosophy and Logical Syntax* (1935), which appeared in the Psyche Miniatures series edited by Richards's colleague and frequent collaborator, C. K. Ogden. Carnap used the distinction, however, as a grounds for rejecting metaphysical propositions because they assert nothing verifiable but have, like lyric poems, "no assertorial sense, no theoretical sense ... [and do] not contain knowledge" (29). In the same work, for similar reasons, he adopts Richards's disastrous notion of the "pseudostatement" in order to guard against any unwary acceptance of abstract entities (e.g., numbers) as if they existed In a material mode (78 ff.).

The ironic importance of this connection is played out in Crane's major effort to launch a "newer criticism" in his much less polemical book, *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry* (1953), calling for a radical "pluralism" in critical theory, in which the relativity between the "kind of questions" one poses about literature and the kind of answers that thereby appear

to be appropriate leads Crane to borrow terms explicitly from Carnap. According to Crane, this matrix of questions and answers constitutes a critical “framework,” which is chosen not because it captures an incontrovertible reality but because, on “practical” grounds, it reflects what a group of critics may be interested in pursuing. But Crane’s acknowledged source for this idea is Carnap’s classic essay, “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology” (1950, reprinted from *Meaning and Necessity*, 1956), in many ways a last-ditch effort to save logical positivism from accepting the reality of "metaphysical" entities. Carnap had argued that one introduces and accepts a "framework" in order to be able to speak about such "entities" as numbers, space-time coordinates, and so on, without having to commit to a belief in their existence. The artifice of the "framework" then protects statements made within it, allowing them to be construed and evaluated for truth and theoretical cogency, without metaphysical compromises.

Crane, however, construed this as a warrant for theoretical pluralism, in which there may be many "incommensurable" frameworks—i.e. “theories”—for discussing poetry. In this vision of critical laissez-faire, it is up to the critic to persuade others to accept one framework rather than another, on the practical basis of what a given framework will allow one to say and do. What Carnap proposed, however, is strikingly different, since the existence of “incommensurable” frameworks for numbers, for example, would only indicate that *no* "framework" had in fact been accepted, thereby preventing the development of any arithmetic theory to which mathematicians could assent. Carnap identified the “practical” problem with the *acceptance* of a framework, as the necessary condition for making statements that could be evaluated as true or false. The apposite analogy for literary study is that the existence of multiple incommensurable “frameworks” for the poem indicates that there is no general agreement about why or whether it is useful to talk about literature, and hence, no “framework” at all in Carnap’s sense, to guarantee that statements about literature could be theoretically consistent and consequential.

Given the increasing evidence that New Critical readings of texts could proliferate indefinitely without the prospect of resolving mutually exclusive readings of the same poem, critical pluralism may have existed by default. It is therefore not surprising that Crane's argument did not succeed either in quelling the errors he had found in New Criticism or in establishing a new Aristotelian “framework”. On the contrary, it led to yet another round of polemical argument, now led by Wimsatt. In his essay "The Chicago Critics: The Fallacy of the Neoclassic Species" (1953, reprinted in *The Verbal Icon)* Wimsatt imagines

> a stage on which stands the contemporary critic, a composite, let us say, of Richards, Eliot, Empson, Brooks and Warren, and Tate. He is wearing the mask of his role in the drama to be enacted, a tolerably good, clean, bright critic's mask, though, let us say, it has some smudges on it (the psychologism of Richards, for instance, the excessive ingenuities of Empson). Enter: Professor Crane. He walks up to the critic and, taking a piece of burnt cork from his pocket, proceeds to blacken the mask all over. "There now," he says, "that is what you really look like."

The scene concludes with Crane reclaiming the mask, partially cleaning it, then writing "Aristotle" on the forehead to announce, "This looks a lot better on me than it did on you" (45-46). Pluralism in this guise is hard to distinguish from bickering, and one could say that by the mid-1950s, while New Critical practice was still thriving in journal articles and classrooms, New Critical theorizing had come to an unresolvable impasse.

Literary historians such as' Douglas Bush and Frederick Pottle continued the complaint that New Critical practice impoverished literary understanding by giving inadequate attention to historical specificity. Critics such as Murray Krieger and Philip Wheelwright sought a way beyond the impasse by a more systematic and intensive alignment of criticism with aesthetic theory and with philosophical studies of language and metaphor, while attempting to preserve the characteristic qualities of New Critical practice. Clearly the boldest theorist to emerge in the aftermath of the polemical quarrels of the late 1950s was Northrop Frye, whose *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) turned back to Eliot and to an Inductive survey of the literary field to view the "masterpieces of literature" as "phenomena to be explained in terms of a conceptual framework which criticism alone possesses" (16). In using Carnap's metaphor (quite probably drawn from Crane), Frye attempted to articulate a framework of precisely the kind Carnap had recommended. In, place of Eliot's "simultaneous order" of works, Frye proposed a total "order of words" in which literature "imitates the total dream of man" (u8-19), structured in and through literary archetypes.

In writing an anatomy of *criticism,* Frye set out explicitly to integrate all of his more or less contentious critical ancestors, including Aristotle, WILLIAM BLAKE, Coleridge and Arnold, Eliot and Richards, Brooks and Crane, into a theory of literature as cultural communication drawing from Romantic theories of symbolism and the medieval fourfold theory of interpretation. The result is a syncretic and encyclopedic survey that marks a passage from formalism to an indigenous Anglo-American literary structuralism. Where CLAUDE LEVI-STRAUSS focused on myth, Frye focused on the archetype; where Levi-Strauss drew upon **FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE,** Frye exploited T. S. Eliot's idea of a total order of words.

From this point of view, Free can be seen as both the point of highest achievement of the modem tradition of New Criticism and the point of its irreversible collapse. For "myth" and "structure" in Levi-Strauss, like the "archetype" and "anagogy" in Frye, are both subject to the same radical critique. The "myth or the "archetype" appears to posit a form of transcendental agency that brings it into being, without having any way to explain that agency or to explain how it is that semantic or semiological differences arise. To see Frye as the culmination of New Criticism, however, is to see in his work both what is of enduring value in the movement and what is most vulnerable on theoretical grounds.

New Criticism, from Eliot to Frye, sponsored a project in the reformation of critical reading that first called attention to the radical specificity of poetic language and dramatically widened the scope for poetic interpretation. Its theoretical frustrations represent less a failure than a gradual realization that a radical rethink-ing would be required, on a wide range of philosophical and metaphysical issues, and thus prepared the way for a more general pursuit of theory by later critics. If the common belief of the New Critics in a fundamental linguistic opposition between poetry and science is untenable, and all uses of language reflect an intrinsic degree of

freedom in the production of meaning, then the history of New Criticism may mark at once the end of a philosophical epoch and the beginning of a brave new world of speculative criticism. In precisely that spirit, moreover, subsequent critiques of the New Criticism have centered on the underlying cultural ideology, to some degree masked by the technical concentration on the aesthetic dimension of language, where the overriding issue lies in clarifying the purpose of literary work, as a form of cultural practice and a form of reasoning that may have the capacity to even more radically disrupt the philosophical heritage that began with Plato's attempt to exile the unpredictable creativity of the poetic as a disruption to a metaphysical pursuit of incontrovertible Truth. Thus, the dilemmas of the New Criticism remain deeply implicated in such movements as the New Historicism, quarrels over the literary canon (see especially in this regard John Guillory's *Cultural Capital*), and the emergence of diverse forms of cultural studies. The enduring importance of the New Criticism in this regard lies in its institutional importance and its insistence on the practice of close reading, whatever conceptual justifications may be involved in putting it to use.

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