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New Criticism: The Challenger, the Winner, and the Lasting Legacy

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Abstract

New Criticism emerged in the early twentieth century from a field of literary theory dominated by Marxism and Impressionism; it rejected both of these from its start. In a bold statement of purpose, J.E. Spingarn sketched out the essence of New Criticism when he strongly emphasized the need for literary theory to return to literature as its basis and its particular context, rather than bringing in outside, non-literary interests. Despite some noted New Critics adhering to this principle less consistently than others, New Criticism itself gained adherents quickly and eventually grew to dominate literary theory.

Ultimately, one of the most noteworthy things about the history of New Criticism is that its effective downfall did not come about from the creation of new theories at the opposite end of any spectrum, as New Criticism itself had, but mainly from a combination of theories that took particular aspects of New Criticism to extreme ends. When the New Critics embraced the idea that a work of art can (and, indeed, must) be analyzed

in itself, without reference to reality, they opened a doorway through which the upcoming Structuralists, Poststructuralists and Deconstructionists were all too eager to run--by rejecting the New Critical principle but keeping many of its implications and practices. Indeed, it is a testament to the lasting legacy of New Criticism that even after its preeminence has receded, its chief analytical method, the close reading, is standard practice everywhere, used on nearly any work for nearly any purpose.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, two forms of literary criticism were jointly dominant: Impressionism and Marxism. Impressionism places its primary emphasis on the subjective experiences of the reader (or critic) while reading a particular work; Marxism emphasizes the material conditions of a work's creation and the relation of a work's ideological content to the prevailing ideologies surrounding the work's creation. New Criticism rejected both of them (Spingarn 4). In rebelling against the prevalent critical doctrines of the time, New Criticism gathered a great amount of intellectual support and eventually became prevalent itself. Even after it became the standard, however, it remained a contentious theory. Ultimately, one of the most noteworthy things about the history of New Criticism is that its downfall did not come about from the creation of new theories at the opposite end of any spectrum, but by a combination of new theories which took some of the aspects of New Criticism to extreme ends and a resurgence of some of the theories New Criticism itself had replaced. New Criticism was and continues to be worthy of consideration for its theory and for its legacy.

In 1910 J.E. Spingarn coined the phrase "New Criticism" as that which is left after the field of literary criticism is "cleared of its dead lumber and its weeds" (3, 14). In a short positive case for his position, Spingarn posits that the central question of criticism (of any art form) is "Has [the artist] or has he not created a work of art?" (13) Then, in perhaps the most important negative case for New Criticism, Spingarn declares what he considers to be the "dead lumber" blocking the way of new, more valid criticism, using this question as the guideline to determine the validity of the new criticism.

The first things Spingarn identifies as antithetical to criticism are "the old Rules." These are the dogmas first set by some late Greek thinkers and hardened into rules by the Romans. They include the proscription that no more than three actors may be on stage at any one time; that each drama must have precisely five acts; that genres must never be mixed. Spingarn condemns these rules as baseless and arbitrary, and argues that they do not at all aid in the creation of art: "in every age the poets have astounded the critics by transgressing rules without the sacrifice of beauty" (14).

A corollary of the classical rules is the strict division of works along lines

of general resemblance into genres. In light of the questions of whether one has created a work of art, and if so what that work of art expresses and how, it is useless and inappropriate to inquire instead whether the work can be conveniently assigned the tag "comic" or "tragic" (Spingarn 15). If these classifications merely represent elements of a work's plot, they are to be used on the same general level as other plot elements, such as the expression of joy or a character's death, and do not influence critical judgment (Spingarn 16). If they are used instead to represent definite, abstract divisions of the concept of literature, they do a disservice to literature itself and go against the very nature of art:

Poets do not really write epics, pastorals,
lyrics, however much they may be deceived
by these false abstractions; they express
themselves, and the expression is their only
form. There are not, therefore, only three, or
ten, or a hundred literary kinds; there are as
many kinds as there are individual poets.
(Spingarn 15)

Spingarn's rejection of "the history and criticism of poetic themes" follows roughly the same argument. When comparing two works it is sometimes relevant to emphasize common elements or themes between them, but the similarities end at that superficial level. *Æschylus* and Shelley both wrote pieces dealing with Prometheus, but their works were written in different ways, with different structures, different purposes, and different qualities of even that common element:

It is possible to speak loosely of the handling of such a theme as Prometheus by *Æschylus* and Shelley, ... but strictly speaking, they are not employing the same theme at all. Each artist is expressing a certain material and labeling it with an historic name. For Shelley Prometheus is only a label; he is expressing his artistic conception of life, not the history of a Greek Titan. It is the vital flame he has breathed into his work that makes it what it is, and with this vital flame (and not with labels) the critic should concern himself in the works of poets. (Spingarn 21-22)

Shelley used Prometheus neither in the same manner nor for the same purpose as *Æschylus*. This is *not* because they lived in vastly different societies, because they had had differing educations, or any other incidental difference between their lives; it is because they were creating two different works of art.

“We have done with... the assumption that style is separate from expression, that it is something which may be added or subtracted at will from the work of art, a flourish of the pen, an external embellishment...” A work of art must be appreciated and considered as a work of art, complete in itself (Spingarn 17). It may sometimes be useful to speak of the form that a specific statement takes within a text, with an implicit distinction with respect to the meaning of the work or statement, but such a distinction cannot be held outside of this very narrow context because it does not by nature occur outside of this context: when one begins to consider the text (the words on the page) in its entirety, as a unified work (the form of art), one must integrate the two to form a cohesive picture of what is happening within a literary work (Spingarn 17). In the same vein and for the same reason, a critic cannot simply identify a metaphor as such, for example, and consider his job done, because a metaphor is not simply a substitute for a more straightforward phrase: it is the most concise way of saying everything that it is saying (Spingarn 17-18):

I think our initial question, “What does the poem communicate?” is badly asked. It is not that the poem communicates nothing. Precisely the contrary. The poem communicates so much and communicates it so richly and with such delicate qualifications that the thing communicated is mauled and distorted if we attempt to convey it by any vehicle less subtle than that of the poem itself. (Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn*, quoted in Green 69)

Brooks' statement is not an indictment of all criticism, but an identification of the extraordinarily dense nature of poetry. The message of a poem is objective, meaning that it is contained within the poem itself, but a fundamental quality of the poetic form is that it is extremely complex. This idea of the poem as an unparaphrasable entity can even explain the overwhelming emphasis that New Critics placed on poetry: if the purpose of criticism is, as Spingarn said, to determine whether a specific document is a work of art, and the proper means to determine this is a close analysis of its structure (remembering that structure and meaning are inextricably tied together), then of course poetry, being the most complicated form of art, would bear the majority of New Critical interest.

“We have done with the race, the time, the environment of a poet's work as an element in Criticism” (Spingarn 22). To investigate any of these things rather than what is contained in the text itself is to treat the text as a social statement, political treatise, historical document—anything other than a *work of art*. The result of such an investigation is a contribution to the study of politics or of history, but not to literary criticism. The job of the poet is not to catalog what external objects are brought into or influence a particular work, but to study the

elements that are in the work and discover how the artist transformed reality into art (Spingarn 22-23).

Each of Spingarn's refutations intimately ties into the fundamental concept of New Criticism: the return to the text itself. A critic analyzing a work in relation to arbitrarily-set rules of literature only erects a wall between himself and the work's meaning; one analyzing a work in relation to predetermined genres does the same; to speak of common themes between works ultimately distances the critic from what the specific, individual work he is looking at is trying to say; the false dichotomy of structure versus meaning only dissolves the unity of a work and obfuscates its meaning; a focus on everything affecting the work except that which is contained within the work itself is equivalent to a person who speaks of analyzing a text while running away from it as quickly as he can—it is inherently dishonest to purport to analyze a work while actually analyzing historical circumstances, political ideas, or any other sort of .

In making this statement Spingarn pitted himself and those of like mind against the entrenched theories in early-twentieth-century criticism. As part of New Criticism's rise to dominance in the field of academic criticism, it became prevalent in university English departments, particularly ones in the United States. This is due to two fortuitous factors of New Criticism. First, it was incredibly easy for a professor to teach to students: any student with an interest in literature, regardless of the presence or absence of a background in any other field of study, could become proficient in the New Critical method; likewise, no professor of literary studies was required to subtract from the study of literature in order to impart these backgrounds to his students (Clausen 55). Second, once a student learned how to analyze literature from the perspective of the New Critics and earned a doctorate, he could go on to earn a teaching position of his own and spread New Criticism as it had once been spread to him. In this way New Criticism's dominance (and, indeed, the field of literary criticism in general) came to be centered on university campuses (Clausen 56). In doing this, New Criticism fulfilled John Crowe Ransom's 1938 statement that "Rather than occasional criticism by amateurs, I should think the whole enterprise might be seriously taken in hand by professionals. ... I have the idea that what we need is Criticism, Inc., or Criticism, Ltd" (1109). This establishment in academic criticism created and solidified New Criticism's place in the field of criticism, while simultaneously shifting criticism's main forum from periodicals to more strictly academic areas (Clausen 56).

Unfortunately, not all of those considered New Critics kept their critical practice to the theory of New Criticism. Most confusingly, one example of this is the one poet-critic who is perhaps best identified with New Criticism: T.S. Eliot. In his analysis of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Eliot establishes the concept of the "objective correlative," a tool that seems to be of great use in judging the success or failure of a literary work. The objective correlative is that aspect of the work consisting of the plot elements that create the characters' emotions; if a work has completed its objective correlative, when the plot elements come

together, the characters' emotions are immediately and completely justified (Eliot, "Hamlet" 14). The objective correlative, in itself, can indeed be very useful in criticizing a work from a New Critical point of view: whether the work provides sufficient justification for the characters' emotions is a fundamental element of the work itself, and not a criterion arbitrarily brought in from outside of the work. The passage in Eliot's analysis that deals with the objective correlative—and Eliot's justification for stating that *Hamlet* is a failure because Hamlet's disgust and stymied state seems to be caused by his mother, while his mother as shown in the play is not sufficient cause for such a reaction—can and arguably does stand on its own (Eliot, "Hamlet" 14). The problem involved in fitting Eliot's essay into the paradigm of New Criticism comes only because there are several pages of analysis accompanying this passage, and this other material, while certainly interesting, simply does not fit with the "objective correlative" passage, nor with the theory of New Criticism.

The most surprising element of Eliot's comments on *Hamlet* comes early in the essay:

Qua work of art, the work of art cannot be interpreted; there is nothing to interpret; we can only criticize it according to standards, in comparison to other works of art; and for "interpretation" the chief task is the presentation of relevant historical facts which the reader is not assumed to know. (Eliot, "Hamlet" 12)

One can imagine some comments that critics closer to the "ideal" of New Criticism—J.E. Spingarn, perhaps, or Cleanth Brooks—might have in response to Eliot's statements. "There is nothing to interpret": there is the work, all of its constituent elements, and the manner in which the elements combine to form the whole. "We can only criticize it... in comparison to other works of art": or we can criticize it according to what the work itself indicates as its message, and how well that message is conveyed (i.e., how far we have to dig to arrive at the message). "The chief task is the presentation of relevant historical information": the chief task of the literary critic is to criticize literature on the grounds of what is present or lacking in the text itself.

Another element of Eliot's criticism that seemingly distances him from New Criticism, despite his reputation as one of the luminaries of the theory, is his emphasis on literary tradition. "No poet, no artist of any art," he writes, "has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead" ("Tradition and the Individual Talent" 29). Eliot goes on to say that any poet must prepare himself to be judged against the great works of the past and that the extent to which a new work conforms to the old when they are

measured against each other is one test of the new work's value ("Tradition" 29-30). Clearly, this is taking the emphasis of criticism away from the discrete, individual work in question and placing it instead on a relational guideline of literary tradition. Later in the essay, in a seeming contradiction, Eliot says that "honest criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry" and that "to divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim," but this only serves to compound the confusion: if one is diverting one's attention away from the poet only to compare the poet's work to that of *other* poets, is one truly getting away from anything? ("Tradition" 31, 33) While it is perhaps true that viewing one work in terms set by another (or a group of others) can yield unique perspectives, the comparative method goes against the principles of New Criticism which demand that criticism be kept within the scope of the unique, singular work being criticized. To practice criticism as Eliot suggests would surely result in a different reading of a work than that of other critics, just as a Deconstructive or Psychoanalytic readings would result in differing perspectives. The method that Eliot suggests would not result in a New Critical perspective on a work—the result would be something else.

One of the great successes of academic New Criticism was to keep explicit political agendas out of literary academia while it could. The effort to keep such agendas out of criticism was surely intentional—one of the theories against which New Criticism once rebelled was Marxism, whose theorists routinely used politics in analyzing literature, a method that a New Critic would deem beside the point of criticism. Many New Critics saw it as their purpose to rescue literary criticism from those who would hijack it in pursuit of ends other than the criticism of literature (Green 66). Many of the theories that rose in the wake of New Criticism in the latter half of the twentieth century took it upon themselves to fill that void:

The New Criticism was followed by a number of complicated theoretical doctrines: structuralism, deconstruction, and, the latest, "cultural studies," a still-evolving neo-Marxist method for "decoding" literary and other cultural artifacts. Cumulatively, their greatest effect on literary study has been to overthrow the central tenet of New Criticism—the autonomy of art—and in its place to institutionalize the social and political attitudes of the New Left, turning the practice of criticism into a weapon of assault against such extramural targets as American foreign policy, capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchy. (Clausen 56)

The fundamental principle of New Criticism is that a work of art is

independent in itself, a unified entity. It is this principle which those theories that replaced New Criticism in mainstream criticism specifically rebelled against in the effort to use literary criticism for purposes *other than the study of literature*, whether political or historical (Clausen 56).

New Criticism and many of the theories that succeeded it, particularly Deconstruction, share much more than either side would probably like to admit. They are linked by a common belief that the role of the critic is almost that of a translator, making clear to others what is presented in a “foreign” tongue—in this case, artistic expression. Christopher Clausen makes the argument that “the New Critics’ embrace of the nonreferential text led them to place a foot experimentally on the top edge of a slippery slope, which... opened the way for more radical forms of subjectivism” (56). In short, when the New Critics embraced the idea that a work of art exists independent of reality, that it must be evaluated on its own terms and by its own level of communication, they stepped partway into a metaphorical doorway through which the upcoming Structuralists, Poststructuralists, and Deconstructionists were all too eager to run. The philosophical link between New Criticism and many of the theories that followed it cannot be accidental: in a natural development of New Critical ideas, the founders of the later theories took those same ideas in then-unexpected directions. New Criticism was the author of its own downfall—this, then, is ultimately its greatest weakness.

If its self-defeating fate is the greatest weakness of New Criticism, the manner in which it defeated itself and its far-reaching effects are undoubtedly its greatest strengths. In a cruel twist of fate, every method of literary analysis practiced today, no matter how antithetical to the principles of New Criticism, owes some intellectual debt to it. In most cases, this debt is due to the near-universal use of “close reading,” a method central to the intense concentration on individual works practiced by New Critics (Green 70).

The field of literary criticism is wide enough and varied enough that anybody who wishes to use any method to look at any work will inevitably find a forum somewhere. The question then becomes not whether to criticize, but how something ought to be criticized—the manner in which a critic must approach a work. The theory of New Criticism—the ideal about which the more philosophical of the New Critics wrote—is to investigate the elements and meaning of a work from the inside, from the things that the author himself put into the text, where he put it, and how it related to the elements or pieces surrounding it. This theory has been criticized from many standpoints. “... New Critics denied that literary language makes true or false statements about reality, [and] deconstructionists (and other poststructuralists) deny that *any* language does so” (Clausen 56, emphasis in original). Marxists, New Historicists, Feminists, Black Theorists, and Queer Theorists criticize New Criticism for ignoring a text’s relation to one external aspect of society or another.

While some claim that New Criticism ignores important aspects of literary works, a more common criticism is that New Critics are themselves hypocritical: their ostensibly apolitical method of analysis actually inserts political agendas into critical essays; for all of their theoretical essays on the return to the text and the metaphysical nature of the singular literary work as a unified entity unto itself, they delude themselves. The charge of political bias is a peculiar one: perhaps one could extract political messages from New Critical analyses (particularly analyses of explicitly political works, such as the colonial poetry of Rudyard Kipling), but when compared to criticism which openly seeks to connect literature to the greater workings of society, for example, the effort required to connect a New critical analysis with political ideas is enormous; one will not find in a scholarly essay by a New Critic an effort to condemn American foreign policy using the themes of a poem. The charge of theoretical entanglement in a theory that presents itself as outside of theory, however, is valid to a certain degree. New Criticism does indeed consist of a great deal of theory, as does any method of literary analysis—the identification of what precisely literature *is* in a metaphysical sense and the decision about what is the proper way to analyze and criticize literature are both esthetic processes, and therefore philosophical ones, and therefore theoretical ones. It is impossible to act without a theory or principle implicitly if not explicitly guiding the action. But the uniqueness of New Critical theory comes in the fact that its theory is trying to move away from theory itself, in a seeming contradiction. Ideally, for a New Critic, no abstract ideas would be needed in order to analyze a work other than those ideas contained within the work. Because the need for analysis—an abstract feeling, a concept—is required, this escape from theory is impossible.

A specific context always dictates what action is most useful, most practical in that context. In the case of literary criticism, New Critics established that each literary work is its *own* independent context, with its own requirements, its own emphases, and its own properties; a work of literature is “a representational structure... inseparable from the representation itself,” a “complicated, unparaphrasable aesthetic structure” (Clausen 56). When New Criticism first took hold of mainstream literary criticism in rebellion against Impressionism and Marxism, this was a controversial and revolutionary concept. It is a measure of the success of New Criticism, though not at all in the way New Critics intended, that this is now taken for granted by most and considered inappropriately conservative by many. New Criticism has left a permanent mark on the history of literary criticism, and is worthy not only of serious study, but also deep respect.

About the Author

Glenn W. Butler is a senior at Southern Connecticut State University, and will complete a Bachelor of Arts program in English at the end of the spring 2006 semester.

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