Rereading the New Criticism

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IN 2008, Garrick Davis published an edited volume entitled *Praising it New: The Best of the New Criticism*, which gathers in one paperback a collection of landmark essays by leading figures of the New Criticism, the mid-twentieth century American movement in literary criticism fabled for its formalist approach to literature, and especially for its techniques of “close reading” that would become integral to academic literary studies in North America. The collection includes work by such major New Critics as John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren. Noting the publication in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Mark Bauerlein recognized the cultural currents against which Davis was swimming to bring out such a volume: the project turns back to critics central to the foundations of literary studies as we now know it in North America, before the rise of poststructuralist theory in the literary academy of the late 1960s displaced their work from prominence. By the 1970s, New Critical influence had waned; the next decades of the literary academy would belong to theorists associated with poststructuralism and postmodernism, such as Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, Lacan and Lyotard. As of the 1980s, New Critical work, relegated to the status of superseded paradigm, was generally mentioned only in brief excerpts and caricatured shorthand terms. Davis’s book thus makes widely available many essays that have been difficult to come by for decades, especially as an ensemble: its back cover frames the project as the “first anthology
of New Criticism to be printed in fifty years.” Our volume of critical essays, *Rereading the New Criticism*, participates in the recent wave of renewed attention to the New Criticism that Davis’s project reflects. Contributors to this collection seek to reexamine in an interrogative spirit the development of the New Criticism, its significance, and its chief lines of thought, as well as to consider dimensions of its work relevant for contemporary literary and cultural studies.

The tale of the New Critics’ ascent and decline is a familiar one: during the 1930s and 1940s, the New Criticism rose to preeminence in North American academic contexts during a time of rapid expansion and professionalization for academic departments of English. As the essays in this volume address, for more than two decades, New Critical methods would exert enormous influence in both criticism and classrooms across North America. The events of an international symposium on structuralism held at Johns Hopkins University in 1966 are often used to exemplify the poststructuralist turn in Anglo-American literary studies that would inaugurate the era, in Frank Lentricchia’s phrase, “after the New Criticism.” The widespread theorization of Anglo-American literary studies would follow—inspired by theoretical models from continental Europe and political developments of 1968 in France; informed by work in fields such as linguistics, psychoanalysis, philosophy, Marxism, and feminism; and fueling the rise of interest in deconstructionist and other forms of poststructuralist thought. As a wealth of new theoretical approaches in the literary academy sought to move, as Geoffrey Hartman’s put it 1970, “beyond formalism,” the New Criticism fell from authority; and as newer schools of thought often involved critique and even censure of New Critical techniques and assumptions, the New Criticism assumed a controversial status. In subsequent years, for many, the New Criticism came to emblemize irresponsibly formalist approaches to literature that showed critical practice at its narrowest. Focused on “the work itself,” and “literature qua literature,” New Critical methods were understood as unfortunately insensitive to authorial intentions and readerly response; to the historical conditions of literary production and reception; and to the cultural relevance and political significance of literary work.

More recently, however, a diverse body of critics have issued calls for a reassessment of the New Criticism and its legacy. Historicist scholarship from commentators such as Gerald Graff (1979, 1987) and Mark Jancovich (1993) has enlisted rereadings of New Critical work in its original cultural contexts to contest widely circulated misrepresentations of its assumptions, politics, and projects. Newer work from commentators such as Camille Paglia in *Break, Blow, Burn* (2006), Terry Eagleton in *How to Read a Poem*
Hickman, “Rereading the New Criticism” (2007), and Jane Gallop in “The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading” (2007) likewise urges such reevaluation, emphasizing how New Critical methods of close reading inform contemporary practice in literary studies—often without acknowledgment—and considering how these might be adapted for today’s climate. Other groups associated with an effort called the “New Formalism” seek to redirect attention to literary form, which they read as neglected in literary study of recent decades, and often point to the work of the New Criticism as important to this endeavor (see Marjorie Levinson’s 2007 review essay “What Is New Formalism?”). The essay collection Reading for Form (2006), edited by Susan Wolfson and Marshall Brown, considers what a commitment to “reading” literature “for form” in these times might involve, at a point when not only the New Criticism, but also critical formalism more generally, is often construed as having “outlived its usefulness” (as the editors quote W. J. T. Mitchell as observing). Frank Lentricchia and Andrew Dubois’s collection Close Reading (2003), meanwhile, recognizing the centrality of close reading to literary and cultural studies (despite its sometime relegation to the dustbin with the New Criticism), traces discussions and demonstrations of close reading from the New Critical heyday to the present, noting a continuity of interest in formalism where others have seen diminishment and rupture. Observing how responses to the specter of New Critical formalism have guided literary–critical evolution since the mid-twentieth century, DuBois maintains that “perhaps the central . . . debate in twentieth-century literary criticism is a debate between formalist and non-formalist modes of response” (1).

Inspired by this range of commentary reconsidering the New Criticism, the essays of this volume aim to reevaluate the New Critical corpus, trace its legacy, and explore resources it might offer for the future. More specifically, these essays shed new light on the genesis of the New Criticism; revisit its chief arguments for little-noticed dimensions and subtexts; illuminate its internal heterogeneity; interrogate received ideas about it; and consider how its theories and techniques might be drawn upon toward the reinvigoration of contemporary literary and cultural studies. Our collection follows a path highlighted by William J. Spurlin’s and Michael Fischer’s The New Criticism and Contemporary Literary Theory (1995), whose articles reflected on the implications of New Critical theory and practice and considered new ways of engaging New Critical methods in view of contemporary theory of that moment. A decade and a half later, in a different literary–theoretical climate, it is time for another such reexamination.

Through this project, we seek to facilitate reassessment of the New Criticism’s significant contributions to the development of academic literary
studies in North America; foster subtler understanding of the complex development of the work of the New Critics from their early Southern Agrarian commitments to their later association with supposedly apolitical and ahistorical critical formalism; clarify the central theories and methods associated with the New Criticism—which will often require reading past and against commonplaces about New Critical thought; and consider what New Critical theories and critical methods might offer for both literary and cultural studies in the twenty-first century.

**Recovering the New Criticism**

Accordingly, this collection aims to resist reductive understandings of what the New Critics did and stood for that have often pervaded accounts of them since their fall from disciplinary dominance. Although they are frequently invoked in today’s climate, the abbreviated ways in which they are usually mentioned contribute to an occlusion of important dimensions of their work. And as Davis’s project implies, such misunderstandings are frequently perpetuated by the limited repertoire of New Critical texts represented in prominent textbooks: generally, examples from New Criticism included in current anthologies feature only a small portion of their wide and diverse corpus. In the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001), for instance, articles by John Crowe Ransom and Cleanth Brooks appear, along with W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley’s classic “The Intentional Fallacy” and “The Affective Fallacy.” Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1998) includes two selections by Brooks, one an excerpt from his famous *The Well Wrought Urn*, the second an essay by Wimsatt on the “concrete universal.” Thus while these two volumes do highlight widely known New Critical commentary, the selections included suggest much more homogeneity of thought within the New Criticism than actually obtained, indicating only a few of the many issues—philosophical, aesthetic, and cultural—with which the New Critics engaged. Also contributing to an atmosphere of misprision and cultural forgetting is the attitude with which the New Critics are generally noted in academic discourse: at best, they are presented as quaint and superseded, at worst derided as what Frank Lentricchia calls “repressive father figures” (*After the New Criticism*, xiii) and the discipline’s favorite “whipping boy” (Suleiman, 5). And despite the historicization of scholars such as Graff and Jancovich that seeks to counter caricatures of the New Critics, New Critical work is still widely misrepresented as ahistorical, apolitical, and acontextual. The essays of this collection investigate these
still tenacious assumptions about the nature and implications of New Critical approaches—to clarify their origins, redress distortions, and deepen understanding of their range and complexity.

In many contexts, the very gesture of returning to the New Criticism after the watersheds of theory and cultural studies can be construed as suggesting literary conservatism, even rearguard entrenchment. In part, this stems from a reflexive association between the New Criticism and “dead white male” cultural conservatism, and the way in which, as Jane Gallop notes, the “ahistoricism” widely connected with New Critical methods, along with the canon of literary work they tended to promote, have come to be “persuasively linked to sexism, racism, and elitism” (181). This volume contends, however, that the convictions and political perspectives associated with the New Criticism were multiple, diverse, and complex; that they were not always as we now often understand them to have been, nor as they later became as they evolved; and that, accordingly, they stand in need of reevaluation. Moreover, the project of rereading the New Criticism to which this volume is committed carries no one set of literary–political valences. In an article for *PMLA* (2007), Marjorie Levinson takes census of the trend known as the “New Formalism,” composed of a diverse body of critics and scholars interested in revitalizing formalist approaches to literary analysis and interpretation, some of whom revisit the New Criticism for techniques and models. Her article emphasizes the coalitionary nature of this endeavor: New Formalists hail from widely varying schools of thought and political perspectives; what unites them is a conviction about the importance of formalist methods to literary study. A comparable range of viewpoints and political positions characterizes the contributors to this volume.

At this point, forty years after the fall of the New Criticism, it is important to revisit the papers in the disciplinary attic—to return, first, to both the letter and the spirit of what the New Critics actually said. They have often been misconstrued as presenting a monolithic school of thought, and accordingly, read as what Frank Lentricchia calls an “inconsistent and sometimes confused movement” (xii–xiii). The essays in this volume suggest instead that the New Criticism comprised a diverse collection of allied critics addressing shared questions and often contending with and contesting one another’s claims. Through a widely circulated repertoire of myths, the diversity and subtlety of their arguments have often been elided, their debates and points of principled difference effaced. Many of the essays in this collection thus aim through historical analysis to recover the internal complexity of the New Critical effort, restoring to view important episodes and conversations in the history of the academic discipline of English in North America. Moreover,
taking advantage of our retrospective position on the New Critics, these essays bring to the surface implicit or subtextual aspects of their arguments and cultural politics that the New Critics themselves did not emphasize and in some cases may not even have recognized—ones which chronicles of their work have overlooked.

Out of this work of reconsideration, several of these essays reflect upon what might now be derived from the examples, conversations, and debates of the New Critics toward the future of both literary studies, which finds itself at an early-twenty-first-century moment of reassessment and reorientation, and its sibling field of cultural studies. What we might now draw upon toward today’s work are not only the techniques of “close reading” and “reading for form” widely associated with New Criticism (which can as easily be directed toward semiotic play in cultural texts in diverse media as toward forms of irony and ambiguity in texts marked as “literary”): also emphasized in the following articles are the New Critical commitment to pursuing ethical projects through approaches to aesthetics (Archambeau); the cultural politics animating their work and methods (Morrison, Shaheen, Hammond); and their pedagogical assumptions and approaches (Lockhart).

The Genesis of the New Criticism

What later became known as the New Criticism first emerged in the late 1930s, as a group of American Southerners—John Crowe Ransom, a professor at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, along with a cluster of his former students (Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and Cleanth Brooks)—gathered forces toward invigorating the practice of literary criticism and legitimating it within academic contexts. As of the early 1920s, Ransom, Tate, and Warren were all affiliated with a group of poets at Vanderbilt called the “Fugitives,” devoted to discussion and critique of poetry, often new modernist verse and often their own, in the name of renewing the literature of the American South. Between 1922 and 1925, they published their verse and criticism in a journal entitled The Fugitive. Ransom was one of the earliest members of the group in the late 1910s; Tate and Warren would later join as undergraduates in the 1920s. Later that decade, all three came to be associated with Southern Agrarianism, a cultural movement catalyzed most immediately by the “Scopes Monkey Trial” of 1925 in Dayton, Tennessee, and the denigration of the American South which it fueled in many quarters. Spurred to organize by such attacks, the Southern Agrarians sought to defend distinctively Southern values and customs against what they perceived as the increasing hegemony
of the industrialized North. Ransom, Tate, and Warren would all contribute
to the symposium of articles that, in aggregate, became the Agrarians’ major
manifesto: *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930).¹

By the late 1930s, the nucleus around Ransom—with the addition of the
slightly younger Brooks, then collaborating with Robert Penn Warren at Loui-
siana State University—had evolved into a group of allies making common
cause. At that point, they turned energies to an effort to reform the discipline
of English in the direction of greater rigor, prominence within the academy,
and cultural authority—an endeavor that would eventually coalesce in the
New Criticism. Specifically, they saw themselves as champions of rigorous
literary criticism focused on aesthetics, which they opposed to approaches to
literary study that emphasized historically-focused scholarly research, mor-
ally-oriented readings like those of New Humanists such as Irving Babbitt,
and Marxist sociological analysis.² As distinct from such approaches, their
criticism concerned itself with the literary “work itself” rather than with the
author or historical conditions of its inception or reception; and with the aes-
thetic form of a literary work rather than just its thematic content: in their
view, form and content were inextricably intertwined.

As of 1937, Ransom was drawn by an attractive offer to Kenyon College
in Ohio, a congenial setting for his teaching and criticism, but one remote
from the American South, signaling a removal from his former interests and
allegiances. As of 1940, Allen Tate was at Princeton, his position suggest-
ing and fostering a comparable distance on the American South. Alexander
MacLeod’s essay in this collection notes the pattern this indicates among the
New Critics of turning away from their Southern Agrarianism as their com-
mitments to literary criticism intensified. Rather than an abandonment of the
Agrarian project, however, cultural historian Mark Jancovich reads this move
from Agrarianism to New Criticism on the part of many nascent New Crit-
ics as a transposition into a different key of the group’s ongoing refusal of
the utilitarian, capitalist values they associated with the American North—a
change of strategy rather than objectives (Jancovich, 208). In their articles for
this collection, Aaron Shaheen and James Matthew Wilson likewise address
this question of the relationship between the New Critics’ Southern Agrarian
and later literary–critical work.

As they sought to endow the academic study of English literature with
greater precision and legitimacy, again, the proto–New Critics saw themselves
as counterposed against the “historians,” or “scholars”—i.e. those in literary
studies devoted primarily to historical scholarly research. As Gerald Graff
notes, historically-minded, research-oriented approaches to literary study had
gained prominence in the American academy as “English” had emerged as a
distinct discipline in the late nineteenth century, at a moment when academe was undergoing professionalization and accordingly increasingly favored a German research-specialist model of practice. In literary studies, this preference often resulted in the rejection of liberal-humanist, Arnoldian approaches to the study and teaching of literature in favor of data-oriented philological methods. In *Defining Literary Criticism*, Carol Atherton notes parallel developments in England at this time at Oxford and Cambridge.

In both the United States and England, however, from the time of the emergence of English as an academic discipline, the importance of philological study of literature had also been contested by many who were trying to establish the new field—sometimes for methodological and sometimes anti-German nationalist reasons. As Atherton observes of Oxford and Cambridge, “The evolution of English at both universities can be seen in terms of a gradual movement away from these philological beginnings” (37). In the context of the 1930s, the rising New Critics thus reprised in a new context and new moment this resistance to an approach to English literature focused primarily on philological and other forms of historical research.

As Graff observes, as they formed their sense of mission, the New Critics were also reacting against a number of other forces of the cultural climate, sometimes pressed by various adversaries in “conflicting directions” (146). They sought to define their program, for instance, against “generalist” approaches to literature prevalent in early-twentieth-century undergraduate classrooms, which often featured surveys of biographical and historical background rather than close engagement with the specifics of literary texts; as well as against what they read as merely impressionistic commentary on literature. They also sought to dissociate themselves from Marxist and Humanist readings that, in their view, focused on moral themes at the expense of attention to the implications of literary form.

And in the spirit of their work as Southern Agrarians, they were also reckoning with work in the sciences that enjoyed significant influence in the academy of this moment—which, as Steven Schryer suggests, they rejected as fostering “technocratic rationalism” associated in their view with the cultural power of the American North (670). But out of awareness of the pressures in their academic and cultural climate to gain legitimacy through scientific rigor, even as they resisted scientific values and perspectives, they also pursued their work with scientific precision. Specifically, Ransom and his compatriots sought precision in the theory and practice of literary criticism, at the time widely regarded as a merely subjective and lax endeavor unworthy of serious academic attention (Graff, *Professing Literature*, 124; Green, 62–63). In one of his essays designed to legitimate the work of literary criticism, “Criticisn,
Inc.,” included in The World’s Body (1938), Ransom noted that he had heard “the head of English studies in a graduate school” observe, “Well, we don’t allow criticism here, because this is something which anybody can do” (335). Ransom’s ringing rejoinder in this essay—“It is not anybody who can do criticism” (336)—represented a shared line of thought, and a pivotal assumption, among the incipient New Critics. In this essay, Ransom defined criticism as “the attempt to define and enjoy the aesthetic or characteristic values of literature” (332): to treat literary texts as art, rather than texts documenting history, social developments, ethics, or philosophy. In his vision, what was needed to make of criticism a newly rigorous, aesthetically focused endeavor was a new cadre of trained professionals, drawn from the university professoriate (“it must be developed by the collective and sustained effort of learned persons—which means that its proper seat is in the universities” [329]), as well as a scientifically inflected approach: “Criticism must become more scientific, or precise and systematic” (329).

As Gerald Graff points out, in view of such statements as the latter, the New Critics often came to be associated with, and “denounced for,” “arid scientific empiricism” (Literature against Itself, 133). But given the cultural convictions informing their literary criticism, he maintains, in many respects the New Critics could not have been more distant from an allegiance to “science”; science was “in fact one of the chief cultural ills that the New Critics themselves sought to combat. The New Criticism stands squarely in the romantic tradition of the defense of the humanities as an antidote to science and positivism” (133). As Southern Agrarians, the New Critics were committed to asserting in the face of the powerful North—which they read as industrial, capitalistic, technocratic and hyper-rational—the distinctive cultural practices of the South, whose way of life, in their reading, had been badly eroded during postbellum years by the Northern juggernaut. As their “Statement of Principles” in I’l Take My Stand observed,

The capitalization of the applied sciences has now become extravagant and uncritical; it has enslaved our human energies. . . . [T]he act of labor as one of the happy functions of human life has been in effect abandoned, and is practiced solely for its rewards. (xxxix)

Thus although these critics’ involvement in the rising New Criticism entailed a turn away from their earlier, more overtly Southern commitments, their critique of the “extravagant” “capitalization” of the “sciences” would continue to inform their literary–critical work. Ransom’s claims in essays such as “Poetry: A Note on Ontology” certainly attest to an ongoing quarrel with
the cultural practice of what he calls “sciencing and devouring” (52), which
Ransom associated with the North, and which the approach to literature
he advocated was intended to resist. The methods, epistemological claims,
and values of the New Critics were often constructed in their work as a shoe
thrown in the machine of industrial capitalism, Northern or otherwise, and
the rational, scientific discourses it involved. When Ransom asserts that
“Criticism must become more scientific, or precise and systematic” (World’s
Body, 329), then, the “precise and systematic” should be read as a qualifica-
tion: Ransom means here that the rigor to which literary criticism aspires in
the process of “sett[ing] up its own house” (345) should match that displayed
by science, widely respected in the cultural climate of 1938, in order to gain
legitimacy—but ultimately in order to achieve objectives that would counter-
vail those of science.

Predecessors at Cambridge

In the mid-twentieth-century American context, as the New Critics-in-for-
motion sought to legitimate literary criticism as an integral part of academic
study of English literature, they were renewing an effort associated with the
late nineteenth and early twentieth century in England. As of the 1920s,
criticism had been especially championed at Cambridge University, whose cli-
mate shaped the work of several critics from whom many New Critics would
draw inspiration, such as I. A. Richards, William Empson, and F. R. Leavis.

When the emergent field of “English Studies” was reinvigorated at Cam-
bridge after the Great War with the establishment of the English Tripos in
1917, I. A. Richards, like the New Critics who later followed his lead, sought
to develop stringent techniques for analysis of literary work that would dis-
tinguish such analysis from and carry it beyond philological study, impres-
sionistic belletristic commentary, and the “survey” style study of literature
common in university programs. In the next generation of Cambridge
English, F. R. Leavis would pursue a similar path.

Richards, trained in the mental and moral sciences, was concerned with
the cultural health of an England struggling with the aftermath of war; ac-
cordingly, he argued that close, careful, trained engagement with literature
could help readers to attain mental “balance,” “poise,” and “equilibrium”
and promote forms of cultural healing. In an Arnoldian spirit, Richards main-
tained that work with literature could guard against a slide into “chaos” to
which he read England as vulnerable during the postwar years. As he noted
in Science and Poetry (1926): “Tradition is weakening. Moral authorities are
not as well backed by belief as they were. . . . We are in need of something else to take the place of the old order.” Concerned that the cultural center would not hold, Richards feared the upsurge of “a mental chaos such as man has never experienced.” If this came to pass, he observed, “We shall be thrown back, as Matthew Arnold foresaw, upon poetry. It is capable of saving us; it is a perfectly possible means of overcoming chaos” (82–83).

While Richards focused chiefly on the psychological and neurological responses of skilled, trained readers, his students, such as William Empson and F. R. Leavis at Cambridge, as well as the American critics who admired his work such as Ransom and Brooks, were more concerned with what was increasingly conceived of as “literature itself”: the formal features and practices read as distinctive to literature. What they drew from Richards were his exhortations about “how to read a page”—and his insistence on attending to words on the page as the primary site of consideration. As F. R. Leavis would put it, “literature is made of words, and . . . everything worth saying in criticism of verse and prose can be related to judgements concerning particular arrangements of words on the page” (Leavis, 25). As Brooks would note in a 1981 retrospective about the impact of Richards on the generation of American critics who succeeded him, Richards offered “a pioneering effort that broke with the literary training of the time—with the traditional British training as well as the American” (587). Brooks recalls becoming aware of Richards’s books during his first academic year as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford in 1929–30:

As I remember, it was Robert Penn Warren, then at Oxford also, who called my attention to Principles of Literary Criticism and Practical Criticism. I read both books eagerly. In Practical Criticism I was especially interested in the students’ comments on thirteen selected poems. Richards had omitted the titles of the poems and the names of their authors to see what the students could make of the naked texts. (587)

The critics who would become the New Critics were thus primarily concerned with “the naked texts,” rather than, as was Richards, in what occurred in students’ minds as they engaged with them. Brooks admits that he and compatriots were suspicious of Richards’s psychologizing (“It was Richards’s psychological machinery that got in the way for me and many other theorists” [587])—which, when Richards’s books first appeared, was considered courageous by some and by others inappropriately “scientific” for literary study. As Brooks notes of John Crowe Ransom’s skeptical distinction between his own New Critical emphases and those of Richards: “what the reader had before
him as positive evidence was the text itself, not certain presumed goings-on in
the reader’s head” (591).

Accordingly, what the New Critics would focus on and invest in was
the construct of “the text itself” as the appropriate object of literary study.
They also aimed for greater precision about that object of study: they sought
to identify what literature offered that no other form of verbal communi-
cation provided and to promote systematic engagement with its distinctive
qualities and techniques. This is why the received wisdom about the New
Critics links them so easily, often too readily, to T. S. Eliot, who famously
declared in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (among the essays of the
Sacred Wood by which Richards was deeply influenced when first teaching
at Cambridge) that criticism should be directed “not upon the poet but upon
the poetry” (40). In the preface to the second edition of The Sacred Wood,
Eliot would reinforce this point by advocating reading poetry “as poetry and
not another thing” (viii). Eliot’s statement entailed assumptions that would
become axiomatic for the New Critics: that poetry (here used as a metonym
for literature) should be read as ontologically separate from other forms of
expression and accordingly, merited a criticism equipped to do justice to its
distinctness and autonomy. Eliot was not actually as intimately involved with
the New Critics per se as many accounts suggest, but his essays and complex
poetry provided a crucial impetus—one might say “catalyst”—for New Criti-
cical work, both literary and cultural.5

The Era of Consolidation

The New Critics began their project at a moment of intense debate about
where the discipline of English would direct itself next: as Ransom noted
to Tate in 1938, the same year that saw publication of his major study, The
World’s Body, “I’ve just come back from the Modern Language Association
at Chicago. The Professors are in an awful dither, trying to reform them-
selves, and there’s a big stroke possible for a small group that knows what
it wants in giving them ideas and definitions and showing them the way”
(Selected Letters, 236). Ransom and his “small group” would attempt this
“big stroke” with their effort to render literary studies a more stringent aca-
demic discipline with a focus on critical practice. The movement’s name
would emerge through the title of Ransom’s book of 1941, The New Criti-
cism, which in turn permuted the title of a 1910 essay by Joel Spingarn of
Columbia University (Graff, Professing Literature, 153).
During the 1940s and 1950s, representatives of the New Criticism, both the former Southern Agrarians and others who became part of the movement’s momentum, would gain prominent posts at a range of American universities—Ransom at Kenyon College in Ohio; Tate at Princeton, later the University of Minnesota; Warren at Louisiana State, the University of Minnesota, and Yale; Brooks at Louisiana State and then also at Yale, where René Wellek and W. K. Wimsatt would teach as well. As Vincent Leitch notes, as compared to critical schools contemporaneous with the New Criticism such as the Chicago Neo-Aristotelians and the New York Intellectuals, by the mid-twentieth century, the New Critics “influenced more colleagues and students, controlled more journals, had wider access to presses, and produced immensely more publications” (80). They disseminated their work and consolidated their program through periodicals such as *The Southern Review*, which Warren and Brooks founded in 1935; *The Kenyon Review*, which Ransom founded in 1939; and the *Sewanee Review*, of which Tate served as editor beginning in 1944. A cluster of landmark New Critical texts appeared in the late 1930s and 1940s: Ransom’s *The World’s Body* (1938) and *The New Criticism* (1941), along with Brooks’s *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939) and *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947). Also appearing at this time was the group of textbooks that Tara Lockhart’s essay in this collection addresses—textbooks that would carry the New Criticism to high-school and university classrooms throughout North America and make of it a widely influential movement, such as Brooks and Warren’s *An Approach to Literature* (1936), *Understanding Poetry* (1938), *Understanding Fiction* (1943), and Brooks and Robert Heilman’s *Understanding Drama* (1945).

In part, the New Critical effort at consolidation, toughening, systemization, and legitimation of academic English took hold in American universities because the methods advanced by the New Critics allowed for a kind of democratization of literary study; since, unlike philological study, which required years of groundwork, training in the close analysis of textual particulars was available to undergraduate students of all backgrounds. This was especially attractive during a time when, thanks to the G.I. Bill, many soldiers were returning from wartime committed to completing their educations. Moreover, as Veysey notes, “The war veterans made up only one segment” of the “dramatic increase in the number of students from 1940 to 1964, which more broadly reflected an awareness within a greatly enlarged sector of the middle and skilled working classes that some version of college was necessary in order to keep economically afloat” (15). While the precise, thoroughgoing criticism that the New Critics offered suggested a vision of
literary study as accessible only to an elite of highly trained specialists, the techniques of New Criticism nonetheless came to be widely used by a large and diverse student population. By the early 1960s, New Critical methods of analysis and interpretation had achieved dominance in English departments at many North American universities, and, through the major New Critical textbooks, also exerted significant impact on North American secondary-school pedagogy.

The rise of the New Criticism was also importantly bound up in, and facilitated by, the ascent of literary modernism, emergent at the same time that figures who would become New Critics were beginning their careers. Modernist literature featured complex texts for which New Critical methods of close reading were particularly apt, often even developed to address. In a climate of what would be widely referred to as modernist literary “difficulty,” readers sought expert guides to help them to navigate the modernist labyrinth. It was the work of poet-critic modernists such as Eliot and Pound that first inspired many of the New Critics. New Criticism and modernism thus quickly became involved in a cultural symbiosis, with New Critics such as Brooks building their reputations on readings of modernist texts such as Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and modernism enjoying wide cultural play in critical fora and classrooms thanks to New Critical attention. But as Adam Hammond’s essay suggests, New Critical conceptions of modernism captured only a subset of the diversity of work associated with the modernist experiment of 1914–45, leaving much of the work of modernism in shadow, shaping limited received ideas about what modernism entailed. By the same token, assuming too close an alignment between the New Criticism and modernism can attenuate critical understanding of the many facets of New Critical work, some of whose animating objectives and values differed markedly from those suggested by modernist poetry and fiction.

**Critiques of the New Criticism**

Over the years, New Critics have frequently been disparaged as head-in-the sand formalists: even before the poststructuralist revolution, they were charged in such terms by contemporaries such as Northrop Frye and Lionel Trilling—as unconcerned with, even oblivious to, anything outside the text. But as several essays in this collection demonstrate, their methods were in fact often intended to register and encourage certain attitudes toward art and culture, as well as certain ethical and epistemological stances; and often, in the tradition of Matthew Arnold, they assigned powerful cultural roles
to both poetry and the reading thereof. To whatever degree we are willing today to countenance their views on how literature and literary criticism can affect the world beyond the text, the New Critics did hold such views. Their famous devotion to the “autonomy” of both literature and literary criticism (for them, the “autonomy” of both placed them as independent disciplines operating by principles and rules distinct from those of other fields such as history or sociology) did not so much preclude as enable their impact on the world outside the literary sphere.

But from the beginning, critiques of the New Criticism were thick and varied, and such critiques often misrepresented what the New Critics had actually asserted. Their contemporaries the Chicago neo-Aristotelians, whom Ransom credited with undertaking a kindred project of differentiating literary criticism from other practices, often jousted with them: Chicago critic R. S. Crane accused them of generating critical “monism” with their methods, failing to take sensitive account of differences among texts, especially those having to do with genre. Frye suggested that they had not done enough to make of criticism a rigorous autonomous discipline. In 1949 in *PMLA*, Douglas Bush critiqued the New Criticism for cliquishness and elitism. And many castigated them for generating what Eliot once wryly termed in the late 1950s the “lemon squeezer school of criticism” (“Frontiers of Criticism,” 537), involving mechanically reiterated readings about irony, ambiguity, and paradox.

Sometimes these attacks struck home, especially when they addressed what the New Criticism had become once it had achieved prominence in the North American academy. One of this volume’s objectives is to reassess the aspects of the New Criticism that came under fire; another is to return attention to the New Criticism’s analyses of literature and culture before their methods became, in the hands of some, mere mechanical routine.

**Contributors**

The collection’s first four essays reread the genesis of the New Criticism to reveal dimensions of New Critical thought generally underemphasized or misrecognized in critical accounts. Robert Archambeau’s “Aesthetics as Ethics” features the ethical emphases of the New Criticism’s supposedly purely “formalist” work that allegedly distanced them from ethical concerns: his essay points up the little-noted indebtedness of several figures important to the New Criticism to German Romantic idealism, especially to Schiller’s philosophy of artistic contemplation as a means of achieving ethical balance.
Reassessing political diagnoses of the New Criticism, Alastair Morrison’s essay, “Eliot, the Agrarians, and the Political Subtext of New Critical Formalism” attributes to the New Critics a subversive illiberalism. Although the hegemony of the New Criticism in the mid-twentieth-century academy has sometimes led to its being regarded as exemplifying the dominant values of its liberal democratic Anglo-American culture, Morrison argues that through their formalism and the Southern Agrarian values underwriting it, the New Critics sought actively to undo a group of key liberal humanist assumptions.

The third and fourth essays in the collection, bringing to light neglected aspects of New Critical thought, enlist these to account for turns within the New Criticism’s development from its Southern Agrarian beginnings to academic authority. Aaron Shaheen calls attention to John Crowe Ransom’s concern with two distinct forms of “androgyny”—for Ransom, one a sign of cultural deterioration, the other indicative of an ideal culture—for fuller understanding of the conservative gender politics informing Ransom’s critical work. Ransom’s struggle with these two models of androgyny, Shaheen argues, informed his move from Southern Agrarianism to literary criticism marked as apolitical. James Matthew Wilson’s “The Fugitive and the Exile” likewise focuses on the New Critical shift away from Agrarianism, highlighting a little-considered impact of the Frankfurt School on the thought of John Crowe Ransom. Wilson suggests that two of Theodor Adorno’s 1940s critiques of American culture, published in Ransom’s *Kenyon Review*, contributed significantly to Ransom’s turn away from his Southern allegiances.

The next three essays in the collection engage with work by the New Critics and their predecessors that significantly shaped understandings of literary modernism. Bradley Clissold’s “No Two Ways about It” reconsiders the work of William Empson, the Cambridge-based critic crucially influential on the New Critics. Clissold maintains that although Empson theorized “ambiguity” in response to the complexities of modernist literature, and despite the close association between modernist literature and New Critical work indebted to Empson’s, Empson himself devoted almost no critical attention to modernist literature. Clissold considers the implications of Empson’s surprising silence on modernist literature for how we should understand Empson’s impact on the New Criticism, ultimately suggesting that Empson still nonetheless might be considered an “enabler” of both New Critical and modernist preoccupations with ambiguity.

Connor Byrne’s “In Pursuit of Understanding” questions the pervasive misconception that the New Criticism remained divorced from popular criticism of its day. Byrne considers how apparent antagonisms between New Critics and their contemporaries occluded commonalities between their
approaches to modernist poetry and those of other critics in their milieu who reached wider audiences. For instance, although New Critical techniques were roundly critiqued by Louis Untermeyer, a self-styled popular critic, Untermeyer’s reading methods in fact shared much with those of the New Critics. Byrne’s case study focuses on commonalities between readings of William Carlos Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow” from, on the one hand, Untermeyer, and on the other, Brooks and Warren.

Tracing the evolution of James Baldwin’s uneasy relationship to the New Critical vision of modernism, Adam Hammond reconsiders the New Critics’ anti-urban bias and the racist elements of Agrarian thought informing New Critical cultural commitments. Behind the anti-modernism of Baldwin’s *Another Country*, which for Hammond indicates both Baldwin’s self-parody and a rejection of the New Critical conceptions of modernism, lies a surprising history of Baldwin’s conflicted support for the New Critics’ anti-capitalist, anti-industrial cultural program.

The collection’s last three essays reread New Critical thought with attention to aspects of New Critical theory and practice that might be used today toward revitalization of theory, criticism, and pedagogy. The first two highlight overlooked facets of New Critical thought with a particular emphasis on how these might be set in dialogue with contemporary developments. Alexander MacLeod’s “Disagreeable Intellectual Distance: Rethinking the New Critics and Their Old Regionalism” focuses on the little-acknowledged complex theory of regionalism forged by the New Critics during the early Agrarian years, which MacLeod argues could benefit contemporary theoretical work on regionalism and cultural geography.

Tara Lockhart’s “Teaching with Style” addresses New Critical pedagogy and its theoretical ramifications through a little-known area of New Critical work—on the genre of the essay. She features Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s *An Approach to Literature* (1936), the earliest and least-known of their highly influential textbooks, which, anomalously in their series, addresses pedagogical approaches to the essay. Generally, their textbooks featured poetry and short fiction, genres to which they most readily turned their methods and with which they showed greatest comfort; in contrast, their treatment of the essay registers a struggle, made evident through successive editions of *An Approach to Literature*, which Lockhart reads as especially revelatory of their commitment to teaching literature “as literature.” Calling for finer understanding of the evolution of New Critical pedagogical convictions, her article also suggests that contemporary literary pedagogy, particularly that concerned with the enigmatic category of “style” on which *An Approach to Literature* focuses in its discussion of the essay, has much to gain from Brooks and Warren’s example.
The volume’s closing essay, Cecily Devereux’s “‘A Kind of Dual Atten-
tiveness’: Close Reading after the New Criticism,” points back to the New
Criticism in an article that, aligned with contemporary work from Jane Gal-
llop and Terry Eagleton, seeks a renewal of “close reading.” While Devereux
remains wary of rehabilitating the kind of “close reading” advocated by the
New Critics, “as the New Criticism represents . . . a problematic, exclusion-
ary, and deeply biased notion of the literary and of the discipline,” she none-
theless suggests that the emphasis the New Critics placed on close reading is
one we should reconsider today. As she explains what’s at stake: “The call
for a return to close reading is a call for English studies to define itself again”
and clarify what constitutes the discipline’s distinctive object of study—what
differentiates it from neighboring fields such as history, sociology, and phi-
losophy. The problem facing contemporary critics, however, is how to do so,
and how thereby to reaffirm “the literary,” without “undermining the crucial
late-twentieth-century expansion of the literary . . . beyond a limited, male-
dominated, Anglocentric, white canon of particular genres” associated with
the New Criticism.

Together, these articles seek to illuminate aspects of New Critical work
that offer resources for rethinking contemporary approaches in literary and
cultural studies, as well as the direction of the profession more generally.
In 1970, retrospecting more than two decades after the heyday of the New
Criticism, just as its academic sun was setting, Richard Ohmann reflected
upon the “relevance” of literary culture as significantly shaped by the New
Criticism in academic contexts of the mid- to late twentieth century. Look-
ing back on the previous two decades, cknowledging the wide impact of the
New Criticism on the generations of readers that it had trained and inspired,
he noted that, “[T]he New Criticism was the central intellectual force in
our subculture during those years.” Accordingly, the educational culture in
departments of English, he maintained, was far more robust during the New
Critical heyday than it had been in previous generations. In 1970, however,
acute awareness of an increasingly politicized counterculture in America and
controversies about Vietnam was exposing the painful limits of a vision of the
“study of literature” built from New Critical ideals. At that point Ohm-
ann meditated on the changing profession for a new wave of academics in
English who would not be able so easily to avert attention from uncomfort-
able political realities as had academics of the 1950s and 1960s. In Ohm-
ann’s view, the New Critical vision had left professors of English—along
with those who followed their ideas of a richly moral life derived from the
study of literature—unfortunately insulated from the forces of the surround-
ing culture.
Forty years after this time of transition, this collection seeks to reopen the question of what the New Critics’ literary and cultural theory, approaches to close reading, vision of literary study, ethical directions, and pedagogical approaches, might offer us today. As the articles in this collection make clear, the New Criticism provided much of the foundation for what we still do now in literary studies; and if we are to reassess our situation at the outset of the second decade of the twenty-first century, if we are to avoid the kind of insularion that Ohmann laments, we need to understand more richly the New Critical matrixes of conviction, professional drives, and intellectual and artistic commitments from which so many of our contemporary practices derive.

Notes


2. For fuller discussion of the various schools of thought within the discipline of English against which the New Critics defined themselves, see Graff, Professing Literature, especially Chapters 8 and 9, and Graff, Literature against Itself, Chapter 5, “What Was New Criticism?”

3. See also Allen Tate’s representation of this view in “Miss Emily and the Bibliographer” (141).

4. See Atherton, Chapter 2.

5. Eliot, in fact, would wryly distinguish himself from the New Critics in “The Frontiers of Criticism” (1956), deflecting the widely held belief that New Critical work “derived” from him: “I fail to see any critical movement which can be said to derive from myself” (529).

6. On this point, see Graff, Professing Literature, 173.


Bibliography


