Preface

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One of the chief objectives of this volume is to revisit and interrogate the many myths that the concept of the New Criticism has accrued over the years—in order to shed new light on their origins, complicate them, and sometimes to overturn them. The essays featured in the volume’s first section pay particular attention to addressing such received ideas, and other essays throughout the volume engage them as well. Connor Byrne’s essay opens by noting that this effort is certainly not new: as early as 1951, in “The Formalist Critics,” Cleanth Brooks famously sought to encapsulate and refute some of the “misunderstandings” about the New Criticism which had already accumulated by only a little more than a decade after its emergence. Many such misconceptions—what Robert Archembault calls the “straw-man versions” of the New Criticism—stem from the assumption that the New Critics, qua formalist critics, were concerned solely with the “work itself” and what F. R. Leavis called “particular arrangements of words on the page” (by which, it is usually maintained, they meant matters of aesthetic technique only) at the expense of attention to all matters outside the realm of aesthetics that literature might address. After all, in “Criticism, Inc.,” the essay-cum-manifesto that culminated John Crowe Ransom’s The World’s Body (1938), Ransom sharply differentiates the “proper business of criticism” from that of “historical studies,” “moral studies,” “linguistic studies,” and “personal registrations.” This was a book in which Ransom, later regarded as prime
mover behind the professional consolidation of the New Criticism, launched many of the ideas that would become fundamental to the New Criticism. The result of the New Critics’ accordance of prime attention to the “work itself” has been a raft of assumptions about what they ruled out of their critical ambit and thus are understood to have dismissed as unimportant. They have widely been seen as unconcerned with either authors’ intentions or readerly responses and as unengaged with politics, history, ethics, and societal conditions relevant to a work of literature.

The strategic disciplinary move that the New Critics made in order to establish the distinctness of the literary–critical endeavor also contributed to this widespread understanding of their criticism as dismissing what was beyond the text: they turned decisively away from approaches in the field of English that focused on literary history, read literature for philosophical insights, or appraised literature through overtly moral criteria. The polemical way in which they did so—in order to define and legitimize criticism during an era when criticism was widely regarded as a slight endeavor that “anyone could do”—often suggested that the work of these other approaches was less worthwhile than that of literary criticism. But according to New Critics such as Ransom and Brooks, New Critical distinctions between the “work itself” and what lay beyond it, and between criticism and other kinds of work with respect to literature, never implied that commentary that engaged extratextual matters was without value, nor that they themselves ignored such matters altogether.

Robert Archambeau’s opening essay focuses specifically on the myth that the New Critics remained aloof from ethical issues. Even when Ransom ruled out “moral studies” from the kind of literary criticism he supported, he was not banishing moral considerations from New Critical attention. Instead, he suggested that in order for the critic to discern the moral dimension of a literary text, rather than search for a moral “message” detachable from its aesthetic form, he had to assess what it implied morally as an organic whole, aesthetic dimensions and all. And as Archambeau notes, tracing the New Critics’ debt to German Romantic idealism—specifically to the ideas of Schiller as transmitted through Coleridge, Arnold, and I. A. Richards—the New Critics in fact take an ethical position by way of their concern with aesthetics: one that reads the disinterested stance enabled by aesthetic contemplation as conducive to a balanced subjectivity, which in turn provides the foundation for ethical conduct. Other essays in this module, such as Alastair Morrison’s, similarly bring out the implicit ethics of the New Critics’ devotion to an anti-instrumentalist perspective on the world, which they viewed as demonstrated and fostered both by the literature they admired and the critical methods
they espoused. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, when several figures who would later dominate the New Criticism were allied with the cause of Agrarianism in the American South, this anti-instrumentalist outlook was also associated by some of them with the Southern “way of life”—focused on art, beauty, gallantry, respect for tradition and custom, and stewardship of the land—which they opposed to a Northern ethos they understood as aridly rationalist, technophilic, pro-scientific, and capitalist.

Morrison’s essay presses most on a second myth, related to the first, that the New Critics advocated a literary criticism that was “apolitical,” “politically quiescent,” or politically “neuter.” He homes in on a politics implicit in the New Critical formalist method—the “covert social and political agenda of formalism.” Even aside from the politics implied by the Southern Agrarian position; apart from the commitment of Cambridge critics such as I. A. Richards and the Leavises to improving society through criticism (which Morrison reads as much more unabashedly political than the allegiances of their American counterparts); and besides the conservative politics suggested by the statements of T. S. Eliot, whose ideas often stand behind those of the New Critics, the political connotations of New Critical theory and formalism were, in Morrison’s reading, profoundly illiberal. In suggesting this, Morrison also addresses another prevalent misreading of the New Criticism: that it was the handmaiden of a hegemonic liberal democratic order. Morrison ultimately maintains that we need to differentiate between, on the one hand, what New Critical theory, manifestic statements, and practice implied as the movement coalesced, and on the other, what the New Criticism later became in the hands of those who made use of it.

Aaron Shaheen, meanwhile, addresses the misconception that the New Critics were unconcerned with history and culture. Starting from Mark Jancoyich’s contention in The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism that “the New Criticism never intended to divorce itself from history and culture,” he stresses that John Crowe Ransom, for one, should be read as grappling with cultural problems not only in his overtly Agrarian phase but also afterward, when he turned to a literary criticism only ostensibly separate from his Agrarian commitments. Shaheen traces a specific way in which Ransom carried out engagement with cultural developments of his historical moment through two distinct conceptions of androgyny that played out in both his cultural and literary criticism. Likewise focusing on Ransom, James Matthew Wilson debunks the related widespread belief that, because the New Critics were supposedly not concerned with culture, their commitments were starkly different from, even opposed to, those of Frankfurt School philosophers such as Theodor Adorno, and that certainly there was no commerce
between them. On the contrary, Wilson notes, as registered by a little-considered encounter between Ransom and Adorno in the pages of the *Kenyon Review* in 1945, Adorno’s essays significantly influenced some late-career turns by Ransom, and the nature of the influence also reflects the subtle and unexpected “affinities” between Ransom’s and Adorno’s lines of cultural critique. Robert Archambeau observes in his essay that, given the New Critics’ opposition to instrumentalism, “in a meaningful sense, the New Critics are . . . Adorno’s cousins”; Wilson illuminates other specific ways in which Ransom’s and Adorno’s ideas crossed paths.