



# New Criticism: Novelties and Limitations

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**Abstract**— *The New Criticism theory has come as a reaction against traditional ways of approaching literary texts. All the approaches that preceded it like the historical, the biographical, and the psychological approaches, mainly, and which relied heavily on extra-textual elements to unfold or disentangle a piece of art, were judged to be biased and lacking, for the simple reason that they make the critic and the reader, alike, stray from the text on the page, and indulge in fields that are beyond the text. For the New Critics, the text should remain an autonomous, auto-referential, highly autotelic, and a hermetically closed entity that derives its meaning, if there is any meaning at all, from the interactions of its internal parts. It should reflect but itself by its free play of signifiers, relying on devices that create ambiguity and tensions to be resolved within the confines of the text itself.*

**Keywords**— *New Criticism, auto-referential, intentional fallacy, affective fallacy, ambiguity, tensions.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

New Criticism is one of the major schools of literary criticism that flourished between the twenties and fifties of the last century. Having come as a reaction against the extraneous approaches to literary texts, especially the historical and biographical approaches, it conceives of a piece of writing as autonomous, with an ontological status, in need of no extra-textual material to be appreciated. It is « the text and the text alone » approach, which discards all other considerations even if they bear a direct relation to the text from the outside. Hence, the writer's biography, his psychology, or any other considerations beyond the text are not taken into account when approaching a literary text. As a critical approach to literature, the New Criticism approach stresses the poetic aspect of language, and sees the text as referring to itself and to nothing else beyond it. The words acquire their status and meaning only within the text and in relation to each other. The primary aim of New Criticism is to 'cleanse' the literary text from all extraneous materials that, more often than not, pervert and distort its meaning by depriving the reader of a real and direct contact with the text.

The present paper purports to investigate some aspects of New Criticism as a critical approach to literature. For the

sake of coherence, it will be divided into three main parts. The first part will deal with some basic theoretical concepts of this approach, such as autonomy, self-referentiality, intentional fallacy, affective fallacy, and heresy of paraphrase. The second part will, however, state some of the essential requirements of a « great » literary text from the vantage point of New Criticism. The third and last part will be concerned with the limitations and critiques levelled at this approach, mainly its exclusion of external evidence, the text/context divide, and the paradox of objectivity/subjectivity.

## II. SOME BASIC THEORETICAL PRECEPTS OF NEW CRITICISM

### 2.1. The Text's Autonomy and Self-referentiality:

As a critical approach, New Criticism finds its « foundations.....in books and essays written during the 1920s and 1930s by I.A. Richards ((Practical Criticism (1929)), William Empson ((Seven Types of Ambiguity (1930)), and T.S. Eliot « The Function of Criticism » (1933)),<sup>1</sup> all of which lay great emphasis on the text as

<sup>1</sup>- Johanna M. Smith, *Frankenstein: Complete, Authoritative Text with Biographical, Historical, and Cultural Contexts*, Critical

autonomous and self-referential entity. This is meant to free the literary text of any dogma or 'doxa,' to use a Barthesian term, and to approach it as a close structure whose essence resides in the relation and interconnection between its parts. For the New Critics, all preconceived ideas, or 'stock responses,' as I.A. Richards calls them, are just parasitic to the text and have to be put aside while approaching a piece of writing. What distinguishes a literary text from all other types of writing is its peculiar use of language. According to the New Critics, if all the other types of writing like History, Geography or Law, to name but few fields, aim behind using language at conveying information of some sort, literature has nothing to convey. The literary text expresses meaning only through language. The advent of New Criticism has marked a breakup with the so called traditional methods of approaching literature. While these approaches hold the view that a literary text is inevitably incomplete, always in need of extra-textual elements to fill in its inescapable gaps, New Criticism dismisses all external considerations and focuses, solely, on the text per se. By autonomy, the New Critics mean that the text can stand by itself. In their view, historical, sociological, psychological, biographical, or authorial intent make the critic stray from the real appreciation of the text and indulge in other fields, bearing only a minor, or no relation at all to the text under study. In a word, the internal elements of the text are sufficient enough to make it highly appreciable.

As far as self-referentiality is concerned, the New Critics assert that the text is not a mirror that reflects the outside world. Rather, the text refers only to itself. Moreover, the meaning of the text – if there is any meaning at all – derives from the internal relations within the text itself. Content and form can, in no way, be dissociated one from the other. The autonomy of a text as well as its self-referentiality represent one of the major theoretical assumptions of New Criticism. It should be stressed that

[a]t its inception, the New Criticism was, among other things, a reaction against the « impressionistic appreciations » of literature by genteel dabblers, against the Romantic worship of the author as prophet or genius, and against a school of literary history that buried individual works under the mass of trivial details about influences and fashions while altogether eschewing the serious task of critical judgment. The New criticism was, above all, an assertion

that a piece of fiction or poetry or drama could matter, could have significance in and of itself.<sup>2</sup>

## 2.2. Intentional Fallacy:

The intentional fallacy, along with the affective fallacy, is one of the famous notions brought up by the New Critics. The phrase was coined by William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley in their essay « the intentional fallacy » (1954). It is the reliance on the author's intention for understanding a piece of writing. And since no reader can really know for sure the real intentions of the authors, this method has proved to be unable to produce an objective reading of the text. For the New Critics, the intention of the author is irrelevant while approaching a text. What matters most is what the text itself is. Such a dismissal of authorial intention has the positive value of avoiding sweeping overgeneralisations that reduce the creativity and the complexity of the work to stereotypes dictated by the intentions – often misunderstood and misconceived – of the author. In this sense, the New Critics never tire of reiterating that « a poem should not mean but be »<sup>3</sup> and that « critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle ».<sup>4</sup>

## 2.3. Affective Fallacy:

A phrase formulated by the two aforementioned leading critics in the same reference related to the intentional fallacy. The two critics assume that it is a fallacy to make a work dependent for its meaning on the effect that it will have on the receiver. The New Critics justify their denunciation of this fallacy by advancing that a reader's response to a particular work would, inevitably, be biased and ultimately uncritical. Since the backgrounds of the receivers of the same text are variegated, any particular reader is likely to imprint the work by his personal experience, and pour on the text – metaphorically speaking – far-fetched aspects, bearing no real or logical relation to the text. This would, in a sense, distort the originality of the text, and make the piece of art vanish to leave the place for relativistic and impressionistic intrusions. This is laconically expressed by one of the founding figures of this approach in the following excerpt:

The Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what *is* and what it *does*), a special case of epistemological

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*History, and Essays from Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (Bedford/St. Martin's: Pennsylvania State University, 2000), p. 458.

<sup>2</sup> - <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1993/08/004-the-old-new-criticism-and-its-critics>.

<sup>3</sup> - Archibald MacLeish: 'Ars Poetica,' in : Geoffrey Moore (ed.): *American Literature* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), 1069.

<sup>4</sup> - Joseph Margolis, *Philosophy Looks at the Arts: Contemporary Readings in Aesthetics* (Philadelphia : Temple University Press, 1987), p 379.

skepticism, though usually advanced as if it had far stronger claims than the over-all forms of skepticism. It begins by trying to derive the standards of criticism from psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism. The outcome of either Fallacy, the Intentional or the Affective, is that the poem itself, as an object of critical judgment, tends to disappear.<sup>5</sup>

It becomes clear, then, that writing texts with the aim of achieving an intended effect on the reader will surely constrain the writer's margin of creativity, because his intention will be targeted at the reader's response to the detriment of the deep essence of the literary work.

#### 2.4. The Heresy of Paraphrase:

If the New Critics express a vehement attack on the intentional and the affective fallacy, it is because they strongly believe on the autonomy of the text and strive to avoid the heresy of paraphrase. The text should be treated as a self-enclosed system, a cobweb of relations, and meaning or appreciation should be extracted from the text itself. It is from this conviction that stems their hatred of paraphrase, qualifying it as heretical

In the last chapter of his *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947), Cleanth Brooks dwells at some length on the non-paraphrasability of literature, essentially poetry. This notion constitutes one of the essential tenets of the New Criticism. For this approach, paraphrase is but a reductionist reading, a distortion of art. A work of art should be considered in its original form, otherwise it is doomed to distortion. This implies that the act of writing is conscious from the part of the writer, who puts the proper word in the proper place; and once the original work is paraphrased, it will, inescapably, be blemished.

### III. THE REQUIREMENTS OF A « GREAT LITERARY TEXT »:

While the New Critics reject the « traditional » approaches to literature, arguing that they distort the originality of the text, they propose some new criteria which they consider more adequate to approaching a work of art. The New Critics distinguish between an 'ordinary' or popular work of art and a 'great' work of art. A great literary text, to use one of Walter Pater's famous

saying, « constantly aspires to the condition of music ». The means and the end of a work of art should be one, and the author should be as detached from his work as possible. Essentially, he should make use of such devices that guarantee his detachment. Hence the New Critics' insistence on the following devices.

#### 3.1. The Use of the Persona:

Etymologically, the persona (its plural personae or personas) is the equivalent of mask in Latin. The term was coined by the poet Ezra Pound in 1909 in an essay entitled « Personae » meaning « an assumed identity or fictional « I » assumed by a writer in a literary work. Thus, the speaker in a literary poem, or the narrator in a fictional narrative ». <sup>6</sup> The term persona, according to many etymologists, is composed of 'per' and 'sonare' (=to sound through), meaning the effacement of the author by creating an external representation of himself which well suits the context. This device reinforces the critics' rejection of authorial intention, referred to above as the intentional fallacy. While reading a work of art, the reader is no longer influenced by whatever elements he knows about the writer because the persona is seen as separate from the real-world author. Unlike the authorially-centered approach which relies heavily and exclusively on the biography of the author to approach a literary text, the use of the persona relegates the role of the author, and paves the way for the reader's competence to grasp the meaning of the piece of art without being guided by biographical elements related to the author and his life.

#### 3.2. The Importance of Ambiguity:

For the New Critics, a « great » work of art is that work which can create ambiguity. However, this ambiguity is not the outcome of a confusion in the mind of the writer but is, rather, the outcome of a skillful mastery of language.

This intended ambiguity is highly functional, for it contributes to the richness and effectiveness of the work of art. « And in truth ambiguity may often add strength. An idea suggested is more weighty: simplicity of statement excites contempt ». <sup>7</sup> The absence of ambiguity, the New Critics claim, kills the text. It makes the reader sink in passivity, making no effort to disentangle the intricacies of the text, essentially multilayered. The dismissal of straightforwardness in the text is one of the major steps towards the creation of

<sup>5</sup> - William Kurtz Wimsatt, Jr. *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1954), p 21.

<sup>6</sup> - Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 254.

<sup>7</sup> T.R. Johnson, *Refiguring Prose Style: Possibilities For Writing Pedagogy* (Utah State University Press, 2005), p. 45.

a great work of art. A straightforward, monosemic text lulls the reader down to sleep, for it guides him to the message intended by the author, depriving him of the pleasure to go through the hidden polysemic nature of the text. The intended ambiguity is achieved through devices that distinguish the literary text from the pragmatic language, or the language of the market, as James Joyce defines it, used by the layman. Thus, a literary text, to be qualified as such, should be fraught with linguistic devices and tropes that create this useful ambiguity which is « not a mistake in denotation to be avoided, but a resource of connotation to be exploited ».<sup>8</sup> The text can acquire its aesthetic value only through irony, contradictions, or tensions which highlight its literary value. One of the clues to the well understanding and appreciation of a literary text, from the New Critics' view, is the detection of the writer's tone. It is the « fissure », in the Jamesian sense, which allows the reader to delve into the heart of the text. The tone, we read in the Glossary of Poetic Terms from Bob's Byway, is « the poet person's attitude in style or expression towards the subject, e.g. loving, ironic, bitter, pitying, fanciful, solemn, ... etc. Tone can also refer to the overall mode of the poem itself, in the sense of a pervading atmosphere intended to influence the reader's emotional response and foster expectations of the conclusion ». The New Critics' insistence on tone in a piece of writing reflects their eagerness for allusiveness and laconicism in style. Since the author is hidden behind the persona, and since ambiguity prevails within the text, the only clue to the text remains the tone. However, linguistic competence is indispensable to detect the nature of the tone, else the meaning will not be appropriately grasped. Not to perceive the ironic tone of a statement, for instance, would reverse its meaning completely. The use of tone is intended to make the reader watchful, even doubtful, about every word in the text, striving to read what is beyond and beneath the words, for every linguistic item in the text is far from being static.

#### IV. THE THEORETICAL LIMITATIONS OF NEW CRITICISM

##### 4.1. The Exclusion of External Evidence:

<sup>8</sup> - Greig E. Henderson and Christopher Brown, *Glossary of Literary Theory*.  
<http://www.library.utoronto.ca./utel/glossary/headerindex.html>

In spite of its prevalence in America as well as in England for many decades, this approach has suffered scathing criticism. Such criticism is levelled, particularly, against its exclusion of external evidence, its text/context divide, and its paradox of objectivity/subjectivity. For example, many critics, especially Marxist critics, are critical of New Criticism's rejection of external evidence. Since a work of art does not grow in a vacuum or a void, and since it is the product of an individual living in perpetual interaction within a particular society, the work will, inevitably, be colored by the spatio-temporal aura which triggered it off. This category of critics asserts that many pieces of art could never have been grasped, had we not had recourse to historical, biographical, or psychological elements. The text, no matter how comprehensive it may be, is always in need of external elements to be grasped in its entirety. One of the oppositional critiques of the exclusion of external evidence while dealing with a piece of art advances that « in its insistence on excluding external evidence, New Criticism disqualifies many possibly fruitful perspectives for understanding texts, such as historicism, psychoanalysis, and Marxism ».<sup>9</sup>

##### 4.2. The Text/Context Divide:

Another issue for which New criticism has been criticized is the split between text and context. It is almost impossible to exclude context from any behavior whatsoever. The context determines, in large part, the nature of the work. How can one understand and ultimately appreciate novels of the nineteenth century if one does not have some basic knowledge about the society in which these novels burgeoned? The context, or the 'Spirit of the Age,' to use a phrase dear to John Stuart Mill, in which the work was produced has often proved to be of much importance in shedding light on the work in question. One can go even further as to say that a work or a word becomes meaningless once it is, socially, decontextualized. It is the context which gives the work its right value; an assessment of a literary work without taking into consideration the context in which it was produced would be like walking along a road without signposts. The Historical-Biographical approach is one of the approaches which stress the importance of context. It owes its development to the French critic H.A. Taine whose phrase *race, milieu, et moment* has become associated with this approach « which sees a literary work, chiefly, if not exclusively, as a reflection of the author's time and life or

<sup>9</sup> -  
<http://www.lawrence.edu/dep/english/courses/60a/newcrit.html>



the life of the characters in the work ».<sup>10</sup> Put otherwise, if the literary work is uprooted of its context, its meaning starts to vanish.

#### 4.3. The Paradox of Objectivity/Subjectivity:

The New Critics preach the close reading of the text. For them, this is the only method which can guarantee an objective reading and an unbiased reading of a text. Its proponents claim that they have sacrificed all external elements for the sake of objectivity. In their view, any reference to an element outside the text, slight as it may seem, will inescapably harm the text. But the idea of considering a literary text without referring to extra-textual elements, as the New Critics claim, to achieve an objective interpretation of the text is somewhat paradoxical. This very claim opens the door wide for subjectivity. The reader is no longer constrained by elements, biographical or others, that bear a relation to the text and which will serve as a beacon for him. He will, worst of all, give free rein to his subjectivity to project his personality on the text. This last idea was exploited by other critics who accuse New criticism of being chaotic since it dismisses all references, hence allowing any reader to impose his unjustified meaning on the text. As for the Marxists, the arch enemies of New Criticism, they accuse the New Critics of emptying literature of its noble role of didacticism.

## V. CONCLUSION

In spite of the critiques levelled at New Criticism, it has, nonetheless, the virtue of liberating the activity of reading from intrusive elements that take the reader away from the text under study. It has, also, contributed to the reconsideration of literary language by focusing on its aesthetic rather than on its referential value. Hence, literature is no longer seen as « the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings », as Shelley said, but as « the dissociation of sensibility », as T.S.Eliot affirmed. By advocating the close reading of the text, New Criticism aims at 'purifying' and 'cleansing' literature from its overlapping with other fields, which tend to exploit literature to convey messages related either to politics or religion. From this perspective, many critics positively qualify New Criticism as neutral criticism, judging by the fact that it allows democratic reading, and guides the reader to no external references. What counts is the text as a closed structure. The author does

not aim at propagating any message to influence the reader's act of reading. And

[w]hatever shortcomings may have emerged in the New criticism program, whatever defects or excesses of method or substance may have stood in need of correction, one would expect the beneficiaries of the achievements of the New Criticism to regard it with at least an affectionate tolerance.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> - Deanne Bogdan, Stanley B. Straw. *Beyond Communication: Reading Comprehension and Criticism* (Michigan: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1990), p. 52.

<sup>11</sup> -R.V. Young, *At War with the Word: Literary Theory and Liberal Education* (Michigan: SI Books, 1999), p. 2.