

# The New Criticism



The New Criticism:  
Formalist Literary Theory in America

Edited by

Alfred J. Drake, Rick Armstrong  
and Shep Steiner

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P U B L I S H I N G

The New Criticism: Formalist Literary Theory in America,  
Edited by Alfred J. Drake, Rick Armstrong and Shep Steiner

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Permissions.....	vii
Editor's Introduction	
<i>Alfred J. Drake, Rick Armstrong and Shep Steiner</i> .....	ix
<b>SECTION I. PHILOSOPHY AND PEDAGOGY</b>	
Some Paradoxes of New Criticism	
<i>Minda Rae Amiran</i> .....	3
Elucidating the Pleasures of the Text: The New Criticism's Pedagogical Value	
<i>Rick Armstrong</i> .....	27
In Defense of Close Reading: Elizabeth Bishop's Fish	
<i>Zachariah Pickard</i> .....	53
<b>SECTION II. HISTORY AND CROSS-COMPARISON</b>	
<i>Ad Textum, Ad Hominem: F. R. Leavis and the "New Criticism"</i>	
<i>Chris Joyce</i> .....	71
The New Criticism and Southernness: A Case for Cultural Studies	
<i>Imola Bülgözdi</i> .....	89
French New Criticism and Anglo-American New Criticisms	
<i>Florian Pennanech</i> .....	109
A New Reading of Clement Greenberg's Modernism C. 1950-1960	
<i>Shepherd F. Steiner</i> .....	135
Contributors.....	167
Index .....	169



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## INTRODUCTION

ALFRED J. DRAKE, RICK ARMSTRONG  
AND SHEP STEINER

The book finds its origin in a project begun in 2007 by Alfred J. Drake. The basic idea was to gather a collection of essays concerning the legacy of the New Criticism. The volume, under his sole editorship, was to provide what he described then as a “renewed concentration not only on the New Critics themselves, but also on the ways they and their work have been contextualized, criticized, and valorized by theorists and educators during and after their period of greatest influence, both in the United States and abroad.” In Drake’s words, “Many of us, were either raised on the New Critics or raised *against* them, and I wanted to get away from either simply defending their methodology and institutional hold or condemning those things.”<sup>1</sup> What was demanded were a set of texts that unpacked the New Criticism as a “monolithic” construct, revealed it as a diverse and long-continued phenomenon and did so through a reasonably objective, if spirited, set of analyses that captured both its difficulties and its merits, its limitations and its reach.

A number of larger questions open up here that productively serve as an introduction to the final book, its possible uses and a general analytic that might be gleaned from the eight essays of which it is comprised. First, it should be said that we (the two editors who teamed up with Drake to see the project through to its completion, Rick Armstrong and Shep Steiner,) were immediately attracted to the basic idea and scope of the book and contributed essays on the importance of the New Criticism to pedagogy in the setting of the multi-cultural classroom and its significance to the theory of mid-century modernist painting, respectively. That two scholars working in the fields of English Literature and Art History with focuses so divergent as to include practice and theory alike should be equally invested in the legacy of the New Criticism should come as little surprise. Drake’s own experience with the New Critics and their respondents opens on to a significant generational complex with multiple and overlapping narratives of influence, antagonisms, lines drawn in the sand, distanced

analysis as well as reaction and productive engagement that had its part to play on all the editors, as much as the other contributors.

To give three concrete examples, as a graduate student at The University of California, Irvine (UCI), Drake would have been exposed to the most theoretically advanced re-evaluations of the New Criticism. In the 1990s, UCI was one of a number of exceptional bubbles of critical activity, and in particular a hotbed for deconstructive theory, with such notables on the faculty as Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, J. Hillis Miller, and Andrzej Warminski. Within Deconstruction, the formal preoccupations of the New Critics provided a productive point of leverage into unexplored regions and possibilities for thought. The upshot? A uniquely constructive dialogue with the New Criticism built upon the identification of limits and pushing the latter's notions of close reading to new heights of sophistication, new depths of ontological scope and towards new vistas of textual analysis. Different again are Armstrong's experiences at SUNY Stony Brook an institution in which most agreed that the critics to be avoided, the ones that were politically reactionary and professionally irrelevant were the New Critics. It was just a given that their brand of literary analysis was elitist, unnecessarily turgid, and hopelessly obsolete. Beyond this, in the thick of the theory wars of the 1990s, Armstrong's colleagues were all especially passionate foot soldiers in the fight for their own particular brand of literary analysis; the majority aligned themselves with the younger professorial practitioners of Marxism, Feminism, New History, and Psychoanalysis, then among the most dominant theories. Multiculturalism was on the horizon, but had not established roots, while Deconstruction was not in the mix, respected, but considered passé by most. Much the same blend of critical theory, with similar opprobrium for formalism and enthusiasms running especially to the Frankfurt School dominated Steiner's graduate years in Art History at the University of British Columbia. Indeed, what is most striking now looking back on the moment are the only minor differences in the playing field that was the humanities, for the theory wars that took hold of Departments of English and Art History, or reproduced themselves in disciplines further afield, were in large part played out as opposition to the intrinsic forms of criticism represented by the New Critics and instead as embrace of extrinsic models of analysis, all topped with the blandest sprinkling (i.e. application as opposed to use) of theory for good measure. Hermeneutics was the rule, and poetics (in the form of semiotics) either the truth of the work, or a minor, if not entirely repressed, player. Yet the deep embeddedness of New Critical methods in so much of what passed as

this generational corrective remained an obscurity, a contradiction waiting to be thought.

In the twenty odd years since, much of the verve, the anger and the greatness of the stakes have softened; the demographics of the classroom have changed; some perspective on the battle has crept in and more worrying developments that follow from believing this whole episode in the history of criticism solved have come to dominate the scene. In this kind of context the *mea culpa* cannot but flourish. In Armstrong's case, faced with non-traditional college students, some of whom had never read a book in their lives, never mind a work of literature, a Donne or Keats poem, the realization was that the most effective approach was to focus on the language of the work, a pathway leading inexorably enough to New Critical pedagogy. Steiner's recognition came hand in hand with encounters with modernist painting in the gallery context and theoretical study of modernist criticism. One simply cannot enter into a productive line of critical thinking in either of these areas without keying ones criticism to the language in question, a staple of close reading in the New Critical tradition. So our offering now, at what we think to be a particularly auspicious moment: one that allows for, rather than prohibits the opportunity to reflect upon a group of critics and a set of discursive practices who in our experience (no doubt somewhat exemplary for an entire generation of scholars in the humanities) were treated for the most part only in crudely historical and dismissive terms.

We have retained Drake's original selection of essays from 2007. The collection features a wide variety of approaches and analyses, and examines a number of crucial assumptions of the New Criticism. Among these the formalism of the New Critics is especially opened up. It is shown to be inseparable from a far more complex notion of language that never simply rests on poetics, but that simultaneously registers both poetic and hermeneutic presuppositions. How this relates to the rhetoric of the symbol, the appeal to science, the prevalence of organic metaphors, the recurrent critical tropes of paradox and the aesthetic as a sacrificial act, and further to a gentle form of ideology critique that strikes up a dialogue between the New Critics and the Frankfurt School are all issues variously confronted. Indeed, to pick up on the last points especially, the bankruptcy of so many political readings today stand to greatly benefit from both the methods of close reading developed by the New Critics and the notion of formal autonomy they held onto—a "dead-end" that turned out to be far more porous than most opponents of the New Critics could have imagined. Finally, we think the collection serves as a sort of litmus test for gauging the variable fortunes of the New Criticism in the contemporary moment.

To an important extent it seems that the interest it had generated in the 1980s and 1990s under the theoretical eye of deconstruction has shifted; that the North American situation is quantitatively different than the situation in Great Britain or indeed France; that theoretical speculation no longer offers a consistent underpinning or defense of engagement with its tenants; that siding with the New Critics can stand as a conservative alternative to theory; that the pragmatics of classroom pedagogy may be its most precious legacy; that aesthetic value is often a bottom line, which comes along with all sorts of excuses for the cannon, against theory, etc.

All of this is evidenced in Drake's original selection that, given the time lag between the original conception of the book and completion, begs a certain meta-textual analysis. These minor differences aside, the essays show that the New Critics' approach is far from exhausted twenty years after they were supposedly obsolete and that it remains a highly contested site with a purchase on the literary past, present, as well as the future. Hopefully, in reading the volume, others will see the potential import of responding to the New Critics as well. But before this, we hope the reader will take the time to consider the contributions that follow.

\*

In her essay "Some Paradoxes of New Criticism" Minda Rae Amiran isolates a shared set of critical tropes that span the many differences constitutive of the New Criticism, including the multiplicity principle, the indivisibility of form and content and the uniqueness of poetic language. As a critic, Amiran is particularly adept at moving between the variable vocabularies of the New Critics, and bringing some semblance of order to this disparate constellation of discourses. However, perhaps most interesting is the pressure she places on the former through the relationship between science and disinterested aesthetics, a tension that is particularly productive for thinking what she characterizes, following T. S. Eliot and Alan Tate, as "complete experience"—a point on which she will ultimately press the New Criticism's notion of objectivity (6). Thus Amiran's notion of the "multiplicity principle," a version of the symbol bound up in "complication, opposition and richness" rather than mimetic likeness, and something difficult to distinguish from the notion of multiplicity, which emerges in contemporary political theory, that is allegorical in its essential constitution (6-8). It seems indeed, that part of Amiran's unstated project is to inject the vocabulary of current political theory into the arena of New Critical debates as a way of both revitalizing interest in the New Critics and providing a subtle corrective to much

contemporary political theorization that fails to acknowledge the status of poetics and instead hypostatizes the importance of a transparent hermeneutics. As is well enough known in deconstructive circles, engaging with the tenets of formalism is part and parcel of thinking the political today, and as Amiran suggests integral to breaking the New Critical rule of scientism. Finally, we should add that Amiran salvages aesthetic judgment: literary merit or value for her, being a horizon of response that blurs with comparativism. The point is an important one, as the reader will encounter a number of very particular solutions to the question of the aesthetic in the book. In fact, if nothing else the book is an analytic of responses to the aesthetic: from the pragmatic and pedagogical, to the historical, theoretical and ideological.

It is from the frontlines of a Brooklyn community college classroom that Rick Armstrong writes “Elucidating the Pleasures of the Text: The New Criticism’s Pedagogical Value.” Arguing the New Criticism as a pedagogical method is especially suited to the changing demographics of the multicultural classroom, Armstrong makes a compelling case for the New Criticism’s political exigency. Calling up the GI Bill and the democratization of the university in the postwar period as a defining context for the New Criticism, Armstrong leans on New Critical pedagogy as a paradigm for confronting the new strains and pressures placed on literacy by global immigration. Certainly there will be those who argue that teaching literature and literary interpretation to students of English as a second language in such settings speaks to the legacy of the New Criticism from a limited perspective, but they would be wise to consider that the community college is a test site for the university of the future. Picking up on a pragmatic edge to the work of Brooks and Warren especially—in particular, their emphasis on getting students to think for themselves—Armstrong aligns his work with a greatly undervalued moment within New Critical method: a political moment that inheres within the ability to make aesthetic judgments. Indeed, following Armstrong we might call the New Criticism’s pedagogical priorities and methods consciousness raising by other means. Working against identity and its various apparatus of projection and with recourse to the Frankfurt School’s notion of arts autonomy and the pleasure of the text at the crux of the operation, learning how to read a text for Armstrong serves as corollary for positive forms of engagement in democratic process. Without the advantages of prior knowledge or an inherited body of culture to lean upon, and with due emphasis placed on “the spontaneous appreciation of the text,” it seems Armstrong’s students of literature—and by association the students of literature of tomorrow—stand to greatly benefit from the

practices of close reading (40). Though he concedes that New Critical methods pose no challenge to dominant power structures, Armstrong puts his finger on the pulse of one of the many natural processes of deconstruction that are alive and well and functioning in the democratic crucible.

Zachariah Pickard's "In Defense of Close Reading: Elizabeth Bishop's Fish" highlights one representative response to the problem of the aesthetic that emerged out of the theory wars of the 1990s: close reading as a reaction to theory with aesthetic judgment as its antidote. It is within this generational complex that we can productively position Pickard's work, for his defense of close reading and the aesthetic is both strategic and specific. Of course, in retrospect we know that close reading was as important to deconstructive theory as it was to the rekindling of interest in the New Criticism's variable notions of formalism. Together, aesthetes and theorists of the aesthetic alike formed a rather patchy alliance against those who wielded theory in a generalizable and abstract sense. Enter Pickard who reserves for himself the notion of "a modest sort of close reading," without the generalizable pretensions of theory and with pragmatic (i.e. pleasurable) import alone (65). Championing the New Criticism's notion of close reading against the meta-textual work of theoreticians, Pickard performs an exemplary reading of the micro textual issues and effects in Elizabeth Bishop's *Fish*. Though poetic in its basic orientation—with special focus on "the particulars of poetic craft and structure"—Pickard's essay is effectively a hermeneutic account of pleasure (57). For Pickard, pleasure is elucidation; and hence his essay is not only an example of how to read one particular text, but exemplary of the kinds of fidelities to text that are necessary if one is to ready oneself for the pleasures any texts have on offer. To this end, Pickard gains special leverage into Bishop's poem from T.S. Eliot's notions of "intensive" and "expansive" imagery (59-60). With a special purchase on the visual object and the literary object, respectively Eliot's terms propel an understanding of the power of the poem rather than power as such, since for Pickard the imagery of a poem is absolutely singular and not to be confused with figural language as such.

Chris Joyce's "*Ad Textum, Ad Hominem*" provides a brief but incisive reading of the criticism of F. R. Leavis. With a notion of use providing the crucial leverage into "how words mean" and a representative notion of the symbol plumbing ontological questions as well as reaching outward to a moral horizon, Joyce lays out the main tenets of Leavis' criticism and marks its exemplary nature ("with numerous caveats and qualifications" as the author puts it) *vis-a-vis* the New Criticism (71). The kernel of Joyce's

reading comes down to isolating three moments in Leavis's critical practice: firstly, his attention to feeling—paraphrasing the critic, that “Words in poetry invite us not to ‘think about’ ... but to ... realize a complex experience.... They demand ... a completer responsiveness [than an abstracting process can supply]” (78); secondly, his defense of value judgment, which places the reader in the footsteps of the writer and effectively enables the former to enact what the latter feels as “‘moral’ valuations” (80); and thirdly, making that substitutive relationship between writer and reader mark a communicative common ground. Leavis's notion of meeting in “meaning” or in “a language” is the crux for Joyce (80), for more than anything else it singles out the specifically pragmatic character of language that Leavis felt to be less a general thing than “a living actuality that is organically one with the ‘human world’” (81). This rich text with so many unexplored pathways—not least Leavis's interest in Mill on Bentham and Coleridge, his proximity to Wittgenstein on language, or his relation to JL Austin and speech act theory—animates the heart of the critic's formalism, and from out of that encounter provides one crucial antidote to the theoretical exposition of problems in criticism that have of necessity to be performed. As Joyce puts it, by showcasing Leavis' incarnational model of language: language... is “the creative activity on the part of the mind, which could not so act if it were not incarnate in a living individual body (83).”

In “The New Criticism and Southernness: A Case for Cultural Studies” Imola Bülgözdí positions the work of the New Critics within the wider crucible of the Southern Renaissance, and in particular within the context of contemporaneous sociological research into Southernness. Her work is that of a hermeneut looking for possible segues into the ground of New Critical poetics. As her departure, Bülgözdí takes John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren's contribution to the 1930 Southern manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* (90). Following Brooks and Warren's own account of the tension between the document and the literary object she argues that a broad notion of transcendence from history is a baseline for reappraising the project of the New Criticism. And with the help of the Manchester School of cultural criticism, she suggests that anti-modernism and the concept of rurality with special emphasis on the Southern character is central to the self-construction of the New Critics.

In “French New Criticism and Anglo-American New Criticism,” Florian Pennanech plumbs the similarities and differences between the French and Anglo-American varieties of the New Criticism. The historical irony he asks us to consider is that Anglo-American New Criticism has more in common with developments in French poetics in the 1970s than

with its French namesake, *la nouvelle critique*, which gained a foothold in critical discourse in the 1950s and 1960s. More curiously still, if in Pennanech's account the relationship between French New Criticism and its Anglo-American cousin is characterized by a lack of dialogue and marked by moments of mistranslation, misunderstanding, and opportunism, the author also tells us that when dialogue finally does happen engagement is borne along by theoretical curiosity, and because a largely retrospective affair, a somewhat cadaverous attempt at classification within the larger parameters of the theory of theory. With the inaugural moment of the French New Criticism located as part of a polemical attempt to discredit the established interpretation of Racine, Pennanech sets the stage for his account, establishing chronological and theoretical limits for using the term, and tracing the shifting allegiances and problems of attribution that plague the French situation. Most rewarding perhaps are Pennanech's characterizations of the French New Criticism as essentially an "intertextual endeavor, with literary criticism being renewed through the human sciences," and its inseparability from a tangle of interpretative methods including thematic criticism, Marxism, structuralism, and psychoanalysis (127). Thus, his singling out for comment Roland Barthes notion of "asymbolie": the linguistic pathology or failure to perceive the symbolic nature of the literary work (120). For those with any investment at all in the criticism of Barthes whose trajectory cuts across the period and practices studied, Pennanech's essay is essential reading. With insight on the variants of formalism and the polyvalent nature of the symbol—whether in and as Anglo-American New Criticism's commitment to the object, or as Georges Poulet's expanded notion of this organic unity to be found in the corpus—Pennanech's essay will be indispensable reading for those interested in French theory, and in particular the proto-theoretical scene in France before the advent of theory proper.

In "A New (and by Extension Leisurely) Reading of Clement Greenberg's Modernism, c. 1950-1960," Shepherd Steiner studies a crucial period that constitutes the height of the art critic Clement Greenberg's engagement with the New Criticism. The essay offers a snapshot view of a larger transition that marks Greenberg's shift from Marxist criticism in the late 1930s to a kind of formalism by 1960. Steiner argues that at the crux of Greenberg's trajectory is an intense dialogue with a complex set of arguments with T.S. Eliot. If the Anglo-American tradition of the symbol and in particular Eliot's notion of the aesthetic as both act and fact are particularly central to understanding the poet's influence on the critic as well as his notion of expression, then Steiner also argues that Greenberg



takes his distance from Eliot as representative of the New Critics on questions impacted by tradition, modernism, democracy and liberalism. At issue are the changes representative of American capitalism over and above the British model, the shift in the American economy toward work and away from leisure, and finally the emergence of middle-brow culture—all positive moments of transformation that Eliot was reluctant to champion. Along the way the argument traces a cluster of words that crop up in the critic's vocabulary and that circle around the notion of the pastoral, materialism and expression. With these positions staked out, the essay looks at a number of key painters championed by Greenberg whose work is similarly impacted by the New Criticism.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred J. Drake, "Book Description," 2007; email to editors, April 6, 2013.



**SECTION I:**  
**PHILOSOPHY AND PEDAGOGY**



# SOME PARADOXES OF NEW CRITICISM

MINDA RAE AMIRAN

## Preliminaries

“The Language of Paradox,” an essay published by Cleanth Brooks in 1942, proposed, “that the language of poetry is the language of paradox.”<sup>1</sup> My title is borrowed from Brooks’: I hope to show that despite its continued usefulness in drawing attention to the exact wording of a literary work, New Criticism was built on fundamental self-contradictions. As a practice, it ruled the critical world for a time, in English-speaking countries, but as a theory it lies in pieces.

And yet, it has never really died. In the last few years alone, Terry Eagleton and Edward Hirsch have both published books called *How to Read a Poem*, Ruth Nevo has put *The Challenge of Poetry* on the internet ([www.intopoetry.com](http://www.intopoetry.com)), and Shira Wolosky has published *The Art of Poetry: How to Read a Poem*—all relying heavily on New Critical terms and methods. In 2008 a collection of seminal essays by New Critics, *Praising it New*, was edited by Garrick Davis with laudatory introductions. There have also been essays such as Caroline Levine’s “Strategic Formalism: Toward a New Method in Cultural Studies,” wishing to extend New Critical methods beyond the study of literature.<sup>2</sup> So it seems useful to examine some of New Criticism’s paradoxes, because since we are still talking about its ideas and using them, we are still living with the confusions its paradoxes helped to cause.

But before beginning, it is important to name the critics to be included in this discussion. Views of New Criticism often depend on the critics chosen as representative. Paul de Man raised problems with New Criticism, as embodied in I. A. Richards and William Empson, which would have dissolved if he had been considering John Crowe Ransom or Cleanth Brooks. Those who rail at the political conservatism of New Criticism on the basis of the southern Fugitive group’s agrarianism might have thought differently if they had included early Kenneth Burke, a Marxist, or R. P. Blackmur, a New Englander from a working-class background. My discussion includes all the critics I’ve just named, together with the early work of T. S. Eliot, a founding member, and the criticism of the Fugitives’

Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren, and W. K. Wimsatt. Despite some disagreements among them—disagreements often based on misconceptions—they all agree on the principles I will examine in the course of this essay.<sup>3</sup>

## **A Cluster of Paradoxes**

### **The Argument Shaped by its Opponent**

It has often been noted that the early New Critics saw the prestigious claims of science as the enemy of literary study. This was a later version of an old story. From Aristotle through the eighteenth century, literary theory in the Western world positioned literature between history and philosophy: literature was more moral or philosophical than history, because it revealed general nature or the results of ethical choices purified of accidental occurrences, and literature was more persuasive than philosophy because it embodied ethical principles in stories or rhetoric that engaged the emotional assent of its audience. The study of literature could thus claim to be queen of the humanities, though moralists and historians periodically needed to be reminded that it was. But as science emerged from philosophy and increasingly usurped its place as a source of truth, it increasingly marginalized all the humanistic pursuits in public esteem. Literary theorists struggled to defend the value of what was in danger of being generally thought at best a harmless pastime for dilettantes and young ladies, like wine-tasting or embroidery.

So throughout the nineteenth century, we find literary critics, especially in England, worrying about poetry's relation to science, concerned to maintain the importance of literary study on the ground of its superiority to the method of inquiry that was undermining even religion and traditional psychology. Some of these critics' defenses of literature used the traditional arguments about general knowledge and emotional engagement. Others upheld the disinterestedness of literature, its promotion of imaginative contemplation as opposed to narrow, utilitarian scientific activity. Still others praised the "synthetic" power of the artistic imagination as opposed to the "meddling" analytic intellect of science, which shows us things only "in disconnection dead and spiritless."<sup>4</sup>

However, by the turn of the twentieth century the study of literature had capitulated: in British and American universities alike, philologists or literary historians dominated English departments. The philologists were interested mainly in tracing the history of words found in medieval and Renaissance texts and the historians were interested mainly in tracing the

publication history of manuscripts, or particulars about their authors or the people or writings to which they referred. In short, they practiced literary science. It should be noted that university study of literature in modern languages was a relatively recent development in itself: the new curriculum was necessarily influenced by traditional philological approaches to the study of Greek and Latin. However, all study of literature now faced the same justificatory challenge: why would a decent young man not destined to live on aristocratic rents study literature at all, rather than law, medicine, science, or engineering? In the United States in particular, there were voices opposing the scholarly answer to that question, the answer that the study of literature was scientific too. Scientific or not, this was the study of something (history or philology) that quite evidently was not literature, these voices said. However, nothing coherent replaced philology and textual scholarship or history, *pace* the New Humanism, until New Criticism began to challenge both the power of science and the power of the university English establishment.

New Criticism opposed science in ways that grew directly from the arguments of its nineteenth-century predecessors. The study of literature was not like science. On the one hand, literature was detached from the world of action: "poetry finds its true usefulness in its perfect inutility, a focus of repose for the will-driven intellect that constantly shakes the equilibrium of persons and societies with its unremitting imposition of partial formulas."<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, literature was the only source of truth about that world: the language of science was too abstract, too oblivious to the richness, complication, and conflicts of real experience expressed by poetic language: "What we cannot know constitutionally as scientists is the world which is made of whole and infeasible objects, and this is the world which poetry recovers for us." Or again, "Language logically and scientifically used cannot [even] describe a landscape or a face." Yet again, "It is the scientist whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox; apparently the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox," for the poet's imagination "welds together the discordant and the contradictory."<sup>6</sup> In short, only the study of poetry delivers a disinterested, fully true understanding of life. Science can provide information on which a person may act, but literature provides her with a richly textured world, the basis for poise of mind toward both action and information.

## The Multiplicity Principle

What I find so interesting is not this continuation of the nineteenth-century offensive against science that was articulated most clearly by Matthew Arnold, but rather the ways in which New Criticism simultaneously internalized a scientific agenda, developing a critical system whose claims aped those of science, as it understood them, while using those very claims to dislodge the aging English department scientists barring its way.<sup>7</sup>

As a first step in internalization, the New Critics needed to adopt a traditional mimetic view of literature. That is, to argue that literature sees life whole while science sees only slivers of it, they needed to maintain that literature does look at life, just as science does, only more comprehensively. In the words of T. S. Eliot, "Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect." Or, famously, while the ordinary person "falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes."<sup>8</sup> Allen Tate puts the matter succinctly: "the high forms of literature offer us the only complete, and thus the most responsible, versions of our experience." Kenneth Burke finds life full of conflicting attitudes: "[Poetry] would try to derive its vision from the maximum *heaping up of all these emotional factors*, playing them off against one another, inviting them to reinforce and contradict one another, and seeking to make this participation itself a major ingredient of the vision."<sup>9</sup>

The more that can be crammed into the poem, the truer it is to life. Thus John Crowe Ransom contrasts the bare "Platonic" poetry of ideas with richly inclusive "physical" poetry, and I. A. Richards contrasts the valuable poetry of inclusion, such as Donne's, to the lamentable poetry of exclusion, such as Woodbine Willie's. The good poem exhibits and induces a "balanced poise, stable through its power of inclusion, not through the force of its exclusions."<sup>10</sup> Modeling themselves on both Eliot and Richards, Wimsatt and Brooks contrast a "sentimental love poem" that "systematically excludes from its context such matters as doctors' bills, squalling babies, and the odors of the kitchen" to the "poetry of inclusion," which "systematically draws upon other and larger contexts. It has already made its peace with the recalcitrant and the contradictory."<sup>11</sup> One of the clearest statements of this idea is in Robert Penn Warren's "Pure and Impure Poetry." There he contrasts the inclusiveness of the garden scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, its Nurse in the background and Mercutio in the



shrubbery, to Shelley's too, too pure "Indian Serenade." Even in comparison to the little medieval lyric "Western Wind," Shelley's poem fails. The medieval speaker is "faithful to the full experience of love. That is, he does not abstract one aspect of the experience and call it the whole experience. He does not strain nature out of nature; he does not over-spiritualize nature."<sup>12</sup>

The claim that New Criticism is a mimetic theory would be disputed by some of the critics themselves, and potted histories using M. H. Abrams' system for categorizing critical theories usually see New Criticism as focused on the literary work "itself," rather than on its relation to the world.<sup>13</sup> However, the passages quoted above speak for themselves: they are not marginal observations but central points, and the logic of the defense against science demands that they be so. Moreover, they lead to a typically mimetic version of value in literature.

For this view of the way literature imitates or represents life authorizes an "objective" scale of values, a scientific system of literary judgment, as it were. Cleanth Brooks is perfectly explicit, referring to I. A. Richards' distinction between "poetry of exclusion" and "poetry of inclusion" as the basis for a "scale" of value for poetry:

Low in the scale I would find a rather simple poetry in which the associations of the various elements that go to make up the poem are similar in tone and therefore can be unified under one rather simple attitude... Higher in the scale, I would find poems in which the variety and clash among the elements to be comprehended under a total attitude are sharper... In tragedy, where the clash is at its sharpest ... I would probably find the highest point in the scale.<sup>14</sup>

R. P. Warren agrees, if more cautiously: "I have implied a scale of excellence based, in part at least, on degree of complication." And later: "other things being equal, the greatness of a poet depends upon the extent of the area of experience which he can master poetically."<sup>15</sup>

Not only is this an "objective" scale for literature, ostensibly based on counting up diverse, or better, opposing, "elements," it is also intrinsic. That is, it doesn't need to base itself on ethics or history or politics or any other discipline. Criticism becomes objective, empirical, and systematic, a scientific discipline in its own right, impervious to the demands of patriots, moralists, Marxists, or philologists, just as physics is. Moreover, the literary scientist need only look at the "work itself." As Brooks and Warren say, they will not substitute "study of biographical and historical materials" or moral messages for study of the poem.<sup>16</sup> As to the author's views, Wimsatt and Beardsley argued in their famous pair of essays that the author's intentions are unknowable, or if known, may not have had the

intended result—one looks at the literary work, what the atom is, not what Mr. Bohr's intentions were in describing it. Also, the effect of the work on its actual readers may be distracting and irrelevant, despite the importance of feeling in literature: As I. A. Richards showed in *Practical Criticism*, even Cambridge undergraduates misread poems through their own preconceptions and associations, and in general, people's personal experience affects how they respond emotionally, a matter about which literary science has nothing to say. (Here is where Richards diverges from his peers: he thinks the poem models itself, as it were, in the reader's incipient impulses, though he has no way of proving this patterning, as Ransom was to point out.<sup>17</sup> Since his students were so obtuse about the poems he gave them, he has to have recourse, in his theory, to a posited ideal reader or "standard experience," and in practice, to the text of the poem as he expounds it.) New Critics do refer to the audience, from time to time, but not in ways that compromise the objective value of the literary work.

It follows from Brooks' scale of values—I call it the multiplicity principle—that the New Critics' predilection for symbol and metaphor over allegory, for irony, paradox, and ambiguity over declarative statement, is also systematic and empirical. For these literary devices are all means of multiplying the number of elements in the work. In particular, as a "transaction between contexts," a metaphor "insures the sort of confrontation of unlike elements that is necessary to prevent discourse from collapsing into literary statement."<sup>18</sup> If you say your beloved is beautiful, you've made a simple, unsupported assertion. If you call her a red, red rose, you've added color, scent, the harmonious beauty of ranked petals, freshness, glossiness, maybe even dew to the idea of her beauty, while also implying its hidden, dangerous thorns. Commending the words of another critic, Empson quotes, "'words used as epithets are words used to *analyse* a direct statement' [as in science] whereas 'metaphor is the synthesis of several units of observation into one commanding image . . . by a sudden perception of an objective relation.'"<sup>19</sup> As Richards says, metaphor "is the supreme agent by which disparate and hitherto unconnected things are brought together in poetry," making one think of Eliot's Spinoza-and-typewriter example in his seminal essay on the metaphysical poets, published three years earlier.<sup>20</sup>

But here we get into trouble. All these metaphors, images, paradoxes, and ambiguities have to be held together in some way—otherwise disjointed notes, verbal doodles, or a dictionary would be literary works. Of course, some might claim they are, but that is a point to bracket here.

## The Formal Principle

From the start, the New Critics recognized this problem, the need for a shaping form, as Brooks' reference to a "total attitude" in my earlier quote clearly shows. For even though they saw life as composed of so many incompatible elements, the New Critics believed that a work of art needed unity: it couldn't be an incoherent jumble. So they turned to various metaphors to describe what is itself a metaphor, the concept of "form" transposed from physical to verbal objects. In my quote, Brooks is looking to I. A. Richards' idea that the poem provides a model for conduct by reconciling opposing impulses into an overriding "attitude," a term he transposes from mind into text, as in Keats' urn ("Fair Attitude!"). But at the same time he talks about opposing thrusts, as in the clashes of tragedy, where the whole may be more like flying buttresses. Or it may be like a ladder covered by an oriental rug, as in John Crowe Ransom's opposition of structure to texture, where "structure" is "a central logic or situation or paraphraseable core," and "texture" is "a context of lively local details to which other and independent interests attach ... in this respect ... unlike the discourse of science."<sup>21</sup> Other metaphors for literary form are "gesture" or "symbolic action," in the words of R. P. Blackmur and Kenneth Burke, or "verbal icon" in Wimsatt's terminology.

Most often, however, the New Critics follow T. S. Eliot (and, of course, Coleridge) in finding multiple elements 'fused' in the literary work, a fusion implied by the metaphors used by Blackmur, Burke, and Wimsatt above. It is worth remembering that Eliot's early description of this fusion compared the poet's work to that of a chemical catalyst making "numberless feelings, phrases, images ... unite to form a new compound." Eliot continues, "it is not the 'greatness,' the intensity, of ... the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts."<sup>22</sup> Eliot is at pains to explain that there is nothing personal in this process: the poet, as poet, like the scientist, is impersonal, and what he produces is an object of a special kind. The result of the fusion is the organically unified work, again just as in Coleridge, though the catalyst metaphor itself is not inherently organic. Commenting on Coleridge's use of this metaphor as corrected in the work of T. E. Hulme, Wimsatt and Brooks note that "the complexity with which poetry deals is not mechanical but organic. . . . Hulme is guilty [sic] of a good many references to the poet's sincerity . . . yet in the end.... He is giving us on the whole the classical and objective version of organicity."<sup>23</sup> It is this version that he passed on to Eliot, they find.

Viewing the poem as an organism gives it "objective" status, like that of the objects studied by scientists. Furthermore, the organic metaphor

supports the idea that form and content are one in the literary work, and this is a widely held New Critical doctrine. Burke writes, "in that fluctuating region between pure emotion and pure decoration, humanity and craftsmanship . . . lies the field of art . . . a conflict become fusion." Blackmur explains, "Gesture, in language, is the outward and dramatic play of inward and imaged meaning . . . what happens to a form when it becomes identical with its subject." "Symbolic action" and the "verbal icon" similarly unite form and content, though they also serve as metaphors for form. In Tate's words, "Form is meaning and nothing but meaning."<sup>24</sup>

The New Critical "heresy of paraphrase" follows from this idea. As Brooks explains the matter, no paraphrase of a poem can possibly convey its complex of ideas and feelings because these are inextricable from its images, metaphors, sounds, rhythms, and turns of phrase which generate its complexities, ironies, paradoxes, or "attitudes." The poem's unity "is not a unity of the sort to be achieved by the reduction and simplification appropriate to an algebraic formula . . . it represents not a residue but an achieved harmony."<sup>25</sup> Brooks sums up by endorsing the statement of another critic: "form and content, or content and medium, are inseparable. The artist does not first intuit his object and then find the appropriate medium. It is rather in and through his medium that he intuits the object." Brooks continues, "The relation between all the elements must surely be an organic one—there can be no question about that."<sup>26</sup>

This is an attractive idea, that form and content are one; in fact, it is hard to believe that anyone could think a paraphrase equivalent to the poem it tries to explain. This view of form and content further serves the New Critical desire to establish criticism as an independent and superior discipline. As Brooks explains, if "we split the poem between its 'form' and its 'content'—we bring the statement to be conveyed into an unreal competition with science or philosophy or theology . . . in a form calculated to produce the battles of the last twenty-five years over the 'use of poetry.'"<sup>27</sup> Yet to say that form and content are one, with the associated organic metaphor, leaves us almost speechless when it comes to discussing form in a useful way. Perhaps a New Critic would say that we shouldn't try—we should just talk about a poem without worrying about its form. But the New Critics themselves do worry about the notion of form, and they have bequeathed to us their confusions, as a few examples will show.

Brooks says, "though it is in terms of structure that we must describe poetry. . . . One means by it something far more internal than the metrical pattern, say, or than the sequence of images." He continues, "the structure meant is a structure of meanings, evaluations, and interpretations; and the

principle of unity which informs it seems to be one of balancing and harmonizing connotations, attitudes, and meanings.”<sup>28</sup> To define structure as a structure of meanings is not really to tell us what *structure* is. In practice, Brooks looks at various metaphors or related images and at rhythms that modify statements made in the poem, but these are things he specifically identifies as not-structure. To add to the confusion, Blackmur expounds his idea of language as gesture, “what happens to a form when it becomes identical with its subject,” as the condition to which all arts aspire. “Control is the key word with regard to gesture,” he tells us, explaining, “to make words play upon each other both in small units and large is one version of the whole technique of imaginative writing.” And yet, Blackmur concludes his essay by stating that in many poems, the refrain gives particular form “to gesture that might otherwise be formless.”<sup>29</sup> What?

For Empson, “the only way of forcing the reader to grasp your total meaning is to arrange that he can only feel satisfied if he is bearing all the elements in mind at the moment of conviction: the only way of not giving something heterogeneous is to give something which is at every point a compound.”<sup>30</sup> That is, form and content are one, but since Empson famously talks about the ambiguities of words and phrases (as in Blackmur’s notion of words playing upon each other), that seems to be what he means by “compound.” Ransom endorses this idea that the poem should be a compound: the rich “physical” poetry he values is not a mechanical mixture, like lemonade, but a compound like salt.<sup>31</sup> In fact, he distinguishes not one but two inferior types of poetry: assemblages and mixtures. So metaphors beget metaphors. Eliot’s idea that not only are elements fused in the literary work but that it is the intensity of the pressure causing the fusion that “counts” leaves us wondering how we can tell if a poem’s elements *are* fused, much less know the intensity of the pressure that fused them.

In short, the New Critical conception or conceptions of form are vague. One has the feeling one understands their drift, but would be hard pressed to define them with any precision or specificity, and in fact, different New Critics found themselves restating one another’s ideas on the form/content unity.<sup>32</sup> In a sense, it’s ironic that the New Critics were called formalists, since their ideas of form were so nebulous. As de Man pointed out long ago, if the New Critics hadn’t had a wrong understanding of intention, they could have seen that intention defines form, for “structural intentionality determines the relation between the components of the resulting object in all its parts, but the relationship of the particular state of mind of the [author] . . . to the structured object is altogether

contingent.”<sup>33</sup> The Chicago critics, too, had a useful concept of form, somewhat similar to de Man’s, though adjusted to literary genres, but the New Critics never understood it. Instead, they went on about the impossibility of separating form from content in organic unity, or about the reconciliation of contradictory elements.

There is still a further problem with the New Critical idea of form that affected later critical practice. It relates to literary genres, and is well represented by Brooks. Having discussed ten different works in *The Well Wrought Urn*, including *Macbeth*, *The Rape of the Lock*, Keats’ “Grecian Urn,” and Tennyson’s “Tears, Idle Tears,” he seeks to identify “the special kind of structure which seems to emerge as the common structure of poems so diverse on other counts as are *The Rape of the Lock* and ‘Tears, Idle Tears.’” (And in fact, all ten of the works.) This “essential structure of a poem ... is a pattern of resolved stresses,” a position entirely consistent with the rest of Brooks’ theory, and with that of many other New Critics already quoted, but nevertheless somewhat surprising, if not paradoxical.<sup>34</sup> The identity of form and content should imply that each poem is unique, but here it turns out that all have the same structure.<sup>35</sup>

This is not a trivial problem. Although, as some of the passages already quoted have shown, New Critics could claim that each poem has the form that realizes its specific content, and thus is unique, such a claim would be a disaster for a theory of form. Of course, every poem that is not a copy of another is unique in an unimportant sense, but no theory can develop on the basis of truly unique objects. Any would-be science, like natural science, must work or classify on the basis of commonalities: Darwin never would have arrived at the theory of evolution if each organism were completely unlike any other—unique. Aristotle would never have developed his theory of tragedy if only one had ever been written. To say that each poem develops a unique organic form would be to deny the possibility of a theory of form, so the New Critics did well to avoid that claim (though they sometimes flirted with it). However, the opposite contention, that works as different as *Macbeth* and “Tears, Idle Tears” have the same structure, is almost equally useless. It is true, for example, that all living things metabolize nutrients, but this statement doesn’t take us very far in understanding the different ways they do so, algae, red corpuscles, giraffes. In other words, theories need classes of objects on which to operate.

But as Brooks has just shown, New Critics find the concept of genre unnecessary. Whether, like Brooks himself sometimes, or Burke in his theory of symbolic action, they see all works as dramas in which a conclusion results in a dynamic manner from conflict, or whether, like