

II THE NEW CRITICISM AND LEAVISIAN CRITICISM

Though the New Criticism had its origins in Britain in the criticism of T. S. Eliot, the theory of I. A. Richards and the practice of William Empson, its most powerful impact has been in America. John Crowe Ransom, who published a book entitled *The New Criticism* in 1941, was the leading American influence and he acknowledged a debt to Eliot and Richards. The other major American New Critics were Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren and W. K. Wimsatt. Indirectly related to the New Criticism are such important figures as Kenneth Burke and R. P. Blackmur. The early New Critics were politically conservative and their attitudes to literature were shaped by their opposition to certain twentieth-century tendencies of thought, such as Marxism.

The fundamental aim of American New Criticism was to create a critical alternative to impressionism and historical scholarship, and thus there are some parallels with Russian Formalism. It advocated 'intrinsic' criticism – an impersonal concern for the literary work as an independent object – and opposed 'extrinsic' critical approaches, which concerned themselves with such matters as authorial intention, historical, moral or political considerations, and audience response. The earlier New Criticism was primarily interested in lyric poetry and regarded most highly forms of poetry in which irony, tension, paradox and ambiguity interact with the semantics of language in such a way, they believed, as to render poetic meaning unique and unparaphrasable. They claimed, however, that poetry could impart knowledge but a form of knowledge radically different from knowledge in the scientific sense. They particularly admired metaphysical poetry. Because the New Criticism argued that poetic language is semantically different from non-poetic language since it does not refer beyond itself but only functions contextually within the structure of the poem, it is sometimes called, perhaps confusingly, 'contextualism'.

In Richards and in such New Critics as Brooks, there is a similar emphasis on the special nature of poetic language and they also agree that the highest forms of poetry embody heterogeneous or what appear to be contradictory elements, necessitating the use of such critical terms as irony and paradox. But whereas Richards

tends to discuss these aspects of poetry in relation to the reader's emotions and psychology, Brooks places the greatest emphasis on the poem as an objective structure, as his essay, 'The Formalist Critic', shows. Richards's concept of the literary work as 'pseudo-statement', however, as presented in 'Poetry and Beliefs', first published in his book *Science and Poetry* (1926), was fundamental to the New Criticism and this essay also shows how important the work of T. S. Eliot was to the New Critical approach. Kenneth Burke might be called the Bakhtin of the New Criticism. He goes part of the way with Brooks's type of formalism but has some sympathy with Marxist ideas and argues that one cannot leave out of account sociological and psychological factors. John M. Ellis is a more recent theorist who defends fundamental New Critical concepts from a standpoint influenced by the later philosophy of Wittgenstein.

F. R. Leavis has a strong claim to be the most influential British critic of the twentieth century. He had a good deal in common with the American New Critics in that he attached great importance to language and literary form. In particular he emphasised the enactive power of literary language. But there is a stronger moral dimension to his criticism than one finds in the New Critics. It is perhaps paradoxical, however, to include him in a book devoted to literary theory since he refused to discuss his critical position in theoretical terms. The essay 'Literary Criticism and Philosophy', first published in *Scrutiny* in 1937, was a response to René Wellek's view that he needed to spell out the theoretical basis of his criticism. Wellek wrote:

Allow me to sketch your ideal of poetry, your 'norm' with which you measure every poet: your poetry must be in serious relation to actuality, it must have a firm grasp of the actual, of the object, it must be in relation to life, it must not be cut off from direct vulgar living, it should be normally human, testify to spiritual health and sanity, it should not be personal in the sense of indulging in personal dreams and fantasies, there should be no emotion for its own sake in it ... but a sharp, concrete realization, a sensuous particularity. The language of your poetry must not be cut off from speech, should not flatter the singing voice, should not be merely mellifluous. ... I would ask you to defend this position more abstractly and to become conscious that large ethical, philosophical and, of course, ultimately, also aesthetic *choices* are involved. (*Scrutiny*, 5 [1936-7], p. 376)

Though Leavis in his reply refused to defend his critical position in abstract terms, the arguments he uses to justify his refusal

are of considerable theoretical interest. A theoretical justification of Leavis's position can, however, be formulated, as John Casey shows in his book *The Language of Criticism*. Indeed, Casey argues that the implied theory that underlies Leavis's critical practice is both innovative and cogent, since it embodies a synthesis of expressionist and mimetic theories of art.

FURTHER READING

The New Criticism

Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (London, 1949).

Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley, Calif, 1974).

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Gerald Graff, 'On the New Criticism: Literary Interpretation and Scientific Objectivity', *Salmagundi*, 27 (1974), 72–93. (A critical view.)

Murray Krieger, *The New Apologists for Poetry* (Minneapolis, 1956).

John Crowe Ransom, *The New Criticism* (Norfolk, Conn., 1941).

I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London, 1924).

William H. Rueckert (ed.), *Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke* (Minneapolis, 1969).

René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750–1950: Vol. 6: American Criticism, 1900–1950* (New Haven, Conn., 1986).

W. K. Wimsatt, Jr, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (New York, 1954). (Contains the essays 'The Intentional Fallacy' and 'The Affective Fallacy', written in collaboration with Monroe K. Beardsley.)

Leavisian Criticism

Michael Bell, *F.R. Leavis* (London and New York, 1988).

F. R. Leavis, *Nor Shall My Sword: Discourses on Pluralism, Compassion and Social Hope* (London, 1972).

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Francis Mulhern, *The Moment of 'Scrutiny'* (London, 1979).

William Walsh, *F.R. Leavis* (London, 1980).

René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750–1950: Vol. 5: English Criticism, 1900–1950* (New Haven, Conn., 1986).