NEW CRITICISM

Formed in response to philological, historical, and moral methods of teaching literature in the mid-1930s, the New Criticism was an American critical movement that insisted poetry should be read as a distinctive object of communication, not a moralizing lesson or a biographical example. The New Critics sought to make the formalist interpretation of poetry the focus of literary education. While their hermeneutics deemphasized the role of politics, history, and authorial intent, the push for the acceptance of criticism in the academy was part of a political effort to preserve tradition in the face of mass culture. Inspired by I. A. Richards and T. S. Eliot, New Critics, including Monroe Beardsley, R. P. Blackmur, Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, W. K. Wimsatt, and René Wellek, interpreted poetry by describing the ways that a poem’s “prose core” was interwoven with its stylistic “tissue,” via the rubrics of irony, ambiguity, and paradox. Brooks and Warren’s *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction* textbooks helped to expand the reach of New Critical methodology to college classrooms. Combined with an influential collection of critical quarterlies—*The Kenyon Review, The Southern Review*, and *The Sewanee Review*—these textbooks helped to solidify New Criticism as the dominant mode of literary inquiry in the United States by the 1950s. Because of the New Criticism’s dominance and its tendencies to deemphasize history and politics in literary studies, its rise has often been too quickly separated from the Agrarian politics of its members from the U.S. South. Ransom, Tate, and Warren were among the twelve southerners who authored *I’ll Take My Stand* in 1930, a tract against the growth of industrialized capitalism in Southern states. Their solution was a return to a political economy based on agriculture that would preserve traditional Southern culture, regardless of the racial assumptions that came with it. Despite the exhaustion of the morality or practicality of the Agrarian position, Agrarian New Critics were simultaneously developing their interpretive approach as well as their politics in Seward Collins’s *The American Review* during the mid- to late-1930s. After the Civil Rights movement and the increased importance of politics and history to literary studies, New Criticism’s turn away from politics and from history provided a shield for its own discriminatory practices. Major works of New Critical inquiry include Cleanth Brooks’s *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947), John Crowe Ransom’s *The New Criticism* (1941) and Wimsatt and Beardsley’s “The Affective Fallacy” and “The Intentional Fallacy.”

Bibliography: Litz, A. Walton *et. al.* (eds.). “Bibliography: New Critics” *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*. Vol. 7. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 512-526. Print

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