**Larbi Ben M’hidi University**

**Department of English**

**Third year students**

**Module: Literature**

**Lesson: The New Criticism**

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**Introduction:**

The New Criticism is an Anglo American approach that dominated teaching and scholarship between the 1920’s and the early 1960’s. The major impetus behind New Criticism was the work of the English poet, educator Mathew Arnold.

Writing in the second half of the 19 century, Mathew Arnold was aware of the moral decline that happened in the western society. As a result, he placed literature within a spiritual context (literature is the repository of the best that has been said and thought in the world). He believed that literature is timeless since it is the creation of timeless minds (based on what is called liberal humanism). He also emphasized the superiority of poetry over the other literary forms.

Coming together originally at Vanderbuilt University in the years following World War I, the New Critics included a teacher school –poet John Crowe Ransom and several bright students –Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks. Associated at first in an informal group, they adopted the name of the **Fugitives** and published a magazine called **The Fugitive** from 1922 to 1925. In the 1930’s other critics associated with them such as T.S.Eliot, I.A.Richards, WEmpson, R.P.Blackmur,R.Wellek, W.K.Wimsatt, K.Burke, Y.Winters.

New criticism regards the literary text as an autonomous product that is free from any external factors as social, economic and political conditions or from any reference to the author that creates the text. The new critics favour poetic texts . For them , the literary text’s meaning is based on its formal and rhetorical properties.

**The Major Figures of New criticism**

**1.Thomas Stearns Eliot**

The most influential spokesman for Arnold’s vision was the young expatriate American poet T.S. Eliot who had settled in London before the First World War. T.S Eliot is considered to be the most influential figure behind new criticism. In his essay **“ Tradition and the Individual Talent”** written in 1919, Eliot stressed the detachment from emotion that a writer must have while writing in order to achieve a scientific state. For Eliot “ Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.” For him, the expressions of profound emotion should not have an autobiographical dimension. What the poet needs to look for, Eliot tells us in **‘Hamlet’**, another essay from 1919, is **an ‘objective correlative’**: ‘a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion’. Emotion must be conveyed indirectly. The poet’s emotion should be invested in such an ‘objective correlative’.

In **‘The Metaphysical Poets’** he argues that the so-called ‘Metaphysical poets’ still knew how to fuse thought and feeling, and seriousness and lightness, in their poetry. After their heyday, however, a ‘dissociation of sensibility’ had set. He seeks in poetry the sort of profound experience that the modern world cannot offer. For Eliot, the natural, organic unity that is missing from the world and that we ourselves have lost – the ‘dissociation of sensibility’ – is embodied in aesthetic form in poetry.

**2. Ivor Armstrong Richards**

In Richards’s hands Eliot’s emphasis on the poem itself became what we call ***practical criticism***. In a still fascinating experiment Richards withheld all extra-textual information – no author, period, or explanatory commentary – and asked students (and tutors) to respond to poems that were thus

Completely stripped of their context. Since Richards developed his practical criticism – the label

was popularized through the title of a book he published in 1924. Richards had deep misgivings about a contemporary world which seemed to have lost its bearings. He, too, saw in poetry an antidote to the spiritual malaise.

The arts are our storehouse of recorded values. They spring

from and perpetuate hours in the lives of exceptional people,

when their control and command of experience is at its

highest, hours when the varying possibilities of existence are

most clearly seen and the different activities which may arise

are most exquisitely reconciled, hours when habitual narrowness

of interests or confused bewilderment are replaced by an

intricately wrought composure.

(Richards [1924] 1972a: 110)

Because the arts are our storehouse of recorded values, they ‘supply the best data for deciding what experiences are more valuable than others’. Literary art, then, helps us to evaluate our own experience, to assess our personal life. It is all the better equipped for this because its language is not *scientific* but *emotive*. Scientific language is for Richards’s language that refers to the real world and makes statements that are either true or false. Emotive language, however, wants to produce certain emotional effects in the reader. Literature, then, conveys a certain type of knowledge which is not scientific and factual but has to do with values and meaningfulness and which makes use of language that expresses and manipulates emotions.

Practical criticism focuses upon the textand the text alone. Because of this exclusively textual orientation, it was an ideal programme for teasing out all the opposites that for Richards (following Eliot) were reconciled and transcended in poetry, often through the use of irony. Practical criticism became a major instrument in spreading the idea that the best poems created a vulnerable harmony.

**3.Frank Raymond Leavis**

Until Leavis changed the picture, fiction had gone largely unnoticed. For him, Novels cannot very well be subjected to the same sort of analysis that we use with poems, especially novels that until the end of the nineteenth century were more or less the rule. But Leavis’s discussions of fiction would in any case have departed from the course set out by Eliot and Richards. By the 1940s Leavis had already in his discussions of poetry begun to include a moralistic dimension that is almost completely absent from the work of his American contemporaries, the New Critics. He increasingly comes to judge poems in terms of the ‘life’ and the ‘concreteness’ they succeed in conveying. In other words, he begins to discuss content, as relatively independent of form while for the New Critics, form and content were inextricably interwoven. What the literary work should provide was a mature apprehension of authentic life (he was not charmed by the ironies of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which Eliot had thought a great work of art). For Leavis, authentic representations of life depended on a writer’s personal authenticity and moral integrity. As he said in his 1948 ***The Great Tradition***of the novelists he considered great: ‘they are all distinguished by a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity’ (Leavis [1948] 1962: 17). He believes that the novel can represent life in all its fullness; it is for Leavis and Lawrence superior to whatever the other arts or the human sciences (such as psychology or sociology) may have to offer. Lawrence said: ‘To be alive, to be man alive, to be whole man alive: that is the point. And at its best, the novel, and the novel supremely, can help you’.

**4. Cleanth Brooks**

The New Critics saw poetry as a means of resisting commodification and superficiality because of its internal organization – its formal structure – a poem presents a vital alternative. Cleanth Brooks set the tone for a new kind of poetic language. He discussed Paradox as the most important language and literary convention in poetry. Paradoxes are not “ some sort of frill or trimming” external to the work , they spring from the very nature of the poet’s language : it is language in which the connotations play as great part as the denotations”. Our Greatest poems are “ built around Paradoxes”.

In ***The Well Wrought*** ***Urn*** 1947, Brooks warrants the claim that poetry and paradox are all but identical. Brooks concludes the work with what he called **“Heresey of Paraphrase**”, arguing that any attempt to reduce poetic meaning to prose statement of a theme or a description of a plot is a betrayal of the poem as a poem. Brooks evoked the Heresey of paraphrase to stress the importance of the creative imagination as a union.

**Allen Tate**

In ***Tension in Poetry*** 1938, Allen Tate talked of each poetic work producing a whole that is the result of the configuration of meaning that is the appropriate subject of investigation by literary critics. Tate believes that the meaning of the poem is “ the full organized body of all **the extension** and **intension** that we can find in it”

An exaggerated emphasis on extension, Tate argued, results in **the Fallacy of mere denotation** while an exaggerated emphasis on intension results in **the Fallacy of Communication.**

**John Crowe Ransom**

The New Critics focus more on the actual *form* of literary works than their English counterparts. In fact, within the context of English and American criticism their approach to literature might well be considered *formalist* and it does indeed often go by that label. The term New Criticism became established as the name of the school after John crow Ransom published a collection of essays bearing that title, in 1941. In one of the essays **, “ Wanted an Ontological Critic”,** he announced the it is time to identify a powerful intellectual movement which deserved to be called “New Criticism”. In the book, he aims to correct some of the errors in the works of the British critics including I. A, Richards and F.R. Leavis. Ransom argues that a critic is needed who would attempt to define poetry in terms of its ontological interests a discourse.

**W.K Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley**

There are two new critical essays in particular which have become influencial texts in modern critical discourse: ‘**The Intentional Fallacy’** (1946) and ‘**The Affective Fallacy’** (1949), written by W.K . Wimsatt- a professor of English at Yale University and author of the titled book, **The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry** – in collaboration with Monroe C. Beardsley, a philosopher of aesthetics.

The first essay argues the Intentional Fallacy represents confusion between the poem and the author: the author’s intention or design is not a desirable standard in criticism.

The second essay argues that the Affective Fallacy represents ‘a confusion between the poem and its results’: ‘tryning to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem…. ends in impressionism and relativism’.

Though it was not the product of a single theoretical voice, New Criticism theories have gained a considerable attention. They have influenced many schools of criticism like Poststructuralism. However, the extremism of the New Criticism was ultimately regarded unacceptable by a number of approaches like New Historicism, Reader Response criticism, and Feminism .