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## THE NEW CRITICISM: REMEMBERING the THEORY THAT SHAPED the STUDY of LITERATURE for GENERATIONS

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### ABSTRACT

*Starting in the 20's, elaborated in the 30's and 40's and living its heydays in the middle decades of the twentieth century, New Criticism radically changed the study of literature both in the United States and abroad. While we are about to enter the centennial of the start of the New Critics, in the midst of ever-growing theoretical critical reading practices, it is important to remember the discussions the New Critics brought to the arena of literary theory and to assess their true contributions now that we are at a safe distance. What caused the New Criticism to be out of favor for the literary scholars and critics? What was wrong with seemingly liberal, objective and humane arguments of the theory? What was wrong with blind reading of a text without taking into account any "outside" factors such as history of the work in which it was produced? Is it really out of practice in 21<sup>st</sup> century's universities, or does today's academia just elaborate on the New Criticism? How far away are postmodern and post-structuralist theories from the New Criticism? This paper will attempt to answer to these questions taking the famous debate over criticism vs. history between Cleanth Brooks and Douglas Bush as its starting point, to be able to provide a*

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concrete analysis rather than overgeneralizations. Then, we will move on to two other essays by Daniel Green and Douglas Mayo shortly, published in contemporary academic journals, half a century later than Brook's and Bush's debate, to see the point where the discussion has come.

**Keywords:** *New Criticism, literary theory and criticism, Eliot, pedagogy, canon*

## **Yeni Eleştiri: Nesiller Boyunca Edebiyat Çalışmalarını Şekillendiren Teoriyi Hatırlamak**

### **ÖZET**

20'li yıllarda başlayıp 30'larda ve 40'larda gelişen, yirminci yüzyılın ortalarında altın çağını yaşayan Yeni Eleştiri hem Amerika'da hem de dünyada edebiyat çalışmalarını radikal bir şekilde etkilemiştir. Yeni Eleştiri'nin ilk doğuşunun yüzüncü yılına gireceğimiz ve kritik teorilerin her geçen gün arttığı günümüzde Yeni Eleştirmenlerin edebiyat eleştiri arenasına katkılarını bugünün güvenli uzaklığından irdelemek ve değerlendirmek önem arz etmektedir. Yeni Eleştiri'nin edebiyat akademisyenlerinin gözünden düşmesinin sebepleri nelerdi? Görünürde gayet nesnel, insani ve liberal bir açılım gibi görünen Yeni Eleştiri pratiklerinin ardında ne gibi sıkıntılar vardı? Bir metni incelerken tarihi arkayapı ve yazarın kimliği gibi unsuları görmezden gelmenin sakıncaları nelerdi? Günümüzün yapısalcı-sonrası ve postmodern teorileri Yeni Eleştiri'den ne kadar uzak? İşte bu çalışma, genel geçer tespitlerin dışında somut bir analiz ortaya koyabilmek adına, Cleanth Brooks ve Douglas Bush arasındaki meşhur tartışmayı merkezine alarak bu sorulara cevap aramaktadır. Sonrasında günümüz akademik dergilerinde yayınlanan, Daniel Green ve Douglas Mao'nun çalışmalarına değinilerek tartışmanın günümüzde geldiği konum irdelenecektir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** *Yeni Eleştiri, edebi eleştiri, Eliot, edebiyat öğretimi, kanon*

“We can only say that a poem, in some sense, has its own life; that its parts form something quite different from a body of neatly ordered biographical data . . . ,” (cited. in Wimsatt and Brooks, 1967: 665) wrote T. S. Eliot in the introduction to the 1928 edition of *The Sacred Wood*. A couple of years later, Richards began his experiments in which he asked his students (at Cambridge) to respond to ‘neutral texts’ without identification of their authors, dates, nor any other factor

except than the text itself (Willingham, 1989: 26), which directly or indirectly led to Wimsatt and Beardsley's 'intentional fallacy'. In 1939, Brooks had already started to suggest revisions for the history of English Poetry in *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* in favor of 'wit' by beginning with the seventeenth century, and the poetry of Donne (219). In the several decades that followed, the American universities witnessed an incredible application of the theory of New Criticism, within the guidance of the textbooks such as *Understanding Poetry* prepared by the very pioneers of the criticism.<sup>1</sup> The influence of New Criticism was also international and seen as far away as in our country.<sup>2</sup> Now, almost a century after T. S. Eliot wrote the above lines, the New Criticism seems to have been erased out of the context of literary criticism; most scholars and institutions but only ridicule it. Decades later, as David Yezzi indicates, "the New Critics are less read and more misunderstood than ever" (2008: 27). The fall of the new criticism from the academia became at least as powerful and quick as its rise.

What caused the New Criticism to be out of favor for the literary scholars and critics? What was wrong with seemingly liberal, objective and humane arguments of the theory such as that the historical background of the work or the biographical data about the author does not create any privilege; if the work is of high quality in and of itself, it will be assessed as such by anybody and for any reader from any cultural, social context? What was wrong with blind reading of a text without taking into account any "outside" factors such as history of the work in which it was produced? Why did literary scholars argue so much against the separation of literature from history? The reason why we used a cautious verb, 'to seem', in the first sentence of this

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<sup>1</sup> It is impossible and unnecessary to give a comprehensive summary of New Criticism within the parameters of this study. For a brief yet succinct summary, see William Logan (2008). "Forward into the Past: Reading the New Critics." *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Spring: 252-9.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Esmâ Dumanlı Kadızade, "(2011). "Hüseyin Cöntürk ve Yeni Eleştirisi." *TÜBAR*. 39: 189-199.

paragraph is not in vain; under the seemingly even surface of the issue, the debate over criticism vs. history continues albeit now with some untold assumptions and taken for granted theories which were first introduced by the New Critics. Is it really out of practice in 21<sup>st</sup> century's universities, or does today's academia just elaborate on the New Criticism? How far away are postmodern and post-structuralist theories from the New Criticism? In the midst of ever-growing theoretical critical reading practices, it is important to remember the discussions the New Critics brought to the arena of literary theory and to assess their true contributions now that we are at a safe distance.

This paper will attempt to answer to these questions taking the famous debate over criticism vs. history between Cleanth Brooks, who could be described as the spokesperson of the New Critics at the time, and Douglass Bush, a strong defendant of the opponents, which took place at the beginning of the 50's as the starting point. We will use Gearld Graff's "History vs. Criticism" as a mediator between these two articles (not in the sense that he is in between but in that he has a different perspective than that of historicists). Then, we will move on to two other essays shortly, Daniel Green's "Literature Itself: The New Criticism and Aesthetic Experience" (2003) and Douglas Mao's "The New Critics And The Text-Object" (1996) published in contemporary academic journals, half a century later than Brook's and Bush's debate, to see the point where the discussion has come.

At the beginning of his essay on Marvell's Horation Ode, Cleanth Brooks makes a short but sound critique of Maurice Kelly's reading of Milton's *Paradise Lost* in the light of Kelly's information on the life and thoughts of the author. Here Brooks introduces us his belief in the idea of the living organism of the poetry by its very own, after which he once more explicitly defines his stand before starting his analysis of Marvell's work:

If we follow the orthodox procedure, the obvious way to understand the "Ode" is to ascertain by historical evidence—by letters and documents of all kinds—what Marvell really thought of Cromwell, or, since

Marvell apparently thought different things of Cromwell at different times, to ascertain the date of the “Ode,” and then neatly fit it into the particular stage of Marvell’s developing opinion of Cromwell. But this yields at best only an approximation of the poem; and there lurks in it some positive perils. . . . There is surely a sense in which anyone must agree that a poem has a life of its own, and a sense in which it provides in itself the only criterion by which what it says can be judged. (1947: 199)

Thus he sets out his methodology through the sole path of criticism devoid of any historical data. The valorization of the *Text*, however, creates its own problems. It should also be noted, for example, as the titles above suggest, New Critics’ choice of “literary” texts would reify and reinforce, if not completely initiate, the “canon” of literature to be criticized in the decades to come. This was also in tune with the liberal humanist perspective of the “individual genius.” As Ronald Strickland argues, “It is well suited to the production and maintenance of the canonical exemplars of individual genius upon which liberal humanist new criticism depended” (1994b: par. 9). This was quite a “neoconservative response” that was going to impose the classist Western hegemony on the study of literatures. The New Critics’ curriculum was always based on the assumption of the “great books,” and they already seemed to know what “great” works they were referring to. Their readings were “based on the classic texts of Western civilization--a version of the “great books” curriculum.” The assumption was that “the most important function of humanities education” was “to pass on a common legacy of Western civilization to all college students.” This mission was, according to the New Critics, was best described by Matthew Arnold, as “the best that has been thought, written, or otherwise expressed about the human experience” (cited in Strickland, 1994a: par. 12).

Going back to Brooks’s critique of Kelly’s reading, Douglas Bush disagrees with Brooks’s methodology: “One might stop to quarrel with such an arbitrary doctrine of criticism, since the critic’s obligation is surely to use all helpful evidence of any kind (and Mr. Brooks himself,

when he wishes, goes outside the poem) . . .” (1952: 363-4). Bush, then provides his own analysis of the poem, saying that Brooks’ is a misreading, concluding that “the result, if not the aim, of Mr. Brooks’ inquiry is, in large measure, to turn a seventeenth century liberal into a modern one,” (1952: 376). This makes him fall into the irony of the New Criticism because this assumption misguides his analysis of Brooks’ reading as the latter in his response claims that he is known not for being a liberal but a “reactionary”, citing that he has also been called a “proto-fascist”.

In this response Brooks also argues that Bush has misunderstood his position about the place of history in criticism. Rather than completely isolating criticism out of history, Brooks says, he acknowledges that “the literary historian and the critic need to work together and that the ideal case is that in which both functions . . . are united in one and the same man” (1953a: 132). However, he further adds that “historical evidence does not solve critical problems” (1953a:132). He explains the reason as that “in the first place, it is often inadequate or problematical. In the second place, the objective facts that can be pegged down and verified do not in themselves yield a judgment: the ‘historian’ finds himself working with probabilities and subjective evaluations almost as much as the ‘critic’” (1953a: 132).

This is perhaps one of the main areas where New Critics could not accurately clarify their main message; they are always criticized for isolating criticism from history. Although it is true to a certain extent, the main emphasis of the New Criticism is somewhat different. As Brooks says in his answer to Bush, he does not push out historical data out of the criticism’s methodology; rather he tries to step beyond history like any other New Critic. Their main argument is that we have lots of examples in literature whose authors and times are uncertain but whose value still can be appreciated, and of which analyses can still be made properly—and according to New Critics even more so. In this way, they hope to see the elements which make a poetry timeless and universal, which Brooks indicates by saying, “I am concerned with

what is universal in the poem, and that means that I am concerned with more than seeing the ‘Horatian Ode’ as merely a document of its age . . .” (1953a: 133) So it is plausible to agree with Brooks, when he says, “I have tried to read the poem, the ‘Horatian Ode’, not Andrew Marvell’s mind,” (1947: 220) while actually summing up the essence of New Criticism. However, it should also be indicated that there is nothing wrong with Kelly’s using another work of Milton to elucidate *Paradise Lost*. Bush, on the other hand, believes in the value of historical conditioning although he falls into the trap of his own doctrine while assuming Brooks to be a liberal. The latter shows this is not so accurate an assumption and proves his point: assumptions about an author as well as the history are unreliable and limited and, conditioning in most cases which totalize and mislead the interpretation of the work. Brooks also agrees that history does indeed shed light on the work.

At this point, it might be useful to turn to what Gerald Graff says about history, which is quite different from both of the above perspectives. He believes that the concept of history held at the time of the New Critics was a narrow one, which was reduced to “atomized ‘background’ information.” So, it is Graff’s argument that instead of challenging this narrow view of history, these new critics conceived literary history “as at best a body of preliminary information that, however indispensable, could be set aside once the would-be explicator had done a minimal amount of homework” (1987: 183). What makes Graff’s argument different from historicists’ is that he sees the problem not in New Critics’ excluding history but in both sides’ wrong perception of it, emphasizing Irving Howe’s account about the issue: “The charge to be made against much traditional academic scholarship is not that it was historical, but that it was not historical enough or it had a narrow view of what ‘historical’ meant” (cited in Graff, 1987: 183). Thus, Graff points out, both sides are to blame for it was the New Critics which based their theory on this false assumption of history, whereas it was the critics of the New Critics who still kept their faith in this false perception of history, which was questioned by neither of them.

Scholars of literature have also pointed out that unlike many historicists claimed, the New Criticism was not an attempt to sever criticism from history. Rene Wellek, another New Critic, theorizes at the time that there are two main branches in literature. One of them is entirely based on history thus dealing with histories of thought or social histories as mirrored in literature whereas the other group is entirely based on the conception of literature as pure art, thus unable to write history. Wellek, then wonders whether he can combine these two separate branches, thus leading to ‘literary history’, which is both literary and a history (Graff, 1987: 184). The reason why then the New Criticism is conceived as the separation between literature and history can be understood in their attempt to be more precise and accurate against the dominant mode of criticism, which is the hardcore historicists, confronting them. If they had made an argument just as Wellek proposed it, somewhere in between literature and history, then without doubt, it would be historicists who would win, as the area in between could be no more than being a shadow of the omnipotent historicists. Schools of thought mostly favor the dominant tone. To create a radical alternative, and reform the methodology usually requires unnecessary but vital overvalorization and overemphasis of certain notions—and in this case, the overemphasis of literature over history.

Setting aside further discussion of history, for now, to be able to see the bigger picture as other facets of the theory is highly related with that of history, it can be said retrospectively that the war over criticism vs. history was won by the New Critics, at least for a couple of decades to follow. The second phase for the New Critics was to introduce how to approach a text now that there was no historical questions to deal with, no social mirroring in the text to find, and no autobiographical data to impose on the text. This is the juncture where the New Critics mostly failed as will be shown below. Now that the only source the critic has is but only the text and nothing else, the New Critics not surprisingly and surprisingly consistently came up with tools taken out of the text itself to be applied to the text itself again. These were the notions of



ambiguity, irony, wit and far-fetched metaphor. In “The Language of Paradox” Brooks writes conspicuously, “the language of poetry is the language of paradox. Paradox is the language of sophistry, hard, bright, witty; it is hardly the language of the soul” (1968: 1). Under the chapter titled as “Metaphor and the Tradition”, he creates a new tradition made of not only metaphor, but “a vigorous and even violent use of metaphor” (1968: 16), which brings us directly to metaphysical poets such as Donne, mostly defined as the totem of the New Critics. He goes so further to show that the seventeenth century poetry—one dominated mostly by metaphysicals—as the new beginning of history of English Poetry, so as to emphasize “the strength of the tradition of wit” (219). Brooks is not alone at all in his emphasis of these literary techniques. According to Hulme, who can be seen as a forerunner New Critic and who is a highly influential figure on Pound and Eliot, “Visual meanings can only be transferred by the new bowl of metaphor . . . Images in verse are not mere decoration, but the very essence of an intuitive language.” (cited in Wimsatt and Brooks, 1967: 661). All in all, it is certain that these are not ‘literary means’ for the New Critics, but the first and foremost aims, the ultimate ends.

These notions, which do not require much elaboration, form the core of the New Criticism, along with the interrelated tools of irony and ambiguity. If we set aside the argument that Eliot, along with his defenders, emphasized his own poetic style, the question is why the New Critics more than anything else pushed forward these notions of irony, paradox, wit, and metaphor over and over as the essentials of a good poetry to the exclusion of many other elements of poetry and literature in general, which also meant the erasure of a giant body of literature. Put in another way, for some other genres it was not much possible to apply these techniques as much as the New Critics wished. The answer is shown in their attempt to find the timeless and universal works as the historical context and value is out of question for them. This means that, according to this line of thinking, and as much as the common sense agrees as well, for a work to be alive in all times it

should first of all not close the discussions about itself, and always have an open-endedness. Put in another way, no critic from any era should be able to totally answer all the questions in his/her mind about that specific piece of work; the work should always go on alluding other minds from centuries to come. It should always carry the conflict in itself that leads and urges elaborations on and on, an endless query, which brings us to the language of paradox, the language of *poetry*, according to Brooks. The poem should be so ambiguous that none could be able to understand it properly, and so full of “vigorous metaphors” and never-ending tension that it should be able to speak to anybody from any time, which Allen Tate defines as “the successful resolution of conflicts” (Guerin and others, 1999: 90). Robert Penn Warren explains this notion in “Pure and Impure Poetry” as:

First, it [the nature of poetic structure] involves resistance, at various levels. There is tension between the rhythm of the poem and the rhythm of the speech...; between the formality of the rhythm and the informality of the language; between the particular and the general, the concrete and the abstract; between the elements of even the simplest metaphor...; between the elements of irony... It is a motion toward a point of rest, but if it is not a resisted motion, it is a motion of no consequence. (Cited in Guerin and others, 1999: 91)

We can sum up this view as that literary work should be so much full of ambiguity and paradox, and so much loaded with metaphors which can open to any interpretation in any time that the literary criticism can never find the one answer which governs it. The critic should always be on the path of solving the mystery albeit never finding it.

We have now formed more or less the backbone of the New Critics, which can be divided into three broad categories: (1) the text is the only source the critic should look at, not at historical, biographical or any other ‘external’ data; (2) the poetic tools for the critic are the ones found in the poetry itself such as ‘ambiguity’, ‘irony’, ‘wit’ and ‘metaphor’; and (3) any reader from any era can understand a good poetry if the work has the essential characteristics mentioned in the previous category.

Although it looks sound in theory, the same cannot be said in actual practices. Behind the façade of the New Critics; there was an ugly truth. This is the focal point of the tragedy of the New Critics; a powerful clash between theory and practice that has been pointed out by literary scholars ever since. To begin with, taking the text as the only and ultimate source for analysis, excluding any other ‘external’ factor is perhaps the most problematic issue. It was simply impossible to strip away any ‘external’ factor while doing a critical reading of a text. A piece of information, let it be historical or biographical, can be internal for some readers whereas external for some others. Moreover, as the critics has no control over the readers’ minds, s/he can never know whether that piece of information has an effect on the conception of the work itself and on the judgment of its value. Graff writes,

The trouble is there is no telling how much a poem or any other text ‘can tell us about itself,’ since that will be relative to how much requisite background information its reader already possesses. . . . If I already know before I read ‘The Canonization’ that for Donne’s contemporaries the word ‘die’ could refer to sexual intercourse, then that meaning of ‘die’ will be intrinsic for me as I read the poem, whereas for someone who does not possess this information it will be extrinsic and have to be supplied.” (1987: 190-91)

Therefore, the perception of historical and biographical data as extrinsic pile of information which can be put aside in the criticism is quite inaccurate since all of this data is always relative, changing from one reader to another, as literary scholars have argued for decades. This problem brings us to the undesirable and rarely-told (by the New Critics) fact, as also demonstrated by scholars, that it is only some certain readers with the necessary background and education who can understand the value of a work. It is true that Richards had got the results he wanted in his experiments on students we mentioned at the beginning of this essay; these students were able to differentiate between the “good” works and the “bad” ones although they were never given any information about the author or the era of the work. However, Ronald Strickland points out to a major handicap of these experiments

which undermines their results. What Richards did not take into account was that he was making his experiments on students at Cambridge—it is not ‘any reader’ but a specific group of students already equipped with necessary educational, cultural and socio-economic background to be able to make the proper aesthetic judgment. As a result, this kind of arbitrary assumption about students’ backgrounds leaves millions of students and their experiences as insufficient and meaningless:

Some obvious objections to this goal are that this legacy isn't, in fact, "common" to all American citizens, that it leaves out a good deal of human experience, and that to subject students from oppressed social groups to an unqualified celebration of this tradition amounts to cultural imperialism. On the other hand, the classics of Western civilization represent an important body of cultural capital to which all students should be given access. (Strickland 1994a: par. 12)

Christopher Clausen also agrees that this was a “bright student” (1997: 55) approach and it does not require much to do on the part of the teacher and the critic as long as students have sufficient background education. “After that, nothing more was needed than a good anthology” (1997: 55). And these anthologies would indeed enrich the careers of many New Critics. Looking at the larger picture, while explaining the general problem of liberal humanism, New Criticism’s larger intellectual framework, Strickland points out to the then uncritiqued and uncontested notion of the “individual genius.” “Under the intellectual regime of liberal humanism, teaching literature was conceived as a straightforward matter of transmitting an objectified literary experience from the text to the student” (1994b: par. 5). Therefore, “the literary experience was represented as the unique individual experience of the author-as-genius, and then retailed to students in a very contradictory fashion as a unique individual experience they could share, at least passively, as readers.” As a result, “as the author "produces" what is then "reproduced" by the reader, it was assumed, so research scholars "produce" what is "reproduced" by "mere" teachers”( 1994: par. 5).

The essentialist and foundationalist approach to literature also created its antithesis soon. It would not be wrong to interpret the emergence of postmodern theories as a reaction to this essentialist framework. “Postmodern theories, by contrast,” Strickland argues, “have recognized pedagogy as a richly complex body of practices that is at least as important as its ostensible “object” texts. As a result, postmodern writing did indeed disturb “the calm status quo of liberal humanism” (1994b: par. 5). It should, therefore, be fair enough to state that the seemingly ‘humanist’ arguments of the New Critics that purports to be privileging the ‘reader’, are in fact humanist only to some group of readers -usually white males from the upper class. In the overall, severing history or any other ‘external’ data from the literary text did actually made certain well-read readers advantageous whereas some others not; to put it in the New Critics’ standards, alienation of literary pieces from other contexts caused the alienation of many readers without necessary educational backgrounds from those who already possesses internally what is external for them to be alienated.

To make things worse, there also lies what Bush calls the ‘circumscribedness’ of criticism, a dead end in itself, which, related with the discrimination we just mentioned, brings us to another facet of the New Critics. Bush indicates that in the valorization of complexity and ambiguity, the critic has been unwilling to accept anything else, thus creating his/her fancy of the work—the fetish of ambiguity. As a result of this irresponsibility, poets and critics cut themselves from the ‘common reader’, who still thought poetry dealt with life whereas poets and critics already decided to write for one another, thus turning criticism into a “circumscribed end in itself” (cited in Graff, 1987: 186).

This circumscribed nature of the New Criticism also leads to the exclusion of the discussion of many socio-political issues that needs to be addressed in the study of literatures and cultures. “The New Critics’ pseudo-religious devotion to literary art,” notes Claussen gravely, “in a world where so many social grievances awaited redress, is said to have lent complicit support to the existing structures of American racism,

sexism, elitism, ethnocentrism, and all the rest” (1997: 54). The textual fetish of the New Critics blocks all sorts of critical engagement with social matters in this regard. The blindness to the author’s identity or to the historical background of the text disarms the intellectual critic. “The editors, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, tried to dissect what a poem said,” states William Logan, “not reveal the poet as a dolt, a closet racist, a chauvinist, a snob, or a prig” (2008: 257). It was pointless to raise such questions according to the New Critics: “New Criticism takes as its task to understand how meaning and feeling are invented in language (theory flinches as much from the neural itch of feeling as from aesthetics) and to judge if some poems are better than others—not simply better at kowtowing to the mores and manners of our day, but better in aesthetic terms” (2008: 257).

Strickland names this as “the fugitive rejection of modern industrial society” (1997: 164) and blames the New Critics for their rejection of social engagement. He further argues that the negative heritage of the New Critics continues to this day: “One of the means by which New Criticism and its narrowly aesthetics-oriented approach to literature has continued to fend off political and theoretical challenges in the classroom (if not in the scholarly journals) is the well-entrenched field coverage model of literary study” (1994a: par. 12). It is true that the New Critics emphasized ambiguity and multiple readings and perceptions, but their ambiguity is the sort which only a selected few can have a say, an ambiguity limited by strict boundaries allowing not multiple readings but the same ones which repeatedly emphasize the mysterious and the inexpressible essence of the poem—the divine quality of the text.

Choice of the word ‘divine’ is not random. This might be the “darker” side of the New Critics. In critical history there might not be another example of a school of theory that looks so liberal in appearance whereas it is so dogmatic and religious in essence; a theory that purportedly is formalist whereas it is mostly spiritualist. Let’s look at T. S. Eliot’s observations about this methodology:

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Literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint. In ages like our own, it is the more necessary for Christian readers to scrutinize their reading, especially of works of imagination, with explicit ethical and theological standards. (Cited in Green, 2003: 73)

Can this be the very reason why the New Critics pushed the Romantics out of discussion from the very beginning as the Romantics always put the emphasis on the ‘individual’ that many New Critics thought as bereft of Christian values? In “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, Eliot valorizes, as Brooks and Wimsatt acknowledge (664), the past, the dead, and the tradition: “The most individual parts of [the poet’s] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (cited in Brooks, 1953b: 70). There is also the fact that in 1928 Eliot declared himself to be a classicist, a royalist, and perhaps as the most important one, an Anglo-Catholic (Bush, 1966: 98), labels which quite often caused him to be called a fascist (one example can be seen on pg. 56 in Lentricchia’s *After the New Criticism* (1983), just like some other New Critics such as Brooks (as we saw at the beginning of this paper).

There are other famous New Critics who equated good literary taste with moral values. Yezzi explains, for example, “For the poet-critic Allen Tate, the failure to judge, to discriminate better from best, was tantamount to a moral failure” (2008: 28). Therefore, “in this approach, ‘moral intelligence’ (Winter’s phrase) enters into poetry not as moral abstractions but as form, coherence of image and metaphor, control of tone and of rhythm, the union of these features.” As a result, “the moral obligation to judge compels us to make not a moral but a total judgement.” Yezzi warns, “this sort of talk can still raise eyebrows in academe (2008: 28).”

Edward Pickering is more clear in describing New Critic’s religious undertones. After stating, “Allen Tate powerfully illustrates the centrality of religion to the movement” (2008: 105), he demonstrates the affinity between Southern Agrarianism and New Criticism in that

they both saw religion as central. “This affinity encompasses one of the most oft refuted tenets of New Criticism, the conviction that poetry represented distinct type of knowledge.” He further explains:

In “Wanted: An Ontological Critic,” Ransom wrote that “poetry intends to recover the denser and more refractory original world which we know loosely through our perceptions and memories. By this supposition it is a kind of knowledge which is radically or ontologically distinct” (3). In making this claim, Ransom effectively transformed poetry into an object of reverence. (2008: 105)

Pickering also reads Tate’s life as “a long pilgrimage toward his conversion to Catholicism,” (2008: 105-6) and cites Tate’s contribution to *I’ ll Take My Stand* (“Remarks on the Southern Religion”) where Tate argued for “the vital importance of religion, and his commitment to Agrarianism has been described as “a religious quest to revitalize the society of myth, tradition, and faith” (Malvasi 125). “Just as the Agrarians defined a “culture of the soil” against an industrial capitalism whose underpinning was applied science, Ransom defined poetry against scientific knowledge” (2008: 105 -6).

This kind of sound and well-established critique against the New Critics caused them to be out of fashion after a couple of decades of serious influence. Yet, their shadow was there to stay for a long time. In this final section, we will look at two articles published more recently to see where the current scholarship has come. In “Literature Itself: The New Criticism and Aesthetic Experience”, Daniel Green indicates that the current academia is overly-politicized, and “the ideological struggle is thought to be the main business of the university scholar” (2003: 63). He further argues that the reason why New Criticism is not welcomed in today’s universities is that the sheer analysis of aesthetics, the idea of the study of literature itself alone does not offer much to today’s mostly historicist scholars who are much more concerned to look at works of literature from a larger historical scheme, thus engaging in ideological and political arguments. Green is quick to note that the New Critics are at least as guilty for the politicization of today’s critics as they “made it



almost inevitable that not only their method but also their insistence on the autonomy of literature—and thus the idea that the study of literature should properly disclose what is ‘literary’ about literature—would eventually be challenged and ultimately displaced” (2003: 64). The New Critics had put so much emphasis on the aesthetics and isolated literature so much from its historical, social and cultural contexts that this sort of positioning was doomed from its very beginning as it spurred instant criticism against itself. The situation has been reversed so much that, Green adds, the word ‘literature’ is hardly ever conceived without its taken for granted connotations such as “its relationship to its audience, to the cultural media in and by which” it was created, to the society which consumes it and the tradition that keeps it. On one hand, Green acknowledges the New Critics’ setbacks in terms of their imposing Christian attitudes and their attempt to substitute religious authority with literature; he invites attention to the urgent need and importance of aesthetics on behalf of ‘literature’, on the other. If we keep on reading poems, stories, and novels for pedagogical and political purposes, Green indicates, than there will be no difference between the act of reading literary texts and reading other written documents. The implication is that the denial of aesthetic experience is the denial of literature.

On the other hand, it is highly interesting to see that Douglas Mao in his “The New Critic and the Text-Object”, has quite the opposite claim—that in many respects the theory is more than alive, having “an enormous influence on teachers of literature in the United States, and to hold an important place in practice of literary pedagogy” (1996: 226). He shows the reason as that the New Criticism makes it easier for the post-Second World War students to study works of literature as it demands too little from them to comment on the works studied [although we now know that this is neither what the New Critics claimed nor did apply]. Moreover, Mao sees most of the counter-arguments about the theory as based on misreadings, arguing, for example although Brooks always insisted that history has its place in

the study of literature, the opponents continued to label him and his colleagues as antihistoricists, which added up to “the myths of New Critical ontological naiveté” (1996: 237). Mao further sees the need to differentiate among the New Critics rather than a blind totalization, as for example, Ransom emphasized the parts in poetry whereas Brooks had a much more holistic approach, reminding us the former’s idea of “texture of particulars” and the latter’s “Well-Wrought Urn”. It would not be fair to give the impression that Mao is a strong defendant of New Critics. At many points he stresses that the theory is dead, along with emphasizing its mishaps we had already talked about. However, he also reiterates the limitations of the historicists’ arguments against the New Critics.

These two articles bring me to the point we would like to make at the conclusion. Although they have two different perspectives, they both seem to perceive a brand new ‘New Criticism.’ Both are aware of the religious connotations of New Criticism and both of them sometimes show the most ardent negative criticisms as misreadings (which are true to some extent) and try to clarify and reposition what the New Critics really argued for, in an attempt to vindicate and salvage the New Critic methodology. The influence of the New Critics is undeniable, their impact so voluminous. It could also be fairly argued that it was only after the New Critics that the field of literary studies has gained ultimate autonomy, and has been flourished in national and world-wide departments of English. It was thanks to the brave claims made by the New Critics which paved the way for the many theories to come after them. They proved that theorists, scholars, and critics can make a change in the way not only students but also societies read literature. Still almost all of the literary theory anthologies show the beginning of the formalist tradition as the New Criticism (*Contemporary Literary Theory* and *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, but to cite two of them). How isolated and separate are theories such structuralism, poststructuralism or deconstruction from New Criticism? Was it not New Criticism that privileged the meaning inherent in the

text before all these other schools of theory? Willingham (before citing setbacks of the theory) points out,

The climate for the proliferation of scholarly associations, literary journals, foundations, and grants supporting literary scholars and endless projects in research is, in large part, the legacy of the New Criticism, which makes possible the kind of speculation and textual studies emerging as structuralism, reader response, and deconstruction. (1989: 38)

Unlike Strickland’s positioning of postmodern and poststructuralist literary theories in contrast to New Criticism, there are also those that interpret later generations of theories as inspired by New Criticism. It is argued, for example, Empson’s concern on language was a “precursor of Derrida,” Richards’ pursuit of scientific, behaviourist model was a “precursor of present day Cognitive Poetics,” and Graves’s approach was “quasi-Jungian” (cited in Adams, 2014: 129). William Logan also agrees that literary theory, or English studies, on its own right was first initiated by the New Critics:

Seventy or eighty years ago, what we now call criticism was forbidden in literature classes—English professors clerkishly confined their studies to literary history or philology. John Crowe Ransom recalled the head of graduate English studies at a prestigious university telling a student, “This is a place for exact scholarship, and you want: to do criticism.” (2008: 254)

However, none of these contributions erase the fact that the New Criticism was elitist and undemocratic, and to a certain extent scholastically dogmatic, limiting the study of literature to finding ironies and ambiguities. It purportedly allows multiple readings, however in fact kills the creativity of the reader, and positions literature into a wordplay between the poet and the critic none can interrupt as it is protected by the cage of scientific as yet ironically religious textual analysis, stripped away all the historical, social or cultural discourses, creating a mysterious and allusive divine work which none can understand totally. The biggest irony of the New Criticism is that, as Green and other scholars suggest, it fell prey to the biographical

backgrounds of its originators. As much as the New Critics urged that a work should be valued on its own, they themselves could not escape their own selfish ideologies which had nothing in common with what they proposed. The liberal, democratic and open-minded notions proposed by them were annihilated by their own dogmatic, elitist, and limiting conceptions of literature—so much so that it was only poetry they kept discussing while talking about literature. One cannot help but ask the questions, what would have happened if T. S. Eliot was not a classicist, a royalist, and an Anglo-Catholic—a religious patriotic, in short? What difference would it have made if Brooks had not limited the language of poetry to only paradox? Would it have been any different if they had not muddied the water with their restrictive sets of mostly Christian and moral believes? Then perhaps, we would have a ‘criticism’, and perhaps it would be really ‘new’; but these are the questions whose answers we will never be able to fully know. After all, we have already come too far into the deep abysses of today’s formalist criticisms built on somewhere between the façade and the fact of the New Criticism.

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