Teaching with New Critics

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Abstract

Anglo-American New Criticism was one of the most important movements in the twentieth century literary theories. It stressed the objectivity of a literary work of art and claimed that literary critics as well as teachers should concentrate, primarily, on the text, its linguistic structures and the ambiguities of meaning resulting from them, and only secondarily on the text’s extraliterary relationships. After the New Critics’ popularity in the early decades of the last century, in its second part they were refused as pure formalists, supposedly unable to see the real nature of a literary work in its social circumstances. The article attempts to reassess New Criticism as a movement which contributed significantly to the reading and teaching literature and claims that their importance has not diminished even in the twenty-first century.

Keywords

New Criticism, teaching literature, literary theory, close reading, formalism

Introduction

The twentieth century saw an unprecedented upsurge of literary theorizing. It was one of the results of the shift of paradigm in the perception of the study and teaching of literature in academic space – from the nineteenth century’s understanding of literary studies as just one, not necessarily the most important, part of a more general philological context, to its establishment as an independent academic discipline. The post-Victorian decades, in case of English literature, brought a realisation that the ethical, biographical or generally cultural reading and teaching was not enough. There emerged a need to study and teach literature “scientifically”, which has continued to be perceived as a necessity by many literary scholars up to the present time. Many manifestations of that “perception”, embodied in various attempts to make the literary process (i.e. the interaction between the writer, text, reader – their conceptualisation itself being a result of the mentioned paradigmatic shift) formalised and objectivised, resulted in the numerous theories of literature, or, at the level of analysis and interpretation, various critical approaches to the study of literary texts. However, alongside the rise of literary theories, the teaching of literature has not been given the amount of attention it deserves, although it has always been an important and indispensable part of the new approaches to the literary process. One of a few of these theoretical approaches which considered the teaching worth mentioning was the American New Criticism, and, partially, also deconstruction, which may be considered a continuation of some of the New Critical methods. One could, of course, find also other instances of the conscious links between the theory and practical academic teaching of literature in other twentieth century theories, but they would be out of the scope of these considerations, since the aim of this paper is to concentrate primarily on Anglophone theoretical and academic milieu, drawing on the authors’ higher education experience with teaching in literary courses, which, among other things, shows that there is something wrong with reading, discussing and understanding literature these days.

The issues have been treated at length in numerous articles of which many point to the decreasing interest of students in mechanically ideological interpretations, in the unbelievable “theoretical” tricky plays with language of literary works, as well as, in general, and consequently, in the reading as such. To confront this state of affairs in literary education, researchers, and especially teachers at HEIs, should therefore depart from a mechanical re-working of a set of didactic rules or methodological procedures
for the teaching, and, instead, attempt a more serious re-thinking of the concept and role of literature, especially in the fast-changing contexts of the twenty-first century. I believe that the best starting point for this "rethinking" would be the "forgotten" or "hated" New Criticism. Naturally, speaking and writing about New Criticism in contemporary ideological climate is not an easy path to step on, since current literary studies is not favourable to the work of New Critics. But the times are changing fast and I hope that also in this field there will be a change of emphasis, from the ideologically enforced contexts to the text, only from which one can proceed to such other phenomena as community, culture, religion, with which literature is inextricably interwoven. One of the most important signs of this change is a relatively recent collection of essays entitled *Rereading the New Criticism* (Hickman and McIntyre) in which the contributors attempted to re-assess the place of New Criticism in contemporary literary theories. Of course, one should not forget one of its “predecessors”, *The New Criticism and Contemporary Literary Theory: Connections and Continuities* (Spurlin), which juxtaposed some of the essays originally written by the New Critics with their later re-positioning. Some pedagogical aspects of New Criticism have also been touched upon in *The New Criticism: Formalist Literary Theory in America* published by Cambridge Scholars in 2013.

**Reading and Teaching with New Critics**

The first real effort to make the study and teaching of literature based on scientific criteria, and thus different from the then prevailing impressionistic, biographical and ethical approaches, was made by John Crowe Ransom, a professor at Vanderbilt University and a leading figure in the crystallisation of a group of scholars that later became New Critics. In 1937 he published an article called “Criticism, Inc.” in which he maintained that criticism of literature at that time was very poor. Reflecting on how it could be improved, he claimed that it is the responsibility of the university teacher of literature (not the poet or philosopher), “who is styled professor, and who should be the very professional we need to take charge of the critical activity” (Ransom “Criticism Inc.”). Professors should stop just “compiling data” and, instead, employ “intelligent standards of criticism” through literary judgements, while “the students of the future must be permitted to study literature, and not merely about literature” (Ransom “Criticism Inc.”). What it means to study literature for Ransom can also be guessed from what he excludes from such study, that is, “Personal registrations, which are declarations of the effect of the art-work upon the critic as reader”, and later synopsis and paraphrase, historical studies, linguistic studies, moral studies, as well as all “other special studies which deal with some abstract or prose content taken out of the work” (Ransom “Criticism Inc.”). Poetry for Ransom represents natural beauty, the world of things, Dinglichkeit, something objective. It is in no way the expression of the poet’s personality. Although he wished to elevate literary criticism to the level of scientific inquiry, he sees the difference between science and art. Science reduces the world to types and forms, while art gives it a “body” (see his *World’s Body*).

A very similar topic was addressed by another member of the group, Allen Tate, who in his famous essay “Miss Emily and the Bibliographer” reflects on the ways the study of literature was practiced at his time. First, he criticises the prevailing practices, saying that if a person eager to study literary criticism “goes to a graduate school he comes out incapacitated for criticism; if he tries to be a critic he is not unlike the ignorant impressionist who did not go to the graduate school. He cannot discuss the literary object in terms of its specific form; all that he can do is to give you its history or tell you how he feels about it” (455). But real literary criticism must start from attributing specific objectivity to a literary work of art, because if it is denied this, “then not only is criticism impossible but literature also” (456).

Giving credit to the above theoretical attempts, one must say, however, that perhaps the best way to get the clearest picture of New Critical methods of reading literary texts would be through the analysis of the work of Cleanth Brooks, one of the movement’s most prominent representatives. Since his critical

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1 It must be realized, however, that the New Critics never claimed that the interpretation of a literary work should be based on the application of the methodology from hard sciences, though their methods cannot be considered “unscientific” either. As Amiran maintains, “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.” (6).
work, however, partakes of the unfavourable tint New Critics have been given in American society after
the demise of structuralism, which, in my opinion, has been the result of, among other things, a gross
misunderstanding of their critical intentions, we could start the discussion of Brooks’ critical practices
through his reminiscences published posthumously in 1995 in the collection of his essays under the title
Community, Religion, and Literature (1995). The title itself is quite symptomatic, since it refutes the long-
accepted misconception that the New Critics are were the naïve purists not seeing the relation of
literature to other social phenomena. In its introductory article “In Search of the New Criticism,” Brooks
returns to the beginning of the “movement” and provides us with valuable information about its origin,
members, etc. One of the things he explains is the fact that New Criticism was not a homogeneous
movement, but that the name was just a label given to various critics because they somehow differed from
what was at that time understood as a proper way of studying and writing about literature. He essentially
confirmed what René Wellek (1986) had said a few years earlier about the nature of New Criticism in his
monumental history of western literary criticism, that its members were very heterogeneous, though
connected by their refusal of the status quo in literary studies.

Community, Religion, and Literature is important for our purposes also because of another of its
author’s reflections on the beginning of his literary career. He says that when in the early 1930s he and
Warren “became members of the faculty of a rapidly expanding state university in the Deep South . . .
[their] students were bright enough young men and women, but very few of them had the slightest
conception of how to read a short story, let alone a poem” (3). He goes on explaining that the problem
was also caused by the textbooks which the students were using and which “did not address themselves
to the real issues. They printed the texts, gave some brief account of the poet’s life, supplied notes for
allusions or difficult words, and usually topped it all off with a dollop of impressionistic criticism” (3).
That situation was the reason why they had decided to write a new book on how to teach poetry,
Understanding Poetry, of which later became a manifesto of a new approach to not only teaching
literature, but literary studies in general – the New Criticism. Although Brooks speaks about the 1930s,
and we are aware of the fact that the textbooks used in literary courses at the beginning of the twenty-
first century are no longer that simple, his description is almost a perfect characterization of what many
students still expect from reading literary works anyway. More details will be illustrated through the
following analysis of the above-mentioned textbook, which demonstrated its continuing relevance even
nowadays.

Understanding Poetry is not just a textbook, but also an anthology. Since its first publication in 1938 it
has gone through several editions in which the authors changed the texts and added new commentary on
the nature of poetry and its interpretation, not betraying, naturally, their own initial intention of close
reading, which has earned them an undeserved label of “formalists” unable to see the meaning of a literary
work in context. Brooks explains the text-context dialectic as follows:

In the first edition of Understanding Poetry we deliberately left out most (though not all)
biographical and historical material, for we were hard pressed for space and we believed that, since
the graduate schools of the day taught little else, the average college instructor could and would
supply any necessary biographical-historical material. When the outcry came, as it soon did, that
we disparaged such helps, in later editions we supplied them in abundance. But it was too late. The
dog had been given a bad name that he was never able to shake off. (4)

The first edition of Understanding Poetry begins with a “Letter to the Teacher” in which the authors
clarified, in a nutshell, what they consider important for the teaching and reading of literature:

This book has been conceived on the assumption that if poetry is worth teaching at all it is worth
teaching as poetry. The temptation to make a substitute for the poem as the object of study is
usually overpowering. The substitutes are various, but the most common ones are:
1. Paraphrase of logical and narrative content.
2. Study of biographical and historical materials.
3. Inspirational and didactic interpretation. (Brooks and Warren iv)
Paraphrasing the content, or re-telling the story, is usually one of the first impulses a student has when asked to analyse a literary work. This is quite natural, since it does not require any great effort, almost no critical or creative thinking. And it can be learned from works’ synopses abundant on various internet pages, even without having to read the work itself. So, it is the first task of the teacher to show that “paraphrase may be necessary as a preliminary step in the reading of a poem,” (iv) that it is not a proper analysis or interpretation. The same holds true for the second “substitute”. Reading students’ term essays and diploma works, a teacher is frequently confronted with much space devoted to historical and biographical context. Again, quite naturally, since they do not require any reading or creative skills, just an ability to summarise well-known facts. The case is the same as with the paraphrase, since “a study of the biographical and historical background may do much to clarify interpretation; but these things should be considered as means and not as ends” (iv).

It may seem that this mistake is (can be) made just by students, and that contemporary theory has progressed much beyond that naïve assumption. However, what certain current scholars do not realise is the fact that what was for the past scholars the biographical and historical context is for the current ones the ideological context, which is also based on extra-literary, or, as Wellek would have it, extrinsic factors. Thus today’s postcolonial literary studies is just very slightly different from the biographical and historical criticism of the past, since it forces the reader to look primarily behind the literary text itself, using it not as an end, by a means of other interests and ambitions.

The third substitution, “inspirational and didactic interpretation,” has much to do with the emergence of literary studies as an academic subject and a need to provide it with a certain methodological outfit, as all proper academic subjects should have. It was not possible to aspire for the scientific universality, if basic tools of evaluation were, for example, the scholar’s impressions. New Criticism in this departure from the impressionistic methods of the 19th century’s Victorian trends falls into a more general European shift towards what was later labelled as formalism and structuralism. As with other principles, however, also impressions are not something one should completely avoid in the analysis of a literary work. Guerin, for example, says that impressions even form a natural part of the appreciation of a poem or a short story, constituting its “pre-critical” phase (1). Thus, when one is faced with a student’s question of whether he/she can express his/her own opinion, impression, one should probably say yes, but not “in isolation from other aspects and from the total intention” (Brooks and Warren iv, emphasis in the original).

All in all, as the first product of the New Critical approach to literary studies, Understanding Poetry can be summarised as a search for a complexity of literary meaning which does not result just from one aspect of an analysed literary work, but from the interaction of its several constitutive parts, from “the relations of the various aspects of a poem to each other and to the total communication intended (ix). A literary work is not seen here to exist in isolation from its surroundings, as it was later claimed by their opponents, but as “a literary construct before it can offer any real illumination as a document” (iv). And this seems to be forgotten by current literary scholarship, of which one group as if almost lost common sense either by looking for literary signification in non-literary phenomena and thus stressing a general relativity, or, by not being able to discriminate between the kind of reality produced by art and the everyday, pragmatic, lived reality.

The complexity of the New Critical literary meaning can also be illustrated on the division of the book into several parts, each as if dealing with one aspect of it: narrative poems, implied narrative, objective description, metrics, tone and attitude, imagery, theme. The authors take pains to stress that each of these aspects has sense only in relation with the totality of other aspects. They also stress that their organisation and model readings of poems should not imply any kind of prescribed procedure for teaching, since “even if a teacher disagrees with an individual analysis, an explanation of that disagreement should dramatize for the student the basic issues involved. And in fact, the editors feel that disagreement is to be encouraged rather than discouraged in so far as pure impressionism can be eliminated from the debate” (xiii). This could answer another most frequent question of students, asking if they can express their own opinion. Yes, but that opinion should be an informed, justified one, a result of the previous critical thinking, of wondering why and how, of trying to induce the general from the relationship of particulars. This is the way of engaging with poems (and, by extension, literary works) the
authors wanted their interpretational anthology to achieve. They summarised it once again for the prospective teachers, claiming that

1. Emphasis should be kept on the poem as a poem.
2. The treatment should be concrete and inductive.
3. A poem should always be treated as an organic system of relationships, and the poetic quality should never be understood as inhering in one or more factors taken in isolation. (ix)

Another important, though frequently misunderstood, concept associated with New Criticism is that of “close reading”. Although it was not invented by New Critics, they elevated it to an important critical principle. It was successfully used in another Brooks’s book *The Well Wrought Urn*, published in 1947, which continues the most important principle emphasised in *Understanding Poetry*, i.e. that poems should be read as poems, and not as something else. Brooks offered his reading of several poems, past and present, with the aim of finding some common denominator for all poetry, a structural feature which would apply to past or present poems, or, as he put it, some residuum which would be left “after we have referred the poem to its cultural matrix” (x). He further justifies this aim as follows:

We tend to say that every poem is an expression of its age; that we must be careful to ask of it only what its own age asked; that we must judge it only by the canons of its age. Any attempt to view it *sub specie aeternitatis*, we feel, must result in illusion. Perhaps it must. Yet, if poetry exists as poetry in any meaningful sense, the attempt must be made. Otherwise the poetry of the past becomes significant merely as cultural anthropology, and the poetry of the present, merely as a political, or religious, or moral instrument. (x)

What Brooks unknowingly says poetry could become if it is stripped of its universality, actually begins to materialize in the following years when in English departments anthropology, politics, religion and ethics, were really given more space than poetry or literature, which, in turn, really served as an instrument in culture wars. Brooks’s readings here, however, were different, both in its choice of the authors as well as in method of interpretation. As in *Understanding Poetry*, in *The Well Wrought Urn* he concentrates on the language and poetic effects created through the interrelationship of its elements. He does not say anything about the life of the authors or a period in which they lived and worked, nor does he reflect on his feelings and impressions, but, on the contrary, takes up words, phrases or lines and analyses their meanings, literal and metaphorical or symbolic. What he is especially after is ambiguity, paradox and irony, for they create the complexity of poetic statement. His first essay is even called “The Langue of Paradox”, and says bluntly that “the language of poetry is the language of paradox” (3). It is necessary to analyse the language, images, tone and theme, but they are only component parts of the ultimate paradox through which the poem says what cannot be said straight. In case of the Wordsworth’s sonnet “Composed upon Westminster Bridge” it is that, Brooks claims, “only when the poet sees the city under the semblance of death that he can see it actually alive” (7), or, as in the analysis of Donne’s “Canonization”, when “lovers in rejecting life actually win to the most intense life” (15).

In addition to language, what is usually very intriguing about poetry for students is that they always try to find out what the poem is about, to paraphrase its meaning. Brooks pays close attention to it in his essay “The Heresy of Paraphrase”, saying that it is not possible to judge a poem either by its content or form. It is a confusing and false duality always reducing the poem’s meaning which does not “reside” in one or the other, but emerges through a dramatization, “the working out of the various tensions” (207).

While *Understanding Poetry* and *The Well Wrought Urn* are rather practical examples of the New Critical methodology of (close) reading, *The Verbal Icon* has become the most sophisticated elaboration of its theoretical principles. It is a collection of essays by William K. Wimsatt (1954, two in collaboration with Monroe Beardsley, as the title page indicates) originally written for various literary magazines and later put together and published as a monographic work studying the “meaning of poetry”. It has become famous especially for the two first essays – “The Intentional Fallacy” and the “Affective Fallacy”, adding
to the repertoire of the sticky New Critical “catchwords”. Naturally, also these two principles were later supposedly “disparaged” by (mostly) post-structural critical approaches, such as the Geneva School (critics of consciousness) or various forms of reader-response critics. What the “disparagers” did not realise (or did not want to?) was the fact that Wimsatt (as well New Critics in general) never claimed that works of art are totally stripped of any relationship to an author’s subjective imagination, or to a reader’s personal impression. As most other misunderstandings of the New Critical “close reading”, also this is thus a result of a pitiful misreading of Wimsatt’s “intention”.

Conclusion
As I have already indicated, one of the most characteristic features of the present is the role theory plays in our everyday life. In the field of sciences new theories usually result in the introduction of new or improved technology - mobile phones, tablets, PC’s, new models of cars, planes or even spaceships. No one can deny this, though one can argue whether new technology is always for the good, or for the worse. However, despite the questionable pragmatic or ethical values of many new technological instruments or machines, they are undoubtedly almost always undeniable manifestations of an increased sophistication of human thinking. But new theories in literary studies may not always be demonstrations of such thinking. Some scholars claim that they may rather be damaging for their main object – literature.

If New Critics are then blamed for the unnatural objectification of a literary work, for the alleged cutting it off of its social and cultural milieu, one can blame many contemporary movements in literary studies for the exact opposite - for the forgetting that social, political, cultural, gender, ideological, sexual, postcolonial, and what not, effects should only be literature’s secondary role or effect, since “A poet must take as his material his own language as it is actually spoken around him”, and the poet’s duty “is only indirectly to the people: his direct duty is to his language, first to preserve, and second to extend and improve” (Eliot). Teaching literature with New Critics shows us what such care for one’s language really is.

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Works Cited


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