

A Practical Introduction to Literary Theory and Criticism

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chapter 1

The New Criticism

The "New Criticism" is by now a somewhat misleading term for what is in fact the oldest systematic theoretical approach to literature in American criticism. This approach, which involves the close and careful reading and interpretation of individual literary texts, has its roots in the 1930s; the label *New Criticism* itself derives from the title of a 1941 book by John Crowe Ransom, one of the leading founders of the movement. The New Criticism was the dominant mode of American literary criticism throughout the 1950s and 1960s. But with the advent of a number of competing theoretical approaches in the late 1960s and 1970s, the New Criticism began to lose this dominance. In fact, the New Criticism has now fallen somewhat into disrepute for both political and technical reasons. Nevertheless, certain basic assumptions of the New Criticism have been so central to American approaches to literature for so long that they have become naturalized and seem almost like common sense. Indeed during the years of New Criticism dominance, many of the assumptions and techniques of the method became almost synonymous with criticism itself; characteristics such as close reading and detailed interpretation of specific texts were eventually broadly perceived as central to the critical enterprise.

As Louis D. Rubin Jr. puts the matter, we are now in a post-New Critical age only in the sense that the New Criticism "has become simply criticism" (106). Indeed Rubin's own rather sanguine acceptance of this situation serves to verify his remark. Many college students are essentially New Critics without even knowing it, and the same might be said for many of their teachers. Thus as William E. Cain notes, the New Criticism may now seem powerless "only because its power is so pervasive that we are ordinarily not even aware of it" (105). Finally even critics who recognize this power and assiduously attempt to escape it in their own criticism often find themselves slipping into New Critical

practices in their teaching because such practices are so well suited to the classroom environment.

The New Criticism is a "formalist" approach to literature—that is, it pays close and careful attention to the language, form, and structure of literary texts while regarding individual texts (rather than historical context or broad generic trends) as the principal object of critical investigation. In the course of the 1950s, the formalism of the New Criticism thoroughly supplanted the historical methods of scholarship that had been dominant in America in the 1930s and 1940s. These methods sought to illuminate literary texts largely by exploring their historical background in terms of both the biographical details of the author's life and the kinds of issues and attitudes that were prevalent during the period in which he wrote the work. A historical scholar, for example, might seek to enhance our understanding of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by discussing the widespread fascination with the phenomenon of melancholia in Shakespeare's Elizabethan England. To an extent, historical scholarship attempts to restore literary texts to their original context, allowing us to react to those texts as their original audiences did.

The New Critics, in contrast, argued that the meaning of literary texts resides primarily in the texts themselves rather than in their historical context. They argued that historical scholarship tended to miss the point of literature by failing to recognize the aspects of literary language and technique that make literature unique, thus reducing literature to the same status as sociological or historical texts. The New Critics insisted that literature has to be read in special ways because style, form, and technique play roles in literary texts that are different from (and more important than) the roles they play in ordinary discursive texts. Moreover, these critics developed detailed and highly sophisticated techniques for the reading of literature. Indeed one of the central demands of the New Critics was that criticism be professionalized and that literary texts be interpreted according to certain well-defined and objective criteria rather than simply according to the impressionistic and subjective responses of the individual critic.

Because of a polemical relationship to other forms of literary study, the New Critics are in some ways best known for what they opposed than for what they espoused. In addition to their rejection of historical scholarship, they are closely associated with the notion of the "heresy of paraphrase," a term coined by Cleanth Brooks to indicate the impossibility of capturing the essence of a work of literature merely by summarizing its content. Two other key targets of the New Critics were the "intentional fallacy" and the "affective fallacy," terms coined by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley to describe the practices of equating the meaning of a literary work with the original expressive intention of the author and with the emotional response of the reader, respectively. In this way, the New Critics sought to shift attention away from the activities of both writer and reader and onto the text itself as a "verbal icon."

The New Criticism was the first systematic formalist movement in American literary criticism, though it had a number of important predecessors among

Anglo-American critics, of whom the most important was I. A. Richards. The New Criticism was influenced by Russian formalism, which emerged before the 1917 revolution and was a more and more political and engaged form of criticism in the Soviet state. The Russian formalists paid attention to the Russian language and to the differences between Russian and English language. In particular, the Russian formalists emphasized "defamiliarization," or the process of creating a fresh perception of the world through language. In this view, literature itself must thus emphasize that the focus is on literature itself, with the expectation that the kinds of renewal of literature is achieved through parody, through which works of literature work as aesthetic art. In his essays, Viktor Shklovsky argued precisely because it seemed that the eighteenth-century literature" (57).

By the 1930s, the New Criticism had eliminated Russian formalism. Perhaps not surprising, the New Criticism (especially Stalinism) as an insistence that literature be read in a political world clearly literature cannot be understood. The New Criticism, despite the fact that it was of political engagement, was founded by the New Criticism discussion group founded by Ransom, Donald Davidson, and the Vanderbilt group at Louisiana State University. The New Critics were "Agrarians" because of their modes of life. The political orientation that was a religious attitudes.

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Anglo-American critics, of whom I. A. Richards and T. S. Eliot were probably the most important. The New Criticism was also importantly preceded in Europe by Russian formalism, which dominated Russian literary criticism in the decade before the 1917 revolution and remained influential after it, though more socially and politically engaged forms of criticism would eventually become dominant in the Soviet state. The Russian formalists paid particular attention to literary language and to the differences between literary language and ordinary everyday language. In particular, they argued that the central strategy of literature was "defamiliarization," or the presentation of reality in new ways that can lead to a fresh perception of the world. Of course, for this process to continue functioning, literature itself must remain fresh and surprising. The Russian formalists thus emphasized that the process of renewal through defamiliarization applies to literature itself, with innovative literary texts continually changing our expectations of the kinds of linguistic strategies to be found in literature. This renewal of literature is accomplished through self-conscious strategies, such as parody, through which works of art "bare[d] the device" and reveal their own workings as aesthetic artifacts. Thus in one of the best-known Russian formalist essays, Viktor Shklovsky argues that Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*—precisely because it seems so odd and violates virtually all of the conventions of the eighteenth-century novel—may be "the most typical novel in world literature" (57).

By the 1930s, the political situation in the Stalinist USSR had effectively eliminated Russian formalism as an intellectual force in the Soviet Union. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the New Critics often identified Marxism (and especially Stalinism) as one of their major ideological foes. The New Critical insistence that literature is a special realm to be distinguished from the social and political world clearly stands in direct opposition to the Marxist belief that literature cannot be understood apart from its historical context. However, the New Criticism, despite its seeming attempt to divorce literature from politics and despite the fact that many of its eventual practitioners had little or no sense of political engagement, grew out of a highly political project on the part of its founders. The New Criticism had its genesis in the "Fugitive" club, a conservative discussion group founded at Vanderbilt University in 1919 and dominated by Ransom, Donald Davidson, and Allen Tate. By the early 1930s, this club, with the Vanderbilt group now reinforced by Brooks and Robert Penn Warren at Louisiana State University, had evolved into the group known as the "Southern Agrarians" because of their vigorous advocacy of southern culture and agrarian modes of life. The politics of the Agrarians was avowedly conservative, an orientation that was further enhanced by their own conservative Christian religious attitudes.

In particular, the Agrarians contrasted life in the antebellum South, which they associated with harmonious relationships between man and God, culture and nature, and the individual and society, with the radical condition of alienation that they associated with life in the twentieth century under industrial capitalism. Brooks, for example, argued that "modern society was sick and that literature

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offered a diagnosis of its problems. Most particularly, society was said to have lost a sense of community. Individuals lacked any shared set of values through which they could relate to one another" (Jancovich 19). Society in the nineteenth-century South, in contrast, was informed by a strong sense of community, which continued to a certain extent even into the present, given that vestiges of traditional southern communal culture had yet to be eradicated by the growth of capitalism. And the Agrarians actively sought to draw on southern cultural traditions in an effort to transform what they saw as a fallen and degraded modern American society. Ransom, for example, felt that "industrial capitalism had produced a degraded form of culture which could only be changed through a social and economic reorganization of society, and the establishment of social relations which were fundamentally different from those of industrial capitalism, social relations which he identified with the Agrarian society" (Jancovich 24).

The Agrarian critique of industrial capitalism no doubt had much to do with the movement's roots in the Great Depression of the 1930s, when capitalism as a system seemed to have failed. Meanwhile this critique often focused specifically on science, whose dominance in modern society Brooks and Ransom, among others, identified as a central element in the dehumanization of life. The New Critics have often been described as attempting to bring scientific precision to the practice of reading poetry, but they consistently align themselves with poetry and against science. As Terry Eagleton points out, the New Criticism's "battery of critical instruments was a way of competing with hard sciences on their own terms, in a society where such science was the dominant criterion of knowledge" (49). I. A. Richards, in this and many other respects a forerunner of the New Critics, embodies this seemingly paradoxical attitude in his book *Science and Poetry*, which seems to be an attempt to provide a scientific method for reading poetry while at the same time asserting that, in its use of language, "poetry is just the reverse of science" (33). Indeed Gerald Graff is correct when he argues that, though the New Critics seemed to adopt scientific or technological styles of reading and argument, they actually did so to combat the "ruthlessly acquisitive and manipulative will-to-power" that they associated with science (*Literature* 136).

In the course of the 1930s, the Southern Agrarians evolved into the New Critics proper, shifting their emphasis from social critique to literary criticism. Meanwhile they moved away from the earlier Agrarian emphasis on southern culture, especially as key figures such as Ransom and Tate left the south to accept teaching positions elsewhere. This disavowal of strict regionalism no doubt played an important role in the subsequent institutionalization of the New Criticism as the principal academic approach to literature all over America. But this move did not represent a turn away from the political concerns of the Agrarians so much as a change in strategy resulting from the developing belief among the New Critics that literary criticism could help them achieve their political goals. For example, the New Critics held up the humanizing potential of poetry against what they saw as the dehumanizing consequences of the hegemony of science and technology in modern capitalist society. By this time, however, a number of other important critics (R. P. Blackmur, Kenneth Burke, Yvor Winters) were

employing formalist methods. The New Critics, in contrast, differed dramatically from the Agrarians and Warren.

Continuing the New Criticism's emphasis on literary language, I. A. Richards, in his book *Science and Poetry*, language as an expression of literary language as an expression of literary language through both denotation and connotation. In fact, is a close analogy to the way in which literature functions. The New Critics, in contrast, showed a particular interest in the texts of literary modernism, which occurred concurrently with the culture of twentieth-century modernism, clearly related to the texts of modernism. That Western culture's emphasis on the individual was focused almost exclusively on the advantage in this

The difficulty of explicating literary texts like *Science and Poetry* justify the use of formalist methods. Conversely the New Criticism's approach to the canon and pedagogy. The New Criticism and modernism for the interpretation of literature. Furthermore the New Criticism was so profoundly different from that of the Agrarians. The New Criticism as virtually nonexistent in 1930, published in 1938, the shape modernism.

Much of this was due to the tendencies of the New Criticism. Ransom and Tate seemed to accept the relation between literature and the world. Furthermore the New Criticism and political age

employing formalist critical techniques that in many ways resembled those of the New Critics, though the personal philosophies of the later group often differed dramatically from the Southern Agrarian heritage of Ransom, Brooks, Tate, and Warren.

Continuing the Agrarian tradition, the New Critics consistently argued that literary language, because of its richness and complexity, is superior to scientific language as an expression of the human condition. In particular, they felt that scientific language operates almost purely by denotation, that is, by direct expression of literal meaning, whereas literary language generates meaning through both denotation and connotation, or the implied suggestion of alternative or peripheral meanings. The central emphasis of the New Criticism, in fact, is a close and careful analysis of the techniques and strategies through which literature generates meanings that go beyond the direct denotation that the New Critics associated with science. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that they showed a particular affinity for the extremely rich, complex, and multiple texts of literary modernism. Indeed the institutionalization of the New Criticism occurred concurrently with the canonization of modernism as the official "high" culture of twentieth-century Western civilization. This canonization itself was clearly related to the political climate of the cold war, with the ultrasophisticated texts of modernism providing ample ammunition for those who wanted to argue that Western culture was somehow more advanced than Soviet culture, with its emphasis on the relatively simple works of socialist realism. That the New Critics focused almost entirely on American and British literature also worked to their advantage in this sense.

The difficulty and complexity of modernist works made necessary sophisticated explications like those espoused by the New Critics, helping in the process to justify the use of such techniques to interpret other kinds of literature as well. Conversely the availability of New Critical methods made it much easier to approach the complexities of modernist works for purposes of both criticism and pedagogy. There is thus a close historical relationship between the New Criticism and modernism, and New Critical readings directly set the standard for the interpretation of modernist literature at least from about 1950 to 1970. Furthermore the impact of the New Criticism on our perceptions of modernism was so profound that many later critics, working from perspectives very different from that of the New Critics, continued to treat modernism and the New Criticism as virtually indistinguishable. As Alan Wilde points out in a text published in 1981, "Modernist literature is by now virtually inextricable from the shape modernist criticism has imposed upon it" (20).

Much of this identification of modernism with the New Criticism arises from the tendencies of the New Critics themselves. Leading New Critics such as Ransom and Tate were also important poets, and the New Critics in general seemed to accept Eliot's judgment that in any given period "there is a significant relation between the best poetry and the best criticism of the same period" (20). Furthermore the New Critics consistently sought verification for their own social and political agenda in the literature they read, attributing their own ideas and

attitudes (particularly a thoroughgoing aversion to the modern world) to works as diverse as *Oedipus Rex*, "The Fall of the House of Usher," and *Finnegans Wake*. This tendency was especially true in the case of modernist works, which the New Critics typically saw as informed by the same revulsion toward modern society that motivated their own work. In an early response to *Finnegans Wake*, for example, Ransom saw the chaotic and seemingly irrational form of the book as a commentary on the fragmentation and decay of modern society. In particular, he read the book's radical technique as a demonstration of the fact that "the intention of art is in reaction against the processes of science, and that it wants to set up an object which is different in metaphysical kind from the objects scrutinized by science" ("Aesthetics" 428). Indeed the New Criticism was new precisely in its departure from the tendency of previous teachers and scholars of literature to focus on the "great" texts of the past. As Walter J. Ong points out, the preoccupation of the New Critics with contemporary literature was unprecedented in the history of criticism (30).

The New Critics engaged in an active program of promoting their ideas and trying to have them accepted as the standard for critical practice and for the teaching of literature at the college level. In addition to major theoretical and critical texts such as Ransom's *The New Criticism* and *The World's Body* and Brooks's *The Well-Wrought Urn* and *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, the New Critics produced a number of important textbooks that were widely adopted at universities all over America. The most prominent of these was *Understanding Poetry*, by Brooks and Warren, first published in 1938 and issued in a total of four editions through 1976. As John R. Willingham notes, this text effectively urges students to adopt what was essentially the practice of the New Critics themselves: "To pay closer attention to the language of literary texts; to form habits of identifying and justifying their identifications of tone, mood, voice, metaphors and symbols; to perceive how formalizing principles unify content and meaning; to share the creative process that brought the work into existence; and to celebrate the organic wholeness when it was discovered" (30-31).

Subsequent texts on fiction by Brooks and Warren (*Understanding Fiction*, 1943) and on drama by Brooks and Robert B. Heilman (*Understanding Drama*, 1948) were somewhat less successful, perhaps because the strategies of close reading followed by the New Critics are more easily applicable to poetry than to fiction or drama. One of the most important expressions of New Critical principles occurs in the 1942 *Theory of Literature*, by René Wellek and Austin Warren, which was widely adopted as a textbook for graduate classes in English but was also widely used by professional scholars as a kind of critical handbook. Although not among the founders of the New Criticism (and not identifying the book's approach specifically as New Critical), Wellek and Warren present a systematic and persuasive argument for what is essentially a New Critical program. They begin with a detailed attempt to define literature, thus specifying the object of their inquiry much in the mode of a scientific investigation. This definition turns out to be complex and difficult, but Wellek and Warren essentially conclude that literature is most importantly distinguished from other modes of

discourse by the "scientific" and "self-referential" nature of its self-referentiality. It is "best to consider literature as a dominant" (25). Literature, including literary text through

Wellek and Warren's theories of literature, the "Extrinsic" approach to the theoretical frame that focus their preference for the latter. Literature to the political theories that external influences. Wellek and Warren fail adequately to separate literature from its sociological approach, value only if it is. They are most (especially Marxist) reflection of society of art from its that "literature particular" because of its own justification.

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discourse by the special operations of literary language, which differs from "scientific" and "everyday" language both in its complexity and richness and in its self-referential emphasis on its own operation. They finally conclude that it is "best to consider as literature only works in which the aesthetic function is dominant" (25). Furthermore they specify several distinctive characteristics of literature, including a drive to impose order, organization, and unity on the literary text through the self-conscious use of aesthetic strategies.

Wellek and Warren then go on to present an extensive review of existing theories of literary criticism, which they separate into two principal categories. "Extrinsic" approaches are those that depend centrally on information or theoretical frameworks outside the text, whereas "intrinsic" approaches are those that focus their attention on the text itself. Not surprisingly, Wellek and Warren prefer the latter. They review a number of the former, including those that relate literature to the author's biography, to theories of psychology, to social and political theories, to philosophical ideas, and to the other arts. While granting that external information can be valuable for reading and understanding literature, Wellek and Warren ultimately find all of these approaches lacking because they fail adequately to consider the elements of form and style that differentiate literature from other kinds of language use. For example, they reject psychological approaches to literature because "psychological truth is an artistic value only if it enhances coherence and complexity—if, in short, it is art" (93). They are most dismissive of social and political approaches to literature (especially Marxist ones), arguing that these tend to see literature as a mere reflection of society and thus fail to take into account the relative independence of art from its social context. Wellek and Warren adamantly reject the notion that "literature is primarily an 'imitation' of life as it is and of social life in particular" because "literature is no substitute for sociology or politics. It has its own justification and aim" (109).

Meanwhile Wellek and Warren openly embrace intrinsic (that is, formalist) approaches to literature. They review in detail how these approaches can attend to the special characteristics of literary language, especially in poetry. Intrinsic interpretation can pay close attention to such elements as rhythm, rhyme, and meter and to the way these aspects of the sound of literary language influence the overall impression of the literary work of art. Similarly such approaches can attend to the participation of images, metaphors, symbols, and myth in the "totality, the integrity, of the literary work" (211). Wellek and Warren also devote a chapter to the study of style, which they see as inseparable from a consideration of the content of a literary work. In particular, their emphasis on stylistic analysis is closely related to their insistence on attention to the organic unity of the work of art, that is, to the way the different parts of a work of art combine to make a coherent whole. They thus argue that "stylistic analysis seems most profitable to literary study when it can establish some unifying principle, some general aesthetic aim pervasive of a whole work" (182).

Wellek and Warren tellingly spend three chapters on poetry and only one on fiction and drama combined. Moreover their discussions of fiction are far less

specific than those of poetry, dealing largely with what they see as the necessity of distinguishing between "great novels" (which they regard as legitimate literature) and lighter novels (which they regard as mere entertainment). They also argue that a novel must not be read as a "document or case history" but as a work of art, with attention to the details of its literary language and technique (212). Wellek and Warren thus reveal a tendency toward the kind of aestheticism and cultural elitism with which the New Critics have often been charged—but which their defenders have vigorously denied. They also show a typical New Critical preference for modern literature, arguing that modernist novels are more like poetry than are the novels of previous historical periods (235).

Wellek and Warren follow their discussion of fiction with comments on the "evaluation" of literature—on the kinds of judgments that critics should rightfully make concerning the quality of literature. Critics, they conclude, have a responsibility to make judgments about the quality and effectiveness of works of art. These judgments ought to involve valuing literature "for what it is"; that is, "they ought to evaluate it in terms and in degrees of literary values" (238). Wellek and Warren also comment on the nature of "literary values," arguing in particular that such values should not involve the various elements of a work of literature so much as the way those elements are put together to make an organic whole. They conclude that the central issue in aesthetic theory involves a confrontation between the belief that art is a realm relatively independent of the social and political world and the belief that art is simply a reflection of the external world (239). Wellek and Warren, of course, opt for the former position.

Their continual focus on the organic unity of the work of art and on the relative independence of art from the social and political world is typical of the New Critical project as a whole. Indeed for the New Critics, a successful work of literature is always that which employs a number of complex literary strategies to indicate a multiplicity of possible meanings but then resolves these multiple possibilities through the close integration of the various elements of the work into a coherent whole. Thus Brooks and Warren conclude in *Understanding Fiction* that the successful story is one that "is a unity," which occurs when "its elements are so related that we feel an expressive interpenetration among them, a set of vital relationships" (xviii). The New Critics tend to emphasize certain key terms in their discussion of the literary drive toward unity through multiplicity. In addition to specific devices such as metaphor and symbol, the New Critics continually call attention to the importance of broad concepts such as irony and ambiguity. Both concepts involve the simultaneous generation of multiple meanings, creating poetic energy through the resultant contrasts, or "tensions," between competing meanings. Robert Penn Warren, for example, argues that successful poems must achieve their effects in such a way that their "motion" generates its own "resistance," which is then overcome in the course of the poem. And this resistance can occur at a variety of levels, arising not simply from the expression of contradictory ideas but also from contrasts like that between the literary language of the poem and the language of everyday life or between various formal elements of the poem itself.

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Brooks's *The Well-Wrought Urn*, one of the most representative works of the New Criticism, provides some excellent examples of the way this emphasis on the richness of literary language was often opposed to the poverty of scientific language. For Brooks, science thrives on precision, whereas poetry thrives on paradox: "It is the scientist whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox; apparently the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox" (3). Brooks sees the precision of science as impoverishing and the paradox and ambiguity of poetry as vivifying and enriching: "The tendency of science," Brooks writes, "is necessarily to stabilize terms, to freeze them into strict denotations; the poet's tendency is by contrast disruptive. The terms are continually modifying each other, and thus violating their dictionary meanings" (9). In an example the more general implications of which are rather clear, he suggests that the lovers in works such as John Donne's "The Canonization" or Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* derive their humanity from their poetic presentation, whereas if viewed "scientifically," they would become mere "animals" (17).

In this emphasis on the ability of literary language to produce a variety of meanings, the New Critics seem to anticipate recent developments in post-structuralist criticism, which emphasizes the unruly and unpredictable ability of language to generate meanings that go beyond the conscious intention of the author. But whereas poststructuralist critics often celebrate this multiplicity of meaning in its own right—sometimes in ways with powerful antiauthoritarian (and especially antitheological) political implications—the conservative Christian ideology of the New Critics remains thoroughly inscribed in their treatment of literary language. Key New Critical terms such as *paradox*, *irony*, *complexity*, *ambiguity*, *contrast*, and *tension*—all of which evoke the richness and diversity of literary language—are ultimately emphasized in the interest not of pluralism but of organic unity. Poems may gain energy from the creation of conflicts and tensions, but for the New Critics these conflicts and tensions in a successful poem are finally resolved. Irony and ambiguity may delay the final resolution of the interpretive process, but they do not prevent it. Brooks and Warren (speaking of themselves in third person) thus defend their emphasis on irony: "They would not endorse an irony which precluded resolution but they would endorse an irony which forced resolution to take stock of as full a context as possible. The reader wants resolution, but he does not want it too easy or too soon. He wants to see the knockout, but he does not want to see it until the fifteenth round" (*Understanding Fiction* xix).

The neatness with which contradictions and conflicts are typically resolved in New Critical readings (especially of poetry) meant that, among other things, the technique was extremely well suited to application in the classroom, where students found such neat solutions comforting. Indeed the obvious advantages of the New Criticism for classroom applications had a great deal to do with the widespread success of the method in the 1950s. The success of the New Criticism (like the success of most things) was largely the result of its being adequate to its particular historical moment. As the first truly professional literary

scholars, the New Critics were able to take advantage of a perceived need for such professionalism (a perception they themselves helped create), especially in the context of an American society in which professional expertise traditionally carried a great deal of cultural prestige: "The New Criticism was the product of the first age when thousands of persons became intent on academic, and ultimately scholarly, analysis" (Ong 33). We might recall here Ransom's suggestion that critics in search of professionalism could consider themselves employees of "Criticism, Inc." (*World's* 329). More important, the convenience with which the professional insights of the New Criticism could be packaged for classroom use was an inestimable advantage in a 1950s environment informed in general by burgeoning college enrollments and in particular by a clear need for a fast and efficient method of literary education in a nation in which such education had not previously been emphasized. The emergence of the United States as a world power after World War II generated a newly perceived need for increased emphasis on culture to counter the supposed philistinism of the Soviet Union—which nevertheless had long emphasized culture and cultural education.

New Critical techniques, then, allowed a generation of English professors to define their work in ways that were well suited to the politics of the cold war and that furthermore made that work seem sufficiently technical and complex to satisfy the American fascination with specialized expertise. After all, the best efforts of critics such as Ransom or Tate or Brooks produced dazzling results that required a subtlety and a virtuosity that no mere amateurs (or, presumably, benighted Soviet professionals) could hope to match. Yet the New Criticism nevertheless provided a tool kit that made it relatively easy for teachers to produce interesting-sounding commentary on literary works and to expound on those works in ways that their students would find both comprehensible and convincing. Although the leading New Critics were themselves highly knowledgeable, the New Criticism allowed—even encouraged—critical approaches that required very little knowledge of historical backgrounds or of disciplines other than literature. New Critical readings were thus accessible to students who might lack such knowledge. Meanwhile the New Criticism was a boon both to professors who wished an opportunity to demonstrate their critical dexterity and creativity and to those who were too overwhelmed with expanding duties to acquire the kinds of knowledge required to interpret and teach literature effectively using historical or interdisciplinary methods. Indeed this ability of the New Criticism to function on a relatively small fund of cultural knowledge may have contributed substantially to the loss of "cultural literacy" bemoaned by certain observers in recent years.

The New Criticism, then, was effective at producing critical and pedagogical discourse that sounded sophisticated enough to justify the existence of professional literary scholars, who could in turn successfully do their work with relatively little actual scholarship. Most important of all, the New Criticism produced results that were politically safe in the hazardous and repressive climate of McCarthyism and its aftermath. The intellectualism of the New Critics themselves might have run against the McCarthyite grain, but that very intellectualism

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served effectively to divorce the New Critics (and their version of modernism) from American political reality, thus safely inscribing both the New Criticism and modernism within a harmless aesthetic realm. In this sense, the New Critical project can be seen as the culmination of the movement toward separation of the social and the aesthetic that numerous critics (especially with Marxist orientations) have seen as central to nineteenth-century bourgeois society.

At the same time, the unholy alliance of intellectualism and agrarianism that constituted a major part of the ideology of the New Criticism was not only highly political but also ran directly counter to the mainstream ideology of bourgeois society, especially in its American figuration. Thus Cain, while acknowledging that the New Criticism was "in a general way" well suited to the American political climate during the cold war, concludes that "it seems misleading to brand the New Critics as servants of the capitalist state when nearly all of them, in their Agrarian phase, assailed capitalism in the most severe terms" (4). But in some ways nothing serves the purposes of the capitalist state better than the assailing of capitalism, at least as long as that assault is not accompanied by any real threat, especially by any support for a genuine (for example, Marxist) alternative. Indeed the New Critical alternative to modern capitalism (basically a return to an idealized notion of the bucolic life of the South before the Civil War) was so patently untenable that even John Crowe Ransom dismissed it as an impossible fantasy late in his career. From this perspective, the naughtily antibourgeois stance of the New Critics was a point very much in their favor, their professional success with this stance providing an image of American tolerance for oppositional thought even as those who really opposed the system (or who were even *suspected* of opposing the system) were being brutally squelched in the McCarthyite purges and their aftermath. The cantankerous New Critics thus became academic reincarnations of the rebellious individual hero of the Wild West—and shining examples of a purported American tolerance standing in opposition to a Soviet system that allowed its citizens no such aberrant behavior, intellectual or otherwise.

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chapter 4

Deconstructive Literary Criticism

In 1873 a youthful Friedrich Nietzsche wrote a brief essay entitled "On Truth and Lies in the Nonmoral Sense." The essay was never published in Nietzsche's lifetime and was never even finished—it comes down to us in the form of two completed sections and preliminary notes toward several more. The essay deals, more or less, with the question of human knowing and especially with the fundamental role that language plays in the conceptualization of all knowledge:

It is this way with all of us concerning language: we believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities. . . . Thus the genesis of language does not proceed logically in any case, and all the material within which the man of truth, the scientist, and the philosopher later work and build, if not derived from never-never land, is at least not derived from the essence of things. (82-83)

To Nietzsche, all knowledge is indirect and metaphorical, and "reality" is nothing but "an X which remains inaccessible and undefinable for us" (83). Language does not refer to some external reality but only to itself, and the same can be said for all knowledge. Any link between language and reality is purely metaphorical. "Every concept arises from the equation of unequal things," Nietzsche writes (83). All knowledge arises in relation to other knowledge, and the resultant epistemological self-referentiality results in an infinite regression that can never hit bottom.

Nietzsche's essay suggests that the search for truth and the quest for centers and origins that underlie the epistemological investigations of post-Cartesian

Western philosophy are ultimately doomed to failure. This suggestion strongly resembles many of the proclamations of recent poststructuralist philosophers such as Jacques Derrida—and with good reason. As Sanford Schwartz points out, the “On Truth” essay has become a sort of “manifesto” of the poststructuralist movement (75). Nietzsche’s radical questioning of the ultimate authenticity of all human knowledge also anticipates many later developments in literature, where numerous authors have launched similar demystifying assaults against the epistemological tradition of the Enlightenment.

The term *poststructuralist criticism* can refer to any one of a number of critical approaches that arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s in reaction to the dominance of structuralism in European intellectual endeavors of the previous two decades. As was the case with structuralism, poststructuralist techniques and assumptions have been applied not only to a variety of strategies for reading literature but also to a variety of disciplines. Poststructuralism has been an important influence in such fields as philosophy, psychology, linguistics, history, and anthropology, in addition to literary criticism. To a first approximation, we can identify two major branches of poststructuralist literary criticism. The first of these, deriving most importantly from the work of Michel Foucault, concentrates its work on culture and society, on the institutions and practices that condition our reading of literature. Poststructuralist cultural criticism is discussed in a later chapter. The other important branch of poststructuralist criticism is identified most directly with the work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. It involves the critical strategy known as “deconstruction,” an approach that gained immense popularity (and attracted violent opposition) in America in the 1970s. This chapter deals with that approach.

Deconstruction is essentially a formalist method of close reading, and for that reason it has often (especially in recent discussions) been compared to the New Criticism. For example, deconstruction closely resembles the New Criticism in its emphasis on careful attention to linguistic subtleties that might lead to irony, ambiguity, paradox, and other forms of multiple meanings. Deconstruction differs substantially from the New Criticism in its refusal to attempt a resolution of these paradoxes and ambiguities through any appeal to organic unity in the literary text. As J. Hillis Miller, one of the leading American practitioners of deconstructive criticism, puts it, “The new turn in criticism involves an interrogation of the notion of the self-enclosed literary work and of the idea that any work has a fixed, identifiable meaning” (“Stevens” 333). Moreover the formalist emphasis on the text itself is significantly problematized in deconstructive criticism, for which textual boundaries are highly permeable and unstable, thus challenging conventional notions of just what constitutes a “text.” Indeed deconstructionists do not distinguish between text and world in New Critical fashion because in their view everything is textual. That is, humans approach everything through language. In an oft-quoted statement, Derrida thus declares that “there is nothing outside of the text” (*Grammatology* 158).

Derrida’s project grows out of a fundamental challenge to the traditions of Western philosophy. In particular, he argues that this philosophy is consistently

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informed by what he refers to as "logocentric" or "metaphysical" thinking—that is, the notion (derived from the monotheistic religions of the Judeo-Christian tradition) that there is an ultimate center and ground to philosophical truth. Derrida notes that logocentric logic sees language as a reflection of some preexisting meaning or reality, whereas he believes that meaning is created in language. This emphasis on the creative potential of language has obvious implications for literature, though its ramifications go well beyond literature as well. For example, Derrida's challenge to the Western tradition of logocentric thought involves a fundamental challenge to the long-cherished notion of the "transcendental subject"—that is, to the idea that individual human beings exist as stable entities identifiably separate from the world around them. But just as Derrida sees no clear boundary between text and context, he also sees no absolute distinction between subject and world. The transcendental subject (modeled on the God of monotheistic religions) uses language to express its feelings and thoughts about the world. For Derrida, however, the human subject is created in and through language rather than existing prior to and independently of language.

The poststructuralist view of language grows out of the structuralist belief in language as a self-referential system that operates according to its own rules and conventions rather than out of any direct relationship to reality. Structuralism crucially relies on the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who developed a systematic approach to the description of language as a self-contained system. Saussure distinguishes between *la parole* (specific instances of actual language use) and *la langue* (the system of accepted rules and conventions that govern the use of language and render communication possible). Saussure's work focuses on the latter aspect of language and on the ways rules and conventions operate to allow the expression of meaning in intelligible ways. For Saussure, language consists of "signs" that allow users to relate linguistic expressions to reality. A sign for Saussure has two fundamental components: the "signifier" (a unit of sound, usually corresponding to a word) and the "signified" (a concept or meaning invoked by the signifier). Importantly, however, the signifier and signified are not linked in any natural or absolute way—as the names of things were synonymous with the things themselves in the biblical language of the mythical Adam. Instead the two parts of the sign are linked purely by arbitrary convention and by their participation in the entire system of language.

Saussure's approach points toward a detailed and systematic study of language. Moreover given the centrality of language to human social endeavors, it is not surprising that Saussure's insights were widely adopted by investigators in a number of human sciences in the course of the twentieth century. Thus Claude Lévi-Strauss applied structuralist insights to anthropology in an attempt to develop an understanding of the social practices of "primitive" cultures and of the functioning of such cultural artifacts as myths; Louis Althusser used structuralist methods to extend the work of Karl Marx to develop detailed models of the workings of ideology in capitalist society; Jacques Lacan updated Freudian psychoanalysis by employing structuralism to produce models of the structure

of the human mind; the early Michel Foucault applied structuralist insights to analyze the workings of social institutions and the history of ideas.

Not surprisingly, structuralist techniques were particularly valuable in the study of literature, with critics Roland Barthes and Tzvetan Todorov, among others, performing extensive studies of the structural principles of literary works. In the important work *S/Z*, for example, Barthes conducts a detailed and systematic analysis of the construction of Honoré de Balzac's *Sarrasine* by performing a sequential reading that separates the text into 561 segments, or "lexias," and explores the function of each lexia in terms of five codes: hermeneutic (dealing with enigmas), semantic (signifying connotations), symbolic (signifying the ability of literary motifs to represent ideas beyond the scope of the text itself), proairetic (dealing with actions), and cultural (referring to knowledge or wisdom). Barthes precedes this analysis with comments on the plurality of texts and on "readerly" texts (which allow the reader to consume them passively) and "writerly" texts (which require the reader actively to participate in the generation of meaning) (4-5).

But structuralist literary criticism goes far beyond the study of narrative structures or of patterns of imagery. In particular, the structuralist emphasis on the system of language undercuts the Romantic notion of the author as the transcendental originator of his own texts, proposing instead that all texts arise within the systems of conventions and practices that constitute language and literature. Thus in a famous essay, "The Death of the Author," Barthes argues that the notion of the "author" is a modern product of the Renaissance emphasis on the individual but that in writing "it is language which speaks, not the author" (143). For Barthes, then, "a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (146). It is the task of the reader, especially of writerly texts, to assemble these textual fragments into meaningful form: "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (148).

In this view, all texts are products of "intertextuality," of the sometimes subtle relationships among all texts: "Every text, being itself the intertext of another text, belongs to the intertextual, which must not be confused with a text's origins: to search for the 'sources of' and 'influence upon' a work is to satisfy the myth of filiation" ("Work" 77). In the course of his career, Barthes gradually moved to a more and more radical emphasis on the plurality and "play" of language in this intertextual process. In particular, he began to emphasize the "pleasure" of the text, distinguishing between the "text of pleasure," a conventional, "comfortable" text, and the "text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language" (*Pleasure* 14). Such emphases, however, begin to unsettle the rather

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scientific structuralist emphasis on system and structure. Indeed while building significantly on the structuralist focus on the centrality of language to human endeavor, poststructuralism arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s largely against what was perceived as an overly simplistic and ultimately impoverishing structuralist emphasis on stable structure and well-behaved form.

From an American perspective, Derrida became the leader of the post-structuralist assault on structuralist decorum when he burst onto the American scene in the late 1960s with the essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." In this essay, he suggests that a fundamental "rupture" in the history of the concept of structure occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This rupture, exemplified in the Nietzschean critique of metaphysics and in the Freudian critique of the identity of consciousness, involved a new ability to conceive of structures based on principles of play, interpretation, and sign rather than on older notions of presence, truth, and an ultimate center to all structures (247-250). Derrida then points out that there are two directly opposed ways of reacting to this loss. The first involves a longing or nostalgia for the apparent security that such centers had always provided. Derrida associates this nostalgic rage for order with structuralism, particularly with the anthropological studies of Lévi-Strauss. The second potential reaction is that of Nietzsche, "the Nietzschean *affirmation*—the joyous affirmation of the freeplay of the world and without truth, without origin, offered to an active interpretation" (264).

Derrida's deconstructive program pursues the implications of this Nietzschean affirmation, especially for philosophy. In the process, Derrida undertakes the development of an alternative approach to philosophy that eschews many of the most cherished and fundamental assumptions of the Western philosophical tradition. Vincent B. Leitch provides a series of aphorisms that summarize many of the principal implications of Derridean deconstruction:

The world is text. Nothing stands behind. . . . The concepts "being," "consciousness," "presence," and "self" are creations, fabrications, patchworks—interpretations. Functions not facts. Effects of language, not causes. . . . The text is not an autonomous or unified object, but a set of relations with other texts. . . . The "genealogy" of the text is necessarily an incomplete network of conscious and unconscious borrowed fragments. Manifested, tradition is a mess. Every text is intertext. (58-59)

Probably the most fundamental assumption of Western philosophy is Aristotle's principle of noncontradiction, which states that a thing cannot both have a property and not have a property. Derrida, following Nietzsche, argues that this principle leads to an "either-or" logic that leads directly to the habit of dualistic thinking (or division of all aspects of life into binary sets of opposed categories) that is central to Western thought. For Derrida, such dualistic thinking is impoverishing; it cannot encompass the complexity and richness of language

and its products, which do not fall neatly into either-or categories. Furthermore, and perhaps more important, Derrida finds that dualistic thought inevitably leads to hierarchization, with one pole of a binary opposition being valued over the other. He therefore seeks to undermine, or deconstruct, binary oppositions throughout his work, typically by showing that the two poles are not diametrically opposed but mutually involved. There can be no concept of "bad," for instance, without a concept of "good"—and vice versa. Derrida thereby disrupts the traditional privileging of one pole over the other by showing that they cannot even be conceived of independently.

This project can be applied directly to literary texts, which are often constructed on the basis of binary oppositions. As Christopher Norris, a leading explicator of Derrida's work, points out, one of the essential features of a deconstructive reading is that it "consists, not merely in *reversing* or *subverting* some established hierarchical order, but in showing how its terms are indissociably entwined in a strictly undecidable exchange of values and priorities" (Derrida 56). Barbara Johnson, describing her own deconstructive critical practice, provides an excellent summary of the process of deconstruction of binary oppositions in the reading of literature:

The starting point is often a binary difference that is subsequently shown to be an illusion created by the workings of differences much harder to pin down. The differences *between* entities (prose and poetry, man and woman, literature and theory, guilt and innocence) are shown to be based on a repression *within* entities, ways in which an entity differs from itself. . . . The "deconstruction" of a binary opposition is thus not an annihilation of all values or differences; it is an attempt to follow the subtle, powerful effects of differences already at work within the illusion of a binary opposition. (x-xi)

Many of the dualities central to Western thought (male versus female, white versus nonwhite) have clear social and political implications. Others have more subtle philosophical implications, and it is on the latter that Derrida himself concentrates. For example, his challenge to the notion of a distinct boundary between the inside and outside of texts undercuts the dualistic distinction between these regions while at the same time questioning the traditional formalist privileging of the text while paying little attention to historical context. Similarly Derrida extends the structuralist challenge to the notion of the autonomous self to undermine the dualistic opposition between subject and object, or individual and surrounding world, that is central to Western philosophical systems like that proposed by René Descartes. From the perspective of literary studies, one of Derrida's most important projects involves a challenge to the traditional distinction between philosophy (as the literal expression of truth about the world) and literature (as the metaphorical realm of fiction).

In particular, Derrida denies a dualistic distinction between literal and metaphorical language. Following Nietzsche, Derrida argues that language cannot

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escape from metaphors: "If one wished to conceive and class all the metaphorical possibilities of philosophy, one metaphor, at least, always would remain excluded, outside the system: the metaphor, at the very least, without which the concept of metaphor could not be constructed, or, to syncopate an entire chain of reasoning, the metaphor of metaphor" (*Margins* 219-220). Philosophical language, like literary language, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature, and as a result the traditional claim that philosophy provides a more direct expression of truth than literature does has no basis.

Derrida pursues this deconstruction of the distinction between philosophy and literature in a number of ways. For one thing, he often writes about literature, as in the essays collected in *Acts of Literature*. For example, Derrida has identified the writing of James Joyce as one of the major influences on this philosophy. Derrida also writes in a highly literary fashion, employing complex writing strategies that eschew the traditional philosophical drive for lucidity and instead embrace a playful, punning discourse in which the sounds of words can be as important as their meanings and style can be as important as content. The sometimes frustrating experience of reading Derrida's writing is described in an early review of the English translation of *Of Grammatology*:

A reader feels that to raise one question will necessarily uncover a whole network of possible lines of investigation, until he finds himself almost entirely implicated in Derrida's text and its system of literary and philosophical allusions—perhaps without hope of exit. . . . After reading a text written, as Derrida would say, by his ironic discourse, therefore, the reader trained in the Anglo-American school of analytic philosophy is likely to be left with the impression of a man playing with the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle—the pieces being fragments largely drawn from texts of Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger. . . . Such a reader naturally expects the puzzle to be solved in the end, and is disappointed and bewildered when he finds instead that Derrida appears able only to play with the pieces. Perhaps the essential pieces are missing after all, or perhaps there are too many pieces to begin with. (O'Hara 363-365)

A great deal of Derrida's work is in fact concerned with the topic of writing. One of his central arguments involves the somewhat surprising conclusion that Western thought has consistently privileged spoken over written language because the former seems more directly linked to its originating speaker and thus more closely similar to the Word of God that supposedly spoke the universe into being. Although Derrida's critique of the privileging of speech over writing goes back to Plato, it focuses particularly on structuralism. For example, he argues that Saussure's emphasis on spoken language is a principal modern example of this long-term trend. Derrida also discusses the argument of Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques* that his introduction of writing into an oral South American native culture resulted in a powerful imperialistic drive toward bureaucratization in that culture. Lévi-Strauss thus sees the native culture as being

threatened with enslavement by the introduction of writing, and Derrida finds here an especially clear example of his argument that Western culture in general hates and fears the power of writing. In fact, Derrida calls this episode "the finest example of what I have called the 'metaphysics of presence'" (*Grammatology* 131). He then proceeds to argue that there is more than one way to interpret Lévi-Strauss's data concerning the effect of writing: "What is going to be called *enslavement* can equally legitimately be called *liberation*. And it is at the moment that this oscillation is *stopped* on the signification of enslavement that the discourse is frozen into a determined ideology" (131).

Derrida's conclusion here flies in the face of most analyses of encounters between European (written) culture and the oral traditions of American, Asian, and African native cultures. In particular, it ignores the many instances of imperial power and domination in which written language often played a central role. It is for such reasons that Derrida's work has often been criticized for a seeming disengagement from political reality, though politically conscious critics such as Michael Ryan have argued that Derrida's frequent radical challenges to accepted ideas have a great deal in common with emancipatory political projects such as Marxism.

In any case, for Derrida the traditional privileging of speech over writing has far-reaching implications. It is related, for instance, to the view of the human subject as the originator of meaning. As Terry Eagleton points out:

We have become accustomed since Derrida to associating a traditional Western prejudice for "living speech" as against script with a potent metaphysic of the human subject, centred in the rich plenitude of its linguistic presence, the fount and origin of all sense. It is in this refusal of the materiality of the sign, this ineradicable nostalgia for a transcendental source of meaning anterior to and constitutive of all sign systems, that Derrida finds the Western tradition most deeply marked by idealism. (55)

Derrida's own emphasis on the materiality of language, and particularly of writing, leads him to a number of important observations about the nature of the writing process. Arguing that Saussure's treatment of the relationship between signifier and signified is informed by a traditional Western belief that meaning precedes language (that the signified exists prior to the signifier, which then simply represents it), Derrida points out that in the epoch of theology/metaphysics, signification (the creation of meaning through signs) is always belated. Signs exist as the secondary expressions of preexisting meaning, and signification points back to a place of origin: "Thus, within this epoch, reading and writing, the production or interpretation of signs, the text in general as a fabric of signs, allow themselves to be confined within secondariness. They are preceded by a truth, or a meaning already constituted by and within the element of the logos" (*Grammatology* 14).

Derrida, however, proposes a fundamentally different conception of the process of signification in which meaning is dynamically generated on the fly

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