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## UNIT 1: I. A. RICHARDS

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### Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Positivist Criticism
- 1.3 I.A.Richards: His Life and Work
- 1.4 *Principles of Literary Criticism*
- 1.5 Richards on Language
- 1.6 *Practical Criticism*
- 1.7 The Achievement of Richards
- 1.8 Glossary
- 1.9 Questions
- 1.10 Reading List

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### 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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I.A.Richards and T.S.Eliot are considered the "fathers" of New Criticism. In this unit, you will read and understand critical essays by Richards, and work towards an assessment of his achievement as a critic.

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### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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In his book *The New Criticism* (1941), John Crowe Ransom begins his chapter on Richards by saying, "Discussion of *The New Criticism* must start with Mr Richards. *The New Criticism* very nearly began with him." In terms of the influence he wielded, I.A.Richards is generally considered the most important theoretician in the first half of the twentieth century. We shall begin with a look at the positivist criticism he rejected. After a brief note on his life and writings in general, we shall examine his works, *Principles of Literary Criticism* and *Practical Criticism*. Next we shall discuss his views on language. The next section will provide a summing up, highlighting his achievements. The glossary will explain technical terms in detail. It is possible that you might find some other words difficult to understand, but I am sure you can solve this problem by using a good dictionary, such as the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. It is a good idea to have a personal copy, at home. (The ninth edition is priced at Rs.425.00; you can get it at a discount at book fairs).

Please note that Richards, like T.S.Eliot or W.K.Wimsatt and many other New Critics, often uses the term "poem" as a kind of shorthand for any artistic creation. What they say about a "poet" generally applies to all literary artists.

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### 1.2 POSITIVIST CRITICISM

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Positivism stands for a philosophy first formulated in the work of the French philosopher Auguste Comte, whose *Cours de Philosophie Positive* was published in the period 1830-1842. The object of this philosophy was to extend to the humanities the methods and principles of the natural sciences. The positivist philosopher was concerned with perceptible facts rather than ideas, and how these facts arise, not why. All knowledge not wholly founded on the evidence of the senses was dismissed as

idle speculation. Positivism in literary criticism is summed up by Taine's famous slogan of "race, *milieu*, and moment". In the introductory chapter of his history of English literature published in 1863, the French scholar Hippolyte Taine said that a literary text should be regarded as the expression of the psychology of an individual, which in its turn is the expression of the *milieu* and the period in which the individual lived, and of the race to which he belonged. All human achievements can be explained by reference to these causes. Literary criticism was devoted to the causal explanation of texts in relation to these three factors. Critics paid attention to the author's life, his immediate social and cultural environment, and any statements he made about why he wrote. Research was directed towards the minute details of the writer's life, and tracing sources. Critics were not interested in the features of the literary text itself except from a philological and historical viewpoint. They disregarded questions concerning the value or the distinctive properties of literature, since these could not be dealt with in a factual or historical manner. Twentieth century criticism reacts against this extrinsic approach to literature. Attention shifts from the author to the text and the reader.

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### 1.3 I.A.RICHARDS: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

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I(vor) A(rmstrong) Richards (1893-1979) was educated at Clifton College, Bristol, and Magdalene (pronounced Maudlin) College, Cambridge, where he studied philosophy. In 1919 he started teaching at the newly created School of English at Cambridge. In 1926, he was made a Fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge. For some time, he was teaching in China. In 1939 he moved to the United States of America, and taught at Harvard, where he was University Professor Emeritus. He published three volumes of poetry, but he is remembered primarily as a literary critic and teacher, not as a poet. Richards was a scholar of semantics, and along with C.K. Ogden, formulated Basic English. *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923) written with C.K. Ogden, is an important contribution to linguistics. *Principles of Literary Criticism* published in 1924, was followed by *Science and Poetry* (1926), *Practical Criticism* (1929), and *Coleridge on Imagination* (1934). Richards believed that literary criticism should be objective. He was fascinated by the newly developing science of psychology, and wanted to evaluate art in terms of the state of mind induced by it. He promoted a psychological theory of value. This theory has become outdated due to later researches in psychology. But his comments on language, and on the practical analysis of poetry, are still valid, and have had an enormous influence on Anglo-American literary criticism in the twentieth century.

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### 1.4 PRINCIPLES OF LITERARY CRITICISM

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In *Principles of Literary Criticism*, I.A. Richards set out to establish a theoretical framework for criticism which would free it from subjectivity and emotionalism. He made some isolated observations which could make profitable starting points for reflection. But they provide no answer to the central question of criticism: "What is the value of the arts, . . . and what is their place in the system of human endeavours?" Richards proposes a psychological theory of art; art is valuable because it helps to order our impulses.

In the second chapter, "The Phantom Aesthetic State", he dismisses the concept of a special aesthetic state. Modern aesthetics, starting with Kant, rests on the assumption that there is a special kind of pleasure which is disinterested, universal, unintellectual and not to be confused with the pleasures of sense or ordinary emotions. They believed that art experience was a special kind of experience, in a class of its own, not

to be compared with the experiences of ordinary life. Richards feels that there is no such special mode. The aesthetic experience is not a new or different kind of thing; it is similar to ordinary experiences. Richards uses a very graphic analogy to explain this point: "When we look at a picture, or read a poem, or listen to music, we are not doing something quite unlike what we were doing on our way to the gallery or when we dressed in the morning" (p.10). He mentions ordinary activities like putting on clothes or walking down to an art gallery, to emphasize his point that art experience is not of a fundamentally different kind; art experience is more complex, and more unified. Those who believe in a special aesthetic state would postulate a peculiar unique value for it. Richards believes that aesthetic experiences are not *sui generis*, that is, they do not merely have intrinsic value. It is possible to analyze art experience, and examine its value in terms of ordinary life, because it is not a special state cut off from ordinary life.

According to Richards, "The two pillars upon which a theory of criticism must rest are an account of value and an account of communication" (p.18). Richards believes that the human mind has developed because it is an instrument for communication. The arts are "the supreme form of the communicative activity" (p.18). Of course, the artist himself may not be conscious of this; he is not as a rule deliberately and consciously engaged in a communicative endeavour" (p.18). The artist is concerned with getting the work "right", regardless of its communicative aspect. Whether it is a poem or a play or a statue or a painting, the artist is wholly involved in making the work embody his experience. He cannot stop to consider the communicative aspect. It is always there at a subconscious level. The very process of getting the work "right" involves endowing it with great communicative power; "efficacy for communication" (p.19) is a main part of the "rightness".

Criticism should not concern itself with the avowed or undeclared motives of the artist. Richards believes that the mental processes of the poet are not a very profitable field for investigation. It is dangerous to try to analyze the inner workings of the artist's mind by the evidence of his artistic work. It is not possible to verify what went on in the artist's mind, just as we cannot be sure what goes on in a dreamer's mind. Very often, the most plausible explanations of the artist's mental processes may be quite wrong. To prove this point, Richards takes up Coleridge's famous poem, *Kubla Khan*. I am sure you would be familiar with the poem, and may have heard that Coleridge wrote it under the influence of opium. Critics like Graves have presented a complex psychological explanation for the sources of the imagery in the poem. Richards points out that the explanation is much simpler: Coleridge was influenced by Milton. Richards examines lines 223-283 from *Paradise Lost*, Book IV. He quotes many lines from Milton's poem to establish it as the source of the underground river, the fountain, and the Abyssinian maid "singing of Mount Abora" of Coleridge's poem. Richards brings up this example to show the difficulties of speculating about the poet's mental processes; he feels that it would be a wrong application of psychology.

Richards believes that the arts can improve the quality of our lives by communicating valuable experiences. It is not easy to communicate complex experiences; Richards believes that the arts provide the only way of doing so. "In the arts we find the record in the only form in which these things can be recorded of the experiences which have seemed worth having to the most sensitive and discriminating persons" (p.23). He believes that "The arts are our storehouse of recorded values" (p.22). He gives a very high place to the artist. "He is the point at which the growth of the mind shows itself" (p.47)

Literary criticism should concern itself with value: Richards believes that "Art for Art's sake" is wrong. He declares, "The critic is as closely occupied with the health of the mind as the doctor with the health of the body" (p.25). He says that it is wrong to consider value a transcendental idea. Metaphysical or ethical considerations should be

kept out of literary criticism. He proposes a psychological theory of value. Anything is valuable which satisfies the impulses or appetencies, as he calls them. These desires or aversions may be conscious, or they may operate at the subconscious level. Appetencies include both conscious and unconscious desires, because the more important appetencies may be ones which are not consciously felt. So Richards defines value thus: "Anything is valuable which will satisfy an appetency without involving the frustration of some equal or *more important* appetency" (p.36). This naturally raises the question, "Which are the important appetencies?" Richards believes that the importance of an appetency can be gauged by the extent to which other appetencies which will be disturbed by the thwarting of the impulse involved, that is, the importance of an impulse can be judged by the way it involves other impulses. If the impulses are properly organized, a maximum number can be satisfied. He proposes a kind of psychological Benthamism: value lies in the number and importance of impulses satisfied within the individual mind.

States of mind are valuable so far as they involve coordination of activities as opposed to curtailment of them. Richards says that the function of the arts is to organize our impulses; the effect of art is "the resolution, inter-animation, and balancing of impulses" (p.113). In some respects, Richards's theory resembles Aristotle's catharsis, which suggested that the function of tragedy was to restore emotional balance. Later researches into psychology and neurology have shown that the workings of the human brain and psyche are much more complex.

Richards has proposed a very simplistic process, and his psychological theories have become outmoded with the passage of time. Moreover, it is difficult to accept the high claims Richards makes for art as an ordering of the mind. In the words of René Wellek, "If we think of the poets there is ample evidence that Richards's view of poetry as an ordering of the mind and the making of a perfect human being is false: there were madmen, suicides, scoundrels and many horribly unhappy and disorganized men even among the great poets."

Richards was one of the first to indicate the importance of the response of the audience. Beauty is "not inherent in physical objects, but a character of some of our responses to objects". But he did not investigate this theme of subjectivity further: critics of Reception Theory and Reader Response schools, like Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, David Bleich and Stanley Fish have presented much more sophisticated and far-reaching analyses of the response of the reader. The value of Richards as a critic lies more in his theories of language and the methods of practical criticism he proposed.

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## 1.5 RICHARDS ON LANGUAGE

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I have mentioned Richards's interest in semantics. His first book, *The Foundation of Aesthetics* (1922) was co-authored with two friends of his undergraduate days, C.K.Ogden and James Wood. He continued his collaboration with C.K.Ogden, the inventor of Basic English. Their book, *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923) created new technical terms for literary discussion; they drew attention to the "symbolic" use of language in science and its "emotive" use in poetry.

Chapter Thirty-four of *Principles of Literary Criticism* is devoted to "The Two Uses of Language". Richards observes that the terms we use to discuss poetry are ambiguous and fail to record the correct distinctions. In this book, he has used words like causes, characters and consequences when analyzing mental activity, in place of *thought, feeling, and will*. Richards distinguishes between two kinds of causation for "mental events". The first kind is represented by the stimuli affecting the mind through the senses immediately, and also combining with what survives from

comparable stimuli in the past. The second kind of causation lies in the mind itself, its needs and its receptiveness. In the scientific field, the impulse should be derived from what is external. The scientific use of language thus relies on *reference* undistorted by the receiving mind. By contrast there is an *emotive* use of language which is designed to arouse emotions. Richards says, "A statement may be used for the sake of *reference*, true or false, which it causes. This is the *scientific* use of language. But it may also be used for the sake of the effects in emotion and attitude produced by the reference . . . This is the *emotive* use of language. The distinction once clearly grasped is simple. We may use words for the sake of the references they promote, or we may use them for the sake of the attitudes and emotions which ensue" (p.211). These two uses of languages are analogous to the denotative and connotative functions of words; the scientific use should avoid ambiguity, it should have a fixed, single meaning. But the emotive use encourages multiple meanings; various connotations of the word are brought into play.

The scientific and emotive use have different criteria for success. For science, the connections and relations of references to one another must be logical. The references should not contradict one another. But a logical arrangement is not necessary for emotive purposes. They can reject logic in favour of their own internal emotional connection; as long as they have a coherent organization, it does not matter even if they contradict each other. Richards goes on to illustrate his proposition by discussing the way the word "truth" is used. In the scientific sense, a reference is true "when the things to which it refers are actually together in the way it refers to them" (p.212). In criticism, the most usual sense is of acceptability. Truth may also be used in the sense of sincerity, when we are discussing art. In *Science and Poetry*, Richards uses the term "pseudo-statement" for poetical statements. Truth in a scientific statement is a matter of laboratory verification; "a pseudo-statement is 'true' if it suits and serves some attitude or links together attitudes which on other grounds are desirable".

Richards uses the word "symbolistic" for the referential use of language, but there is a difference between his views of language and Saussure's. You would learn about Saussure in the next block, so it would be a good idea to come back to this unit after you are acquainted with semiotics. Like Saussure's *Cours*, *The Meaning of Meaning* starts with the proposition that there is an essential disjunction between language and reality, that it is wrong to believe that "words are in some way parts of things" (to use the words of Ogden and Richards in *The Meaning of Meaning*). From this common starting point, their ideas develop in different directions. For Saussure, the meaning of words does not depend in any way on their relationship with things, it is wholly determined by the arbitrary and conventional structure of language. Ogden and Richards, in contrast, stress that words are used to "point to" things, and that their meaning does depend on the things they are used to point to, their referents. Language may be different from reality, but it reflects it. Their position is thus an empiricist one, in that it rests on the principle that knowledge is the product of experience.

Richards continues his discussion of language in *Practical Criticism*, when he analyses the "Four Kinds of Meaning". All articulate speech can be regarded from four points of view:

1. *Sense* -- the state of affairs or the items presented for consideration.
2. *Feeling* -- By feeling he means the whole range of emotional attitudes, desire, pleasure etc. that the words evoke. Feeling does not enter into some types of discourse -- mathematics, for example.
3. *Tone*: the attitude of the speaker to the audience.
4. *Intention* -- the speaker's conscious or unconscious intention, the effect he is trying to promote.

## 1.6 PRACTICAL CRITICISM

Richards asked a sample audience in Cambridge to describe their responses to a set of thirteen poems supplied without titles or the authors' names. The students were not given any clue to the period in which the poems were written. The students were encouraged to read the poems more than once, and given one week's time to write down their comments. A selection of these comments, (which he calls "protocols") forms the substance of the book, followed by an analysis of characteristic errors and suggestions for educational reform. Richards says in his introduction that he had three objectives: (1) to document "the contemporary state of culture", (2) to provide a new technique for responding to poetry, and (3) to reform the teaching of literature. The book *Practical Criticism* analyses the different mistakes of interpretation and evaluation that Richards saw in these responses, and seeks to identify their causes. He was concerned by the low level of critical competence that was revealed, for he had chosen a set of educated Cambridge students. Let us look at the obstacles to proper response that Richards catalogues: I am following the system of numbering by alphabets used by Richards himself in *Practical Criticism*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1964, pp.13-17).

A. The difficulty of *making out the plain sense of poetry* -- a large number of readers failed to understand it, both as a statement and as an expression.

B. The difficulties of *sensuous apprehension* -- many readers do not appreciate the sound, the rhythm and movement of the text.

C. The problems of *imagery*, primarily visual imagery -- some readers have a poor imaging capacity.

D. *Mnemonic irrelevancies* -- the reader remembers some personal experience which is not relevant to the poem.

E. *Stock Responses* -- the reader may have fully prepared views and emotions, which are simply triggered off by the poem. He does not respond to the poem in question -- he already has a ready-made response.

F. *Sentimentality* -- the reader may be too emotional.

G. *Inhibition* -- the opposite extreme to sentimentality, the reader experiences less emotion than he ought to.

H. *Doctrinal Adhesions*. Poetry may contain or imply certain beliefs about the world, or at least seem to contain certain views. A clash between the reader's own views, and the views he finds expressed in the poetry, are a fertile source of erratic judgement.

I. The effects of *technical presuppositions*. When some poem succeeds by using a certain technique, we expect similar themes to be handled with the same technique, and do not respond when a new or different technique is used. The converse is also true -- if a technique has failed in one case, we jump to the conclusion that the technique itself is useless. Many readers make this mistake of confusing cause and effect.

J. *General critical preconceptions*. The reader may have preconceived notions about the nature and value of poetry. Whether these preconceptions are conscious or unconscious, they create an obstacle between the reader and the poem.

He felt that readers can, and should be, trained to have the proper response. The decline in speech and the loose use of words lie at the root of the problem. Richards suggests that the quality of communication between persons, and the level of discussion, can be raised by a "conscious and deliberate effort to master language." A student should learn how language works, which means studying "the kinds of meaning that language handles, their connection with one another, their interferences" (p.330). The student should not rest with studying the rules of syntax or grammar or lexicography. Richards believed that when we remove the obstacles in the way of the poet communicating with the reader, he will be open to the poet's mental condition and can experience the poem properly. Richards was not bothered by problems of interpretation, unlike the hermeneutical critics who are concerned with the subtle problems of correctly understanding a text.

## 1.7 THE ACHIEVEMENT OF RICHARDS

Richards did not recommend unhistorical reading, isolated from the context. But his emphasis on the text as an autonomous entity, and his example of a criticism that is practical rather than pedantically historical, was enthusiastically taken up by the New Critics. *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, by Robert Graves and Laura Riding, published in London in 1927, contained a detailed analysis of Shakespeare's 129th sonnet, "The expense of spirit in a waste of shame". They demonstrated how several meanings may be interwoven together within a single line of verse. This inspired Empson, a student of Richards, and formed the model for a study of multiple meanings in his *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930). William Empson (1906-1984) defines ambiguity as "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions" and classifies it into seven types representing advancing stages of difficulty. In his next book, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), interest shifts to the total meaning of whole works; the close readings present here reveal the influence of Marx and Freud. Empson's later essays, on Shakespeare, Milton and the novel, take due cognizance of the context of the work. He had no hesitation in going against one of the tenets of New Criticism, and declared (in 1955) that "A critic should have insight into the mind of his author, and I don't approve of the attack on 'The Fallacy, of Intentionalism'."

Richards's own analysis of specific texts is in the organicist tradition of poetic theory descending from Aristotle through the Germans to Coleridge. But his literary theory was quite original: the radical rejection of aesthetics, the resolute reduction of the work of art to a mental state, the denial of truth-value to poetry, and the defence of poetry as emotive language ordering our mind and giving us equilibrium and mental health. I.A. Richards was unusual in combining interest in reader response with scientific aims, but he took a simple psychological view of the reader. Later critics have investigated the role of the reader in much more sophisticated terms. The Constance school of phenomenologists (Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss) recognize that the reader's cultural and historical situation is a key factor in responding to the text. Some features of Richards's theory, such as his materialistic concept of poetic value, or his theory of communication, lack clarity and sophistication. It remains unclear why a more complex organization of impulses should be better than a less complex one and how a system of balances can be said to contribute to the growth of the mind. Nor is it clear that poetry is communication of specific emotional experiences of an author and that reading a poem enables us to have an identical or very similar experience.

But many features of Richards's criticism have not become outdated. They have become established parts of the Anglo-American critical tradition. These are his empiricism and humanism, and his organicist insistence on close reading, on careful attention to every detail of a text, on the principle that a literary text, like a living organism, functions through the interaction of all its constituent parts. In *Practical*

*Criticism*, he carefully distinguished between the sense, feeling, tone and intention of a text. The discussion of rhythm and metre in *Principles of Literary Criticism* clearly showed that sound and meaning, metre and sense cannot be separated. Content is not something that can be discussed in isolation from the expression. In the words of R. n, Wellek, "The stimulus that Richards gave to English and American criticism (particularly Empson and Cleanth Brooks) by turning it resolutely to the question of language, its meaning and function in poetry, will always insure his position in any history of modern criticism."

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## 1.8 GLOSSARY

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**Basic English:** A simplified form of English, with a limited vocabulary of about 850 words, intended for international communication.

**Bentham:** Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) was a leading British economist. His theory was called Utilitarianism. He believed that "the greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation."

**Croce:** Benedetto Croce (1862-1950) is a leading Italian critic. His most important book, *Aesthetica* (1902) propounds a theory of art as intuition which is at the same time expression. Art for Croce is not a physical fact, but purely a matter of the mind. There is no distinction between form and content. Croce is not a defender of "art for art's sake", he believes that art does play a role in society. Croce's aesthetics has no place for rhetorical categories, for style, for symbol, for genres, literary history, psychology, biography, sociology, philosophical interpretation, or stylistics, even for distinction among the arts.

**Idealism:** in philosophy, the doctrine that considers thought or the idea as the ground of knowledge or existence; the objects of knowledge are considered to be in some way dependent on the activity of the mind.

**Privileging:** to privilege (transitive verb) is to invest something with special advantages or rights, consider it worthy of special attention.

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## 1.9 QUESTIONS

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1. Write a note on communication, and its importance for the artist.
2. Comment on Richards' theory of value.
3. What are the two uses of language? What influence did this theory of Richards have on other critics?
4. **Present** an evaluation of I.A. Richards as a critic.
5. Write a note on *Practical Criticism*.

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## 1.10 READING LIST

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### Part I

- \* Richards, I.A. *Principles of Literary Criticism*. London, 1924. Indian paperback edition Universal Book Stall, 5, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110001.

----- *Practical Criticism*. London, 1929. Indian paperback edition Universal Book Stall, 5, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110001.

I.A. Richards

----- *Coleridge on Imagination*. London, 1934.

----- *Science and Poetry*. London, 1930.

## Part II

Empson, William. *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. London, 1930.

Ransom, John Crowe. *The New Criticism*. New York: New Directions, 1941.

Wellek, René. *A History of Modern Criticism 1750-1950* Vol.V. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986, pp.

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## UNIT 2 T.S. ELIOT

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### Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 "Tradition and the Individual Talent"
- 2.3 "The Function of Criticism"
- 2.4 "The Dissociation of Sensibility" and "The Objective Correlative"
- 2.5 The Achievement of T.S. Eliot as a Critic
- 2.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.7 Glossary
- 2.8 Questions
- 2.9 Reading List

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### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit, we will discuss "Tradition and the Individual Talent", the most influential essay Eliot wrote, and "The Function of Criticism" where he talks about the tools of the critic. We shall also acquaint ourselves with some critical catchwords he coined—"The Dissociation of Sensibility" and "The Objective Correlative". Our aim will be to evaluate his achievement as a critic, and try to gauge his influence on later critics.

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) is probably the best known and most influential English poet of the twentieth century. His work as a critic is equally significant. He was born in St Louis, Missouri; his parents belonged to New England, from a section of society which has been called WASP: White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, that is, part of the mainstream of society which colonized the eastern coast of America. He joined Harvard University in 1906, obtained his M.A. in 1911, and started work on a doctoral thesis on the philosophy of F.H. Bradley. In 1912 he was appointed an assistant at Harvard, but he was already under the influence of the symbolists, and had started writing poems in the manner of Jules Laforgue. He spent one year (1910-11) in Paris, and in 1914 he joined Merton College, Oxford. He settled in London, and became a member of the Anglican church and a British citizen in 1927, preferring to renounce his American heritage. He left academic pursuits to earn a living, working first in a bank, later as an editor with the publishing firm of Faber and Faber. In 1922 he founded *The Criterion*, a cultural quarterly, and *The Waste Land* was published in the inaugural issue. In 1924 he published *Homage to John Dryden*, which contained studies of Dryden and the metaphysical poets. This was followed by *For Lancelot Andrews: Essays on Style and Order* (1928) in which he announced himself to be "classicist in literature, royalist in politics and Anglo-Catholic in religion." His major books of criticism include *The Sacred Wood* (1920), *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1949) and *On Poetry and Poets* (1957). I am sure you are already familiar with his achievements as a poet and dramatist. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948.

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Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) is probably the best known and most influential English poet of the twentieth century. His work as a critic is equally significant. He was born in St Louis, Missouri; his parents belonged to New England, from a section of society which has been called WASP: White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, that is, part of the mainstream of society which colonized the eastern coast of America. He joined Harvard University in 1906, obtained his M.A. in 1911, and started work on a doctoral thesis on the philosophy of F.H. Bradley. In 1912 he was appointed an assistant at Harvard, but he was already under the influence of the symbolists, and had started writing poems in the manner of Jules Laforgue. He spent one year (1910-11) in Paris, and in 1914 he joined Merton College, Oxford. He settled in London, and became a member of the Anglican church and a British citizen in 1927, preferring to renounce his American heritage. He left academic pursuits to earn a living, working first in a bank, later as an editor with the publishing firm of Faber and Faber. In 1922 he founded *The Criterion*, a cultural quarterly, and *The Waste Land* was published in the inaugural issue. In 1924 he published *Homage to John Dryden*, which contained studies of Dryden and the metaphysical poets. This was followed by *For Lancelot Andrews: Essays on Style and Order* (1928) in which he announced himself to be "classicist in literature, royalist in politics and Anglo-Catholic in religion." His major books of criticism include *The Sacred Wood* (1920), *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1949) and *On Poetry and Poets* (1957). I am sure you are already familiar with his achievements as a poet and dramatist. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948.

T.S. Eliot's critical output was quite diverse; he wrote theoretical pieces as well as studies of particular authors. In "To Criticize the Critic", a lecture delivered at Leeds University in 1961, Eliot divided his prose writings into three periods. During the first, he was writing for journals like *The Egoist*; the main influences on him were Ezra Pound, and Eliot's teacher Irving Babbitt, who had introduced him to the philosophy of Humanism at Harvard. The second period, roughly from 1918 to 1930, was primarily one of regular contributions to the *Athenaeum* and the *Times Literary Supplement*; the third period was one of lectures and addresses, after Eliot had established himself as the leading poet of the age. As he grew older, he produced a lot of social and religious criticism; books like *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) shed light on his literary criticism and poetry. The later writings reveal a certain tiredness, a refusal to take his role as poet-critic seriously. He often suggested in his later lectures that he ought not to be taken too seriously. His second lecture on Milton, delivered in 1947, contradicts his first one, delivered in 1936, which declared that "Milton's poetry could *only* be an influence for the worse, upon any poet whatsoever" and accused Milton of "having done damage to the English language from which it has not wholly recovered". His convoluted style of qualification and reservations grows more complex over the years. In the words of George Watson, (he is commenting on Eliot's two lectures on Milton), "Argument advances crabwise." His first book, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1920), containing seminal essays like "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and "Hamlet", is central to his achievement as a critic. It is this early work which influenced the New Critics.

## 2.2 "TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT"

"Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) clearly expresses Eliot's concepts about poetry and the importance of tradition. Eliot emphasizes the need for critical thinking -- "criticism is as inevitable as breathing". He feels that it is unfortunate that the word "tradition" is mentioned only with pejorative implications, as when we call some poet "too traditional." He questions the habit of praising a poet primarily for those elements in his work which are more individual and differentiate him from others. According to T.S. Eliot, even the most "individual" parts of a poet's work may be those which are most alive with the influence of his poetic ancestors. Eliot stresses the objective and intellectual element. The whole of past literature will be "in the bones" of the poet with the true historical sense, "a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order." No poet has his complete meaning alone. For proper evaluation, you must set a poet, for contrast and comparison, among the dead poets. Eliot envisages a dynamic relationship between past and present writers. "The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them." An artist can be judged only by the standards of the past; this does not mean the standards of dead critics. It means a judgement when two things, the old and the new, are measured by each other. To some extent, this resembles Matthew Arnold's "touchstone"; the "ideal order" formed by the "existing monuments" provide the standard, a kind of touchstone, for evaluation. As with Arnold's touchstones, Eliot's ideal order is subjective and in need of modification from time to time.

Eliot lays stress on the artist knowing "the mind of Europe -- the mind of his own country--a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind". But he does not mean pedantic knowledge, he means a consciousness of the past, and some persons have a greater sensitivity to this historical awareness. As Eliot states, with epigrammatic brevity, "Some can absorb knowledge, the more tardy

must sweat for it. Shakespeare acquired more essential history from Plutarch than most men could from the whole British Museum." Throughout Eliot's poetry and criticism, we find this emphasis on the artist surrendering himself to some larger authority. His later political and religious writings too valorized authority. It is interesting that Eliot always worked within his own cultural space: religion meant Christianity, while literature, culture and history meant exclusively European literature, culture or history. Tradition, for Eliot, means an awareness of the history of Europe, not as dead facts but as an ever-changing yet changeless presence, constantly interacting subconsciously with the individual poet.

He wants the poet to merge his personality with the tradition. "The progress of the artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality." He suggests the analogy of the catalyst in a scientific laboratory for this process of depersonalization. The mind of the poet is a medium in which experiences can enter into new combinations. When oxygen and sulphur dioxide are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphuric acid. This combination takes place only in the presence of platinum, which is the *catalyst*. But the sulphuric acid shows no trace of platinum, which remains unaffected. The catalyst facilitates the chemical change, but does not participate in it, and remains unchanged. Eliot compares the mind of the poet to the shred of platinum, which will "digest and transmute the passions which are its material". Eliot shifts the critical focus from the poet to the poetry, and declares, "Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry." Eliot sees the poet's mind as "a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together." He says that concepts like "sublimity", "greatness" or "intensity" of emotion are irrelevant. It is not the greatness of the emotion that matters, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure under which the artistic fusion takes place, that is important. In this way he rejects the Romantic emphasis on 'genius' and the exceptional mind.

Eliot refutes the idea that poetry is the expression of the personality of the poet. Experiences important for the man may have no place in his poems, and *vice-versa*. The emotions occasioned by events in the personal life of the poet are not important. What matters is the emotion transmuted into poetry, the feelings expressed in the poetry. "Emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him". Eliot says that Wordsworth's formula is wrong. (I am sure you would remember Wordsworth's comments on poetry in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*: "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling: it takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquility.") For Eliot, poetry is not recollection of feeling, "it is a new thing resulting from the concentration of a very great number of experiences . . . it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation." Eliot believes that "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." For him, the emotion of art is impersonal, and the artist can achieve this impersonality only by cultivating the historical sense, by being conscious of the tradition.

It is now generally believed that Eliot's idea of tradition is rather narrow in two respects. First, he's talking of simply the poetic tradition and neglects the fact that even the poetic tradition is a complex amalgam of written and oral poetry and the elements that go into them. It was only in later writings that he realised the fact that in the making of verse many elements are involved. In his writings on poetic drama he gives evidence of having broadened his scope.

Second, Eliot is neglecting other traditions that go into social formations. When he later wrote 'Religion and Literature', he gives more scope to non-poetic elements of

tradition. On these considerations one can say that he develops his ideas on tradition throughout his literary career – right up to the time he wrote 'Notes Towards a Definition of Culture' in which tradition is more expansive than in his earlier writings.

T.S. Eliot

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## 2.3 "THE FUNCTION OF CRITICISM"

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Early in his career, Eliot had declared, "The poet critic is criticizing poetry in order to create poetry" ("The Perfect Critic", 1920). Eliot's criticism was subsidiary to his creative writing. We can consider him Dryden's successor because his critical work serves the purpose of introducing and justifying his own practice as a poet and playwright. He also shared Dryden's classical leanings. In "The Function of Criticism" (1923), Eliot unambiguously states his views on criticism, and on the methodology it should adopt.

He begins the essay by repeating his views on tradition expressed in "Tradition and the Individual Talent". That essay postulated a certain order of literary masterpieces which constituted tradition. It is only in relation to this tradition that individual artists have their significance. He says that criticism too requires the same sacrifice of the ego.

He defines criticism as "the commentation and exposition of works of art by means of written words." Criticism, unlike literature, is not an autotelic activity, it is dependent on literature. The purpose of criticism is "the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste." Commenting on the prevailing state of criticism, Eliot bemoans the fact that criticism, "far from being a simple and orderly field of beneficent activity" is a field where critics excel in opposing each other. For Eliot, criticism should be marked by "cooperative labour." "The critic . . . should endeavour to discipline his personal prejudices and cranks . . . and compose his differences with as many of his fellows as possible, in the common pursuit of true judgement." In the New Critics in America, we find a demonstration of this co-operative venture. And much of Leavis's criticism is expressed in terms of friendly debate, as if he were discussing the work with a colleague, and trying to reach a consensus. A collection of his essays has the very apt title, *The Common Pursuit*; the title pays a graceful compliment to Eliot's theory of criticism, and also demonstrates the use of this collaborative method.

Eliot refutes a fellow critic Middleton Murray's suggestion that progress is possible by following the "Inner Voice". He believes that following the "Inner Voice" is only an excuse for "doing as one likes." He feels that Matthew Arnold is among those who value "tradition and the accumulated wisdom of time." According to Eliot, Arnold distinguishes too sharply between the "creative" and "critical", he overlooks the importance of criticism in the work of creativity. Eliot believes that "the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour: the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing: this frightful toil is as much critical as creative." He says "some creative writers are superior to others solely because their critical faculty is superior." He believes that the criticism employed by a good writer on his own work "is the most vital, the highest kind of criticism." The vast amount of critical labour may not be apparent, it may have "flashed in the very heat of creation." Just because it is not obvious, and we have no way of knowing what goes on in the mind of the creative artist, we should not assume that this critical activity is absent. Here Eliot is presenting his concept of artistic activity; in "Tradition and the Individual Talent", he had talked about "impersonality" and criticized Wordsworth's concept of poetry as a "spontaneous overflow". Here Eliot attacks the

idea that "the great artist is an unconscious artist". Art does not arise just from inspiration; a lot of effort has to go into perfecting it, "expunging, correcting, testing",

According to Eliot, "The critical activity finds its highest, its true fulfilment in a kind of union with creation in the labour of the artist." It follows that creative artists would be the best critics: He admits that at one time he believed that "the *only* critics worth reading are the critics who practised and practised well, the art of which they wrote." He says that what gives the practitioner's criticism its special force is his "highly developed sense of fact." The best critics can make nebulous feelings into something "precise, tractable, under control."

Eliot then considers the importance of interpretation. A critic may feel that he has the true understanding of a work, but there is no way of confirming this interpretation. Eliot feels that such interpretations are of no use; far more useful would be to put the reader in possession of facts about the work to enable him to respond to it fully. "Interpretation is only legitimate when it is not interpretation at all, but merely putting the reader in possession of facts which he would otherwise have missed."

Eliot has already said that criticism is a common pursuit. Now he tells us how to go about it. "Comparison and analysis, I have said before, and Remy de Gourmont has said before me, are the chief tools of the critic." But one must know what to compare and what to analyze, we should not reduce it to a mechanical exercise, counting the "number of times giraffes are mentioned in the English novel." He is against interpreters who can find things in the poem which are not there. He uses the metaphor of medical dissection to emphasize his point: "Comparison and analysis need only the cadavers on the table; but interpretation is always producing parts of the body from its pockets, and fixing them in place." The text is compared to the dead body on the operation table; when an interpreter puts ideas of his own making into the reading of the poem, he is compared to a doctor bringing in parts from outside when conducting a post mortem. Eliot feels that anything which produces "a fact even of the lowest order about a work of art" is better. With a trace of wit, he states, "We assume, of course, that we are masters and not servants of facts, and that we know that the discovery of Shakespeare's laundry bills would not be of much use to us." But he adds that we should reserve judgement on the futility of research, it is possible that some genius may appear in the future who would make good use of even trivial facts. He feels that "facts cannot corrupt taste", but impressionistic criticism, expressing opinion or fancy (he suggests Coleridge's comments on *Hamlet* as an example) can be harmful. He ends the essay by warning us against an ever present danger of criticism: "the multiplication of critical books and essays may create . . . a vicious taste for reading about works of art instead of reading the works themselves, it may supply opinion instead of educating taste."

Eliot anchors criticism squarely in the text and is wary of opinionated views. In this respect Eliot echoes some contemporary theorists who believe that a text is animated by the reader and the critic only facilitates the exercise.

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## 2.4 "THE DISSOCIATION OF SENSIBILITY" AND "THE OBJECTIVE CORRELATIVE"

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In "The Frontiers of Criticism", a lecture delivered at the University of Minnesota in 1956, T.S.Eliot referred to "a few notorious phrases which have had a truly embarrassing success in the world" (*On Poetry and Poets*: 106). He had in mind "the dissociation of sensibility" and "the objective correlative". These phrases occur in the essays on the Metaphysical poets and *Hamlet* respectively, but the concepts can be

found in some other essays too. Students should read some other essays of Eliot; do not confine yourself to the material provided in the reader. Most of the essays collected in *On Poetry and Poets* are quite interesting. The book provides a cross-section of his work over the years, and we can see the slight changes in Eliot's critical stance over four decades. The two essays on Milton (the first one written in 1936, the second in 1947) reveal how his work has become more conventional over the years, he is no longer an iconoclast. The essay on "Johnson as Critic and Poet" (1944) would be a good aid to your study of the critical work of Dr Johnson. Of the essays in the first section of the book (I hope you will read "What is a Classic?", "Poetry and Drama" and "Three Voices of Poetry") the most interesting is "The Frontiers of Criticism". Eliot provides a fine overview of his own achievement as a critic, and a survey of literary criticism in the first half of the twentieth century.

Eliot's essay, "The Metaphysical Poets", was occasioned by H.J.C. Grierson's anthology, *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*. Eliot begins by pointing out that it is "extremely difficult to define metaphysical poetry." There are marked individual differences among the poets of the period: Donne (and Marvell and Bishop King after him) have a late Elizabethan quality, reminiscent of Chapman. The courtly poetry is in the tradition of Ben Johnson, while the devotional verse of Herbert, Vaughan and Crashaw represents a third strain. One of the devices characteristic of Metaphysical poetry was the "elaboration of a figure of speech to the farthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it." Eliot examines such a Metaphysical conceit from a poem by Donne, but observes that a similar telescoping of images can be found in Shakespeare and later playwrights like Middleton, Webster and Tourneur.

In his search for something which would define the metaphysical school of poetry, Eliot turns to Samuel Johnson. Dr Johnson, who first called them "metaphysical poets" in his life of Cowley, criticized their poetry because "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together." He implied that the ideas are yoked together, it is not true meeting or union. Eliot defends the metaphysical poets by pointing out that "a degree of heterogeneity of material compelled into unity by the operation of the poet's mind is omnipresent in poetry." He gives an example of such a contrast of ideas by quoting a few lines from Johnson's own poem, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. He then looks at the poem "Exequy" by Lord Herbert, which is considered "metaphysical", but cannot find anything which fits Johnson's observation.

Eliot now tries a different approach; he assumes that the metaphysical poets were in the mainstream of English poetry, and their poetry was distinguished by a valuable quality "which subsequently disappeared, but ought not to have disappeared." Eliot says that these poets possessed a unified sensibility. Poets up to the seventeenth century thought and felt and saw together but then a fatal split occurred. After the triumph of scientific rationalism, poets only thought (as they did in the eighteenth century). In the Romantic period, they only felt. In the later nineteenth century there seems to be, according to Eliot, a return to thinking, or rather a confusion (and not fusion) of thought and feeling which Eliot disparagingly calls "rumination". The later Elizabethan and early Jacobean dramatists were men "who incorporated their erudition into their sensibility; their mode of feeling was directly and freshly altered by their reading and thought. In Chapman especially there is a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling, which is exactly what we find in Donne." He compares passages by Chapman and Lord Herbert of Cherbury with poetry written by Victorians like Tennyson and Browning, and finds a basic difference in sensibility. "It is the difference between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet. Tennyson and Browning are poets and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modifies his sensibility."

According to Eliot, "the poets of the seventeenth century, the successors of the sixteenth, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience. In the seventeenth century, a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered." The language became more refined, but the feeling became more crude in later poets. Eliot suggested at first that this split was "aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden." But later he recognized that the process was much more complex. In his second essay on Milton, Eliot said that "to lay the burden on the shoulders of Milton and Dryden was a mistake." The split could not be accounted for in purely literary terms, "We must seek the causes in Europe and not in England alone." But he continued to believe in this theory of dissociation of sensibility, and speculates on the difference it would have made to the course of English poetry if "the current of poetry descended in a direct line from them." He feels that we would have had poets like the metaphysicals, who are "more mature". The trouble with English poetry is that the "greatest masters of diction in our language, Milton and Dryden, triumphed with a dazzling disregard of the soul." Critics say that we should "look into our hearts and write." But Eliot feels that easy emotionalism is not the answer, the heart alone will not do, "One must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts."

Eliot feels that it is wrong to look at Donne and his school as "witty", "quaint", or "obscure", or think of them as "metaphysical". The modern poet can learn from them for they were the mainstream of English poetry. "Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity" and the poet must become more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning. He shows how French symbolist poets such as Laforgue have turned to devices which resemble the Metaphysical conceit.

Eliot's essay played an important role in rehabilitating the Metaphysical Poets. Many contemporary critics, like F.R. Leavis, agreed with his theory of the "dissociation of sensibility." Cleanth Brooks suggested that Hobbes was responsible for this dissociation, while L.C. Knights suggests that we should go further back in time, it is there in Bacon. According to Frank Kermode, we find a dissociation however far back we look; he doubts whether such a split ever occurred. He expresses his objection to Eliot's theory in a very persuasive manner in his essay "Dissociation of Sensibility: Modern Symbolist Readings of Literary History". A golden age of unified sensibility never existed. Not only in England, in other literatures too we find this nostalgia for a golden past. Eliot suggests that this dissociation happened round about the time of the English civil war. But Kermode finds that "However far back one goes, one seems to find the symptoms of dissociation -- there is little historical propriety in treating it as a seventeenth century event." Kermode feels that this theory was invented only to give weight to the Imagist theory of aesthetics.

The phrase "objective correlative" was first used by T.S. Eliot in his essay on *Hamlet*. The phrase occurs, with a very different meaning, in the American aesthetician Washington Allston's *Lectures on Art* (1850). But Eliot owes nothing to Allston -- he was not even aware that the phrase had been used. Eliot was probably influenced by George Santayana's use of "correlative objects". According to Eliot, "the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked." He gives examples of this "exact equivalence" from Shakespeare's successful plays, such as *Macbeth*: "you will find that the state of mind of Lady Macbeth walking in her sleep has been communicated to you by a skilful accumulation of imagined sensory impressions." *Hamlet* was a failure because Shakespeare had been unable to find a proper chain of events or set of words to evoke the emotions. Eliot says that in Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene, and in the speech that Macbeth makes when he hears of his wife's

death, the words are completely adequate to the state of mind, whereas in *Hamlet* the prince is "dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear."

T.S. Eliot

Before Eliot, Ezra Pound and T.E. Hulme too approached the problem of artistic representation in a similar way. Pound said that "poetry provides equations, like mathematics, but equations for emotions." T.E. Hulme (1883-1917) said in his "Lecture on Modern Poetry": "The poet is moved by a certain landscape, he selects from that certain images which, put into juxtaposition in separate lines, serve to suggest and evoke the state he feels." In Eliot's account, the artist presents the "formula" of a particular emotion. There is an "exact equivalence" between an object or situation and the emotion it is supposed to evoke.

Eliot was concerned with the problems of artistic expression. He refers to the Metaphysical Poets struggling "to find the verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling." "Tradition and the Individual Talent" had declared that artistic expression was not a simple matter of presenting the artist's emotions. He talked of a "continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality." The poet has to "transmute his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and impersonal", and this can be done only by finding an objective correlative.

Whatever may be Eliot's justification, the fact is that Eliot wanted to escape from direct expression of emotion—this is in keeping with his anti-romantic objective. But it is difficult in practice to find equivalence, if that were possible. Language would lose its suggestiveness, its power to evoke not only the feelings intended by the poet but other feelings which inhere in language as a social medium of communication.

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## 2.5 THE ACHIEVEMENT OF T.S.ELIOT AS A CRITIC

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Eliot's influence as a poet and critic has done a lot to establish a climate favorable to objective criticism, eschewing the nebulous impressionism of the preceding age. His best critical writing analyzes and clarifies the theoretical and technical problems which had a bearing on his writing of poetry. He made an important contribution to ideas concerning the integrity of poetry, the process of poetic composition, the importance of tradition to the maturing of the individual talent, the relation of the past and the present, and the fusion of feeling and thought. Eliot as a critic can be considered a successor of Matthew Arnold, because he assumed the role of a guardian of culture; like Arnold, he laid stress on impartiality, and proper evaluation of a poet. And like Arnold, he became a legislator of literary culture, as his later writings testify.

The earlier Eliot staunchly defended the autonomy of art, arguing against linking up art and religion or art and morality. But later he started believing in the importance of the poet's beliefs. R.N. Wellek points out that Eliot "advocated a double standard of criticism: artistic on the one hand and moral-philosophical-theological on the other." Eliot declared (in *Essays Ancient and Modern*, 1936) "In an age like our own . . . it is the more necessary . . . to scrutinize works of imagination, with explicit ethical and theological standards. The 'greatness' of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards; though we must remember that whether it is literature or not can be determined only by literary standards."

Many fellow critics have expressed their dissatisfaction with Eliot's criticism, in spite of its great influence. Yvor Winters categorically states, "Eliot is a theorist who has repeatedly contradicted himself on every important issue that he has touched. . . many of them [the contradictions] occur within the same book or even within the same

essay." F.R. Leavis grants Eliot's eminence as a poet, but feels that his criticism falls short of the "consciousness that one thinks of as necessary to the great creative writer." According to Leavis, "some of the ideas, attitudes, and valuations put into currency by Eliot were arbitrary." He says that "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is "notable for its ambiguities, its logical inconsequence, its pseudo-precisions, its fallaciousness, and the aplomb of its equivocations and its specious cogency" (pp. 178-79). He attacks the "falseness" of Eliot's doctrine of impersonality, and says that it is designed to eliminate the conception of the artist as an individual distinguished by his openness to life.

Lack of clarity is another common charge. W.K. Wimsatt says of "Tradition and the Individual Talent":

This celebrated early essay, despite its forceful suggestiveness, the smoothness and fullness of its definition of the poet's impersonality was a highly ambiguous statement. Therein, no doubt, consisted something of its pregnancy. In this essay as poet and critic Eliot is saying two things about three ideas (man, poet and poem) and saying them simultaneously. He is saying that a poet ought to depersonalize his raw experience, transcend the immediacy of the suffering man. At the same time, he is saying that the reader ought to read the poem impersonally, as an achieved expression, not personally, with attendant inquiries into the sufferings, the motives of the man behind the poem. The idea 'poet' as Eliot employs it in this essay is sometimes the antithesis of 'man' and sometimes the antithesis of 'poem'.

(p. 118)

The attempt to minimize the role of the poet's personality leads to confusion, as two views of the mind emerge from this essay. The mind is presented as an agent of change, it is an active force which transmutes experience, Eliot refers to "the mind which creates". But it is also referred to as a catalyst, which facilitates change without itself changing. His further statement only confuses the issue further, when he says, "the more perfect the artist the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates."

In many places there is a gap between his theoretical formulations and his practical criticism. He insisted that critics should not indulge in interpretation or judgement: "The critic must not coerce, and he must not make judgements of worse or better" (*The Sacred Wood*, p. 10). But his best essays, whether on the metaphysical poets, Marvell or Milton, make clear value judgements. Even the concept of a tradition implies an hierarchy, for it is the best works which make up the tradition that Eliot considers so important.

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## 2.6 LET US SUM UP

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T.S. Eliot's critical pronouncements stimulated a revaluation of various literary reputations. He brought about the re-appraisal of metaphysical poetry and sixteenth and seventeenth century drama. His successful practice as a poet gave special weight to his pronouncement as a critic. His later prose writing gives more attention to society and culture, and the literary essays and lectures of the later part of his life tend to be more conventional than his early work. "Tradition and the Individual Talent" presents a view of the great artist as part of tradition. Eliot refutes the concept of poetry as an expression of emotion, and lays stress on its impersonality. He used the phrase "the objective correlative" to describe how emotion can be represented in literature. "The Metaphysical Poets" presented the concept of a "dissociation of

sensibility", and declared that "poets in our civilization . . . must be difficult"; these comments shed as much light on Eliot's own poetry as on the process of literary creation. His essay, "The Function of Criticism", discusses the tools, like "comparison and analysis" which have been used by most New Critics in their analysis of literary texts.

T.S. Eliot

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## 2.7 GLOSSARY

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- autotelic:** having or being a purpose in itself, not dependent on other things for its intention or usefulness.
- Bacon:** Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Elizabethan man of letters. His *Essays* and *The Advancement of Learning* are good examples of early English prose.
- catalyst:** in chemistry, a substance that without itself undergoing any change, starts a reaction or increases the rate of a reaction; metaphorically, a person or thing that causes change.
- epigrammatic:** having the quality of an epigram, a short witty poem, proverb or expression.
- Hobbes:** Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), author of *Leviathan*, one of the earliest books of political economy.
- iconoclast:** literally, a person who breaks religious images used in worship. Now the word is more commonly used for its metaphorical meaning, a person who attacks cherished beliefs or established reputations.
- Plutarch:** The Greek historian Plutarch (c. 46-114 A.D.) wrote about important Greeks and Romans in his *Parallel Lives*. He started with contemporary historical figures like Julius Caesar and Mark Anthony, and went back to mythical figures like Theseus, in ancient Athens, and Romulus, founder of Rome. Shakespeare's Roman plays were inspired by his reading of Plutarch's *Lives*, translated into English by North.
- valorized:** to valorize is to raise the value of something, to invest it with special significance.

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## 2.8 QUESTIONS

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1. How far do you agree with Eliot's view that poetry is not an expression of personality but an escape from personality?
2. Discuss Eliot's view of the relationship between the individual poet and the tradition.
3. Write a short note on Eliot's concept of history.
4. What is Eliot's definition of criticism? What guidelines does he give for the practice of criticism?

5. Does Eliot's critical practice conform to the guidelines he has given for the critic?
6. Write short notes on
  - (a) dissociation of sensibility
  - (b) objective correlative.
7. Write a critical commentary on Eliot's essay, "The Metaphysical Poets."

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## 2.9 READING LIST

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### Part I

- Eliot, T.S. "The Function of Criticism"\*  
----- Excerpt from "*Hamlet*"\*  
----- "Tradition and the Individual Talent"\*  
----- "The Metaphysical Poets"\*  
----- *On Poetry and Poets*. London: Faber, 1957.  
----- *Selected Essays*. 1932. London: Faber, 1950.

### Part II

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## UNIT 3 F.R. LEAVIS

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### Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 "Introduction" from *Revaluation*
- 3.3 "Literary Criticism and Philosophy"
- 3.4 A Representative Essay: "Milton"
- 3.5 The Achievement of F.R. Leavis
- 3.6 Glossary
- 3.7 Questions
- 3.8 Reading List

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit, we shall acquaint ourselves with the literary criticism of F.R. Leavis. Our aim will be to evaluate his achievement as a critic, and consider to what extent he can be said to belong to the school of New Critics.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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Frank Raymond Leavis (1895-1978) was born at Cambridge, where he spent most of his life. He was educated at Perse School, and had just won a scholarship to study history at Emmanuel College when the First World War broke out. He worked as a stretcher bearer on the battlefields of France, and resumed his academic career in 1919. In his second year at Cambridge University, he moved from history to the newly introduced subject of English. He submitted his Ph.D. in 1924, and started working as a lecturer at Cambridge. He became Fellow at Downing College, Cambridge, in 1937, and was University Reader in English from 1959 to 1962. He started the literary quarterly *Scrutiny* in 1932, and edited it till it ceased publication in 1953. He wrote widely on literature as well as popular culture: publications include *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (1930), *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932), *Revaluation* (1936), *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (1948), *D.H. Lawrence: Novelist* (1955), *Dickens the Novelist* (1970, written in collaboration with his wife Q.D. Leavis) and *The Living Principle: "English" as a Discipline of Thought* (1975). *Nor Shall My Sword*, 1970.

He was above all a teacher, and preached and practised an approach to literature which advocated close attention to the text: sharp discrimination in evaluating the text was all important to him. He taught literature with a missionary zeal: he felt that the study of literature was the only thing that could save us from the dehumanisation inherent in the impersonal civilization of the technological age. He always insisted that "Literature matters because life matters." His enthusiasm drew many students to him, and his "disciples" can be found in English faculties throughout the Commonwealth. His widespread influence on English studies in the second and third quarters of the twentieth century is not due to his books alone: his classroom lectures and *Scrutiny* played an equally important role.

Leavis's early books, on the English poetic tradition, clearly show the influence of T.S.Eliot. *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932) dismissed the popular acclaim accorded to Victorian and Georgian poets. He follows Eliot in finding in the Metaphysical poets the qualities needed in modern poetry, and values Hopkins, T.S.Eliot and Ezra Pound. Leavis's concern with "concrete realization" and his emphasis on a writer's using the full resources of the English language is obvious even in this early book, in the terms in which he praises Hopkins. In his later work, Leavis repeatedly attacked Eliot's criticism, especially the theory of impersonality proposed in "Tradition and the Individual Talent". Leavis was "a man of strong convictions, and even resentments, of harsh polemical manners, who did not practice diplomacy" (Wellek, p.241). He made many enemies, especially in the literary establishment at Cambridge, and they responded by trying to marginalize him. But we need not concern ourselves with such details of his personal life and career; in this unit we shall examine his writing to try and understand how he became, with Eliot, the most influential critic of the age. His criticism of fiction owes nothing to T.S.Eliot.

His books on English fiction represent the most original part of his contribution. He recognized that the novel deserved the kind of critical attention to detail which had been given only to poetry or drama. *The Great Tradition* demonstrated that novels can, and should be, analysed in terms of the words on the page. He declared:

A novel, like a poem, is made of words; there is nothing else one can point to. We talk of a novelist as "creating characters", but the process of "creation" is one of putting words together. We discuss the quality of his "vision", but the only critical judgements we can attach directly to observable parts of his work concern particular arrangements of words -- the quality of the response they evoke. Criticism, that is, must be in the first place (and never cease being) a matter of sensibility, of responding sensitively and with precise discrimination to the words on the page. But it must, of course, go on to deal with larger effects.

Leavis hardly ever theorized. Stray thoughts on his critical method can be found scattered through his empirical work. The above piece, though it was written in the context of the study of novels, describes the method he uses in the study of a lyric, a long poem, or a play by Shakespeare. He never talks of "vision" without particular reference to the "particular arrangements of words." For him, literary criticism is primarily a question of "responding sensitively and with precise discrimination to the words on the page."

The introduction he wrote to *Revaluation* is one of the few occasions when he has discussed his methodology. The correspondence with R,n, Wellek (published in *Scrutiny* and reprinted in *The Common Pursuit*) is another rare instance. Let us examine these two pieces of writing. Then we shall read a chapter from *Revaluation*, to get a taste of Leavis's typical aggressive mode of criticism, designed to provoke controversy and debate.

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### 3.2 "INTRODUCTION" FROM REVALUATION

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In his introduction, Leavis tells us that the book was written as a companion piece to *New Bearings in English Poetry*, published four years earlier. That book described contemporary poetry. *Revaluation* is its complement, an account of the past of English poetry, for a "full perspective" can be provided only if the present is correlated with the past. Leavis says that it is "the business of the critic" to see the poetry of the present as the continuation and development of the past. The poetry of the past is alive

only in terms of its relevance to us, the present day readers. He plans to present the main lines of development of English poetry, from Shakespeare to Keats. Any worthwhile criticism has to be from a clearly defined point of view. Leavis's perspective, naturally, will be of a person living in the present, though he will try to make it "as little merely individual" as possible. Needless to say, in the last report, he becomes very personal in his judgements and valorizes these judgements as beyond dispute.

He next takes up the question of method. "No treatment of poetry is worth much that does not keep very close to the concrete." The critic should work in terms of "particular analysis--analysis of poems or passages, and to say nothing that cannot be related immediately to judgements about predicable texts." This is the method he has used in all his criticism. Even studies of long novels like *Middlemarch* are distinguished by the way he never strays from the text. Every critical study by Leavis is full of quotations: he never makes a general statement unsupported by lines from the text. Ian MacKillop compares his technique to that of a lecturer who illustrates his talk with visuals: projected slides, and now transparencies or graphics. In *Revaluation*, for instance, he can make evaluative comparisons by juxtaposing one extract with another. For instance, the drawbacks of Shelley's play *The Cenci* are fully demonstrated when he places extracts from Shelley side by side with the Shakespearean passages which inspired them. The method makes for a very lively presentation, full of wit and humour.

He proposes to discuss tradition not as an abstract concept but in terms of the concrete. Just as he evaluates an individual poet in terms of representative pieces of his work, "one deals with tradition in terms of representative poets". He then briefly justifies his choice of poets, and the pages he devotes to them. He has devoted a chapter to "The Line of Wit" rather than to Donne because he has received a lot of attention as the most important of the Metaphysical poets (Leavis must have been thinking of critical studies by T.S.Eliot, H.J.C.Grierson and Helen Gardner). Dryden, a relatively simple poet, has received more attention than he deserves, but the range of Pope's poetry has not received its due, so he has a chapter on Pope. There is no chapter on Shakespeare, because Leavis feels that "Shakespeare is too large a fact to be dealt with in that way." But the book is full of recurrent references to him. There is no chapter on Spenser because his place in the tradition is clear; his influence is brought out through incidental references to him in the chapters on Milton and Keats. There are individual chapters on Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats, but none on the Victorians, because "they do not lend themselves readily to the critical method of this book." Leavis feels that the defect is not in the method but in their poetry, "their verse doesn't offer, characteristically, any very interesting local life for inspection."

Every chapter in *Revaluation* has many "Notes"; these appendices help to clarify points raised in the main essay. Thus many poets not treated in detail in the chapter (Blake, Byron and his satire, Coleridge etc.) are the objects of very interesting comments in the notes, which are sometimes small chapters in themselves.

Leavis ends the "Introduction" with his concept of how a critic should function. His duty is "to perceive for himself, to make the finest and sharpest relevant discriminations, and to state his feelings as responsibly, clearly and forcibly as possible." Leavis's own work is marked by force and clarity. He believes that even if the critic is wrong in his valuation, he has served the business of criticism, because he is open to correction, he has profitably participated in the debate. Criticism is "the profitable discussion of literature." He stresses the importance of collaboration.

### 3.3 LITERARY CRITICISM AND PHILOSOPHY

The essay "Literary Criticism and Philosophy", first published in *Scrutiny* in 1937, was a response to R. n. Wellek's suggestion that Leavis should spell out the theoretical basis of his criticism. After reviewing *Revaluation*, the eminent critic and literary historian Wellek wrote:

Allow me to sketch your ideal of poetry, your "norm" with which you measure every poet: your poetry must be in serious relation to actuality, it must have a firm grasp on the actual, of the object, it must be in relation to life, it must not be cut off from direct vulgar living, it should be normally human, testify to spiritual health and sanity, it should not be personal in the sense of indulging in personal dreams and fantasies, there should be no emotion for its own sake in it. . . but a sharp, concrete realization, a sensuous particularity. The language of your poetry must not be cut off from speech, should not flatter the singing voice, should not be merely mellifluous. . . . I would ask you to defend this position more abstractly.

(*Scrutiny* 5, March 1937)

Wellek has provided a good summary of Leavis's assumption derived from his critical practice. In his reply, Leavis expresses his views on the discipline of literary criticism, and pleads that by making precise discriminations, he has advanced theory, "even if I haven't done the theorizing." Leavis says that literary criticism is a "distinct and separate discipline", quite different from philosophy and its abstract speculations. The reading demanded by poetry is of a different kind from that demanded by philosophy. The critic is the ideal reader of poetry. The critic is (of course) concerned with evaluation, but judgement is not a question of applying an external "norm". The critic's aim should be to realize as completely and sensitively as possible the experience that is given in the words. "The business of the literary critic is to attain a peculiar completeness of response". A critic should observe a strict relevance in developing this response into commentary, and guard against premature generalizing.

Leavis defends his practice by pointing out that his critical assumptions are implicit in his work. "If I avoided such generalities, it was because they seemed too clumsy to be of any use. I thought I had provided something better." He feels that the best way of presenting theoretical principles is to show them at work in practical criticism. He believes in working in terms of "concrete judgements and particular analyses". Leavis thinks of criticism as a cooperative effort, in terms of discussing the text with fellow critics. His method, to quote him, is "'This--doesn't it?--bears such a relation to that; this kind of thing--don't you find it so--wears better than that' etc."

To reduce his principles to abstract statements would be to take away their precision, and make them "clumsy and inadequate". Leavis wrote that he believes in demonstrating his critical principles, not in stating them: "I do not argue in general terms that there should be 'no emotion for its own sake, no afflatus, no mere generous emotionality, no luxury in pain and joy'; but by choice, arrangement and analysis of concrete examples I give those phrases a precision of meaning they couldn't have got in any other way. There is, I hope, a chance that I may in this way have advanced theory, even if I haven't done the theorizing."

Yet in his own way, Leavis does offer a 'theory' even though it is not conceptualized. The assumptions which guide his judgement of poets and novelists are the nearest to a framework even if they cannot be abstracted into a philosophical theory.

### 3.4 A REPRESENTATIVE ESSAY: "MILTON"

Leavis looked upon criticism as "the common pursuit of true judgement" . . . a place for quiet cooperative labour" (in the words of T.S.Eliot). Many of his essays begin with a discussion of other critics' views: he either corroborates or violently disagrees. The second chapter of *Revaluation*, "Milton's Verse", begins with quoting Eliot, Middleton Murry and Alan Tate. Leavis supports Eliot's denunciation of Milton, and takes issue with Tate who believes that if we do not like Milton, it is because we are prejudiced against his mythology. Leavis maintains that his dislike of Milton is based purely on his antipathy to his verse, Milton's beliefs have nothing to do with it. He criticizes the monotony of Milton's verse: "reading *Paradise Lost* is a matter of resisting, of standing up against, the verse movement, of subduing it into something tolerably like sensitiveness, and in the end our resistance is worn down; we surrender at last to the inescapable monotony of the ritual." And Leavis immediately quotes a passage from the text. He analyses some lines from the end of Book I, and demonstrates how "the usual pattern of Milton's verse has here an unusual expressive function", quite different from the usual movement, which is just a ritual. The verse movement in the rest of the poem does not contribute to the meaning, it is a fixed, repetitive movement.

Eliot had used the word "magniloquence" for Milton's verse, and Leavis develops this charge by means of suitable illustrations. When we call verse magniloquent we mean that it indulges in outward show, it is not doing what it purports to do, it is hollow. It suffers from "a certain sensuous poverty". He takes a passage by Milton himself, from his masque *Comus*, marked by sensuous richness. Leavis picks out lines and phrases to demonstrate the "Shakespearean life" of the passage, created by telescoping diverse associations. "The texture of actual sounds, the run of vowels and consonants" plays an essential part in the effect of the passage, but this verbal music should "not be analysed in abstraction from the meaning." The total effect is that the reader is aware of a tissue of feelings and perceptions, the words withdraw themselves from our attention. Milton's use of words is quite different in *Paradise Lost*, where Milton's seems to be "focusing rather upon words than upon perceptions." The medium itself calls for attention. Milton "exhibits a feeling *for* words rather than a capacity for feeling *through* words."

Leavis ascribes the failure of Milton's verse to its remoteness "from any English that was ever spoken." According to Leavis, subtlety of movement in English verse depends upon the play of natural idiomatic speech against the verse structure. No such play is possible in *Paradise Lost*, because, unlike Shakespeare, idiomatic speech is completely absent. Milton does not bother about "the intrinsic nature of English", he had renounced the English language, and wrote it as if it were Latin. Leavis consistently lays stress on using the full resources of the English language; he places a high value on the poetry of Hopkins (in *New Bearings* and other articles) because he exploits the native resources of the language.

Milton belongs to the tradition of Spenser. They use a diction remote from speech, dominated by a concern for mellifluousness. There is no pressure behind the words. Leavis repeatedly contrasts this usage with the Shakespearean use of English, "in the essential spirit of the language", making full use of its "characteristic resources." Donne and the Metaphysical poets, and later Keats, belong to this tradition. And Leavis clarifies his assertion by quoting passages from Donne and Milton.

He ends the essay by asserting Shakespeare's incomparable superiority. He quotes G.Wilson Knight, the eminent Shakespearean critic, who looked upon a play as an extended metaphor. He praises the structural unity of Shakespeare's plays, and

condemns critics who praise the "architectonic" power of *Paradise Lost*. With a touch of wit, Leavis says that the only architectural analogy he can find for Milton is with bricklaying. Laying bricks is a purely repetitive activity, where the semi-skilled labourer mechanically puts down line after line of bricks. Leavis suggests that Milton's verse is equally monotonous and mechanical.

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### 3.5 THE ACHIEVEMENT OF F.R. LEAVIS

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Leavis is in the "great tradition" of English literary criticism, which can be traced from Dryden, Pope, Dr Johnson, Coleridge, and Matthew Arnold. He is especially close to Dr Johnson in laying stress on the moral value of a work of literature. He lives up to Arnold's ideal of objectivity, comprehending the work "as in itself it really is." *New Bearings* and *Revaluation* have rewritten the history of English poetry from a quasi-new critical perspective. His criticism of fiction was a pioneering attempt to win for fiction the kind of verbal analysis which earlier critics had reserved for poetry, he never talked vaguely about characters or structures. No matter what the genre, Leavis always supports his arguments with quotations from the text. This facilitates critical debate: even where we disagree with his valuations (as in his glorification of all aspects of the writings of D.H. Lawrence), his approach serves to draw attention to the text, and enhance our response to it.

Leavis was always wary of theorizing. He constantly emphasized his lack of interest in abstract principles, and recommended a purely empirical textual approach to literary criticism. Ideological critics like Eagleton have pointed out that disowning ideology is itself a kind of ideology. As Catherine Belsey says "There is no practice without theory, however much that theory is suppressed, unformulated or perceived as "obvious" (p.4). According to her, Leavis believed in expressive realism, the practice of reading that the New Critics attacked. Expressive realism is the theory that literature reflects the *reality* of experience as it is perceived by one (especially gifted) individual, who *expresses* it in a discourse which enables other individuals to recognize it as true. In the article "Henry James and the Function of Criticism" (reprinted in *The Common Pursuit*), for instance, Leavis grounds his discussion of what he finds most valuable in James's work on unquestioned expressive-realist presuppositions. The novels he most admires are praised for "the vivid concreteness of the rendering of this world of individual centres of consciousness we live in" (p.231). There is a marked tendency to blame the personal failings of Henry James for the inadequacies in his work.

Catherine Belsey has pointed out a major failing: "In Leavis's criticism in general there is a recurring slide from text to author which manifests itself in a characteristic way of formulating his observations" (p.12). A weakness of the chapter on Shelley in *Revaluation* is the way he slips into condemning the personality of Shelley, from analysing the poetry. Leavis did not believe in the rigid separation of artist and work advocated by Eliot; he believed that masterpieces drew their moral intensity from the artist's openness to life. He says of the great novelists in the opening chapter of *The Great Tradition*: "They are all distinguished by a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity" (p.17).

Raman Selden prefers to categorize Leavis as a "moral critic", rather than among the New Critics. He has pointed out that Leavis's form of close reading differs from the American New Criticism's methods in its stress on "sensibility". The New Critics were committed to an "objective" form of textual analysis. Moral criticism is the most natural of critical practices, and the least explicit theoretically. Its concepts and values are implicitly connected with human experience. Leavis assumes that their validity is

self evident, and does not care to examine concepts like "maturity", "seriousness", "wholeness", "authenticity", "sincerity" or "life". His criticism rests on intuitive values grounded in social commitment to concrete actualities of living. Values are intuitive and felt, never discussed in the abstract. Concreteness is a major value in criticism and in literature. He believes that literary texts are not reducible to abstract summary or to generalized statement. (The American New Critics also laid stress on this view.) The tragic quality of a Shakespeare play is something inseparable from the poetic language of the play: it is "enacted".

C.D.Narasimhaiah, a self-confessed admirer of Leavis, has pointed out a major drawback in his work, his insularity:

While his main approach to literature is that of a collaborator, of the Indian *sahrdaya*, there are some significant gaps in Leavis's critical positions, that is, for an Indian who believes in the validity of his own tradition--the gap is not one of sensibility or self-contradictions or modes of approach to a work of art. No critic of standing in our times or before has made fewer mistakes than Leavis in these respects and when it came to *demonstrating* the value of a work of art by his incisive analysis, Leavis is still unsurpassed. Where correctives are needed, for the Indian reader at least, is in the Englishness of his outlook, an Englishness which took the form of: "Such prepotency as this country may hope for in the English-speaking world of the future must lie in the cultural field and that it should exert such a prepotency — as focus of the inner life of cultural tradition is very much to be desired" (*Education and the University*, 1943). Now the dangers of such self-glorification in matters of culture should be obvious to Leavis himself, in retrospect. It is amazing that Leavis who did so much to teach the sharpest and subtlest kinds of discrimination in reading should not have contributed vigorously to breaking the insularity of the Englishman, and that he who did so much to advance the Arnoldian function of criticism should have in practice minimized the importance of the international perspective in the study of literature. (pp.76-77)

And yet one is not surprised in the kind of interest--it is a major interest--he took in Conrad and Henry James. Conrad is a Pole but to Dr Leavis the secret of the strength of Conrad is in the British Merchant Navy which made him the great novelist that he is. Similarly James: his interest in James is an interest in the English scene--that James was after all a naturalized Englishman and as a novelist he is in the line of Jane Austen and George Eliot who constitute for Leavis a major part of the Great tradition. And yet the "Great Tradition" took singularly little notice of the greatness of Melville or Faulkner, the incomparably greater Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. His admirers would like to think his recent essay on *Anna Karenina* is an effort at making some amends in that direction." (p.78).

The narrow range of Leavis's sympathies are obvious even without any reference to the Indian viewpoint. He values only realist art, of the kind we find in Shakespeare or the nineteenth century novel. One may liken him to Lukacs who also had a puritanical disregard for everything non-realistic. He is hostile to modernism or verbal experimentation: he has a low opinion of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, but exalts D.H.Lawrence as the greatest novelist and literary critic of the century. He also ignores literatures of other countries, the only exception being the essay on *Anna Karenina* and a late interest in Eugene Montale. He may have had genuine scruples about analysing texts in translation, but he is silent about literature written in English in Australia, Canada, Africa, the Caribbean or India. His stray comments on American literature fail to do justice to great novelists like Melville or Mark Twain. He ignored the discipline of comparative literary studies. This is a charge that can be

brought against the New Critics in general: poetry was their first concern, which might be the cause of their preoccupation with texts in English.

In spite of his insularity, Leavis has had a lasting effect on English literary criticism. His recourse to practical criticism rather than theory has had wide-ranging pedagogical significance. His demonstration of the actual organization of the poem and the way language created what it conveyed in the poem shows the new critics' theory at work. He insistently pointed to the poem as an object in front of us, rather than other things which had figured prominently in literary criticism, such as the biography of the poet, the background material, the ethos, the message, or the philosophy related to the work. Leavis established the importance of the intrinsic, rather than the extrinsic study of literature.

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### 3.6 GLOSSARY

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|                       |                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>architectonic:</b> | relating to architecture, construction.                                                                                                                            |
| <b>insularity:</b>    | literally, quality of belonging to an island; the attitude of a person who is narrow minded, cut off from others, not caring about the culture of other countries. |
| <b>magniloquent:</b>  | speaking in a grand and pompous style, meant to produce an effect; bombastic, inflated speech.                                                                     |
| <b>prepotency:</b>    | abstract noun from <b>prepotent</b> , greater than others in power and influence.                                                                                  |

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### 3.7 QUESTIONS

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1. Attempt an appraisal of F.R. Leavis's achievement as a literary critic.
2. How far do you agree with the opinion that Leavis's values are moral rather than aesthetic?
3. Write a note on Leavis's critical method.
4. Do you think Leavis's critical practice was influenced by T.S.Eliot?
5. René Wellek says, "*Revaluation* can be described as an application of Eliot's methods and insights to the history of English poetry." How far do you agree with this view?
6. "Leavis was primarily an iconoclast." Discuss.
7. Is Leavis a puritanical moral critic? Give reasons for your answer.

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### 3.8 READING LIST

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#### Part I

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## UNIT 4 JOHN CROWE RANSOM AND CLEANTH BROOKS

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### Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 John Crowe Ransom: Introduction
- 4.2 "Criticism Inc."
- 4.3 Other Essays by J.C.Ransom
- 4.4 The Achievement of J.C.Ransom
- 4.5 Cleanth Brooks: Introduction
- 4.6 "Irony as a Principle of Structure"
- 4.7 Other Essays by Cleanth Brooks
- 4.8 The Achievement of Cleanth Brooks
- 4.9 Glossary
- 4.10 Questions
- 4.11 Reading List

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit, we shall examine the contribution of John Crowe Ransom and Cleanth Brooks to literary criticism. We shall make a detailed study of one important essay by each of them. Though they had a lot in common, there is some difference in their critical approaches, as we shall see.

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### 4.1 JOHN CROWE RANSOM: INTRODUCTION

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John Crowe Ransom (1888-1974) was born in Pulaski, and received his bachelor's degree from Vanderbilt University in 1909. He was a Rhodes Scholar at Christ Church College, Oxford, and took a degree there in 1913. After service in the First World War he returned to Vanderbilt University, where he taught till 1937. He was a leading member of the group of writers known as the Southern Agrarians or Fugitives (after a poetry magazine *The Fugitive* co-founded by Ransom and Allen Tate). This group, which included Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren, is identified with the rise of New Criticism in America. They shared religious, political and cultural convictions of a conservative character, with a special allegiance to the American South. Many leading poets of the period, such as Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, Robert Penn Warren and Randall Jarrell considered him their mentor. He made his mark as a poet, though he was not very prolific. He shared T.S.Eliot's anti-romantic, neo-classical stance. Ransom's organic theory of poetry is well illustrated by his own practice as a poet.

As critic, poet, teacher and editor, Ransom was widely respected and influential. In 1937 he moved to Kenyon College, Ohio. He was the founder-editor of the *Kenyon Review*, one of the most successful literary quarterlies of the time, which played an important role in disseminating the ideas of the New Critics. His first important book, *The World's Body* (1938) saw poetry as taking on some of the tasks performed by religion in the previous ages. He believed that poetry embodied the world by summoning creation in all its variegated detail and natural organic form. *The New*

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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### 4.1 JOHN CROWE RANSOM: INTRODUCTION

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John Crowe Ransom (1888-1974) was born in Pulaski, and received his bachelor's degree from Vanderbilt University in 1909. He was a Rhodes Scholar at Christ Church College, Oxford, and took a degree there in 1913. After service in the First World War he returned to Vanderbilt University, where he taught till 1937. He was a leading member of the group of writers known as the Southern Agrarians or Fugitives (after a poetry magazine *The Fugitive* co-founded by Ransom and Allen Tate). This group, which included Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren, is identified with the rise of New Criticism in America. They shared religious, political and cultural convictions of a conservative character, with a special allegiance to the American South. Many leading poets of the period, such as Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, Robert Penn Warren and Randall Jarrell considered him their mentor. He made his mark as a poet, though he was not very prolific. He shared T.S.Eliot's anti-romantic, neo-classical stance. Ransom's organic theory of poetry is well illustrated by his own practice as a poet.

As critic, poet, teacher and editor, Ransom was widely respected and influential. In 1937 he moved to Kenyon College, Ohio. He was the founder-editor of the *Kenyon Review*, one of the most successful literary quarterlies of the time, which played an important role in disseminating the ideas of the New Critics. His first important book, *The World's Body* (1938) saw poetry as taking on some of the tasks performed by religion in the previous ages. He believed that poetry embodied the world by summoning creation in all its variegated detail and natural organic form. *The New*

*Criticism* (1941) does not discuss contemporary criticism in general, Ransom writes about three critics: I.A.Richards, T.S.Eliot and Yvor Winters.

John Crowe Ransom  
and Cleanth Brooks

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## 4.2 "CRITICISM INC"

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"Criticism Inc." which was first published in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* in 1937 makes a strong plea for the development of literary criticism as a distinct discipline in universities. It expresses the New Critics' concept of what criticism should be—a collaborative effort in the elucidation and evaluation of literary texts, including contemporary works. He attacks other rival approaches: historical scholarship, impressionistic, emotional appreciation, and the various kinds of criticism which focus on the abstracted content of a work of literature instead of the work itself.

The essay begins by reviewing the current state of criticism: "critics nearly always have been amateurs", they feel that no special training is needed to be a literary critic. According to Ransom, the critic needs the kind of competence that three different people possess: the artist, the philosopher, and the university teacher of English. But each profession has its drawbacks. The artist's evaluation is intuitive, he cannot explain it to others; however, practitioners often make the best critics as T.S. Eliot also believed in his later writings, because they have a good command of the language. The philosopher knows the function of the fine arts, but his theory is too general—he cannot appreciate the technical effects. He has no intimate knowledge of particular works of art, and his generalizations are drawn not from observation and study, but from other generalizations. The professors should take charge of critical activity, but they are not critical enough. They are learned men who are ready to spend a lifetime in compiling the data of literature, but they avoid making literary judgement. Ransom insists that it is the duty of the university professors to set up proper standards of criticism. Criticism should be developed by the systematic effort of learned persons, and the proper place for this is the university. (When we read this, we should keep in mind the fact that most universities in England and America did not offer English studies as a discipline till the second quarter of the twentieth century. Cambridge University offered courses in classical languages, in the history of the English language and Old English, but the school of English was established only after the First World War. In the nineteen-thirties, American universities would offer courses in literary history, but nothing in criticism or twentieth century literature.)

Though Ransom suggests that criticism should be made scientific, he does not mean that it can ever be an exact science. What he means is that it should be systematic, and professionals should take charge of it. Hence the title of the essay: he wants criticism to be established as a profession, "what we need is 'Criticism Inc.'", he says. In India, when serious entrepreneurs establish a company, they engage professionals to run it, and it is called "Ltd." (short for "Limited"). In America, the preferred term is "Inc.", an abbreviation for "Incorporated", which is added to the name of a company. For example, you have "The New India Assurance Company Ltd." or "Sun Microsystems Inc."

He gives due credit to R.S.Crane, Professor at the University of Chicago, (who led a group called the "Chicago Critics"); he was the first of the professors to advocate the study of criticism as an academic discipline. In his influential article, "History versus Criticism in the University Study of Literature" (first published in 1935), Crane said that the emphasis must be shifted to the critical from the historical in literary studies.

Ransom attacks other contemporary schools. The Humanists (Irving Babbitt, W.C.Brownell and Paul Elmer More, among others) had adopted an approach

different from historical scholarship; but they failed to provide objective criticism, they were engaged in advocating a certain moral system. For Ransom, "Criticism is the attempt to define and enjoy the aesthetic or characteristic values of literature", but the preoccupations of Irving Babbitt are ethical, not literary. Another diversion from objective evaluation of literature is provided by the Leftists or Proletarians; these Marxist critics want literature to "serve the cause of loving-comradeship", they are not interested in literary values, the last a judgement only vulgar Marxists and not genuine Marxist critics would endorse.

He advocates an autonomous school of English studies; it should not be a branch of the department of history, or of the department of ethics. It is wrong to think that just anybody, without specific training, can be a critic. He gives examples from other fields: in economics, chemistry, sociology, theology or architecture, criticism of the performance is in the hands of men who have had formal training in its theory and technique. Literary criticism, too, should be a specialized discipline.

In the third section of the essay, he considers what the duties of a critic should be. Departments of English have to communicate the understanding of literature, but professors should not content themselves with just reading the text well, hoping that the students will somehow learn to appreciate it. A teacher who stops with exposing students to the text is compared to the curator of a museum, who shows works of art to an audience. He is not an instructor. Historical scholarship is important; but it is not the end, it is only instrumental. Like linguistic study, historical study is a necessary aid, it is indispensable for a true understanding of the text. "We can never have too much of it" declares Ransom, "if the critical intelligence functions, and has the authority to direct it."

In Section IV, Ransom sets out to define criticism. He proceeds by explaining "what criticism is not". He begins by excluding book reviews, and (following Crane,) works of historical scholarship and Neo-Humanism. He presents a list of six items which he considers to be not literary criticism:

1. Personal registration. Describing the effect of the work of art on the reader cannot be considered literary criticism. Criticism should be concerned with describing "the nature of the object rather than its effects on the subject". This is a point developed fully by Wimsatt and Beardsley in "The Affective Fallacy". To say that the reader is moved to tears is not an analysis of the text. Ransom says that even Aristotle succumbed to this fallacy in his theory of "catharsis", though other parts of the *Poetics* present fine objective criticism of tragedy. Judging by effects denies the autonomy of the work. A text is something which exists for its own sake. Ransom warns us against using words loosely. We should not ascribe qualities to the object which actually apply to the subjective effect: moving, exciting, entertaining, pitiful etc.
2. Synopsis and paraphrase. It may be necessary to discuss the content of a work when analysing it, but we must always keep in mind that the story or the plot is an abstract, the true content of a work cannot be isolated from it. Discussing the synopsis of a novel or the prose paraphrase of a poem does not amount to literary criticism.
3. Historical studies. Understanding the general literary background, the author's biography, autobiographical evidence, bibliographical items, and knowledge of the literary originals can all be useful aids to literary criticism, but they do not constitute it.

4. Linguistic studies. Studies concerned with meaning of words and idioms ensure that criticism is based on proper understanding of the text. But linguistic studies alone cannot produce a critic.
5. Moral studies. Individual readers will apply their own moral standards; it may be the Christian ethic, it may be Aristotelian, or Marxist. But the moral content should not be taken as the whole content of the work. Criticism is concerned with the whole content.
6. Any other special studies. Various departments can find relevant material in literature: works can be written from the point of view of sociology, geography, law etc. Discussions of Milton's geography, or Shakespeare's understanding of the law, do not constitute literary criticism. It can be considered literary criticism only when the critic discusses the creative writer's literary assimilation of material pertaining to other disciplines, he can analyse how Milton's or Shakespeare's knowledge of geography or law has become part of his poetry.

In Section V of his essay, Ransom discusses the critical act. He believes that book reviewing cannot be an act of purely literary criticism, because the reviewer has the responsibility of presentation and interpretation as well as criticism. Criticism is an important part of book reviewing, but it involves other things as well, such as telling the reader about the book itself (presentation) and discussing the main themes of the book ("explication").

Studies in technique are an important mode of literary criticism. Thus a critic of poetry would discuss the devices such as metre, inversion, tropes, inventions etc. which differentiate it from ordinary prose. The good critic is not content with just listing the separate devices, he discusses their function. The critic should regard the poem as a metaphysical manoeuvre — Ransom has written elsewhere about his concept of poetry, and we shall read excerpts from his essay on poetry in the next section (4.5). The poet presents a total poetic or individual object which tends to be universalized. The critic has to identify the logical object or universal, and the dense technical structure in which it is enmeshed. According to Ransom, there are two aspects to a poem: "the prose core", the universalized object, and the "differentia, residue or tissue which keeps the object poetical or entire." In a later essay, "Criticism as Pure Speculation", he uses the terms "structure" and "texture" for the same concepts. He feels that this two-fold construction is true of other forms of literature, such as fiction, as also the non-literary arts (like painting, sculpture, music etc).

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### 4.3 OTHER ESSAYS BY J.C.RANSOM

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Some other essays that Ransom wrote were quite influential. In this sub-unit, we shall take a brief look at two of them, "Poetry: A Note on Ontology" and "Criticism as Pure Speculation".

"Poetry: A Note on Ontology" is an important chapter in *The World's Body* (1938). In it, he expresses his concept of poetry. He says that poetry can be divided into three major types, physical poetry, Platonic poetry and metaphysical poetry. Physical poetry deals with things. The Imagists wrote physical poetry, and attempted to present "things in their thinginess". Ransom uses the German word *Dinglichkeit* for "thinginess". Platonic poetry is the poetry of ideas. No poetry can be purely of one type; physical poetry tends to employ ideas, while Platonic poetry dips heavily into the physical. In the third section of this essay (included in your **Reader**), Ransom

talks of the relationship between science and poetry. Science gratifies a practical or rational impulse, while art gratifies a perceptual impulse. The poet develops many techniques for attaining his purpose; Ransom mentions three of them, metre, fiction and tropes. Metre impresses us as a way of regulating the material. The second device, which Ransom calls fiction, is the poet's consciousness that art is different from the life of action. Art sets out to create an "aesthetic distance" between the object and the subject. The "reality" or "authenticity" of art is different from scientific reality, it is one degree removed from actuality. The third device is tropes. There are various other devices used by the poet, but Ransom wishes to concentrate on figures of speech. He considers metaphor the most important figure of speech, and he believes that the third kind of poetry, metaphysical poetry, was created by developing the use of metaphor. Here it is useful to mention that tropes in Ransom do not acquire the same semantic baggage as they do in contemporary critical theory, particularly in de Man.

Dr Johnson popularized the term "Metaphysical Poetry", but he probably took the term from Pope, and Dryden, who said of Donne that "He affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign." Ransom points out that in Dryden's time, metaphysical meant "supernatural, miraculous". In describing Metaphysical Poetry, Ransom endorses Eliot's theory of the "dissociation of sensibility". He says that Dryden and Milton were the poorer for repudiating this miraculism. His admirer Cowley initially used metaphysical conceits, and later repudiated them and even wrote an ode in extravagant praise of "Mr Hobs". Ransom believes that Hobbes, and Bacon before him, were responsible for the suppression of the spirit of miraculism. The name stood for common sense and naturalism, the monopoly of the scientific spirit over the mind.

Metaphysical poetry is the most original and exciting period of English poetry. Ransom goes on to present an original analysis of the poems of the period. According to him, metaphysical effects may be large scale, or small scale. If Donne and Cowley illustrate the small scale effects, the use of conceits, Milton exhibits large scale, scriptural miraculism. Ransom stands apart from Eliot and Leavis in praising Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but he agrees with them about the degeneration of sensibility in the romantic and Victorian ages. The nineteenth century was half-heartedly metaphorical, it was the age of the simile, not the metaphor. The seventeenth century was pithy and original in its poetic utterances, the nineteenth was verbose and predictable. Ransom quotes from poems to justify his stand.

In a later essay, "Criticism as Pure Speculation" (1941), Ransom proposed his most widely known idea, the dichotomy of structure and texture. He said, "A poem is a logical structure having a local texture." By "logical structure" Ransom means the logical, rational argument, while "texture" is the presentation of the qualitative density of the world. The structure is the story or object or situation, which gives us the "argument" of the poem. The texture is the "thingness" of the things by which it is particularized. This dichotomy is a bit like the old form-content duality, though Ransom always insisted that "the texture is ubiquitous" meaning that it is the felt quality of the experience described. Metaphor is the main element in poetry, as we have seen in the terms in which he praises the Metaphysical Poets in the essay "Poetry". He said, "Texture is the thing that particularly qualifies a discourse as being poetic". He rejects organicism in poetry; he believes that "a poem is much more like a Christmas tree than an organism." In "Criticism as Pure Speculation", he says that a poem is like a house with the paint, paper and tapestry compared to the texture, and the roof and beams to the structure:

Apparently, it had a plan or a central frame of logic, but it also had a huge wealth of local detail which sometimes fitted the plan rationally, or served it, and sometimes subsisted comfortably under it

#### 4.4 THE ACHIEVEMENT OF J.C. RANSOM

John Crowe Ransom can be considered the father of New Criticism in America not just for his books, *The World's Body* and *The New Criticism*, but because of his influence as a teacher and poet. Leading critics like Allen Tate and Cleanth Brooks were his students at Vanderbilt University. As founder of the School of Letters at Kenyon College in Ohio, he invited leading critics of the day to conduct classes each summer in the theoretical and practical criticism of literature; he did a lot to make literary criticism an accepted academic discipline. Under his editorship from 1939 to 1959, the *Kenyon Review* became a leading forum for New Critics.

Ransom was not only the leader of the group of critics, he was also its outstanding theoretician. His concern with poetic structure and texture, with its corollary of close textual reading, and his pre-occupation with the autonomy of art, have been the central concerns of the New Critics. His "structure-texture" theory of poetry ("A poem is a logical structure having a local structure") reappears in a slightly different form in Cleanth Brooks' concept of paradox and irony, or Allen Tate's theory of tension. As is natural for a poet critic, he wrote in defense of his own poetic craft; his own poems were born of a balancing of sound and meaning, the tension between sound and sense. He recognized the binary nature of art, the complex relationship between theme and style, and rejected the organicist concept of style as meaning. He used the word "ontology" in a new sense. Ontology deals with the general formal categories or characteristics, a concern which is almost opposite to Ransom's concern with the qualitative aspects of the world. Ransom calls a knowledge of the world of things (things include not only inanimate objects but also precious objects of our affection like father and mother, nation, church, God, even one's own house). Ransom uses "ontology" as a synonym for any concern with actual reality. The function of poetry is to celebrate the concrete, it is concerned with "investing with body". He plays down the personality of the poet. He sharply differed from I.A. Richards in having no use for affective theories. The New Critics were never unanimous in their approach, and Ransom has differences with Cleanth Brooks too. Though he praised Brooks as "the most expert living reader or interpreter of difficult verse" (in the second issue of *Kenyon Review* published in 1940), Ransom disagrees with his preoccupation with paradox, wit and irony. "Opposites can never be said to be resolved or reconciled merely because they have got into the same poem" (*The New Critics*, p.95).

#### 4.5 CLEANTH BROOKS: INTRODUCTION

*Cleanth Brooks* (1906-) was born in Murray, Kentucky. He studied at Vanderbilt University (he was a student of Ransom), Tulane University, and as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University. He was a leading member of the Fugitives (also called the Southern Agrarians). *The Southern Review*, edited from 1935 to 1942 by Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, was the principal critical organ of this group. He was professor of English at Louisiana State University, and later at Yale. From 1964 to 1966 he was cultural attaché, at the American embassy in London.

His best known work is the collection of critical essays, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947). An earlier book, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939) presented a revised history of English poetry; it resembles *Revaluation* (1936) by F.R. Leavis in emphasizing the tradition of wit in seventeenth century English poetry. Brooks has written with distinction on fiction also; *William Faulkner: the Yoknapatawpha Country* (1963) is the best of his later work.

*Understanding Poetry* (1938) edited in collaboration with Robert Penn Warren, has had a profound influence on the teaching of poetry, as it was adopted as a textbook in many American universities. The work, a critical anthology, contains some of the best practical criticism of individual poems that the New Critics have produced. Along with *Understanding Fiction* (1943), it introduced their methodology to a whole generation of American students of literature. *Literary Criticism: a Short History* (1957) was written in collaboration with W.K. Wimsatt; it has become indispensable to students as a concise guide to literary criticism in the West from the beginnings to the nineteen-fifties. (We shall study some important essays by Wimsatt in Unit 5).

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#### 4.6 "IRONY AS A PRINCIPLE OF STRUCTURE"

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In 1948, Brooks published an article, "Irony and Ironic Poetry". "Irony as a Principle of Structure" is an expanded version, published in 1951. By then, New Critical methods had found acceptance. This article is representative of his approach; like Leavis, Brooks never indulges in generalities, but works only through concrete examples. His theoretical essays are full of perceptive close readings of a variety of texts, though his partiality for Metaphysical poetry is obvious.

Brooks begins his essay on irony by laying stress on the importance of metaphor. He says that the poet can reach the universal only through the particular. The poet does not begin with an abstract theme; the only valid method is to start with individual details, and then work towards general meaning. He seems to echo Blake's stance, that the artist works through "minute particularities". Brooks uses a memorable simile, that of a kite flying. The long tail of the kite, though it adds to the weight of the kite, gives it stability and direction. He compares the kite to the universal meaning, and the tail to the particular details which weigh it down. Just as the kite's flight would be without direction without the tail, the poet can say things only through metaphor. Direct statement leads to abstraction, and "takes us out of poetry altogether".

Brooks believes in "a principle of indirection". The statements and images in a poem are in an organic relationship, with one part qualifying and adding meaning to the other. The elements in a poem are the different parts of a plant, such as the roots, the stalk and the leaves which produce a beautiful flower. The elements are not separate beautiful things, like the flowers in a bouquet. You can make a bouquet by placing together different beautiful flowers, side by side. But a finished poem is the flower itself, produced by the interaction of different elements. Another simile he uses is that of drama; "the poem is like a little drama". The total effect of a drama is the result of the combination of the different elements in it -- the different characters, lines, dramatic movements on the stage etc. Just as there are no superfluous actors in a good play, a good poem has no unnecessary lines.

**Context** is the most important thing in determining meaning. When we take a close look at memorable lines of verse, we realize that they draw their poetic quality from the context. Brooks refers to Shakespeare's "Ripeness is all". These famous lines from the play *King Lear* get their full meaning only when we read them in the context of the play, as an expression of the wisdom Lear acquires through suffering. He takes another example from the same play, the line "Never, never, never, never, never" to show how context can load even ordinary phrases with meaning. He generalizes and declares that the part "is always modified by the pressure of the context."

In the ordinary sense of the word, we refer to a statement as "ironical" when it is obviously modified by the context. He quotes a simple example of sarcasm, the statement "this is a fine state of affairs" when we mean just the opposite. But irony

can take forms other than sarcasm. He gives the example of some lines from Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* which use rhetorical questions. (A rhetorical question is one to which the answer is obvious, instead of stating it, the writer phrases it as a question.) Even in its conventionally recognized forms, irony has a wide variety, such as tragic irony, self-irony, playful irony, mocking irony, or gentle irony.

Brooks feels that there can be no statement which does not employ irony, if we use irony to mean the modifying force of the context. Perhaps only statements of a science like mathematics, "Two plus two equals four" or the Pythagoras Theorem (about the properties of a right-angled triangle) are unqualified by any context, they are true no matter where they occur. These statements are abstract, they possess only denotations. But connotations and multiple meanings are important in poetry. So Brooks declares, "poems never contain abstract statements." Any statements made in a poem should be read as if it were a speech in a drama, the context is all important. The importance of the context is a very important aspect of poetry. Brooks presents an analysis of Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" to show how the poetic "truth" of the statement in it (that the world "hath really neither joy nor love nor light . . .") should be considered only in terms of the context, who the dramatic speaker is, whom he is addressing, and the circumstances in which he makes the statement. We should see "whether the statement grows properly out of a context."

The best poems are ironical, in the sense that they are able to fuse the discordant elements in them. They approach Richards' "poetry of synthesis". The stability of such poems is like the stability of an arch. In architecture, the very force of gravity which pulls stones to the ground is used to support the stones in an arch. The structure of the ironical poem is one of thrust and counterthrust.

Brooks analyzes many poems to illustrate his view. Well known poems like Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" or Walter Raleigh's "Nymph's Reply" (written in answer to Marlowe's famous "Come Live with Me and Be My Love") contain obvious ironies. According to Brooks, even simple poems like the Elizabethan lyric have this structure, and make full use of "irony"; words acquire their meaning only because of the context, every part of the poem is modified by other parts. He presents a fine analysis of Shakespeare's song "Who is Silvia" (from the play *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*) in support of his stance.

According to Brooks, all good poems contain ironic complexity. A poem by Shakespeare may not be a convincing example, because he was a contemporary of the metaphysical poets. So Brooks chooses examples from another period, and analyzes two of the Lucy poems of Wordsworth. In the poem which begins, "She dwelt among the untrodden ways", Brooks draws our attention to the images of the violet and the star. Wordsworth is content with simply placing Lucy, the violet and the star side by side, he does not develop the contrast as Donne would have. But the contrast, with its potential irony, is present in the poem. The critic says that there can be no "Act of Uniformity" in the world of poetry, yet all poets, to a greater or lesser degree, take recourse to irony. He presents a close reading of another Lucy poem, "A slumber did my spirit's seal" to show how all good poems have a dynamic structure of thrust and counterthrust. Each part of a poem modifies and is modified by the whole. He says that people may object to his finding ironical possibilities in Wordsworth, because his poetry is supposed to be "simple" and "spontaneous". Brooks points out that "spontaneous" applies to the way he may have composed his poems. Such a theory should not be allowed to intrude into our reading of the poem. "A theory as to how a poem is written is being allowed to dictate to us how the poem is to be read." His objections tie up with what has come to be known as the "intentional fallacy" (examined in the next unit).

According to Brooks, irony, "taken as the acknowledgement of the pressures of context", is to be found in every period and even in simple lyrical poetry. Irony is especially important in the modern age, when the public has been corrupted by Hollywood films and pulp fiction. He takes up a poem by Randall Jarrell (a modern American poet) to prove his point. The basic theme of the poem "Eighth Air Force" is the goodness of man, and the guilt felt by the airmen, can they be considered murderers? The question is not of our personal beliefs, whether we believe in the innate goodness of men. The poem should dramatize the situation so accurately that we can participate in the poetic experience. Poetry does not confront us with abstract themes, but with "many-sided, three-dimensional" experiences. Even the resistance to abstraction plays a part in the poetic process. And Brooks goes back to the metaphor of the kite, with which he started the essay. A kite, skillfully controlled, rises up against the thrust of the wind.

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#### 4.7 OTHER ESSAYS BY CLEANTH BROOKS

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In many other essays, Brooks has discussed the importance of the indirect method for poetry. "The Language of Paradox" (first published in 1942, subsequently as the first chapter of *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947)), thinks of literary language as conveying a special kind of meaning or knowledge, different from that of science, which is one-dimensional and unambiguous. He says, "Paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry. 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." After examining a sonnet by Wordsworth and Gray's *Elegy*, he presents a close reading of "The Canonization" by John Donne, his favourite poet.

Another important article by Brooks is "The Formalist Critic" (excerpts have been included in your Reader). He presents the basic assumptions of the New Critics, "Literary criticism is a description and evaluation of its object". It concerns itself with the work of art itself. In reply to those who argue that the work should not be isolated from the author's life or the readers and their response, he replies that biography and history may be interesting, but "they should not be confused with an account of the work. Such studies describe the process of composition, not the structure of the thing composed, and they may be performed quite as validly for the poor work as the good one. They may be validly performed for any kind of experience -- non-literary as well as literary". Brooks implies that it is the duty of the critic to be concerned with value judgements; he should examine the value of a literary work, and whether a work is literary or non-literary.

He observes that the formalist critic (by which he means the New Critic) makes two assumptions: (1) the author's intention as *realized* is the "intonation" that counts. And (2) the formalist critic assumes an ideal reader, that is, instead of focusing on a range of possible readings, he attempts to find a central point of reference from which he can focus on the work itself. In answer to the objection that there is no ideal reader, Cleanth Brooks grants that "there is no ideal reader, of course." But he defends the New Critic by saying that it is "a defensible strategy" adopted by all critics for the purpose of focusing on the poem instead of his own reactions. Laying stress on the reader means that "we move from literary criticism into socio-psychology". He sums up their avoidance of the intentional fallacy and the affective fallacy in these words: "The reduction of a work of literature to its causes does not constitute literary criticism, nor does an estimate of its effects".

"The Heresy of Paraphrase" is another of his famous essays. He lays stress on the specificity and verbal density of poetry. Poetic language cannot be translated into

prose statements. The meaning of a poem cannot be reduced to anything outside the poem, whether it is an experience, an idea or an intention. To take the example of "Ode to a Nightingale" by John Keats: it cannot be reduced to statements about life and death. If we try to consider the theme in isolation from the poem, we remove all the poetic texture which makes the poem what it is. The poetic texture does not simply ornament the prose core of meaning, it conveys the poet's realization of a complex human response to life. Content and form are inseparable. To paraphrase a poem is not literary criticism. In "The Heresy of Paraphrase" he lays stress on irony and the organic structure of a poem, and uses the same metaphor as in "Irony as Structure", and says, "The essential structure of a poem resembles that of architecture or painting." His close reading of Marvell's "Horatian Ode" shows that the New Critics did not ignore historical considerations. He recognizes that the critic must know the linguistic context and know what words meant at a particular period, and some knowledge of history is essential to understand a poem concerned with historical figures such as Cromwell and Charles I. But even in such a poem the most important thing is the poetic organization, which accommodates paradox, irony and ambiguity.

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#### 4.8 THE ACHIEVEMENT OF CLEANTH BROOKS

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Cleanth Brooks is best known for his brilliant and sensitive close readings of the text presented in books like *The Well-Wrought Urn* and *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*. His comments as a theoretician are always supported by close readings, in a style reminiscent of Leavis. He believes in the unity of a poem not as something mechanical, but as something organic, with each part modifying and being modified by the whole. He is very conscious of the creative tension inherent in a work of art, and talks of paradox, ambiguity and irony. According to him, "The work of art is a pattern of resolutions, and balances and harmonizations." He believes that poetry gives knowledge, but it is a special kind of knowledge, not that of science. Scientific statements do not derive their meaning from the context, a statement like "Two plus two is equal to four" is an abstract statement which has the same meaning in every context. All good poems employ irony, which Brooks defines as "a general term for the kind of qualification which the various elements in a context receive from the context". In his critical practice, he examines the interaction not only of words but of motifs, themes, metaphors and symbols.

He wants a poem to be judged in its totality as a poem: it is wrong to equate a poem with its prose meaning, its paraphrase. Poetry is not an abstract statement about experience, it is itself an experience. In *The Well-Wrought Urn*, he has shown that his concept of poetry as irony applies not just to Donne and the Metaphysical Poets, but to the most diverse poets: Shakespeare, Milton, Herrick, Pope, Gray, Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson and Yeats. He was generally in agreement with other New Critics like Ransom, Wimsatt and Allen Tate, and spoke for all of them in "The Formalist Critic". Brooks shares Eliot's critical doctrines: the impersonal theory of art, the dissociation of sensibility (which Brooks blames on Hobbes) and the view of tradition.

The achievement of Brooks as a critic of fiction and criticism also deserve mention. He is the author of two well researched books on Faulkner. He wrote extensively on other critics, in essays and articles and in *Literary Criticism A Short History*. According to René Wellek, to whom it is dedicated, Brooks wrote the last section, devoted to twentieth century criticism, in this collaborative effort. The rest of the book was primarily Wimsatt's contribution. In his comments on other critics, ranging from A.C. Bradley to Northrop Frye, Brooks is eminently fairminded and text-oriented. He faithfully presents their views, even though he differs from them.

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## 4.9 GLOSSARY

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|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Act of Uniformity:</b> | In seventeenth century England, there was a law by which all worshippers had to follow the same prayers and rituals in church.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>American South:</b>    | The southern states of the U.S.A, also called the Confederate States. In 1860, the American Civil War started because they broke away from the union. They were unhappy with President Lincoln's move to abolish slavery, because their economy was dependent on slave labour. The novelist William Faulkner is the most famous writer from the American South. |
| <b>Idiosyncratic:</b>     | highly individualized, eccentric. Having a very personal, peculiar view of things.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>laryngeal:</b>         | pertaining to the larynx, the upper part of the windpipe, the throat. By "visceral or laryngeal reaction" Ransom means physical sensations, such as a feeling at the bottom of one's stomach, a thrill down the spine or a lump in the throat.                                                                                                                  |
| <b>ontology:</b>          | the science that treats of the principle of pure being; that part of metaphysics which deals with the nature and essence of things.                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>trope:</b>             | a figure of speech, in which a word or expression is used in other than its literary meaning. Nowadays we use it in the sense of an over-arching, inclusive metaphor.                                                                                                                                                                                           |

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## 4.10 QUESTIONS

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1. Discuss the contribution of either Ransom or Cleanth Brooks to literary theory and practice.
2. Do you agree with the view that all the American New Critics were influenced by Ransom?
3. What does Ransom mean when he advocates "Criticism Inc."?
4. Discuss the ideas expressed by Cleanth Brooks in his essay "Irony as a Principle of Structure".
5. Do you agree that "The Formalist Critic" by Cleanth Brooks is a kind of manifesto of the New Critics?

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## 4.11 READING LIST

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### Part I

Brooks, Cleanth. "The Heresy of Paraphrase", "The Language of Paradox" in *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947.

----- \*"The Formalist Reader", *Kenyon Review*, No. 13 (1951) pp.72-81.

----- \*"Irony as a Principle of Structure" in *Literary Opinion in America* ed Morton D. Zabel

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, eds. *Understanding Poetry*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1938.

----- eds. *Understanding Fiction*. Henry Holt and Co., 1943.

Cleanth Brooks and William K. Wimsatt Jr. : *Literary Criticism: A Short History*. 1957. Reprint: New Delhi: Oxford and I.B.H. Publishing Co., 1970.

Ransom, John Crowe. "Criticism as Pure Speculation". In *The Invention of the Critic*, ed. D.A. Stauffer. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1941.

----- *The New Criticism*. New York: New Directions, 1941.

----- \*"Criticism Inc.", and \*"Poetry: A Note on Ontology", *The World's Body*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938.

## Part II

Kohli, R.K. "John Crowe Ransom's Defence of Poetry". *Indian Response to American Literature* ed C.D.Narasimhaiah (New Delhi: USEFI, 1967), pp.271-293.

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## UNIT 5 W.K. WIMSATT

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### Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 "The Intentional Fallacy"
- 5.3 "The Affective Fallacy"
- 5.4 The Achievement of W.K. Wimsatt
- 5.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.6 Glossary
- 5.7 Questions
- 5.8 Reading List

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### 5.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit, we shall read two important essays written by Wimsatt in collaboration with his friend Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy". These essays sum up one of the basic tenets of the New Critics regarding the objectivity of critical activity. Because they touch upon many other aspects of literary criticism, such as the question of meaning and interpretation, and the role of the reader, they initiated a debate which continued well into the 1970's. We shall also discuss the relationship between the New Critics and contemporary literary theory, when we talk about the achievement of Wimsatt.

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### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

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**William K. Wimsatt** (1907-1975) was professor of English at Yale, where he had been teaching since 1939. He was an authority on eighteenth century English literature: his first important book, *The Prose Style of Samuel Johnson*, was published in 1941. *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (1954) and *Hateful Contraries: Studies in Literature and Criticism* (1965) bring together some of the articles which first appeared in journals. *The Portraits of Alexander Pope* (1965) collects the known portraits of Pope, and examines the complex relationship between the poet and his painters. *Literary Criticism: a Short History* (1957) was written in collaboration with **Cleanth Brooks** (whom we discussed in Unit 4). It has become indispensable to students as a concise guide to literary criticism in the West.

The two essays, "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy", were written in collaboration with Monroe C. Beardsley. Beardsley (b.1915) has taught philosophy and aesthetics at Yale University, Mount Holyoke College, Swarthmore College and Temple University. His publications include *Aesthetic Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (1958) and *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present* (1966).

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### 5.2 THE INTENTIONAL FALLACY

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**B**y artistic intention, we mean the design or plan in the artist's mind. Critics and poets from **Longinus** to Wordsworth and Coleridge, and even early twentieth century critics like **Benedetto Croce** believed that in order to judge the poet's performance, we must know what he intended. They feel that we must evaluate the work of art by seeing

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whether the artist achieved his intention. This school of thought has been challenged by the New Critics, who argued that the artistic intentions of the creator are not relevant when judging a work of art. The New Critics' standpoint has been expressed forcefully by Wimsatt and Beardsley.

W.K. Wimsatt

In an article on "Intention" written for an encyclopedia of literary criticism, *The Dictionary of World Literature* edited by Joseph T. Shipley (New York, 1942), Wimsatt and Beardsley had argued that "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art." The essay, "The Intentional Fallacy", (first published in 1946 in *The Sewanee Review*), works out the full implications of this statement. The critic's view of authorial intention has an effect on every aspect of literary criticism. By intention is meant "the design or plan in the author's mind", and the author's "attitude towards his work, the way he felt, what made him write."

Let us first understand what they say in the essay. They begin with a series of propositions which they think are axiomatic. There are five points, of varying length; I shall follow the numbering they use:

1. Wimsatt admits that a poem does not come into existence by accident or by itself. The words are written by the poet, his intentions have brought the poem into being, they can be considered the *cause* of the poem; but the intention cannot be the *standard* by which the critic judges the poem.
2. Moreover, there are practical difficulties in the critic determining the poet's intentions. "How is he to find out what the poet tried to do?" The poem is the only evidence before us. If the poet succeeded in doing it, the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. If the poet did not succeed, it is absurd for the critic to look outside the poem for an intention which is not effective in the poem. The critic should not go to other sources to find out what the writer wanted to say.
3. Wimsatt and Beardsley make a categorical declaration of the New Critic's stance on literary appreciation: they give a great deal of importance to judgement. As they put it, "Judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. One demands that it work." Just as we do not enquire about the intention of a cook, what kind of pudding he had in mind, it is irrelevant to enquire into what kind of poem the author wanted to write. It is only because an artifact works that we can infer the intention of its creator. "A poem should not mean but be" wrote the poet Archibald MacLeish, as the concluding lines of his poem 'Ars Poetica' (The Art of Poetry) published in 1926. A poem simply is, there is no point in asking what part is intended or meant. Poetry is a feat of style by which a complex of meaning is handled all at once: a multiplicity of meanings at different levels can be presented in a poem, and poetry succeeds primarily because it excludes all irrelevant material. In this respect, artistic creation differs from practical messages, which have just one meaning; Ordinary discourse is different from poetry; it is more abstract, and is successful only if we correctly infer its intention.
4. A poem can be about a state of mind or a personality rather than a physical object like an apple. But this personality, these thoughts and attitudes belong to the character, "the dramatic *speaker*", not to the author.
5. An author may improve his work by revision. But we cannot say that he has achieved his intention better, because he has written a better poem; his former intention was expressed in the earlier version. The revised version would be

expressing a different intention, for we cannot look for the intention as something outside the poem.

They quote Professor Stoll of the "intentionalist school" who says that the critic should not explore his own consciousness; he should determine the author's meaning or intention, for "the poem is not the critic's own". The New Critics retort by pointing out that a poem is not the critic's own and not the author's: "The poem belongs to the public". It is an autonomous unit; "it is detached from the author at birth". Once he has published a poem, it no longer belongs exclusively to the author, he can no longer control it.

Wimsatt and Beardsley go on to consider the views of other critics and reviewers, such as Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. In his review of the article on "Intention" (which appeared in *The Dictionary of World Literature*) he said that there are two kinds of enquiry about a work of art: (1) whether the artist achieved his intentions (2) whether the work is worth preserving. According to him, the first is artistic criticism, while the second is not criticism of a work of art as a work of art, it is moral criticism. But Wimsatt and Beardsley reject his stance; they point out that no moral considerations are involved in judging the value of art, "objective criticism of works of art as such" is the only method of judging.

"The Intentional Fallacy" started a profound debate on various aspects of literary criticism, including meaning and interpretation. The most important of these articles, by critics like E.D. Hirsch, Morse Peckham, Graham Hough and George Watson have been reprinted in the book, *On Literary Intention* edited by David Newton de Molina. The book also contains Wimsatt's own reply to the ongoing debate, "Genesis: A Fallacy Revisited", which was first published in the book *The Discipline of Criticism: Essays in Literary Theory, Interpretation and History* edited by Peter Demetz, Thomas Greene and Lowry Nelson (Yale University Press, 1968). Wimsatt clarifies some points of his first essay; Beardsley believes that any work which successfully achieves what it set out to do can be considered skillful; but the term applies to the artist himself, not the work. A murderer who successfully plans and executes a murder can be considered "skillful".

To discuss the problems of adducing the intentions of the author from outside sources, he takes the case of the poem "The Raven" by Edgar Allan Poe. Poe wrote a long article, "The Philosophy of Composition", explaining why he chose that particular theme and form. But it would be wrong to consider "The Raven" a good poem simply because it fulfills his stated objectives. Once we look outside the poem for its intention, there can be no end to our search. In Poe's own case, the essay was written *after* he had published the popular poem, it cannot be a valid guide to his intention because it is "an ex post facto invention and a tongue-in-cheek tour de force".

In the second section of "The Intentional Fallacy", the critics show that it is part of the romantic tendency to consider poetry as an expression of the poet's soul. Longinus defines sublimity as "the echo of a great soul." In the nineteenth century, Goethe expressed the intentionalist stance with great clarity, when he asks, "What did the author set out to do? . . . how far did he succeed in carrying it out?" Croce, too, lays stress on seeing a work of art "as its author saw it in the moment of production." The third section is devoted to the testimony of poets. Wimsatt and Beardsley admit that they might have much useful advice for the budding poet, but the "judgment of poems is different from the art of producing them." Poets do not occupy a privileged position when it comes to judging poetry: Socrates observes that poets themselves cannot talk well about poetry, others have "talked better" about the meaning of difficult passages written by diverse poets.

Section IV cautions against confusing personal studies (literary biography) with poetic studies. It discusses the use of evidence for understanding the meaning of a poem. Evidence can be of three types :

- (1) Internal evidence for understanding a poem is knowledge which is in the public sphere: knowledge discovered through the semantics (the meaning of the words) and the syntax (the order of the words) of a poem.
- (2) External evidence is private, and not part of the poem. It consists of revelations, in journals or letters or reported conversations, about how or why the poet wrote the poem.
- (3) An intermediate kind of evidence about the character of the author or about private or semi-private meanings attached to words or topics by an author or the coterie of which he is a member.

They believe that the critic should use only the first type. But they do not completely rule out the third type. In some cases, "the use of biographical evidence need not involve intention, because while it may be evidence of what the author intended, it may also be evidence of the meaning of his words and the dramatic character of his utterance." They believe that "the meaning of words is the history of words, and the biography of an author, his use of a word, and the associations which the word had for *him*, are part of the word's history and meaning." They add in a footnote that if we are free of the intentionalist bias, the history of words *after* a poem is written can contribute meanings relevant to the original pattern. To illustrate their stand, they cite explications of Coleridge and John Donne. John Livingston Lowes' *Road to Xanadu* (1926) uses the second and third types of evidence; as a consequence, Lowes's explication throws attention on the poet Coleridge rather than on the poem "Kubla Khan". The critique of Donne's poem is so involved with the new astronomy of his time and its effect on Donne's theological beliefs that it distorts the poem. In the later essay, "Genesis: A Fallacy Revisited" he gives the example of Blake's poem, "London", where the poet's private meaning, as inferred from external evidence, clashes with the public material of his poem. If we give more weight to private meaning, as E.D. Hirsh does, our reading of the poem suffers.

The last section of the essay looks at the question of "allusiveness" in Eliot's poetry, where a false judgment is likely to involve the intentional fallacy. The allusions work best when we know them, but they work to a great extent even when we do not know them. This is because of their suggestive power. But intentionalists would insist on reading the notes (provided by Eliot himself), and then judging the poems in the light of these notes. Wimsatt believes that notes should be used only as a crutch to understanding. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", there is the line, "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each", and we wonder whether it is an allusion to Donne's line, "Teach me to hear mermaids singing" (from his song "Go and Catch a Falling Star"). Wimsatt declares that there are two ways of solving the problem:

- (1) the way of poetic analysis and exegesis, which enquires whether it makes any sense if Eliot-Prufrock is thinking about Donne. This is the true and objective way of criticism.
- (2) the way of biographical or genetic enquiry, where the critic in the spirit of a man who would settle a bet, writes to Eliot (who was still alive) asking him if he had Donne in mind. Eliot's answer (if he cared to answer) would have nothing to do with the poem itself, for it is not a critical enquiry.

Wimsatt and Beardsley insist on the objective reality of the poem. A work of art emerges from the private, intentionalistic realm of its maker's mind and personality,

but after emerging, it enters a public and objective realm. It claims attention from an audience, and invites discussions about its meaning and value. The author is likely to be a good guide for interpreting its meaning, but he cannot be an infallible guide. As a commentator on his own works he enjoys no prescriptive, or creative, rights. As an example, they take the case of the poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": Eliot is not an oracle to be consulted.

"Genesis: A Fallacy Revisited" makes some important clarifications. Wimsatt says that their statement should have read: "The design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging either the meaning or the value of a work of literary art." Their argument against interpretation based on a poet's "intention" does not refer to intention as found in, or inferred from, the work itself. Their stand is supported by the critical practice of F.R. Leavis, who declared that intentions are relevant only in so far as they are realized in a work of art. Such an analysis can extend to conflicts of intention found in a given work. An example is Blake's comment that "Milton was of the Devil's party without knowing it". This is an argument which can be carried on within the poem itself, without appealing to Milton's own rebellious personality.

T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis, two leading critics of the time, supported Wimsatt's stand. Eliot's statement in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that "Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry" is an indirect attack on Intentionalism. In *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* he is more direct, when he says, "I prefer not to define, or to test poetry by means of speculations about its origins; you cannot find a sure test of poetry, a test by which you may distinguish between poetry and mere good verse, by referring to its putative antecedents in the mind of the poet." F.R. Leavis takes an uncompromising stance regarding the importance of the social context of a poem. In the article, "The Responsible Critic" (first published in 1953 in *Scrutiny* Vol. 19) he attacks F.W. Bateson's suggestion that we must fully understand the "complex of religious, political and economic factors that can be called the social context" to achieve a correct reading of a poem. Leavis declares, "It will not, I think, be supposed that I should like to insulate literature for study, in some pure realm of 'literary values' (whatever they might be. But on the one hand it is plain to me that no poem we have any chance of being able to read as a poem requires anything approaching the inordinate apparatus of contextual aids to interpretation that Mr Bates sees himself deploying. On the other hand it is equally plain to me that it is to creative literature, read as creative literature, that we must look for our main insights into those characteristics of the social context that matter most to the critic."

Newer schools of literary criticism have objected to this stance. One of the most cogent refutations has been provided in E.D. Hirsch, who regrets the "heavy and largely victorious assault on the sensible belief that a text means what its author means." In essays like "In Defence of the Author", "Objective Interpretation" and "Three Dimensions of Hermeneutics", he refutes Wimsatt on hermeneutical grounds. Interpretation is a necessary part of evaluation, and we cannot understand a poem's meaning without understanding his intention. Hermeneutics has established that there can be more than one interpretation of a text, and Hirsch says that the most valid meaning is that of the author. The original meaning is the best meaning. "Unless there is a powerful overriding value in disregarding an author's intention (i.e. original meaning), we who interpret as a vocation should not disregard it" he asserts in his essay "Three Dimensions of Hermeneutics". He disagrees with Wimsatt's assertion that "poetry differs from practical messages." In "The Intentional Fallacy" Wimsatt wrote that "poetry differs from practical messages, which are successful if and only if we correctly infer the intention." Hirsch feels that "No literary theorist from Coleridge to the present has succeeded in formulating a viable distinction between the nature of ordinary written speech and the nature of literary written speech. . . there is no viable

distinction between 'literature' and other classifications of written speech, the ethics of language hold good in all uses of language, oral and written, in poetry as well as in philosophy. All are ethically governed by the intentions of the author."

W.K. Wimsatt

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### 5.3 "THE AFFECTIVE FALLACY"

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"The Affective Fallacy", first published in 1949, presents a theoretical formulation of another aspect of the New Critics' attempt to objectively focus on the work itself: they feel that the critic should not be concerned with the emotional effect of the work on the reader. The affective fallacy, like the intentional fallacy, is another obstacle to objective criticism. The intentional fallacy represented a confusion between the poem and its origin, the mistaken attempt to judge a poem by its causes. The affective fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its results. The intentional fallacy tried to derive its standards of judgment from the poet; the affective fallacy tries to derive its standards from the psychological effects of the poem, and ends in impressionism and relativism. The outcome of both fallacies is that attention is deflected from the poem itself. The essay briefly discusses the history of such criticism, beginning with the question of meaning.

In the "The Affective Fallacy", the authors disagree with the theories of I.A. Richards. Richards in *Principles of Literary Criticism*, and *The Meaning of Meaning* makes a clear distinction between the emotive and referential uses of language. In *Practical Criticism*, he had proposed "four kinds of meaning", and his semantic researches were taken up by Chase, Hayakawa, C.L. Stevenson and others. Wimsatt and Beardsley point out that Richards uses the term "meaning' loosely. The term meaning has been traditionally assigned to the cognitive or descriptive function of language, and it would have been better if Richards had employed some other term such as "import". When Richards mentions "feeling' as one of the kinds of meaning, and mentions words like "liberty', "pleasant" 'beautiful' or "ugly", he neglects the descriptive meaning of the words, he is concerned only with the emotive *response* which these words may evoke in a listener. Richards and his followers are guilty of not realizing the difference between the "grounds of emotion and emotion themselves".

Semantic writings also tend to ignore other facts: (1) a large area of emotive *import* depends directly upon descriptive meaning and (2) a great deal of emotive *import* which does not depend directly on descriptive meaning depends on descriptive *suggestion*. After discussing various semantic experts' views on meaning, they conclude that none of them has offered conclusive evidence "that what a word does to a person is to be ascribed to anything except what it *means*, or if this connection is not apparent, at the most, by what it *suggests*. The kind of emotive meaning propounded by these semanticists leads to one kind of affective relativism in poetics, the personal. If emotional response is independent of the cognitive quality of the context, a reader can feel either "hot" or "cold", report either "good" or "bad" on reading either "liberty" or "licence", either an ode by Keats or a limerick. Similarly anthropologists can encourage another type of affective relativism, the cultural or historical, by advocating the measurement of poetic value by the degree of feeling felt by the readers of a given era. Just as intentionalistic poetics was encouraged by historians and biographers, the affective fallacy will be encouraged by historians who will be interested in whatever can be discovered about the personal responses of Shakespeare's audience.

In the third part of the essay, Wimsatt and Beardsley deal with the history of affective theory. Plato's comments, and Aristotle's counter-theory of catharsis, are an early instance of emotive criticism. Longinus and his followers in the eighteenth century, Tolstoy and his infection theory, Saintsbury and his "Grand Style", and now I.A.

Richards and Max Eastman all believe that poetry should be judged by the emotional effect it has on the reader. Affective criticism can even have a physiological form: the emotional effect of the poem can be manifested by physical symptoms of the reader, such as the bristling of the skin or a shiver down the spine.

In the fourth section, the authors have shown how the affective theory has produced very little practical criticism. Longinus, the author of "On the Sublime" is least convincing when he tries to link up passion and sublimity with hyperbole in speech. We still do not have a clear account of Aristotle's concept of *catharsis*, critics are still debating whether the term applies to the thing purged or the object purified. The critical practice of I.A. Richards in *Practical Criticism* has little to do with his affective theory of synaesthesia. The purely affective report is either too physiological or it is too vague.

Richards has anticipated some of the problems of affective criticism by saying that it is not intensity of emotion that characterizes poetry, but the subtle quality of patterned emotion. We have psychological theories of aesthetic distance, detachment or disinterestedness. Criticism on these principles tends towards objectivity. Richards' theory of balanced emotions has contributed much to recent schools of cognitive analysis, or paradox, ambiguity, irony and symbol. The emotive and cognitive forms of criticism need not be very far from each other. If the affective critic ventures to state with precision what a line of poetry does, it will be a description of what the meaning of the line is. The more specific the account of the emotions induced by a poem, the more nearly it will be an account of the reasons for emotion, the poem itself. It will supply the kind of information which will enable readers to respond to the poem better, and the critic can fulfill his role as teacher or explicator.

"The Affective Fallacy" attacks the vague emoting about poetry, or Richards' "balancing of impulses". Poetry relates more to knowledge than to emotion. Wimsatt is suspicious of terms like the sublime, or rapture (derived from Longinus) or "the grand style." and insists that "a poetry of pure emotion is an illusion" (Section V). He declares that the important thing is the poet itself, not its cause ("intention") or its effect.

In these two famous essays, he pays no attention to the question of audience. But his critical practice was quite conscious of it, in his essays on comedy or on Pope. In the "Introduction" to *The Verbal Icon* he writes: There are certain poems in which a particular dramatic listener (poems of a lover to his mistress, for instance) has a great deal to do with determining a certain kind of style, a certain kind of structure, a certain kind of metaphor. Other poems we may conceive as poems for a sex, a caste, a party. *The Rape of the Lock* is addressed, immediately, to a more squeamish audience than *The Dunciad*" (p.xv). Wimsatt internalizes both the dramatic audience and the speaker of a poem: "Both speaker and dramatic audience are assimilated into the implicit structure of the poet's meaning. . . . at the fully cognitive level of appreciation we unite in our own minds both speaker and audience" (p.xvi). Wimsatt seems to anticipate the "fusion of horizons" propounded by the German school of reception theory. But he never advocated judging a poem in terms of the response of a specific audience. He said that a critic ought to have in mind not just any response of a contemporary reader, or the average response, or even the response of any elite group, but in a more generally human sense an 'ideal response'.

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## 5.4 THE ACHIEVEMENT OF W.K.WIMSATT

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Wimsatt's importance as a critic is not restricted to two important theoretical concepts. His essays on criticism and poetry, and his empirical work on eighteenth century writing is equally important. With Cleanth Brooks, he is the author of *Literary*

*Criticism: A Short History*. First published in 1957, it traces literary criticism in the west from Greek antiquity to the nineteen-fifties. This history pays due attention to literary criticism in languages other than English: to Italian (Vico and Croce), German (Schlegel, Schiller, Goethe, Hegel, Kant etc.), Russian (Tolstoy) and French (Taine) criticism.

W.K. Wimsatt

Wimsatt is concerned primarily with the meaning of the poem: both the fallacies he criticises are attempts to judge a poem by something other than the poem, either its cause or its effect. His essays analysed devices like metre, euphony and rhyme, elements of style, and their relationship with meaning. He defended the unity of form and content, and like Brooks, thought of poetry as a harmonization of opposites. He was greatly concerned with the relation of poetry to reality. He used the term "verbal icon" for poetry. Poetry both represents and interprets reality, and the concept of the icon as a bridge between literature and reality; he discussed these ideas in articles about metaphor, symbol and the problems of artistic representation.

Wimsatt successfully defended the New Critics against attacks by the Chicago School. The Chicago School was a group of critics led by R.S.Crane, and included Elder Olson, Norman Maclean, and R.W.Keast. Under the inspiration of Richard McKeon, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Chicago, they developed a theory which has come to be called Neo-Aristotelianism. They believed in rigid distinctions of genre, and the importance of literary history. The Chicago critics and other New Critics had one goal in common: both laid stress on studying literature and criticism in universities. But the Neo-Aristotelians produced very little practical criticism: "The Plot of *Tom Jones*" by R.S.Crane is one of the few essays which is still read. Attacks on the New Critics seemed to be a major part of their agenda: articles on I.A.Richards (R.S.Crane), Cleanth Brooks (R.S.Crane), William Empson (Elder Olson), Robert Penn Warren (Elder Orson) and Robert Heilman (W.R.Keast) argued that modern critical theory has gone astray since it deserted the teaching of Aristotle. Their charges against the New Critics had some basis: Richards is guilty of psychologism, Cleanth Brooks' concept of poetry as irony is too narrow, Empson is simply juggling with his types of ambiguity, while R.P.Warren presses the symbolism of the *Ancient Mariner* beyond reasonable limits. The Chicago critics were quite oblivious of the drawbacks in their own theory while they launched a wholesale attack on the New Critics. In essays like "The Chicago Critics: The Fallacy of the Neoclassic Species", Wimsatt provided a valid defence the New Critics, while clearly revealing the weaknesses of the Chicago critics.

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## 5.5 LET US SUM UP

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The two essays by Wimsatt and Beardsley first published in 1946 and 1949 in the *Sewanee Review* are clear expositions of the New Critics' theoretical stance: their exclusive emphasis on the text. In "The Intentional Fallacy" they insist that no poem can be judged by reference to the poet's intentions. It is what is "internal", what can be discovered from the text of a poem, that is public; everything that is "external" and "not part of the work as a linguistic fact" is private and idiosyncratic. The elaborate investigation into Coleridge's life and readings made by John Livingston Lowes in his book *Road to Xanadu* may be interesting in its own right, but it is not valid evidence for judging the poem "Kubla Khan". Poetry should not be judged as a simple expression of the poet's feelings or his aims and intentions as gathered from diaries, biographies etc. Historical study is helpful only in so far as it helps us understand the meanings of the words on the page.

"The Affective Fallacy" is an attack on the attempt to judge a poem by the effect it has on the reader. The school of semantic criticism that arose from the work of

I.A. Richards believed in the distinction between the referential and emotive use of language. Wimsatt and Beardsley argue that this is an oversimplification, even emotional response is based on the cognitive meaning of the word. Poetry is an independent object with distinctive features of its own. To try to judge it by the effect it has on the reader will lead to limitless relativism, for the response can vary from one reader to another and from one reading to another. The critic should base his judgement on the meaning or "cognitive structure" of the poem, the objective constituent of the text.

Wimsatt's theoretical explication is well illustrated by his practical criticism, his studies of eighteenth century writers like Samuel Johnson and Pope. His work is notable for its clarity and force.

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## 5.6 GLOSSARY

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|                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>intentionalist:</b>  | a person who believes that it is the duty of the critic to determine and understand the author's intention. Artistic creation should be judged in terms of how successful the artist is in achieving his intention. |
| <b>autonomous:</b>      | independent, self governed, not needing reference to any outside authority.                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>cognitive:</b>       | pertaining to cognition, the act or faculty of knowing or perceiving, as distinct from emotion.                                                                                                                     |
| <b>epistemological:</b> | relating to epistemology, the theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods and validation.                                                                                                            |
| <b>ex post facto:</b>   | action with retrospective effect, based on events which happen later.                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>tongue-in-cheek:</b> | with ironical intent, not direct or sincere.                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>tour de force:</b>   | an impressive demonstration of skill or strength.                                                                                                                                                                   |

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## 5.7 QUESTIONS

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1. What do you understand by "The Intentional Fallacy"?
2. How does Wimsatt and Beardsley's concept of poetry differ from that of I.A. Richards?
3. Give an estimate of Wimsatt as a critic.
4. Comment on Wimsatt as the theoretical spokesman for the New Critics. On what grounds does he defend them?

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## 5.8 READING LIST

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### Part I

- \*Wimsatt, W.K. and Monroe C. Beardsley. "The Affective Fallacy".  
\*----- "The Intentional Fallacy".

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W.K. Wimsatt

----- *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. 1954. London: Methuen, 1970; includes reprint of "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy".

## Part II

\*Eliot, T.S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

----- *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*.

Hirsch, E.D. "In Defence of the Author", from *Validity in Interpretation* Yale University Press, 1967.

----- "Objective Interpretation" *PMLA* Vol.LXXV, No.4 Pt. 1, September 1960, pp.463-79.

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## UNIT 6 CONCLUSION

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### Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Other New Critics
- 6.2 Later Schools of Criticism
- 6.3 The Achievement of the New Critics
- 6.4 Questions
- 6.5 Reading List

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### 6.0 OBJECTIVES

---

In this unit, we shall attempt a general appraisal of the New Critics. You have studied the work of Richards, Eliot, Leavis, Ransom, Brooks, and Wimsatt. We shall take a look at other critics of the period who contributed to this movement: Allen Tate, R.P.Blackmur, Kenneth Burke and Yvor Winters. After comparing New Criticism with other schools of criticism like Russian Formalism and structuralism, we shall sum up the achievement of the New Critics.

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### 6.1 OTHER NEW CRITICS

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You have familiarized yourself with the writings of Ransom, Brooks, and Wimsatt in America and the *Scrutiny* group in England. There are a number of other critics who played an important part in the movement in America. Under the influence of T.S.Eliot (*The Sacred Wood* was published in 1920) and Richards' *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924), poet-critics like Allen Tate, R.P.Blackmur, Robert Penn Warren and Yvor Winters wrote articles and books with a new approach to literary criticism.

**Allen Tate** (1879-1979) was born in Winchester, Kentucky. He was educated at Vanderbilt University, where he joined John Crowe Ransom's literary discussion group, and co-founded and edited its journal, *The Fugitive*, a poetry magazine which published nineteen issues between 1922 and 1925. He made his name as a poet with *Mr Pope and Other Poems* (1928), and *Three Poems* (1930), and was poet in residence at Princeton in the early nineteen-forties. He continued to publish volumes of poetry, such as *Poems* (1960) and *The Swimmers* (1970). He started teaching in Tennessee in 1934, and published his first book of criticism, *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas* in 1936. From 1951 he was professor of English at the University of Minnesota. He was editor of the *Sewanee Review* from 1944 to 1946. *Reason in Madness* (1941) and *On the Limits of Poetry* (1948) established his reputation as a critic.

His criticism reveals the influence of T.S.Eliot. In one of his early letters, he refers to him as "a greater critic than poet" whom he considers "the most intelligent man alive". Eliot said that poetry was impersonal, Tate declares that poetry is not a vehicle for imprecise feeling but an autonomous structure, an objective frame for tension between themes. A poem has its own integrity, it is a whole in which the parts corroborate and modify each other. He says that a poem is not a statement like a sermon. Poetry is removed from the "domain of practicality", "it is neither true nor false: it is an object

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## UNIT 6 CONCLUSION

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that exists." Yet he believed in the social relevance of poetry. According to Tate, it provides "special, unique and complete knowledge." Tate always said that he owed a lot to John Crowe Ransom. Like Ransom, who said that poetry provides "the world's body", the particularity of the real world in contrast to the abstractions of science, Tate believed that the "knowledge" provided by poetry was superior to that found in science or historical documents. His "knowledge" denoted a kind of union of intellect and feeling, like Eliot's "unified sensibility". He said that poetry was "tension", a term he formed by "lopping the prefixes off the logical terms extension and intension". "Good poetry is a unity of all the meanings from the furthest extremes of extension and intension."

Like the other New Critics, Tate rejected the genetic bias, and laid stress on the poem as an independent object: "What is the poem after it is written? That is the question. Not where it came from and why." In a witty early lecture, "Miss Emily and the Bibliographer" he attacks scholars who trace influences or apply psychology, economics or sociology to give their literary criticism a scientific air. He said that they avoided "the moral obligation to judge." Tate's theoretical pronouncements are generally backed by analyses of texts. His empirical work recognizes the importance of a poem's cultural and biographical context.

**Yvor Winters** (1900-1968) took an M.A. in Romance languages from the University of Colorado, and taught French and Spanish at the University of Idaho. In 1927 he enrolled as a doctoral student at Stanford University, California, where he later took up teaching. He became professor of English in 1949. He was a poet whose career falls into two distinct phases. His early poems, *The Immobile Wind* (1921), *The Magpie's Shadow* (1922) and *The Bare Hills* (1927) were written in free verse, under the influence of the Imagists. But in the early nineteen-thirties Winters rejected modernist innovations, and turned to the conventional prosody found in Dryden and Pope. He published many volumes of neoclassical poetry, and defended his revised poetic practice in his essays. His critical output was not large; *Primitivism and Decadence* (1937), *Maule's Curse* (1938) and *The Anatomy of Nonsense* (1943) were short books later published in a single volume, under the title *In Defence of Reason* (1947). *Forms of Discovery: Critical and Historical Essays on the Form of the Short Poem in English* (1967) presents a highly idiosyncratic view of English and American poetry.

Winters believed that poetry is "a statement in words about a human experience." He believed that poetry should be a clear statement, using traditional metres, since they alone could exploit the full emotional potential of language to convey feeling informed by understanding. He rejects all emotionalism or mysticism. The language should be charged with emotion adequate to the idea.

Winters shares the New Critics' concern with value judgments, but insists that ethics is important: "ethical interest is the only poetic interest, for the reason that all poetry deals with one kind or another of human experience and is valuable in proportion to the justice with which it evaluates that experience." Winters believes that the primary function of criticism is evaluation. Even within the canon, the critic should lay down rankings. Winters himself was notorious for his value judgements: he ranked Robert Bridges above T.S.Eliot, and Edith Wharton above Henry James. Perhaps he was deliberately provocative: even those who did not agree with him found his forthright criticism quite stimulating.

**Richard Palmer Blackmur** (1904-1965) was born in Springfield, Massachusetts. He had no formal academic education: he worked in a bookshop, instead of going to university. From 1928 to 1940 he was a free-lance literary critic and poet. Then Allen Tate, who admired his "vigorous, tough-minded criticism" appointed him to assist in the newly established course on creative writing at Princeton. He remained at

Princeton for the rest of his life: first as resident fellow, then as Professor from 1948. He earned a reputation as a poet with volumes like *From Jordan's Delight* (1937), *The Second World* (1942) and *The Good European and Other Poems* (1947).

His first books of literary essays, *The Double Agent: Essays in Craft and Elucidation* (1935) and *The Expense of Greatness* (1940) advocate a "technical approach", and provide brilliant analyses of many modern poets like Yeats, Wallace Stevens and e.e.cummings. He admired T.S.Eliot, as critic and poet, and wrote widely on his poetry. The best of his critical essays appear in *Language as Gesture* (1952) and *The Lion and the Honeycomb* (1955). He was one of the few New Critics to analyse fiction: he wrote on English novelists like Henry James and D.H.Lawrence, as well as on European and American novelists, but his critical studies are not as well argued and convincing as those of Leavis. He believed, especially as he grew older, that criticism has a strictly limited use: its function is to remove obstacles between text and reader. He felt that "no amount of linguistic analysis can explain the *feeling* or existence of a poem". He shares the New Critics' belief in the autonomy of the text. He declared, "Criticism must be concerned, first and last--whatever comes between--with the poem as it is read and as what it represents is felt." He rejects extrinsic methods of criticism based on biography, psychology, history or Marxism. He valued impersonality, objectivity and concreteness. This insistence on impersonality (probably inspired by Eliot) made him place a very low value on Emily Dickinson's poetry.

His most famous essay of theoretical formulation is "Language as Gesture". Blackmur says, "Gesture in language is the outward and dramatic play of inward and imaged meaning" (p.6). He says that meaning is born out of the complex interrelationship between words: by making his written words sound in the inward ear of his reader, and so play upon each other by concert and opposition and pattern that they not only drag after them the gestures of life but produce a new gesture of their own." (p.13). "The soul of a composition is in the *dhvani*" says the opening section of *Dhvanyaloka*, and Blackmur's concept of gesture closely parallels the Sanskrit concept of *dhvani* (suggestion). Blackmur uses the term "gesture" very broadly to include rhythm and cadence and all the devices such as symbols "which we use to express meaningfulness in a permanent way which cannot be expressed in direct words or formulas of words with any completeness." (p.16)

**Robert Penn Warren** (1905-1988) was born in Guthrie, Kentucky. Like Cleanth Brooks, he was a student of John Crowe Ransom at Vanderbilt University. He wrote a number of novels and two volumes of short stories, but his claim to literary fame lies primarily with his poetry. His later poems are marked by a brooding violence, and there is a sense of guilt akin to that expressed in Faulkner's fiction. For him, criticism was secondary to his creative writing. With Cleanth Brooks, he started teaching at Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge; together they founded and edited *The Southern Review* in 1935 till it ceased publication in 1942. They collaborated in a series of anthologies for American college students: *Understanding Poetry* (1938), *Understanding Fiction* (1943) and *Modern Rhetoric* (1949). He was interested primarily in teaching, and told an interviewer, in 1972, that criticism "is an extension of teaching, even conversation."

Like Leavis, Warren tended to stay away from theory. He does not believe in a fixed methodology, and repeatedly emphasized that the New Critics had no consistent doctrine. His main contribution to criticism was his empirical work. In addition to criticism of poetry, He has written studies of novelists like Faulkner (whom he admired), Henry James, Melville, Hemingway, and Conrad. Two early essays on poetry have attracted a lot of attention and provoked debate: a theoretical essay, and a study of Coleridge. "Pure and Impure Poetry" (1942) is a paradoxical study of "impure poetry". (George Moore and his group in London had published an anthology

of poems called *Pure Poetry*). Warren said that poetry should be neither effusion of sentiment nor propaganda for an ideology. He pleaded for a kind of inclusive poetry which would make use of irony and juxtapose contrasting moods: he employs close reading of Landor's "Rose Aylmer" and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to illustrate his point. "A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment in Reading" is a detailed study of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Coleridge. He rightly rejects psychoanalytical and biographical readings, and presents a fine analysis of the main action of the poem. But his argument that "imagination" is the theme of the poem, and that the sun and the moon are image clusters, is not equally convincing.

## Conclusion

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## 6.2 OTHER SCHOOLS OF CRITICISM

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New Criticism developed independently of the Russian Formalist or the Prague and Paris structuralist theories. It is possible that the New Critics did not know about these theories: *Literary Criticism: A Short History* by Wimsatt and Brooks, published in 1957, does not mention the Formalists or Structuralists, though it deals with Northrop Frye and myth criticism. There are some affinities between the New Critics and the Formalists, though the differences are equally important. Both rejected positivist literary scholarship and called for a renewed attention to literature as literature, and insisted on the difference between literature and other kinds of statements. They emphasized structure and interrelatedness, and looked at the text as an object independent of its author or the historical context.

The New Critics came very close to the Russian Formalists and the Prague School in the importance they give to the objective character of criticism, and the distinction of the text from the author ("intentional fallacy") or the reader ("affective fallacy"). Both schools emphasize the concept of structure and interrelatedness. But the New Critics' idea of structure was different from the Prague school, for whom the concept of structure included all the different levels of the text, not just its meaning. The New Critics were not interested in the ideas of difference, defamiliarization or deviance which were important to the Formalists and structuralists. Nor are they interested in the business of 'foregrounding' and 'deformation' that the Prague School make so much of. The New Critics pay little attention to the form of a poem. They do pay attention to meter and stanzaic forms, and Winter has an essay on "The Audible Reading of Poetry". But the New Critics reject the distinction between form and content. They believe in the organicity of poetry. In practice, there are some differences: Ransom's distinction between structure and texture roughly corresponds to the old dichotomy of content and form. But the New Critics never concentrated on the form, they were overwhelmingly concerned with the meaning of a work of art, the tone, the feelings, and the implied world view conveyed. For them, the technical devices too were part of this overall meaning.

"The Intentional Fallacy" insisted that the author's intentions were not important. This did not lead to the disappearance of the author from literary study, the New Critics simply shifted the author from the outside to the inside of the text. Instead of an author based on biography, history and psychology, we had an author based on the words on the page. The Formalists went much further in abolishing the author. In the words of Osip Brik, "There are no poets or literary figures, there is poetry and literature". The New Critics were concerned with meaning and the vision expressed in the words on the page, but the Formalists were not interested in vision or authorial meaning. For them, the author is nothing more than a craftsman, the means whereby literature is brought into being. The vision of the author, or his real or imaginative experiences transmuted into art, do not enter into Russian Formalism.

The New Critics' attitude to meaning and language differs from that of Saussure and his school. They recognized the importance of convention and culture in fixing the meaning of a word, but they never believed that the meaning of words is purely conventional. For them, art and language always pointed to reality. So they did not believe, as the structuralists do, that literature is a closed system, or that language is a prison house that shuts us away from reality. The structuralists have some affinities with the New Critics in their concern for a detailed analysis of the text. But there is a major difference: the structuralists do not believe in judgement or ranking, nor do they believe in language as an autonomous entity.

In one respect, Eliot anticipates later schools, in recognizing the importance of the reader. Eliot's skepticism about interpretation implies a concept of the meaning of a work of art as something indeterminate. He said, "A poem may appear to mean different things to different readers, and all of these meanings may be different from what the author thought he meant. . . The reader's interpretation may differ from the author's and be equally valid—it may even be better" (*Of Poets and Poetry*, p.30). He believes that a work of art is an artifact in the public sphere, detached from the author, and the author's intentions are irrelevant, as the New Critics insist. But the suggestion that meaning may be something dependent on the reader is the central concept of the schools of reader-oriented theories. The hermeneuticians have fully investigated the difficulties of interpretation.

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### 6.3 THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE NEW CRITICS

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In his essay, "The Frontiers of Criticism", T.S.Eliot gives a good account of the diversity and unity of New Criticism:

The term "*The New Criticism*" is often employed by people without realizing what a variety it comprehends; but its currency does, I think, recognize the fact that the more distinguished critics of today, however widely they differ from each other, all differ in some significant way from the critics of a previous generation.

In their protest against Romantic, impressionistic and positivist criticism, the New Critics shared some basic assumptions. They all believed that a literary work was primarily a linguistic artifact, a verbal structure. It was a mode of communication between the artist and the reader. The primary function of the critic, they believed, is to understand and judge the poem, unaffected by the intentional fallacy or the affective fallacy. They believed in the supremacy and autonomy of the words on the page, the text. They believed that a work of art has an independent existence, but art is not divorced from life, they did not subscribe to the beliefs of the "Art for Art's sake school". Most of the New Critics were concerned with man and civilization, though their interpretation of "value" is not identical. For them, the exploration of literature was an exploration of life: whether it is Eliot in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, Leavis in *The Common Pursuit*, J.C.Ransom in *The World's Body*, I.A.Richards in *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Allan Tate in *On the Limits of Poetry*, or R.P.Blackmur in *Language as Gesture*, they all agreed with Leavis's formulation that "Literature matters because life matters." The American and English critics shared an acceptance of the tenets of Matthew Arnold's essay, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864). Arnold considered the study of literature a great civilizing force, a substitute for religion in the approaching age when people were losing faith in religion. Arnold said that literary study should be "disinterested", it should encourage the "free play of the mind". The function of criticism is to see "the object as in itself it really is."

They were concerned with the ontology of poetry, and looked at it as an organism. They might have been influenced by the scientific temper of the early twentieth century in finding a biological metaphor, but the debt to Coleridge is significant. Coleridge propounded the theory of the "esemplastic power" of the imagination, which has the creative capacity to reconcile opposites. They were all concerned with the structure of the work of literature as part of its total meaning, for they do not accept any dichotomy between content and form. Cleanth Brooks expresses this concept clearly when he talks about the "heresy of paraphrase": the paraphrasable content of a poem cannot be equated with its meaning. He objects to reducing a work of art to a statement of abstract propositions, or to a moral message, or to any verifiable truth.

For Richards, meaning grew out of the interplay of sense, feeling, tone and attitude. Ransom conceives of the structure of a poem as incorporating its logical or prose content and its local texture. Tate finds the significance of a poem in the complex relationship between the extension (the denotative sense) and "intention" (the connotative sense or emotive charge). Brooks and Robert Penn Warren regard wit and irony as principles of structure. In his book, *The Well Wrought Urn*, Brooks takes representative poems of different ages as illustrations of the operation of paradox. Empson values ambiguity as a device which adds to the complexity and density of the meaning of a poem.

The New Critics considered judgement a very important element of literary criticism. Through textual analysis, these critics have illuminated and judged literary works, and discussed the established canon. Allen Tate, for instance, declared that criticism involved "the moral obligation to judge." Yvor Winger argues that literary history involves value judgements: "Every writer that the scholar studies comes to him as a result of a critical judgement". They judged literature from a new perspective. This has resulted in a process of revaluation. The Metaphysical poets have gained in reputation, while Milton, Spenser, Shelley and the Victorian poets like Tennyson have been revalued downward. Shakespeare has profited from the approach of the New Critics, and has confirmed his place as the pre-eminent poet and dramatist.

The American New Critics and Leavis had much in common, though there were differences. Both had been influenced by T.S. Eliot's poetry and critical formulations. They believed that content and form cannot be separated, and viewed modern technological society in negative terms. They looked back to a more unified society (Leavis's "organic society") which supposedly existed in the past. They share a common emphasis on practical engagement with literary texts. But there is a difference in their methods of close reading. Leavis refused to make any distinction between formal and moral values. He always talked in terms of "completeness of possession" of the text.

The technique of the New Critics is most suitable for the classroom, and continues to dominate the academic teaching of literature in the English speaking world. Eliot gives a witty description of this methodology, which he calls "the lemon-squeezer school of criticism":

The method is to take a poem . . . without reference to the author or to his other work, analyse it stanza by stanza and line by line, and extract, squeeze, tease, press every drop of meaning out of it that one can. It might be called the lemon-squeezer school of criticism. . . .

There are a few inherent drawbacks in the methodology of the New Critics. It is not very conducive to the study of fiction. The New Critics have produced many brilliant critical essays on poetry, but fiction studies lag behind. The exception is Leavis, whose criticism of fiction is as good as, if not better than, his studies of poetry.

The New Critics pay insufficient attention to the problems of interpretations and audience response. They assume that a literary work has just one meaning for all time. As Eliot puts it:

The first danger is that of assuming that there must be just one interpretation of the poem as a whole, that must be right. . . the meaning of the poem as a whole is not exhausted by any explanation, for the meaning is what the poem means to different sensitive readers.

Critics of the school of interpretation (hermeneutics) and "Reader Oriented Theories" have analysed these problems with great subtlety.

As was the case with Romantic literary theory or Positivism, a reaction set in against New Criticism; after holding sway for more than four decades, it has been displaced by approaches like structuralism, deconstruction, Marxism, new historicism and audience-oriented criticism which lay stress on linguistics, the context or the reader rather than on the text itself in isolation. Yet the New Critics cannot be considered outmoded. Their work still has considerable validity, for their theories reflect the feelings of many common readers: theories like formalism and structuralism tend to be elitist. While they emphasized the special qualities of literature, the New Critics insisted on the links between literature and the real world. New Criticism is humanistic and empiricist, and provides useful tools for the practical criticism of literature. It constitutes the English-speaking world's major contribution to modern literary theory.

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## 6.4 QUESTIONS

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1. Write about any two American New Critics, and their contribution to literary theory and practice.
2. Give an estimate of the achievement of New Criticism.
3. Do you agree with the view that the New Critics do not form a coherent school of criticism?

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## 6.5 READING LIST

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### Part I

Blackmur, R.P. *Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1952. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1954.

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## NOTES