The New Criticism was extraordinarily influential from the end of the 1930s on into the 1950s. It is widely considered to have revolutionized the teaching of literature, to have helped in the definition of English Studies, and to have been a crucial starting-point for the development of critical theory in the second half of the twentieth century. However, it is in some respects an unusual critical theoretical movement. It is not dominated by any single critic, it has no manifesto, no clearly defined and agreed-upon starting-point, and there is no clear statement of its aims, provenance, and membership. The label that we have for it was first formally applied in 1941, in a book with that title by the American poet and critic John Crowe Ransom; yet Ransom’s book was as much about the need for a certain kind of critic as it was about identifying New Criticism. There is no typical ‘New Critic’. The critics whom Ransom examined in his 1941 book promptly rejected the label and dissociated themselves from what he was calling New Criticism, while the critics who are now usually designated New Critics were hardly mentioned by Ransom at all.

Rather than calling it a critical movement, New Criticism may be better described as an empirical methodology that was, at its most basic and most influential, a reading practice. As such, it was a practice that was expressed most cogently in three important books: Principles of Literary Criticism (1924) and Practical Criticism (1929) by the English critic I. A. Richards, and Understanding Poetry (1938) by the Americans Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. In their different ways, each of these works grew out of perceived needs regarding the definition of English as a discipline, and the teaching and study of English in universities. Defining the discipline of English, or, indeed, literary criticism, meant a loosening of the links that had in the past bound English so closely to other disciplines, notably Classics and History. In this respect the New Criticism was crucial in helping to define English Studies, clarifying the role of the literary critic and shaping the development of departments of English in universities. It is in this spirit that John Crowe Ransom’s essays ‘Wanted: An Ontological Critic’ (the concluding section of his The New Criticism) and ‘Criticism Inc.’ (1938) are of particular importance.

In a perhaps more pragmatic way, the New Criticism was also crucial in developing teaching practices that are still used in the classroom. Richards wrote Practical Criticism because he felt that undergraduates at Cambridge had never been taught to read literary texts by closely focusing on the words before them on the page. In a series of experi-
ments, Richards provided undergraduates with the texts, without providing the names of the authors or the titles, of eleven previously unseen poems, and asked them to provide written responses. He noted from these the students' general inability to comprehend meaning and to be sensitive to nuance and linguistic ambiguity. Their responses, Richards thought, were too often vague and impressionistic. Consequently, he argued that the practice of teaching English had to change radically in order to help develop modes of comprehension and ways of paying attention to the text's language. Although its aims were different, and its proposed readership was university undergraduates, Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry* originated in a similar dissatisfaction with the state of English teaching. While teaching at the Louisiana State University in 1936, Brooks and Warren, in collaboration with another colleague, produced a guide for their students called *An Approach to Literature. Understanding Poetry* arose from the same impulse, and played a significant part in the systematization of teaching English; it became a widely distributed college textbook and poetry anthology, being published in four different editions between 1938 and 1976. In this respect it is important to bear in mind that the expansion of entry into higher education after 1945 played a key role in the dissemination and practice of the New Criticism. It is easy to exaggerate this aspect of its development, and some commentators have, but an empirical teaching methodology was welcomed in the post-war years.

Practical Criticism and *Understanding Poetry* are key foundational texts for New Critical theory in their shared insistence on the special nature of the language of the literary artefact. It is interesting that the first title considered for *Understanding Poetry* was 'Reading Poems'. *Understanding Poetry* is a better title, because it indicates that there is a principle of reading poetry that must be learned, whereas 'Reading Poems' suggests developing strategies for approaching individual poems. Language functions in a different way in a work of literature than it does elsewhere, and the first job of the reader is to acknowledge and apprehend this special function and the role it plays in the formation of meaning. In this regard, New Criticism is aligned with formalism, and significant connections have been made between New Criticism and Russian formalism. Both place special emphasis on the formal elements of the literary text, because these most obviously signalled the crucial distinction between literary and non-literary uses of language. It also needs to be emphasized that whereas the New Critics considered all literary genres, it was poetry which most occupied them and to which they gave their fullest attention. Indeed, some of the New Critics were significant poets themselves.

Although it remains true that there was no typical New Critic, there are key figures whose critical approaches were closely aligned with New Criticism's development and characteristics. As well as Ransom, Richards, Brooks, and Warren, other important figures are Allen Tate, Kenneth Burke, R. P. Blackmur, William Empson, Yvor Winters, and W. K. Wimsatt. Some of the earlier work of F. R. Leavis is usually included in accounts of the New Criticism, while the critical essays of T. S. Eliot (and to a lesser extent those of Ezra Pound) played an important role in New Critical thought. In addition to those already mentioned, key New Critical texts include Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930),

...
Brooks's *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1949), the essays collected in Tate's *Essays of Four Decades* (1974), and Wimsatt's *The Verbal Icon* (1954). There were also two critical journals in particular which became strongly associated with New Criticism: the *Southern Review*, which began in 1935 and was edited by Brooks and Warren, and the *Kenyon Review*, founded by Ransom in 1939.

**Origins**

Since the nineteenth century the term 'new criticism' had been used to describe various movements, and the American critic Joel Spingarn had applied the label in 1910 to a range of critical methods that were developing in Europe. Although it was misleading, Ransom's 1941 designation of a New Criticism was helpful in marking the sense that fresh and challenging ways of examining literature were being explored. At the same time, though, the New Criticism did have antecedents. Its theoretical origins are twofold. Specifically through the work of Richards, New Criticism is rooted in English Romanticism. This may seem odd, given that the New Critics were generally sceptical about what they saw as the subjective interventions of Romantic poetry (they particularly disapproved of the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley); nevertheless, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's writings on poetry, notably his *Biographia Literaria* (1847), gave special sustenance to the roots of New Critical theory. In chapter 14 of the second volume of the posthumously published *Biographia*, Coleridge wrote that poetry arose from the poet's imaginative fusion of competing energies, and was most successful when it led to a balance of opposites: 'the general with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individual with the representative; ... a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order'.

This was an important antecedent of the New Critical emphasis on the special nature of the literary text and the organic unity that it maintained, so that form and meaning were inseparable. Brooks and Warren are clearly deriving their approach from Coleridge when they write, in the Introduction to *Understanding Poetry*, that a poem is 'an organic system of relationships, and the poetic quality should never be understood as inhering in one or more factors taken in isolation'.

In the same (much quoted) chapter of the *Biographia*, Coleridge claimed that poetry 'brings the whole soul of man into activity'. This phrase, often cited by the New Critics, was an important precursor of the New Critical emphasis on the idea that poetry was a powerful combination of the intellectual and the emotional. They believed that the finest literature provided what they called 'whole knowledge' of human experience, because in finding a balance between the rational and the emotional which acknowledged both, it provided a world-view unavailable from other media. John Keats's description of 'negative capability' and T. S. Eliot's notion of the 'objective correlative' were also significant concepts for New Criticism, again emphasizing poetic language's command of 'whole knowledge' rather than the limited perspective on experience afforded
by emotional subjectivity or by what the New Critics thought of as reductively scientific approaches to knowledge and experience.

The second major origin of New Criticism, at least in part of its American identity, is more overtly political than literary theoretical, and this fact has helped to fuel some of the radical objections to New Criticism that are still evident today. In the early 1920s Ransom and Tate were leading members of a literary group called 'the fugitives', based in Nashville, Tennessee; Warren was also a member. Although they were not overtly political, the Fugitives evolved by 1930 into a group called 'the Agrarians'. This group was made up of a broader base of intellectuals than the Fugitives, and was much more politically defined. Specifically, it held a radical conservative position, and offered a defence of the South against what it saw as the materialist, industrial, socially progressive North. Ransom and Tate were, again, key members; Warren and Brooks were involved, though not as heavily as others. The group's members published many essays and lectures on what they saw as the Agrarian organic unity of the South, and, importantly for the later development of New Criticism, they expressed the belief that a meaningful literature grew out of, and was part of, particular social circumstances.

By 1937 the Agrarian group had ended; it was in that year that Ransom left the South to take up a position at Kenyon College, Ohio, where he shortly afterward founded the Kenyon Review. In their post-Agrarian identities, Ransom, Tate, Warren, and Brooks claimed to have turned away from politics and towards literary criticism. But, as many commentators have observed, American New Criticism did to some extent maintain a conservative ideology even in its aesthetic judgements and preferences. This is evident, for example, in its adherents' belief in universal value, in the idea that the literary work holds and preserves values in a timeless way, in their embrace of a formalist poetic, and in their preference for symbolic poetry, which was seen to preserve a moment and remove it from the flux of time. In this way, and because of these origins, New Criticism has been considered a conservative practice, whose origins demonstrate the covert and subtle aestheticization of the political.

It is worth remembering this, as it helps explain the extreme hostility felt toward New Criticism by such critics as Frank Lentricchia and Terry Eagleton—a hostility that may seem exaggerated if the New Criticism is seen only as a teaching methodology.

With regard to the origins and development of New Criticism, two other points need to be made. First, over time some connections did develop between the New Critics and the Russian formalists, which helped to clarify the aims and procedures of the New Criticism. Secondly, although it is sometimes convenient to see New Criticism as developing separately in England and in the United States, it is important to acknowledge that there were important interactions and a great deal of sharing of ideas. These interactions arose not just from these critics reading and being familiar with each other's work (Brooks once said that he had read Principles of Literary Criticism fifteen times by the early 1930s), but in more personal ways; Richards eventually moved to the United States, and Kenyon College hosted several major international conventions devoted to critical theory. To some degree there had also been a shared origin in the political, notably with the evident ideological links between Agrarianism and the early work of F. R. Leavis.
None the less, there are differences between American and English New Criticism, with the American variety moving more towards pedagogic formalism, while English New Criticism more usually included a moral element that (except in the work of Yvor Winters) was less evident in American New Criticism.

**Methods and characteristics**

Brooks and Warren’s description of the poem as ‘an organic system of relationships’ is a telling phrase, as it indicates a key element of New Critical approaches to the text. For the New Critics the literary artefact was primarily a system of language. In it, language operated in a different way from how it did elsewhere, being governed by a different set of rules. For instance, a poet will use a particular word with a full sense of its qualities, will exploit its suggestive meanings (its connotations) as well as its literal meaning (denotation), will choose a word for how it may sound, and for how it resonates with other words in the poem. In the literary text, then, words are qualitatively different from words (even the same words) in another, non-literary context, where their denotation and literal meaning may be the only qualities that the writer focuses on and all that the reader expects or requires. You might, for instance, be justifiably annoyed if an instruction leaflet on how to make a cupboard were full of suggestion and ambiguity; in this situation you want language that is unambiguous and clear; you do not want the author to use all of the connotative possibilities of language. To develop this further, literary language is non-functional language, because the language is doing more than giving us straightforward information. Nevertheless, as both Ransom and Tate emphasized, this did not mean that literary language was useless. On the contrary, they both argued, it was through literature that we come to fullest knowledge of reality, since in it language is used in a way that reflects all of our human needs and resources, which are not only utilitarian.

In approaching a literary text, therefore, the New Critics emphasized that readers needed to adjust their reading strategy to accommodate the difference between literary and non-literary language. This is exactly what Richards, Brooks, and Warren saw their undergraduates not doing, and this helps to explain the genesis and longevity of New Criticism as a reading practice. But, more than that, the difference between literary and non-literary uses of language was a crucial starting-point for the development of other New Critical ideas. Several New Critics attempted to define what characterized poetry’s difference from literalistic discourse. Empson focused on ambiguity, Tate on what he called ‘tension’, Ransom on the ‘concrete universal’, and Brooks on paradox.

While these theories have less resonance for us now than they did for their contemporaries, what has remained with us is the New Critical idea of the autonomy of the literary text. Since literary language is special language, we need to acknowledge that there are clear boundaries between the text and the world. When approaching the text, readers need to focus on the ‘system of relationships’ that are operating within the text,
criticism, with English New work of Yvor

tionships' is a text. For the usage operated e of rules. For will exploit its notation, will sin the poem, ven the same meaning may ts or requires, low to make a nguage that is ative possibil-

ness of New Critical. These are the 'intentional fallacy' and the 'affective fallacy'. Both were developed in essays published in 1946 and 1949 by Wimsatt in collaboration with Monroe Beardsley, and were collected in The Verbal Icon. The attack on both of these perceived 'fallacies' was very much in line with the New Critical belief in the autonomy of the text. In 'The Intentional Fallacy' (1946) Wimsatt and Beardsley argued that what an author intended was irrelevant to judgement of a literary text. Intention, they said, was 'neither available nor desirable' in the formation of literary judgement. That is, there were two grounds for the attack on intentionality. The first is that authorial intention is never clear and may always be a matter of dispute. The second ground, and a more important one for the New Critics, was that to invoke intention was to threaten the integrity of the text by introducing the figure of the author. Once the text's boundaries were threatened, then the text could not be seen as a system of language operating with its own rules. This is an important point, and one which marks a crucial distinction between the New Critical removal of authorial intention and the 'death of the author' advised by structuralism and post-structuralism. For structuralists and post-structuralists, the removal of the author from critical consideration was an act of liberation which meant that the text could be scrutinized in the contexts supplied by historical and social discourses, languages outside the text. For the New Critics, removing authorial intentionality was part of a strategy of sealing off the boundaries of the text and ensuring that only the words on the page were the true focus of critical judgement.
This strategy was also evident in the attack on the 'affective fallacy'. The literary text cannot be judged, Wimsatt and Beardsley argued, by the way in which it emotionally affects the individual reader; the 'affective fallacy' is a confusion between the poem and its results. A text dealing with a highly emotive subject still has to be judged as a text, by the working of its 'system of language', and not by the intensity that its subject might generate. Richards's *Practical Criticism*, with its scrutiny of lazy impressionism, was the grounding for 'The Affective Fallacy' (1949), as was T. S. Eliot's view that the poet must externalize emotion through an 'objective correlative'. To include a text's effects in one's analysis, wrote Wimsatt and Beardsley, is to invite impressionism, relativism, subjectivity, and to ignore the dynamic of the text. Obviously, this attack on the 'affective' is strongly related to the attack on intentionality, because both seek to maintain the focus of inquiry on the text itself and its dynamics, rather than on something outside of its boundaries. Neither the text's origin nor its results are the proper focus of literary criticism. But the attack is also very much bound up with New Criticism as a teaching practice and with the professionalization of criticism. The New Critics feared that validating the effects that a text had on its readers meant validating subjectivity, and therefore threatened their fundamental belief that as a discipline criticism had to be objective and discursive.

For the New Critics, then, close, detailed analysis of the text was the main purpose of criticism. They thought of the text as an autonomous object, and their critical approach sought to exclude speculation about its origins and effects. With regard to their strictures concerning the text's origins, it should be noted that these origins were not only those related to the life of the author but also included the historical context in which the text was produced. There was in fact a strong anti-historical bias in the New Criticism, mainly because in trying to define the discipline of literary criticism, it was very self-consciously working against what it saw as a dominant historicist approach to literature. New Critics insisted that you could not use a literary text as if it were historical evidence. This was because such a literalist approach ignored the text's special dynamics, its tropes and use of figurative language. It is worth recalling the anti-historicism of New Critical theory. For some observers, notably the deconstructionist critic Paul de Man in *Blindness and Insight* (1971), this was its fundamental limitation, which it was never able to overcome. On the other hand, some critics have recently revived the New Critical idea of the literary text as a special kind of discourse in pointing out that movements such as the New Historicism ignore this textual quality.

**Influence and legacy**

Although the theoretical basis for the New Criticism has been challenged and to a large extent superseded by more recent developments in literary theory, New Criticism has to a large extent endured as a teaching practice. Though perhaps less so than earlier, the
transmission of literature in the classroom typically relies on paying attention to 'the words on the page', behind which lies the assumption that the literary text is a distinct form of discourse, which therefore demands reading strategies that are different from those needed to apprehend other discourses. This is in itself part of another of the legacies of New Criticism: the professionalization of literary study and the validation of English as a discipline. Again, this is intimately allied to the belief that reading strategies have to be learned.

Another major legacy of the New Criticism was in the reformation of the poetic canon. Although they theorized about prose literature as well as poetry, the New Critics tended to concentrate most of their energy on the explication and understanding of poetry. This is evident even by a cursory glance at the most influential New Critical texts: Practical Criticism, The Well-Wrought Urn, Understanding Poetry, and Seven Types of Ambiguity. As is also evident from looking at these texts, the New Critics placed a special emphasis on lyric poetry. This is of course consistent with their view that the literary text is a special, systematic discourse in which the fullest resources of language are deployed, since these features may be most evident in a short lyric poem. The preference for lyric is also consistent with New Criticism as a pedagogic practice, since short poems lend themselves more readily than longer ones to classroom discussion (it is telling that the average length of the poems that Richards chose for his Practical Criticism experiment is under eighteen lines, and the longest poem is only thirty-two lines long). Of course, there are other factors that may help explain the ascendancy of the short lyric in contemporary poetry, but there is no doubt that the critical and pedagogic practice of New Criticism is a major one.

Furthermore, the New Critics' preference for particular kinds of poetry helped to reshape the existing poetic canon. The most obvious example of this is in the revaluation of previously neglected metaphysical poetry, especially that of Donne. Thanks in part to the essays of T. S. Eliot, there was a fresh critical interest in the metaphysical poets, which raised their status considerably, while the reputations of some other poets, notably John Milton, suffered. At the same time, the New Criticism had an important influence on the formation of taste whereby the poetry of their contemporaries was evaluated. The work of Robert Frost was well matched with the New Critical ethos, as was the early poetry of Robert Lowell (who was at one time a close friend of both Ransom and Tate). But other contemporary poets were, by the same token, neglected. The strategies of reading that New Criticism endorsed and encouraged meant that poets who did not write lyrical, symbolist, subjective poems were almost unreadable—the most obvious example is William Carlos Williams. This aspect of the New Critical legacy is an important one, and not confined to literary history, since it inevitably affects the contemporary formation of taste and the evaluation of poetry. That is, the New Criticism has helped to shape a reading strategy that is appropriate for particular kinds of poetry. It may be unhelpful or inappropriate to apply this to poets for whom the poem is a field of energy, or a process or part of a sequence or a deeply felt personal statement, and not a wholly integrated system of relationships, an autonomous depersonalized object.
In terms of the development of critical theory, the influence and legacy of the New Criticism have been mixed, and at times problematic. Its assumption of a bounded text as the focus of critical study was detrimental to the development of intertextual criticism and to the kind of criticism which seeks to relate the text's language to discourses outside the text. Hence, this became one of the crucial ways in which the primacy of the New Criticism was challenged in the 1950s and 1960s. Similarly, reader-response theorists challenged the New Critical sense of the text as a spatial unit. They saw the text operating sequentially and temporally, rather than spatially, and considered it as an energy in which meaning was constructed through a relationship with an active reader, rather than something that the reader received from the text. Thus, contrary to the conclusions of the 'affective fallacy', the effect of the text on the reader mattered very much, and the text could no longer be viewed as if it were an autonomous object. It is worth recalling here that one of the founding texts of reader-response criticism, Stanley Fish's 1970 essay 'Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics', was something of a rejoinder to 'The Affective Fallacy'. (In fact, the critical path taken by Fish is interesting for its series of challenges to New Critical concepts.) The fundamental question raised by reader-response theory involves the location and production of meaning, and of necessity challenged the New Critical view that meaning was located within the boundary of the text. But other critics also took issue with this, and also challenged the New Critical idea that literary discourse was special, ontologically different from other kinds of discourse.

In a broader way, the limitations of New Criticism were most exposed by its dehistoricization of the text, as De Man observed. There are really two aspects to this. The first is that the formalist approach actually devalues the power of literature to mean something in the world. This is an aspect of dehistoricization, because the literary text is thereby divorced from the social and historical context in which it may otherwise function meaningfully. A reader might well, therefore, feel uncomfortable with an explication of Shelley's sonnet 'England in 1819' which focused exclusively on it as a system of language and ignored the historical circumstances of its production and the fact that it was written with the aim of effecting a change in social attitude. While this discomfort may arise from any formalist approach to a text, it is more intense in the case of the New Critics, because they explicitly rejected the historical and political locations of texts, and valued texts according to their control of ambiguity and their presentation of 'whole knowledge', rather than their power to challenge and disturb.

The second concern with New Critical dehistoricization involves the view that New Criticism was itself not at all ideologically innocent, and that the claim to focus on the bounded space of the text was a gesture arising from a covertly held conservative position. This is where the ideological roots of American New Criticism are important, because it is claimed that the New Critical view of the literary text is of an insulated space in which certain values are preserved. Several notable critics have expressed this view, perhaps none more forcefully than Terry Eagleton in Literary Theory: An Introduction, where he wrote that New Criticism was 'the ideology of an uprooted, defensive intelligentsia who reinvented in literature what they could not locate in reality'.


The New Criticism of the New bounded textual criticism courses outside the New once theorists, text operating an energy in the reader, rather than conclusions much, and the forth recalling its 1970 essay under 'The for its series sed by reader-necessity chal of the text. But to that literary tion, it's dehistor- y. The first is an something function on explanation s a system of the fact that its discomfort use of the New's of texts, and ion of 'whole view that New focus on the conservative re important, isolated space this view, 'Introduction, ensive intelli-

Such hostility may seem disproportionate to the relatively modest aims of what is primarily a reading practice, and perhaps over time the importance of New Criticism will be seen more clearly. When contrasted with other critical theoretical positions, New Criticism may be considered ideologically problematic, theoretically unformulated, and unsystematic. But it none the less occupies a significant place in the development of modern literary theory and English Studies. The New Criticism mounted the first serious challenge to reductionist and impressionistic approaches to literature, and with its emphasis on rigour and objectivity, it initiated the professionalization and formalization of literary criticism as a discipline. Indeed, in the face of critical approaches which pay relatively little attention to the formal qualities of the literary artefact and seem to devalue the imaginative use of language, we might do well to remember that at its best the New Criticism valued the texture of language and paid scrupulous attention to the structures within which that language functioned.

FURTHER READING

The texts by the New Critics that are cited in this essay are of special significance. The items that follow are important evaluations of New Criticism.

Brooks, Cleanth, 'The New Criticism', Sewanee Review, 87 (1979), 592-607. A useful retrospective article that also considers some of the then current evaluations of New Criticism.

De Man, Paul, 'Form and Intent in the American New Criticism', in idem, Blindness and Insight (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 20-35. De Man explores the implications of the New Critic's ahistorical approach to literature, and emphasizes how this both characterizes and limits New Criticism.

Eagleton, Terry, Literary Theory: An Introduction (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). Includes a summary of New Criticism which takes issue with the political ideology that underpins it.


