

INTRODUCTION

The Golden Age of Poetry Criticism

I do not believe there has been another age in which so much extraordinarily good criticism of poetry has been written.

—Randall Jarrell

A renaissance begins, if it begins at all, in the unlikeliest of places. It was in the cramped London offices of one Methuen & Co. Ltd., for instance, as the printers finished binding a collection of essays entitled *The Sacred Wood* in 1920, that the Golden Age of Poetry Criticism dawned. Methuen & Company Limited—the name conjures up the very archetype of the tiny English press, now long extinct. And the author of the collection? Once an unfamiliar name as well, now rather famous, belonging to an American living in England: Thomas Stearns Eliot.

Now, a renaissance is not born in one place and, to be effective, is not the product of one man. Dates can be quibbled with, and other books chosen. Two years before, the first collection of another expatriate American's prose had been issued in New York: *Pavannes and Divisions* by Ezra Pound. That poet's criticism was to be just as influential, in its way, as Eliot's—but the two were close friends and collaborators, so it is not particularly enlightening to investigate who came first. They both helped create the "current of ideas" that produced so much of what is admirable in the poetry and criticism of the twentieth century.

The Sacred Wood, then, has been preferred because it contains many passages in which that current was shaped into its most durable and influential forms. Of what was this current of ideas composed? In the preface to the 1928 edition of his book, Eliot offered the following summation of its intent: "It is an artificial simplification, and to be taken only with caution, when I say that the problem appearing in these essays, which gives them what coherence they have, is the problem of the integrity of poetry, with the repeated assertion that when we are considering poetry we must consider it primarily as poetry and not another thing." Out of this rather drab statement, almost a banality, sprang the New Criticism.

To understand why this should be so would require a catalog of the faults and errors committed by the literary ancestors of Eliot's generation. And in the first forty-six pages of his book, evaluating figures as diverse as Aristotle, Arthur Symons, and Charles Whibley, the author provided just such an examination. In these pages we are told: "Hence, in criticizing poetry, we are right if we begin, with what sensibility and what knowledge of other poetry we possess, with poetry as excellent words in excellent arrangement and excellent meter. That is what is called the technique of verse."

The outline of a new approach to poetry criticism was contained in these lines. Poetry was to be criticized *as poetry*, and not some other thing, which meant "as excellent words in excellent arrangement and excellent meter." It was to be studied as a definite genre of writing—with its own history and practices—and not for the sake of its philological origins, its political aims, or its social content. It was to be studied by comparing the present object under scrutiny with the best samples drawn from foreign and ancient languages—the great procedure of comparative literature. It was an art form that critics could study as seriously as any of the classical subjects, and that some had taken as seriously as life itself.

Eliot's approach to—or attitude toward—criticism had an enormous influence on his contemporaries, of course, but it made even greater demands. It assumed that the critic approached his task with the demeanor of the professional—poetry being such an essentially serious matter that it rewarded one's lifelong study and devotion. It assumed that the critic would exceed the scholar's narrow specializations and be intimate with the finest poetry of many periods and literatures. The attitude, in other words, assumed *perfection*—or the disinterested pursuit of it. But who would care to commit to such a profession? Who would study with such devotion?

And what was the purpose of such cultivation—criticism being itself such a tenuous and disposable form of writing? The ages remembered their artists—but their book reviewers? Eliot, considering why the criticism of artists should so often prove durable, remarked:

The writer of the present essay once committed himself to the statement that "The poetic critic is criticizing poetry in order to create poetry." He is now inclined to believe that the "historical" and the "philosophical" critics had better be called historians and philosophers quite simply. As for the rest, there are merely various degrees of intelligence. It is fatuous to say that criticism is for the sake of "creation" or creation for the sake of criticism. It is also fatuous to assume that there are ages of criticism and ages of creativeness,

as if by plunging ourselves into intellectual darkness we were in better hopes of finding spiritual light. The two directions of sensibility are complementary; and as sensibility is rare, unpopular, and desirable, it is to be expected that the critic and the creative artist should frequently be the same person.

And so Eliot dispensed with the old division of labor between the artist and critic. For it remains a perpetual heresy that the critic who is not an artist must be the more dependable judge simply because he does not engage in “creative activity”—he is impartial and thus objective—whereas the artist’s engagement must alter his views, making them partisan. The creative and critical faculties were not mutually exclusive, Eliot averred. In fact, “When one creative mind is better than another, the reason often is that the better is the more critical.”

This, then, was the impetus and justification for the rise of the poet-critics. Of those associated with the New Criticism—in the American South (John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren), in England (I. A. Richards, William Empson, and F. R. Leavis), and elsewhere (Yvor Winters, R. P. Blackmur, Kenneth Burke, and William K. Wimsatt)—all but Wimsatt and Brooks were published poets. And if we include those mavericks who came a generation later—like Randall Jarrell and W. H. Auden—then we shall immediately see just how various and how great this golden age was.

Nor should it surprise us that the greatest age of poetry criticism was also one of the great ages of poetry in English, if we take Eliot’s comments for truth. When the poets of the first half of the twentieth century began to write criticism seriously—that is, as an examination of themselves, and of their contemporaries and masters *undertaken as a necessity for their own development*—their own poetry matured as a matter of course. Here is at least one reason our poetry enjoyed such a renaissance in that half century: never before, or since, has the discussion of the techniques of poetry been so varied or so astute.

These poets brought about a great revolution in criticism in their day, a revolution that overturned the practices of nineteenth-century literary scholarship. Of course, to fully understand this we must first understand the previous regime they conquered and replaced.



In that earlier era, the university student who wished to study poetry could do so—for the sake of its word origins, or its historical and social implications. What he could *not* do was study poetry for the sake of writing it himself. The study of literature was conducted, in other

words, only for purposes ulterior to literature, while scholarship had become an end in itself.

It was this brand of academic scholarship that was denounced by the poet-critics, who labeled it the *historical method*. In the most brilliant denunciation of this approach—or antipathy—to literature ever written, entitled “Miss Emily and the Bibliographer,” Allen Tate complained: “It was—and still is—a situation in which it is virtually impossible for a young man to get a critical, literary education. If he goes to a graduate school he comes out incapacitated for criticism. . . . He cannot discuss the literary object in terms of its specific form; all that he can do is to give you its history or tell you how he feels about it.”

Now the reason why young men interested in literature became incapacitated for criticism, became either historians who “amassed irrelevant information” or journalists “for whom intensity of feeling was the sole critical standard,” was their inability to “discern the objectivity of the forms of literature.” They were *expressionists*, who saw no essential difference between the genres of literature—between poetry, plays, and prose.

When *Paradise Lost*, *Othello*, and *Huckleberry Finn* are lumped together in one genre, what is left to discuss but the content or the history of the particular work? To the expressionist, “the subject matter alone has objective status, the specific form of the work being external and mechanical—mere technique.” Tate added: “The historical method will not permit us to develop a critical instrument for dealing with works of literature as existent objects; we see them as expressive of substances beyond themselves. At the historical level the work expresses its place and time, or the author’s personality, but if the scholar goes further and says anything about the work, he is expressing himself. Expressionism is here a sentiment, forbidding us to think and permitting us to feel as we please.”

Tate’s argument demonstrated that, within the critical terms of the historical method, criticism was impossible. The literary historian and the journalist, the learned academic scholar and the ignorant book reviewer, wrote incoherently for the same reason: they had abandoned the very categories that would allow the formation of a critical judgment. So the revolution that overturned nineteenth-century academic scholarship returned, first, to the categories such scholarship had dismissed: *form* and *technique*.

It must be said, in passing, that *revolution* is not a romantic but, rather, a precise term—indicative, as it is, of warfare and great social change—and that the literary historian and the book reviewer perceived the threat to themselves and fought vigorously against a superior force. Eliot had

robbed them of the traditional sanction of their office, while Tate had destroyed their philosophy, but they were not about to abdicate their department chairs or their assignments. As Yvor Winters testified:

I am proud of my part in this revolution, but my part was not an easy one. Of the four gentleman who have been head of the department of English at Stanford in my time, the second, the late Professor A. G. Kennedy, told me that criticism and scholarship do not mix, that if I wanted to become a serious scholar I should give up criticism. And he added that my publications were a disgrace to the department. Fortunately for myself, he was the only one of the four department heads to hold these views, but one was almost enough. And he was far from an exception so far as the profession as a whole was concerned.

This was the state of affairs that confronted the poet-critics, and which Irving Babbitt had been the first to excoriate in *Literature and the American College* (1908). Only with great difficulty did such brilliant teachers as Winters and Leavis gain tenure. In 1941, Randall Jarrell despaired of the situation:

The last twenty-five years have seen part of a great change in taste, a reevaluation of most English poetry—I do not believe there is a good critic living who shares the taste of the scholars. So the scholar, who already looks down on the critic in theory, is able in practice to condemn him, even more severely and sincerely, for the immense disparity in all their judgments. Today there is not merely a division between scholars and critics, but open war; and since scholars are a thousand to one, and occupy every important position in the colleges, there is not much hope for the critic.

By 1955 all of this had changed so dramatically that the English critic A. Alvarez complained, in an essay that year, about the number of poets teaching at universities. What had happened in the space of those fourteen years? I am tempted to say that by the sheer force of its analytical brilliance, and by the eloquence of its proponents—a number of whom are counted among the great teachers of the century—the New Criticism simply replaced the old academic scholarship in the universities. And this is certainly true, but not the whole truth either—in that victory was sown the defeat of the New Criticism. It became a victim of its own success.

For the scholars never went away, nor could they remain silent. Tenure demanded that they produce articles. If scholarship had been soundly defeated by criticism, then the scholars would simply do the

unthinkable: they would switch sides and become critics too. Rather than collect facts, they would analyze the structure of poems; rather than sift clues concerning Keats's love life, they would sift through the verbs of "Hyperion."

This had been the hope of more than one New Critic. In 1938, John Crowe Ransom had called on the professors of English to make "the erection of intelligent standards" in literature their collective business. That same year, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren published their textbook, *Understanding Poetry*, which soon became the standard classroom guide for a generation. But this was the Indian summer of our golden age. As Robert Lowell remarked, "Somehow in the next generation the great analytical and philosophical project turned to wood, the formidable inertia of the pedagogue, the follow-up man."

The New Criticism was boiled down to a method by these imitators, who promptly produced analysis every bit as dull as their hastily abandoned scholarship. Alvarez explained: "Perhaps this was inevitable; the pressures of academic life sooner or later bring everything down to plain method. For method is impersonal, almost an abstraction. It reduces to clear teachable elements the huge complexity of disciplined response and choice which the reader otherwise needs to re-create for himself each poem. Method, of whatever brand, is always easier to teach than discrimination." So the New Criticism became institutionalized, with the usual results.



What has been traced here is the rise and fall of the New Criticism *as an academic movement*. Its influence in the universities was immense: it was responsible for the introduction of close reading and the verbal analysis of the rhetorical structures of poetry as the central method of criticism, and that contribution remains vital to this day. That is not, however, the main concern of this essay. We must, instead, discover what is worthy of retrieval from that former time; what principles led these critics to issue such lasting judgments; what examples may serve to guide us through the bewildering present.

The main point that must be made is that there was nothing new about the New Criticism. What Eliot found in Aristotle, and Tate in Longinus, was a criticism of permanence rendered so because it "looked solely and steadfastly at the object." Ransom called such criticism *ontological*, while Brooks preferred the term *formalist*; the latter enjoyed a wide circulation, and was eventually preferred as the group name for the New Critics and their followers. It was given a better title by R. P. Blackmur, who called it *technical* criticism: it would focus on

the techniques and forms of poetry, not on its uses as social comment, political statement, or historical document.

That poetry criticism should concern itself primarily with “the technique of poetry” appears, at first sight, to be an obvious point and self-evident: it is not. There are temptations that distract critics, always, away from the poem. The temptation to make poetry the crude vehicle of some purpose greater than itself is perennial, and has overwhelmed the least among us (like the Marxist critics of the 1930s and the academic theorists of the 1980s) as well as a few of the greatest (witness Plato and the elderly Tolstoy). The temptation to moralize is greater still.

It has often been remarked that the New Critics do not hold together as a group, sharing as they do such disparate aims. Yet they were all united against certain deplorable tendencies in their time: principally, the use of such extra-literary criteria in the judgment of poetry. Of course, this was sometimes honored more in the breach than in the letter—Yvor Winters, for example, was a tireless moralizer. Yet his morality was no simple affair of interrogating a poem’s subject matter for heresies, but rather weighing how every metrical variation, “no matter how slight, is exactly perceptible and as a result can be given exact meaning as an act of moral perception.” Even this most moral-minded of New Critics argued for the indivisibility of form and content, so that the distance of his insights from the comparable blushings of Victorian prudery at, say, Swinburne’s verse simply cannot be measured.

Such distinctions were lost on a subsequent generation of readers who preferred their ideas to be simplistic. Academic taste, in particular, ridiculed the New Critics for half a century as either insufficiently political or politically unsound. Randall Jarrell anticipated the pointless objections of these detractors and called it “a fool’s game.” The poet-critic Stephen Burt has been even more unsparing: “It is a grim irony that people who argued for the independence of literary art from instrumental political ends should now be impeached or dismissed for their politics; it makes an even harsher irony that people who insisted on fine distinctions now get lumped together as reactionaries.”

Since those who objected to the New Criticism most categorically have left us with little criticism of any value, we may conclude that envy animated more than a few.

And what of the ironies of our own day? When poets occupy all the important positions at the universities and scholars have all but disappeared, it seems inconceivable that criticism has become a neglected art once more. Yet *technique* has, again, become a suspect word. The graduates of our writing programs produce derivative work, and negligible scholarship, and receive polite applause for their errors. Doggerel is

festooned with laurel. There seems, at the moment, little hope for the critic. It is at such a time that the directions of Ezra Pound become prescient once more: “The first step of a renaissance, or awakening, is the importation of models for painting, sculpture, or writing. . . . We must learn what we can from the past, we must learn what other nations have done successfully under similar circumstances, we must think how they did it.”

This is the spirit that brought about a golden age—and will again, when the poets are ready.