Rediscovering the New Critics

Aaron Urbanczyk


The field of literary criticism and theory is certainly ripe for a change, a shift, at least something to shake it up a bit. The one-time Yale professor William Deresiewicz astutely diagnoses the stagnation in literary criticism in a 2008 article in _The Nation_. Quoting Louis Menand, Deresiewicz articulates a fact of which professors of literature across the country are painfully aware: “our graduate students are writing the same dissertations, with the same tools, as they were in 1990.” The academic study of literature is still recycling the now-hackneyed orthodoxies of identity politics, deconstruction, and New Historicism, but without the sense of intellectual excitement felt by many when the likes of Derrida, Judith Butler, and Stephen Greenblatt were, if nothing else, new and provocative figures. As Deresiewicz aptly puts it, “[t]here have always been trends in literary criticism, but the major trend now is trendiness itself,” and the craze for trendiness seems in the grip of what is evidently a terminal illness. When the most recent edition of _The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism_ (a title conspicuously lacking the term “Literary”) has an essay celebrating the advent of “Disability Studies” as a promising new paradigm for the literary critic, one can say with some justice that literary theory seems to have almost completely forgotten its object (however admirable its interest in matters of social justice). In such a state of affairs, a hopeful soul may recall the words of Edgar in _King Lear_: “Ripeness is all.” Garrick Davis, poet and founding editor of _Contemporary Poetry Review_, may have had the words of Edgar ringing in his ears when he set about editing _Praising It New: The Best of the New Criticism_. The timing for reintroducing the New Critics into the field of literary studies couldn’t be more opportune.

Organizing the heterogeneous cross-section of poets, critics, and professors lumped under the term “New Critics” is a daunting task, but Davis is equal to it and has succeeded admirably. _Praising It New_ only deals with American figures, thus one won’t find selections from important non-American figures such as William Empson or I. A. Richards. His selection of essays is, however, widely representative and coherently organized along thematic lines. The recognized giants associated with the New Criticism are well and generously represented: the volume contains seminal essays from T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Yvor Winters, Cleanth Brooks, Wimsatt and Beardsley, Kenneth Burke, and Robert Penn Warren. Further, _Praising It New_ performs the great service of popularizing several excellent critical essays from lesser-known figures influenced by the New Criticism,
including R. P. Blackmur, J. V. Cunningham (Yvor Winters's protégé at Stanford), Randall Jarrell (a student of Ransom and Warren's at Vanderbilt), Hugh Kenner (Cleanth Brooks's student at Yale), and Delmore Schwartz.

Praising It New revolves around two central preoccupations of the New Critics: the need to treat literature as a distinct mode of aesthetic expression and the responsibility of the critic to make a judgment of the aesthetic object according to rational standards. The New Critics began their rise to prominence in the early twentieth century (e.g. Eliot published his widely influential collection of critical essays, The Sacred Wood, in 1920), and they would come to dominate the field of literary criticism well into the early 1960s. Indeed, the measure of their success is witnessed by the fact that the textbooks written by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (Understanding Poetry and Understanding Fiction) became the standard tool for generations of college English professors in the undergraduate classroom. Yet, initially, the New Critics took the stance of opposition to popular criticism and academic English studies. They sought to create a space in universities and colleges for aesthetic criticism (as opposed to leaving it solely to magazine reviewers), and believed teachers and professors should provide such criticism (particularly for the emerging Modernist school of poets). Thus they strongly challenged the two reigning forms of literary analysis in their day: academic “scholarship” (which was mostly historical and philological) and “impressionistic” criticism (the critic registering his psychological and emotional responses to a literary work as a mode of evaluation). Critics such as Ransom and Tate perceived a deeply troubling state of affairs: academic professors of English were trained exclusively as literary historians and actively discouraged from writing “criticism,” while many of the popular “critics” (i.e. impressionist critics) were merely eloquently articulating their psychological experiences of reading literature. The conventional wisdom was that real scholars didn’t trifle with treating literature as an aesthetic object, because doing so was unscientific. In “Criticism Inc.,” John Crowe Ransom reports that one of his contemporaries, head of a graduate English department, flatly asserted, “This is a place for exact scholarship . . . we don’t allow criticism here, because that is something which anybody can do.” Further, Tate laments in “Miss Emily and the Bibliographer” that if a young student “goes to graduate school, he comes out incapacitated for criticism; if he tries to be a critic he is not unlike the ignorant impressionist who did not go to the graduate school. He cannot discuss the literary object in terms of its specific form; all that he can do is to give you its history or tell you how he feels about it.”

While the orthodoxies have changed a bit, this diagnosis sounds strangely like our own era. While the “old historicism” is out of fashion, the “New Historicism” has risen to take its place (the ideological study of history and culture as a matrix of the struggle for power and domination à la Foucault, Greenblatt, et al). In fact the New Historicism, coupled with the ubiquitous influence of identity politics in graduate literary study, has collapsed both of Tate’s vices into the modern graduate student: he is both incapacitated for criticism (by the New Historicism) and tends to indulge widely on how he feels about a text (according to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.).

Yet the New Critics were not merely astute diagnosticians of the dearth of sound aesthetic criticism in their day. They were some of the most lucid purveyors of
rational principles for evaluating the literary work of art in the history of literary theory. The literary work of art is first of all an object, a “form” in its own right. In “The Formalist Critic,” Cleanth Brooks observed with remarkable clarity that “form is meaning” in literature, and that form is the proper concern of the critic. Thus the literary critic must begin with his object, and not such extra-literary issues as authorial intent (see Wimsatt and Beardsley on “The Intentional Fallacy”), emotional response (Wimsatt and Beardsley on “The Affective Fallacy”), or literary biography. Praising It New includes numerous seminal essays wherein the rational principles of formalist criticism are articulated (e.g. Pound’s distinction of poetry into melopoeia, phanopoeia, and logopoeia in “How to Read”; Eliot’s famous doctrine of the “objective correlative” in “Hamlet and His Problems”; the “dissociation of sensibility” in “The Metaphysical Poets”; and Warren’s doctrine of “pure poetry” in “Pure and Impure Poetry”). Yet literary criticism, like all forms of praxis, is best learned through watching the masters at work. On this score, too, Davis has chosen wisely, for Praising It New contains not only works that are primarily theoretical, but also numerous essays containing the type of “close readings” (primarily of poetry) that made the New Critics famous. It is a delight to read Randall Jarrell’s analysis of Housman, Cleanth Brooks’ magisterial study of Eliot, R. P. Blackmur on American religious verse, Eliot on the Metaphysical poets, and the many snippets of close readings peppering the essays throughout the anthology. Such intelligent, eloquent, and precise literary criticism is a refreshing, though rare, commodity in the groves of academic “scholarship” these days.

The New Critics also vociferously insisted that aesthetic criticism is not only the proper job of the critic—it is in fact his moral obligation. Tate and Winters insisted upon this obligation so strongly that one gets the impression that not to do so, in their eyes, was a type of betrayal of humanistic learning itself. Yet the moral judgment of the literary work is not the type with which we are acquainted today. For decades ideological theorists and critics, giving in to the impulse of the social engineer, have denounced the racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and other such real or perceived faults in literary texts. If the professor can ferret out the alleged “-isms” in great (or not so great) works of literature, the hope is he can reprogram the minds and hearts of his students according to his ideological code. The concern, much like the Marxism that inspires most of these readings, is with changing society, not with understanding literature.

The New Critics’ notion of the judgment involved in literary criticism has its roots in the very origin of literary theory itself (which is to say, in Aristotle). In “Miss Emily and the Bibliographer” Tate speaks of the critic’s “obligation to judge,” and the failure to render criticism of the literature of the day he calls the “Great Refusal.” Indeed, the unwillingness to be attentive to literary form was an indication to Tate that the literary establishment of his day, much as our own, “no longer believe[s] in literature” or its vital connection to culture.

Further, in the selection from The Anatomy of Nonsense, Yvor Winters insists literary criticism is inherently “an act of moral judgment,” yet moral in a specific fashion. Winters is no naive moralist, suggesting the critic should applaud “good” deeds in art and deplore “wickedness.” Rather, he returns literary theory to the context of Aristotle’s Poetics. Winters reminds us that the critic must evaluate literary form in the broad context of anthropology (hence, his evocation of Aristotle and St. Thomas
Aquinas). Is the crafted literary form, what Winters would call the “adjustment of feeling to motive” in language, doing justice to human nature as it really is? In the face of such a question, the critic must judge, and his judgment cannot but be “moral” insofar as the approximation to human nature is involved. Thus we find deep in the heart of the New Criticism a re-emergence of Aristotle: literature is imitation (or mime- sis), and what is imitated through language is human action (and Aristotle never tires of reminding us that it is action that manifests human nature). The critic must not only judge the technical virtuosity of the literary form, he must also accept the invitation to and obligation of moral criticism: he must judge whether the aesthetic object does justice to human experience and the truth about human nature.

Perhaps Praising It New will mark the beginning of a renewed interest among literary scholars in the criminally neglected work of the New Critics. Perhaps this volume may be instrumental in a renascence of aesthetic criticism among professors and critics. Or perhaps this volume will simply rescue the brilliance of the New Critics from the nearly complete cultural amnesia to which they have been subjected by the “advances” in academic criticism of the last four decades. Whatever its impact, the moment is right for this volume to appear. “Ripeness is all,” and Garrick Davis has happened upon the perfect time to reacquaint us with what his subtitle justly heralds as The Best of the New Criticism.

Reason Defended?

James Kalb

The Suicide of Reason: Radical Islam’s Threat to the West
by Lee Harris (New York: Basic Books, 2007)

What do we make of radical Islam? Of Islam in general? Of the present state of the West? It is easier not to deal with such large questions, but events force them on us. Lee Harris wants us to take them very seriously indeed, since he believes that weaknesses of the liberal West make radical Islam a threat to its very survival. To avoid disaster, he believes, we need to abandon a great deal of fuzziness, insist on the unique value and fragility of liberal society, attend to considerations drawn from sociobiology and social Darwinism, and moderate the liberalism we want to preserve.

At bottom, his argument is quite simple. American and Western society has a particular way of doing things, which the author calls “reason,” that is based on the rational pursuit of individual interest. We are very much attached to that way of doing things, and it has great advantages. Other peoples have very different ways, to which they are also attached, that also have great advantages. In particular, Islam has achieved great and enduring success by slighting the rational pursuit of individual interest in favor of group solidar-