

The New Criterion

Features

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Grammars of a possible world

by [David Yezzi](#)

On the New Critics, then & now.

The New Criticism, like old Marley, is dead as a door-nail. A number of imposing monuments left over from its heyday in the early to mid-twentieth century remain—books with titles like *The Well-Wrought Urn*, *The World's Body*, *The Sacred Wood*, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, *The Expense of Greatness*, *The Forlorn Demon*, *Primitivism and Decadence*—but they are seldom visited. One can wander Stanford University's cloistered walks, for example, and imagine Yvor Winters crossing the quad (whaling harpoon in hand!) for his lecture on *Moby-Dick*, but ask an undergrad about Winters and you get a fish-eyed stare. It's the same, I imagine, at Cleanth Brooks's Yale or Allen Tate's Princeton. The poet-critics who crafted these works—Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, T. S. Eliot, William Empson, R. P. Blackmur, Tate, and Winters—have long passed out of fashion. Who now reads William K. Wimsatt's *Verbal Icon* or anything by Kenneth Burke? Their well-wrought urns show no signs of tribute (though they are still occasionally vandalized by literary malcontents).

This neglect is not a recent development. In 1986, René Wellek began his clarifying and sympathetic survey of the New Criticism, from *A History of Modern Criticism, 1750–1950*, in a minor key: “Today the New Criticism is considered not only superseded, obsolete, and dead, but somehow mistaken and wrong.” Thirty years later, not much has changed, or, if anything, things are worse: the New Critics are less read and more misunderstood than ever. As the Irish critic Rónán McDonald confirms with his new book *The Death of the Critic* (Continuum), “These critics are still paraded before each generation of university students as ideologically befuddled, or reactionary bogeymen.”

Today's trendier academics instinctively look askance at the New Critics. Instead of applying the touchstones of politics and sociology to works of art, the New Critics sought to describe the fine-grained aesthetic qualities of poems, a pursuit seen by theorists as woefully passé. Truth be told, the New Critics never had it very good in the academy. Even in their own day, their colleagues in fusty mid-century English departments felt that “criticism” was not a legitimate academic pursuit and that “anybody could do that.” As McDonald explains, the New Critics were shunned both coming and going:

Close reading of poetry, however brilliant, did not seem quite so serious a business [in the 1950s] as doing “proper” research in an archive. If in the 1980s the frosty stares were between the theorists and the traditionalists, the black polo necks against the tweed jackets, in the 1950s it was the critics against the scholars.

For their insufficient interest in the poet's biographical details and the “undecidable” nature of texts, the New Critics were branded (take your pick!): reactionary, formalist, traditional, scientific,

absolutist. This last particularly rankles in the post-structuralist academy, since the notion that one poem might be judged better than another sets theorists' teeth on edge. (Where the New Critics have consistently done well, of course, is with the general reader.)

The poet and critic William Logan, a regular contributor to these pages, handily skewers the hypocrisy of literary theory in his foreword to *Praising It New: The Best of the New Criticism*, edited by Garrick Davis: "In classrooms of theory, all readings are tolerated, except the wrong ones—the morally absolute masquerades here as the morally relative and manages to be high-minded about it, too." Kafka, he adds, "would have smiled in recognition." In the subtitle to his winning selection of essays, Davis throws down the gauntlet with that word *best*. Anyone who has sat around a seminar table with students of literary theory knows this can be a provocative term.

Here is just one example: I knew a professor who used to like to assign students to pick the *best* of Spenser's "Amoretti." A harmless enough activity, you might think, but in the era of French theory it could fairly cause a riot. In one lecture class, the professor was hounded by a student who would stand up every time a literary judgment was made and yell out "Essentialist!" While it is difficult to imagine that assignment going over well with would-be deconstructionists or New Historicists, it is no surprise that young poets, for whom aesthetic choices are their stock in trade, flocked to his classroom.

For the poet-critic Allen Tate, the failure to judge, to discriminate better from best, was tantamount to a moral failure. "The moral nature affirms itself in judgment, and we cannot or will not judge," he lamented. For Tate, the "moral intelligence" (Winter's phrase) enters into poetry "not as moral abstractions but as form, coherence of image and metaphor, control of tone and of rhythm, the union of these features. So the moral obligation to judge compels us to make not a moral but a total judgement." Needless to say, this sort of talk can still raise eyebrows in academe.

There is, however, one place where, for better or worse, the New Criticism maintains a toehold, and on this both Logan and McDonald agree—in creative writing classes. I'm not so sure. Many "creative writers" seem to be churning out the kinds of poems that the New Critics would have loathed, both technically and in their weakness for cultural politics. But Logan is right that if the mechanics of poetry have a shot anywhere then, generally speaking, it's with poets, not literary theorists. It's a poet's job (at least it ought to be) to know how poems work, prosodically, rhetorically, rhythmically. For the poets of the New Criticism, Wellek explains, there is no "distinction of form and content: they believe in the organicity of poetry and, in practice, constantly examine attitudes, tones, tensions, irony, and paradox..." Getting under the hood was what the New Critics did best, and in this regard they still have much to offer both poets and readers.

When the New Critics are dismissed, they tend to be dismissed *en masse*, which is odd considering how frequently and how widely they disagreed. Most of them were uncomfortable with the very label, coined by John Crowe Ransom in *The New Criticism* (1941). As their essays reveal, they could be a fractious bunch. In fact, what we now think of as the New Criticism is no single universally held guiding principle (though there were certain basic commonalities), but, rather, the myriad flashes of brilliant insight thrown off like sparks by their constant quarreling. None of them missed a chance to counter or revise another's assertions. It is hard to imagine anything quite like it today: eminent critics duking it out in public—not posturing or grandstanding, but carrying on a riveting exchange of ideas in journals like *The Kenyon Review* and *The Sewanee Review*. Whole essays and parts of books were devoted to their back-and-forth. They also unsparingly reviewed each other's poems: as Winters wrote of Tate, for example, he is "a poet who has promised a great deal throughout his career but has never produced it..." They were nothing if not critical.

The New Criticism came about in part as a way to account for and interpret the obscurity in modern poetry, and also as a reconsideration and rehabilitation of Donne and the Metaphysicals. Brooks,

Tate, Winters & Co. grappled with Eliot's *Waste Land* and charted the poem's tributary streams back through the nineteenth century to Baudelaire and forward, though Laforgue, Mallarmé, and Valéry, to Crane and Stevens. Before modernism, poetry had largely (with a few significant exceptions) followed the shapes of rational discourse; after the Symbolists and surrealists came the Savage God. It was at this intersection—between the rational arguments of Renaissance poetry and the associative, Symbolist tendencies of modern poetry—that the New Critics pitched camp.

In his dense and brilliant essay, "Tension in Poetry," Allen Tate identifies the rational-emotive scale along which these two kinds of poems may be found:

The metaphysical poet as a rationalist begins at or near the extensive or denoting end of the line; the romantic or Symbolist poet at the other, intensive end; and each by a straining feat of the imagination tries to push his meanings as far as he can towards the opposite end, so as to occupy the entire scale.

This opposition between reason and emotion is restated throughout the New Criticism. In the last chapter of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), the English poet-critic William Empson finds the same dichotomy expressed in this passage from the 1927 edition of *Oxford Poetry*: there is a "logical conflict, between the denotary [*sic*] and the connotatory [*sic*] sense of words; between, that is to say, an asceticism tending to kill language by stripping words of all association and a hedonism tending to kill language by dissipating their sense under a multiplicity of associations." The important point here is that as soon as a poet moves too far in one direction—toward denotation or connotation—the language dies; the object, as Tate says, is to occupy the entire scale.

Earlier in *Seven Types*, Empson takes a whack at his great teacher at Cambridge I. A. Richards for daring to suggest that the "Emotions of words in poetry are independent of the Sense." Empson is quick to point out that Richards later "dropped the idea that a writer of poetry had better not worry about the Sense," and, indeed, he ultimately argues "that the only tolerable way to read poetry is to give the full Sense a very sharp control over the Emotion."

Winters, of all the so-called New Critics, was most outspoken about the need in poetry to modulate and control emotion. The management of emotion, Winters believed, constitutes what he refers to as the "moral" element in poetry. To understand Winters's "moral" sense (a term with a specific and idiosyncratic meaning for him), it is necessary to begin with Winters's basic definition of poetry. A poem, for Winters, is a statement in words about a human experience. So far so good. The statement of the poem, as opposed to statements in prose, pays particular attention to the emotional or connotative dimensions of words. (Prose pays attention to them as well, but verse heightens the relationships between words and can marshal them with greater emotional precision.)

By weighing the emotional charge carried by words, Winters is able to consider the appropriateness of every word in a poem. Here's how he puts it in his forward to *In Defense of Reason* (1947):

Words are primarily conceptual, but through use and because human experience is not purely conceptual, they have acquired connotations of feeling. The poet makes his statement in such a way as to employ both concept and connotation as efficiently as possible. This poem is good in so far as it makes a defensible rational statement about a human experience (the experience need not be real but must be in some sense possible) and at the same time communicates the emotion which ought to be motivated by the rational understanding of that experience.

This is where, for Winters, the moral element comes in: the relationship of motive to emotion. In other words, the poet must take pains to ensure that the emotional content of the language does not exceed the motivating experience. An extreme example would be describing a hangnail with the word *genocide*; an actual example might be Sylvia Plath's use of *fascist* and *Auschwitz* to

characterize her relationship with her father. This kind of exorbitance—the disconnection between emotion and experience—results in sentimentality, or “unearned” emotion, which Winters saw as a moral weakness in poetry. Winters believed the poet’s duty was to represent emotion accurately. The poem must be a rational reflection of a human experience; how else may one judge the aptness of the feeling expressed?

Cleanth Brooks called Winters’s insistence on logical content (though *rational* is perhaps a better word) the “heresy of paraphrase,” insisting that you can’t sort out the content of a poem in words other than the ones used by the poem itself. The poem is exactly what it says; any statement of the poem’s argument in different words does violence to the poem. But Winters could find serviceable paraphrases for obscure poems by Crane and Tate, for example, without for a moment suggesting that the paraphrase should compete with the poet’s original expression.

Brooks’s “emphasis on the ‘fictionality’ of all art,” Wellek explains, “its world of illusion or semblance, cannot mean a lack of relation to reality or a simple entrapment in language.” What Winters refused to condone was sentimental blather and willful, decadent obscurity, a view ultimately shared by most of the New Critics (though they never tired of squabbling over emphases within the same argument). Even Brooks could applaud Winters’s resistance to “mere impressionism in criticism, which . . . ultimately leads to relativism and the abandonment of universal standards. One applauds too his attack on the fuzzier kinds of Romanticism.”

In similar fashion, the Southerner John Crowe Ransom “had the idea of a poem as a great ‘paradox,’ a construct looking two ways, with logic trying to dominate the metaphors, and metaphors trying to dominate the logic.” As Wellek writes, “he obviously, like Valéry, practiced [poetry] as a balancing of sound and meaning, as continued compromise between meter and sense, metaphor and argument.” For Winters, the method best suited to working this fault line between the connotative and denotative, the associative and rational, was what he called the “post-symbolist” method, as embodied by the greatest poems of Valéry and Stevens. The post-symbolist poem adopts the rational structure of the Renaissance lyric, while opening up the poem to the greater range of connotation afforded by the “pure” poetry of the Symbolists. “The method,” Winters wrote with characteristic decisiveness, “is potentially the richest method to appear.”

Tate, for his part, felt that Stevens, in substituting the imagination for reality, had gone too far. He reviled “that idolatrous dissolution of language from the grammar of a possible world, which results from the belief that language itself can be reality, or by incantation can create reality: a superstition that comes down in the French from Lautremont, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé to the Surrealists, and in English to Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens, and Dylan Thomas.”

Superstitions were common among the modernists (in painting as well as in poetry). A profound mysticism and spiritual longing animated much of the early twentieth-century avant-garde: think of Yeats’s private mythology in *A Vision*, Eliot’s Anglicanism, Tate’s Catholicism. Such systems were mined for their mystery and potent symbolism. The New Critics were careful, however, to draw a line safely on this side of unreason.

Contemporary poets have pushed this irrationalist-obscuratist tendency in modernism to extremes. The result is a kind of secular mysticism that poaches on the religious impulse. At its best, it works a travesty on the mysteries comprised by deism; at its worst, it is an ironized shadow-play, in which the poet winks to his knowing audience of experimentalists and agnostics to acknowledge that the outmoded traditions are over once and for all. In their place, they substitute the vague charge that results when meaning is drained from language, offering this cloud of unknowing as a kind of sham religious experience.

The recipe for poetry of this kind is easy to follow. As the critic David Orr wrote recently in *The*

New York Times Book Review, “the trendiest contemporary style” relies “heavily on disconnected phrases, abrupt syntactical shifts, attention-begging titles, ... quirky diction, ... flickering italics, oddball openings, ... and a tone ranging from daffy to plangent—basically, two scoops of John Ashbery and a sprinkling of Gertrude Stein.” For “daffy” read playfully opaque, the irrationality that results when reason slips on a banana peel—a briefly amusing, but ultimately cheap gag.

In fairness, artists should not be held accountable for the sins of their epigones. If the modernists confirmed the trend (begun by the Romantics) toward irrationalism, then they also understood its limits. Yeats explored an alternate Theosophical realm, in which symbols pointed toward mystical phenomena, but these phenomena, for all of their idiosyncrasy, were meant to relate ultimately (albeit tenuously) to the world. For some New Critics, Yeats’s poetry paid the price for its eccentricity. “Winters, like Auden and Eliot,” Wellek tells us, “is greatly bothered by the truth-value of Yeats’s philosophical and political views.” “The better one understands him,” Winters writes, “the harder it is to take him seriously.”

In his essay on Poe in *The Forlorn Demon*, Tate attributes poets’ disconnection from reality to the “angelic imagination”: Since Poe, Tate argues,

refuses to see nature, he is doomed to see nothing. He has overleaped and cheated the condition of man. The reach of our imaginative enlargement is perhaps no longer than the ladder of analogy, at the top of which we may see all, if we still wish to *see* anything, that we have brought up with us from the bottom, where lies the sensible world. If we take nothing with us to the top but our emptied angelic intellects, we shall see nothing when we get there.

Ransom says in *The World’s Body* that “art gratifies a perceptual impulse and exhibits the minimum of reason.” Still, it exhibits *enough* reason to keep the poem from escaping the world and the laws of language entirely. The downside of maintaining an attachment to the world is a flattening out of the very imaginative, musical, and emotional flights that constitute the *poetic* in poetry. This flattening of emotion, of course, is never the aim of any poet, least of all the New Critics, who appreciated with such energy the new vibrations set in motion by modernism. What they wished to define with clarity and force was the limit after which the poetic outpaces reality so utterly that it becomes a diminished thing.

The essays in *Praising It New* still carry a potent charge for anyone interested in what makes the best poems tick. Davis has performed a service to readers (often in the face of recalcitrant publishers unwilling to make works available for reprint at reasonable rates), and the book will be of particular interest to poets and students of poetry. Whether or not teachers will have the good sense to assign it remains to be seen.

Notes

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1. *Praising It New: The Best of the New Criticism*, edited by Garrick Davis; Swallow Press, 332 pages, \$36.95 cloth, \$18.95 paper. [Go back to the text.](#)

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