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New Criticism – Worth Reconsidering?

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In current literary studies, it seems to be quite common to associate New Criticism with what is already old-fashioned, surpassed, and rigorous. It is usually claimed that although the New Critics may have been useful in the past for their directing of the literary scholars' attention to texts, instead of historical and sociological aspects, at present their theories seem funny, for, as we have been taught by the (post)modern critical approaches, texts are always only signals of more important ideological issues – which, supposedly, should be a primary focus of criticism. Instead of textual matters, current critical theory is expected to deal with linking literature to the class struggle, reflection of historical inequalities done to women, gays, lesbians, or, for example, non-Western cultures, and, consequently, with literature's task to serve as a tool to "mend" them. In the light of these developments, the New Critical association of literary texts with primarily aesthetic meaning necessarily made them seem, as their current opponents claim, to pretend "that a busy warehouse is a monastic cell"¹. They were accused of "esoteric aestheticism" (revival of art for art's sake), formalism, unhistorical approach to literature, attempts to make literary study scientific, and, last but not least, of doing not more than just introducing a pedagogical method to teach students how to read literature². However, in their defence Wellek claims that all of the above mentioned "sins" could be easily refuted, paradoxically, by "an appeal to [new critical] texts", and wonders whether current commentators "have ever actually read the writings of the New Critics"³.

In my paper, I would like to share the Wellek's wonder with regard to one of the above issues, i.e. the accusation of their supposed "unhistoricity". To do that, I will refer to some of their seminal texts – *The Well*

¹ Kincaid, James: "Coherent Readers, Incoherent Texts". *Critical Inquiry*, 3 (1977). p. 802.

² Wellek, R.: *A History of Modern Criticism 1750-1950: Volume 6: American Criticism, 1900 – 1950*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986, p. 144.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

Wrought Urn by Brooks, *The Verbal Icon* by Wimsatt, and to some essays from the Tate's *The Man of Letters in the Modern World*. Naturally, the problem of (un)historicity cannot be restricted only to those works; it appears already in what could be taken the "New Critical Manifesto", i.e. the Brooks' and Warren's *Understanding Poetry* (1938) in which the authors are against substituting the poem as the object of study by the study of "biographical and historical materials"⁴. One could even say that it is maybe this first strong, and widely misunderstood, position which launched the avalanche of attacks by the future commentators.

To defend their position, Brooks explains his attitude to history in his most important work *The Well Wrought Urn*, saying that if literary history is not emphasised in his essays, it is not because he discounts its importance, but because he is anxious to see what would be left after the poem is referred to its "cultural matrix".⁵ And further he is even more precise:

*"We tend to say that every poem is an expression of its age; that we must be careful to ask of it only what its own age asked; that we must judge it only by the canons of its age. Any attempt to view it sub specie aeternitatis, we feel, must result in illusion. Perhaps it must. Yet, if poetry exists as poetry in any meaningful sense, the attempt must be made. Otherwise the poetry of the past becomes significant merely as cultural anthropology, and the poetry of the present, merely as a political, or religious, or moral instrument."*⁶

This problem was also addressed by W. K. Wimsatt who in his most famous work *The Verbal Icon* (1954) attacks the so-called "historical" scholars by saying that "our value judgements of past literature can certainly not be decided by the simply historical side of empirical findings about what groups of persons, larger or smaller, for longer or shorter periods in the past, have thought or felt about this or that – anthropomorphism or anthropophagy"⁷. He goes on to quote a passage by Benedetto Croce

⁴ Brooks, C. – Warren, R. P.: *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students*. Available from World Wide Web:

<<http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/understanding-poetry.html>>, quoted on 30 November 2006.

⁵ BROOKS, C.: *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1974, p. x.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

⁷ WIMSATT, W. K.: "History and Criticism". In: *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the*

who says that as Plato, Aristotle and Homer have to be judged not according to the philosophy and culture of their, but our times, so Dante has to be judged according to our thought; otherwise we “should find ourselves desperately engaged in an impossible effort to distort our own mind.”⁸

Last but not least, the problem got its treatment in the work of Allen Tate as well. In his essay on Emily Dickinson Tate claims that her poetry was great not because of some “unanchored” universal aesthetic qualities of her verse, not connected to her environment, but because she embodied the historical and cultural change, the change from the once strong and coherent culture of Puritanism and from a rising culture of modernism. Dickinson was great because she found herself struggling with both of them.

“She had all the elements of a culture that has broken up, a culture that on the religious side takes its place in the museum of spiritual antiquities. Puritanism, as a unified version of the world is dead; only a remnant of it in trade may be said to survive.”⁹

What do the above examples of the New Critics’ engagement with history show?

Firstly, it is evident that contemporary views of New Criticism are really not based on the attentive reading of their seminal texts, and “produce” a great misunderstanding as far as their critical principles are concerned. As it could be seen from the above examples, New Critics never really ignored the importance of history in the interpretation of a literary work. Their interest, however, was just different from what is in fashion nowadays. And, moreover, they differed from one another as well. We can see that while Brooks was interested in finding out what makes a work universal, how to identify its “all-human” layers (leaving its more particular aspects unaddressed, though, I would say, never ignored), Wimsatt thinks that it is impossible to separate the values of the past from those of the present. Perhaps the most “historical” of the three mentioned scholars was Tate, for in his interpretation of Emily Dickinson’s poetry he credits the consciousness of a particular age with a constitutive role in the writer’s aesthetic form.

Secondly, it is even more evident that certain current critical approaches are practicing what New Critics considered unacceptable for literary scholars and, in a way, had foreseen it. What is, for example, most

Meaning of Poetry. Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1989, p. 257.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 257 – 258.

⁹ TATE, A.: “Emily Dickinson”. In: *The Man of Letters in the Modern World*. Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, p. 225 – 226.

interesting about the above Wimsatt's statement (from the aspect of the present) is not the relationship of a literary work to its age, or the canons by which one should judge it, but, strangely enough, what will be left from the literary work if it is not approached as a literary work – a political, religious, or moral instrument. If one looks at current theoretical and critical scene, with its various critical approaches, in most of the so-called “western literatures”, one can see that what New Critics “feared of” has come along. What else governs feminism if not the understanding of literature as a tool in invoking social, cultural, or aesthetic difference between the sexes, not speaking about earlier periods in the history of feminism when literature served as an open tool in women's emancipatory struggle. What else is, for example, New Historicism governed by if not by political agenda in its focusing on the literatures of previously neglected social or political groups? Or in relating interpretational problems to contemporaneous cultural, historical, mostly extra-literary matters - letters, diaries, and other material artefacts?¹⁰

Thirdly, a closer look on new critical theories would also tell us that they can be related to current theories not only *per negationem*, but “positively” as well. There is no doubt that they share with current theories their fascination for close reading, though the object and results of this reading may markedly differ. While for the New Critics the close reading means close concentration on a text, its language and composition, the identification of its aesthetic qualities, for many current critical approaches it is the scrutinising of a text in order to find its extra-textual – cultural, historical, sociological, political, or, in general, ideological values. Whatever the aims, however, there is no doubt that the text is very closely examined and analysed in both cases. And this is markedly different from, say, biographical or moral-philosophical approaches¹¹ of the early twentieth century. Thus even though the New Criticism “has often been treated as a scapegoat” by (post)modern critical approaches, it seems fair to say that it has “enabled a space for the serious study of literature contemporary to it,” as

¹⁰ Hedges, W.: “*New Historicism Explained*”. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.sou.edu/English/Hedges/Sodashop/RCenter/Theory/Explained/nhis-texp.htm>>, quoted on 6 December 2006.

¹¹ For a more detailed examination of the approaches, see Guerin, Wilfred, L. et al. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches*. Fourth Edition. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

well as for "new theoretical sites and praxes".¹² And this makes it worth re-considering.

Literature

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¹² Spurlin, W. J. - Fischer, M. (eds.): *The New Criticism and Contemporary Literary Theory: Connections and Continuities*. New York: Garland Publishers, 1995, p. xix.