

ANGLO-AMERICAN NEW CRITICISM

So-called *objective* critics are, according to Abrams, ones who focus on the *form* or *structure* of the literary work itself to the exclusion of all other considerations such as the world which it reflects (the mimetic approach), the author who wrote it (the expressive approach), or the impact which it has on the reader and vice versa (the pragmatic approach). In other words, it matters less what a work represents or is about, what its author meant, or what it does, good or bad, to the reader, or what a reader does to a text. What matters more is understanding the literary work per se, the textual *object* itself or, to be precise, how it is put together or structured, its form. The objective approach is an essentially empirical undertaking that is supposed to permit an objective or neutral apprehension of the text 'as in itself it really is,' something that the emphases of the other approaches do not allow. Another related term for this approach is *formalism*.

The New Critics were an 'objective' school of literary critics who flourished in the South of the USA at universities like Vanderbilt during their heyday of the 1940s. An off-spring of the Modernists (and of Eliot's insistence in particular that we should train our attention upon the poem rather than the poet), their influence in turn (especially of such concepts of theirs as the 'intentional fallacy') upon subsequent generations is incalculable even here in the Caribbean where for decades after their views were critical orthodoxy. Advocating what some termed an *intrinsic* rather than *extrinsic* approach to criticism, they were primarily interested in the study of lyric poetry (i.e. poetry normally viewed as written to express the point of view and subjective state of mind of the poet). However, contrary to the Romantics, they advised that the critic should focus not on the poet, the reader, or on what the poem represents (these would all be extrinsic to or a distraction from the poem itself), but on the poem (to do so would constitute an intrinsic approach to criticism). Sometimes, the New Critics are accused (for example, by critics of theirs such as Alfred Kazin) of 'fetishising form,' that is, placing it on a pedestal and worshiping it to the exclusion of all else.

W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley The "Intentional Fallacy" (1946) and the "Affective Fallacy" (1949)

Wimsatt and Beardsley took it upon themselves to 'legislate' for the benefit of subsequent generations two of the most important critical *heresies* or *fallacies* (these two are also buzzwords of the first half of the twentieth century) which were implicit, if not explicit, in the work of Ransom and Brooks: the *intentional* and the *affective* fallacies.

For them, critics were too frequently prone to two grave errors: that of focusing upon *either* the author him/herself, his/her biography and/or his/her intention (all elements external to the text itself) *or* the emotions inspired by the poem (its 'effect' or 'affect' which is again something external to the work). This was done to the exclusion of attention upon the poem itself which, they argued, was all a critic had before him/her and, thus, could be sure about.

Conclusion

The New Criticism opposed the interest of earlier generations in the author's biography and/or intention, the object of representation, and the work's impact upon the reader. In many respects, their emphases represent the culmination of the post-Kantian quest for objectivity. Whatever their particular emphases, Arnold, Richards, James, Eliot and many others had all urged an objective approach to criticism. The New Critics, however, insisted that the only true path to objectivity was by training critical attention on the work to the exclusion of all else. The proper focus of criticism is not upon circumstances external (or extrinsic) to the work but the work itself in all its verbal detail (those intrinsic formal details). New Critics warn, in a way that became critical dogma for decades afterwards, against procedures of reading which would lead the critic away from the work itself. They offer in their place a purely *formalist* approach that eschews all reference to the author's life and purposes, what the work represents, and the work's psychological and moral effects upon the audience. Their favourite kind of literary work is lyrical poetry. The essential component of any lyrical poem is, from their perspective, the diction itself (the poet's

choice of words, including imagery, symbolism, etc.), that is, the very verbal stuff of which the poem is made. Their distinctive critical procedure consists in a detailed, subtle analysis of the complex interrelationships (tensions and reconciliations) of the verbal components of a work.