CHAPTER TWO

(A)

The New Criticism: Basic Tenets

The New Criticism as a critical practice was much in vogue from the 1930s to the 1950s. It helped in defining the study of English in the universities, and drew up the contours of the development of critical theory in years to come. As a critical practice, it was quite unconventional in the sense that no single critic was its proponent, it had no so-called manifesto, no clear-cut aims, no linear history of its origin and development, and no avowed followers. It was only in 1941 when John Crowe Ransom published *The New Criticism* that the emergence of something new and invigorating in the critical field was perceived to be happening. However, it should pertinently be mentioned that those who have eventually come to be identified as prominent New Critics were not mentioned in Ransom's book, though Ransom tried to establish the need for a 'new' kind of critic for the dissemination of the study of English as an independent discipline.

It was with this specific aim that the books which have been identified as propagating the methodology of the New Criticism on its practical side — namely, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) and *Practical Criticism* (1929) by I. A. Richards, and *Understanding Poetry* (1938) by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren — were written. The study of English had been overshadowed by disciplines as remotely related to English as Classics and History. Besides, it was entangled with the academic study of philology, source-hunting, and literary biography. It was the endeavour of what came to be known as the New Criticism to shift the focus from extra-literary contextual study to close textual analysis. That is why the New
Criticism has often been associated with empirical methodology for classroom teaching of literature. Richards wrote *Practical Criticism* because he found that his undergraduate students at Cambridge, when they were not given the extra-literary information like names of the authors or the titles of the poems, could not comprehend the poems objectively by closely focusing on the words on the page. Brooks and Warren, while teaching at Louisiana State University, were similarly dissatisfied with the methods of teaching English. So they wrote first *An Approach to Literature*, and then, with a broader base, *Understanding Poetry* which was first entitled 'Reading Poems,' a title that obviously stressed how to approach individual poems, whereas the present title points to the need for developing a strategy or principle for understanding poetry.

The New Criticism has often been disparagingly characterised as 'asocial formalism' that divorced literature from its social and historical origins by its insistence on close textual analysis. This is far from the truth, and exactly opposite to what motivated the members of the group to develop and promote the New Criticism. It was their concern with the state of society and culture in twentieth-century America that was at the bottom of the origin and development of the New Criticism. Critics like Ransom, Tate, and Warren who were at the centre of the New Critical movement hailed from the South of America, which was as yet, more or less, unaffected by the industrial and capitalist development of the North. Though they have been associated with bourgeois individualism, they have voiced their dissatisfaction with that ideology in the strongest terms. In order to appreciate their stand on such issues, it is necessary to understand the nature of their origin.

The New Critics were much influenced by the Romantic Movement, though they could hardly get on with the subjective nature of much of the Romantic poetry — especially that of Percy Bysshe Shelley. However, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s well-known formulation of the
imaginative fusion of competing energies in the poet's mind gave a great impetus to the New Critics. The Coleridgean theory of 'the balance of opposites' in his *Biographia Literaria* (1847) gave support to the New Critical belief in the fusion of the emotional and the intellectual. It was this fusion which could give 'whole knowledge' and replace the partial knowledge offered by the emotional subjectivity of Romantic poetry or the reductively abstracted view of science.

There was also a political perspective of the New Criticism. Ransom and his followers formed a group named the 'Fugitive,' after the name of their magazine. It was more or less an academic activity. This group gradually grew into what came to be known as the 'Agrarians.' This group had a definite political agenda, and was bent on defending the agrarian character of the South against the materialist, industrial, capitalist culture of the North. They expressed their views in essays read out at a symposium, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. To the New Critics, culture was very much related to the economic activities of human beings. It was part of the wholeness of life. But the capitalist set-up believed in separating the cultural sphere from the economic activity. For the capitalists, culture was merely a diversion, an alternative sphere. Culture became associated, in the capitalists' view, with the consumption of commodities, not a part of productivity and efficiency. It was against this background that the New Critics proposed the agrarian civilisation of the South, with its pre-industrial economic relations, as the remedy for the havoc brought about by the capitalist economy of the North.

From the beginning, the New Critics were preoccupied with modernist poetry. When T.S. Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land* was published in 1922, it brought Ransom and Tate into sharp disagreement with one another. Ransom criticised the poem for its direct transcription of surface reality — an approach which had been identified as naturalism, not realism. Ransom's opinion
was that realism to be used in literature must undergo the process of analysis. In his opinion, Eliot had not bothered to shape the poem into a definite form. Tate's reply was that Ransom had equalised the form with regularity of metre, and had consequently failed to understand the varied use of metre and the bewildering multiplicity of themes that the poem presented. The disagreements put aside, it was the endeavour of the New Critics to come to terms with the form of the modernist poetry.

For the New Critics, the speciality of a literary composition was its particular system of language. In literature, language is used in a way different from how it is used elsewhere. In a poem, for example, the poet exploits all the denotative and connotative possibilities of words, besides taking care of the sonic and rhythmic aspects of words. But in an instruction leaflet, if the writer begins to explore, say, the ambiguities and the suggestive qualities of words, the reader will feel repelled. In an instruction leaflet what the reader wants to find is an unambiguous and clear message. Any kind of dabbling with the literary potential of language will fail to bring about the desired effect in such a case. The language used in literature, on the other hand, is non-functional in the sense that it does not have a utilitarian end. However, it does not mean that the language of literature is useless. It is only literature that can give us whole knowledge, not the reductive view of rationalist discourses. This distinction of literature from other kinds of discourses has been emphasised by the New Critics in their unique ways — Empson drew attention to 'ambiguity,' Tate spoke of 'tension,' Ransom focused on 'concrete universal,' and Brooks pointed to 'paradox.'

The special character of the language of literature imposed another important feature on the New Criticism. It was the autonomy of the text. While trying to comprehend a literary text, the reader should focus on the linguistic system operating within the boundaries of the text, not
to anything beyond its limits. It was this focus on the words on the page that Richards, and Brooks and Warren found wanting in their readers. It was also this characteristic of the literary artefact as an enclosed space that encouraged the use of spatial metaphors by the New Critics to describe the poem, the most well-known of them being Brooks’s characterisation of the poem, taking a cue from John Donne’s poem, “The Canonization,” as a ‘well-wrought urn.’

The New Critics believed that literature should not be judged merely by the statements it makes. The statements provide only the rational content; and judging literature only on the basis of the rational content is tantamount to judging it on the basis of abstractions on which other rationalist discourses like science thrive. In such cases where the rational content is given priority, literature becomes valued like science for its usefulness, in utter disregard of the formal features which make it a discourse distinct from and superior to rationalist discourses. Ransom explains the difference between rationalist and aesthetic discourses in terms of work and play. A rationalist discourse is like ‘work’ where an object is considered valuable if it has utility in economic terms. On the other hand, an aesthetic discourse is like ‘play’ where an object is viewed in its totality. The tendency of the rationalist discourses is always to undermine the formal features of the text, either by ignoring them or by considering them as non-functional decorations or merely a vehicle for the expression of the rational content. It had been the endeavour of the New Critics to emphasize the formal features of the text, because it is the formal features that make up the texture of the discourse. A discourse depends upon the texture for its materiality, for its objective patterns, while the statements it makes merely form its structure which is supported by the texture, i.e., its objective sound patterns. This distinction of the literary discourse becomes evident in its use of figurative language, its use of tropes, so to say. It is through the use of such figurative aspects of language that the literary discourse
establishes its distinction and uniqueness from rationalist discourses. The foregrounding of the tropes and figures of speech in a literary discourse also points to the limits of a rationalist discourse which has to depend for its desired effects on the literalistic aspects of language and can resort to figurative language only at the risk of invoking ambiguity and turbidity.

The New Critics' emphasis on the formal features of a discourse should not lead one to think that they utterly neglected the rational content. On the contrary, they were equally critical of those who tried to judge literature solely on the basis of formal elements, in total disregard of the ideas or social concerns it might contain. As Ransom says in "The Inorganic Muses": "No prose argument, no poem" (286). Judgement of literature on the basis of its textural features to the exclusion of its rational content would be as hollow as the judgement of literature on the basis of its rational content to the exclusion of its formal features. Hence the poetry of Archibald MacLeish who sought to write poetry without ideological content found little favour with the New Critics. However, the New Critics were sensitive enough to the formal aspects to advise that the ideas or social concerns should be used by the writer 'ironically.' The ideological content should be analysed through 'irony' — a term which was given utmost importance by the New Critics for its potential to bring in the opposites and bring about their reconciliation according to the Coleridgean formula.

The New Critics were also sceptical and distrustful about paraphrasing the content of a literary discourse. In fact, Cleanth Brooks who was one of the prominent New Critics considered paraphrase as no less than a 'heresy.' Ransom tried to conceptualise the paraphrase of a poem as "our idea of its operative or structural element, and in that sense presumed to be within the power of any person intelligent enough to make prose discourse" (Ransom, "Inorganic Muses" 288). The meaning of a literary composition, say a poem, depends on the totality of its experience. The
meaning cannot be separated from the other elements of a poem which is considered a self-
sufficient and autonomous entity. All the elements of a poem are inter-related, and the
experience of the poem depends very much on the inter-relation of the various elements. Hence
to paraphrase a poem would be to translate it from one medium to another in which that inter-
relation would be sorely missed. In Ransom’s opinion, “The paraphrase ‘reduces’ the text; even
if it should employ more words than the text it leaves out some of the meaning” (“Poetry
Formal” 440). However, they also held that a literary text is never a stable structure. The inter-
relation among the elements is always in a flux. The meaning of a literary text is produced in the
process of the ever-changing relationship among the elements of a literary discourse. It is this
totality of the poetic experience that I. A. Richards was pointing to when he wrote in Science and
Poetry (1926) that “it is never what a poem says which matters, but what it is” (qtd. in Waugh
171). And it was not without nothing that Brooks and Warren at one time thought of the title of
their much-used volume to be ‘Experiencing Poetry,’ instead of Understanding Poetry.

For the New Critics, the literary text does not comprise a single subject matter or a single
formal feature. A text is the result of the inter-relation of different elements — structural as well
as textural. It was this view of the organic nature of the text that prevented the New Critics from
accepting the function of the form as a vessel containing meaning. They never made any
distinction between form and meaning. It is rather through an interaction between form and
content that meaning is produced. This interaction is brought about through paradoxes and
contradictions. The obvious outcome that one can think of is that a literary text can never attain
stability, though it has a unified structure.

Unlike a rationalist discourse which views objects in their abstractions, an aesthetic
discourse presents an object in its individuality and complexity. It is this individuality and
complexity that invests the literary discourse with its iconic value. The New Critics claimed iconic stature for the literary text, not because it referred to or resembled some outside object, but it offered itself in its fullness and singularity, which is attained through form. Wimsatt conceived of the text as a ‘verbal icon’ keeping in view this roundness of the literary artefact.

The New Critics’ belief in the autonomy of the text led them to attack what Wimsatt and Beardsley characterised as the ‘intentional fallacy’ and the ‘affective fallacy’ — the two kinds of approach to the text — in their two essays published in 1946 and 1949 respectively. The first one is a confusion between the text and its origin. The New Critics objected to the introduction of the authorial intention on two counts. First, the authorial intention cannot be ascertained with clarity and conviction. It is never, after all, possible to know what the author had in mind while creating a literary work. Secondly, to introduce the figure of the author in the experience of the poem is to threaten the integrity of the text. The New Critics believed in sealing off the boundaries of the text in order to ensure concentration on the words on the page. Language is a public medium, and the authors’ exploration of this medium cannot take charge of the process of meaning-making.

The attack on the ‘affective fallacy’ was launched on similar grounds. The New Critics believed that judging the text on the basis of its results, that is, how it affects the readers is to jeopardise the objective and impersonal existence of the text. The affective fallacy was based on the impressionistic and subjective judgement of the text. The critical pursuit of the New Critics was directed to expose the inanity of the extra-literary considerations that were stultifying the growth of true critical judgement. Promoting affective fallacy would involve inviting impressionism and subjectivity. Hence it was in the interest of the professionalisation of literary
theory that the New Critics sought to banish both intentional fallacy and affective fallacy from the domain of literary criticism.

Although the New Critics sought to establish the uniqueness of the aesthetic discourse, it does not imply that they ignored its cognitive aspect. On the other hand, they held that an aesthetic discourse offers the fullness of knowledge, which scientific and other rational discourses fail to deliver. What science can offer is only an abstraction, in the process leaving things disintegrated. It is due to the role of the art that they are integrated again. As Ransom says, “As science more and more reduces the world to its types and forms, art, replying, must invest it again with body” (World's Body 198). Tate also speaks for “the special, unique and complete knowledge” (qtd. in Wellek 6: 152) that literature provides.

It may, therefore, be safely concluded that whatever the New Critics wanted to promote was motivated by their conception of the autonomy of the aesthetic discourse as a unique source of knowledge. They put in the best of their efforts to free the literary text from all kinds of extra-literary criteria which would inhibit the objective, impersonal judgement of its value. It has also to be remembered that it was the New Critics who gave a new direction to the concept of the teaching of literature in the classroom by their method of close reading, and it is in this respect that their appeal has been enduring.
That Literary Theory has emerged today as a distinct form of study is due to the effort of the New Critics who pioneered something revolutionary in disengaging the literary work from the cumbersome and digressive approaches of philological, historical, and biographical studies which would go on collecting information about the text and its author rather than paying close attention to the words on the page. The objective of the critics like John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Cleanth Brooks who initiated this New Critical practice of objectively evaluating literary works was obviously to show the superiority of the knowledge of literature over the knowledge imparted by science and technology, in the process asserting the superiority of the agrarian civilisation of the South over the technological and industrial civilisation of the North. However, this stress on the words on the page was carried to its extremes by the lesser critics who utterly neglected the moral, philosophical, and social impact of a literary work to its detriment. This inevitably provoked sharp reactions from different quarters.

Those who were the first to react to the increasing narrowness of the New Critics were from the field of academics itself, known as the Chicago Aristotelians, led by Ronald S. Crane whom Ransom lauded in the final essay of The World’s Body for his commendable enterprise in establishing criticism as a professional activity. In his paper, “History versus Criticism in the University Study of Literature,” Crane pleaded for dissociation of historical studies from critical activities and the shifting of focus to the latter. However, it was the Chicago Aristotelians who criticised the New Critics for their obsession with language which they thought to be merely the
material out of which poetry is made. Instead of language, the attention of the Chicago Aristotelians was focused on upholding plot, character, and genre. Unlike the New Critics, however, they did not find it a matter of concern to justify the claims of poetry in the face of the growing engrossment with scientific and technological advancements. Art, for the Chicago Aristotelians, was a source of pleasure and instruction; that justified enough the claim of art as a human activity. In place of the monistic obsession of the New Critics with ‘paradox,’ ‘tension,’ or ‘concrete universal,’ they brought in the concept of pluralistic criticism.

The New Criticism received a jolt in the hands of Northrop Frye who propounded a new kind of criticism known as the Archetypal Criticism. The New Critics’ endeavour had been directed to bringing out what Prof. Seturaman describes as the “uniqueness and timelessness” (Seturaman 4) of a work of art. Northrop Frye, on the other hand, believed that every work of art has its archetype. The critic’s responsibility was not so much to establish the uniqueness of a work of art as to correlate it with its archetype. So the archetypal scheme was a universal pattern for Frye, and every work has to be conveniently placed in this archetypal scheme in order to assert its identity. In this type of criticism the identity of a work of art is justified by its conformity to the archetypal model, while in the New Criticism the uniqueness of a work of art depends upon disengaging the work from its extra-literary dimensions.

The New Critics held up the work of art as an autonomous object made of words organically interrelated. However, in the process of objectively analysing the literary artefact, they disapproved of the method of judging it in terms of the authorial intention as expressed in the work. Wimsatt and Beardsley classically expounded in their essay, “The Intentional Fallacy” (1946) the pitfalls of trying to discover the authorial intention from a literary work. The loss of the authorial intention could not be made up for by the sternest formal analysis of the text. Hence
many critics, trying to locate the missing link, moved again from the objective to the subjective sphere. In this process they were helped by the insights of phenomenology as propounded by Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre — which dealt with the consciousness or intentionality of human experience. These critics who grouped themselves as the ‘Geneva School’ became known as the Critics of Consciousness, equivalent to the term, critique de la conscience, coined by Georges Poulet. They had also affinity with the Romantics in that they were interested in the role of the creative inspiration in the poetic process. Hence, like the Romantics, they were also designated as the ‘genetic critics.’ However, while the Romantics were basically interested in the pre-verbal conditions of creation, the critics of consciousness offered an extension of this interest. Their intention was to offer a criticism of the consciousness of the author as conveyed in the text. It should not, however, come to mean that a piece of literature is a subjective domain which cannot be accessed by others. It is, in fact, a field of intersubjectivity. Like the New Critics, the critics of conscious believed that literature in indeed made of words, but unlike them, these critics also believed that the words embody the author’s intentionality at the time of creation, which the New Critics rejected so vociferously. The duty of the critic of consciousness was to enter the subjective domain of the author through the medium of words, live through the experience of the author, and convey that experience to the reader. So, for the critics of consciousness, the comprehension of a work of art entirely depends upon the subjective phenomenon of intention as expressed through the objective means of words. One of the important critics belonging to this school was J. Hillis Miller, an American who tried to supplement the notion of objective textual analysis with the insights of phenomenology. His opinion was that the world view of an author evolved with the progress of his consciousness as encountered in his works, an approach not much different from Edward Dowden’s attempt to track Shakespeare’s spiritual journey in his
plays, or the attempt at constructing a psychological autobiography of Wordsworth from his poems.

The New Critics, in their disapproval of what Wimsatt and Beardsley called the intentional fallacy, had opened up the text to the reader. A text could have meaning and significance only from the reader's viewpoint. It was the duty of a responsible reader to endow the words on the page with meaning. This insight of the New Critics finds wider interpretation in the Reception Theory of the Reader-Response Critics. Among these critics, Roman Ingarden is accorded a pride of place. He appreciates a work of art in terms of different layers. He describes the first layer as the phonetic layer which consists of the sound segment. The second layer is the semantic layer, consisting of the words, sentences, and paragraphs. The third layer is the layer of the represented objects of real life. The fourth layer is the schematization of these objects. The duty of a responsible reader is to determine the gaps (also known as 'indeterminacies') between the third layer and the fourth layer, and then proceed to fill in those gaps or indeterminacies with the help of his cognition. It is through this process that a text is concretised. On the other hand, Hans-Georg Gadamer believes that all our understanding flows from our prejudices and presuppositions. The belief that understanding is the result of our prejudices places the hermeneutic significance of a text in a historical context. E. D. Hirsch, Jr. adds his voice to the hermeneutic tradition by differentiating between a set of doublets. For him, the intention of the reader is reflected in the meaning, while significance arises from the reader's relationship with the meaning. He also differentiates between 'type' and 'token.' Type is all the possible interpretations to which a text may be subjected, while token is a specific instance of the type. The interpretation of a text Hirsch arrives at is validated by his cumulative knowledge of the intention of the writer as well as his acquaintance with other works of the writer. Hans-
Robert Jauss is the proponent of what Seturaman terms as “understanding enjoyment and enjoying understanding” (11). For him, the understanding of a text depends equally upon the text and the historical knowledge of the genre of which it is a part. Such knowledge helps to establish the uniqueness of the text within and as part of the genre. In this way Jauss was able to combine the New Critics’ obsession with the text with its historicity. For Wolfgang Iser the literary text has meaning out of the interaction between the objectivity of the text and the subjectivity of the reader. The concretisation of a schematised text takes place by the existence of several conditions. There is ‘the implied reader’ who helps the real reader to adjust his attitudes to the multiple perspectives of a work of art. Secondly, there is the totality of social, historical, and cultural norms known as ‘the literary repertoire,’ using which the reader removes the indeterminacies. Finally, there is ‘the literary strategies,’ better known as the defamiliarizing devices. A successful reading necessarily involves the fulfilment of these conditions. In this array of anti-textual critics, the critic with a post-structural affinity is Stanley Fish. He poses a challenge to the New Critics in his conception that the text is not something spatial but is created in the flow of reading — a challenge posed in the form of a question, “Is there a text in this class?,” which is also the title of one of his well-known books published in 1980. According to Fish, the reader cannot independently bring out the meaning of a text. It has to be located within its contextual scheme. The social, cultural and literary norms, more appropriately the reading conventions — which mould the thinking of the reader — form the context. It is this context which ultimately determines the interpretive strategy that the reader will have to adopt for the understanding of the text. The interpretive strategies are shared by the members of what Fish calls ‘the interpretive community.’ So the act of reading becomes an intersubjective activity, and is thus prevented from becoming an act of irresponsibility by the check of the community norms.
The school of criticism to which New Criticism has been much related, though fallaciously, is **Russian Formalism**. The supposed affinity is not without reason. The Russian Formalists were out, like the New Critics, to emphasize the importance of ‘literariness’ as opposed to ‘extrinsic’ considerations in the reading of literature. The reading of literature should not be vitiated by extra-literary considerations, they held. Like the New Critics, the mission of the Russian Formalists was to establish literary studies as a form of discipline independent of biography, history, sociology, psychology, or philosophy. And they could probably be confused most with the New Critics in their insistence on the self-contained and autonomous character of a work of art. As Boris Eichenbaum, the best exponent of this formalist school, wrote in the first sentence of the essay, “The Theory of the Formal Method” in 1925: “The school of thought on the theory and history of literature known as the Formal method derived from efforts to secure autonomy and concreteness for the discipline of literary studies” (qtd. in Hawthorn 308).

However, it is on this point that the Russian Formalists also differed significantly from the New Critics. According to the Russian Formalists, the literary work was a linguistic or semiotic system, and the excellence of a literary work depended upon the poet’s ability to manipulate language towards defamiliarisation. The mimetic aspect of a literary work did not find any place in the Russian Formalist’s scheme of things. It was not the poet’s job, the Formalist believed, to represent reality. The New Critics, especially Ransom and Brooks, set great store by the concept of imitation. As Cleanth Brooks asserted in *The Well-Wrought Urn*, “The poem, if it be a true poem, is a simulacrum of reality” (Brooks 173). For the Russian Formalists, the subject-matter or the content part of a literary work is not its distinguishing mark. What differentiates a literary work from its non-literary counterpart is the way language is used. The poet performs the task of defamiliarising the ordinary language by the use of literary devices. However, unlike the New
Critics, the Russian Formalists did not attach much importance to metaphor and image. These were, for them, like any other literary device. They considered poetry a verbal art. For both the schools, form was not mere external covering for content. Both the New Critics and the Russian Formalists believed in the inseparability of 'form' and 'content.' Their inseparability also ensured organic unity for a work of art.

Another critical method which tried to study literature objectively and had some affinities with the New Criticism, though strong divergences, was Structuralism. The foundation of Structuralism was laid by Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist. Saussure's insights into linguistics became known to people through his posthumously published book, *Course in General Linguistics* which was virtually an assortment of his lectures. The key terms used by Saussure were 'langage,' 'langue,' and 'parole'. By 'langage' he means the entire corpus of human speech. 'Langue' indicates the rules or the system used by the speakers governing the production of speech. 'Parole' is the individual utterances. Saussure's focus was on langue, the system underlying parole, the rules that governed the production of well-formed utterances. However, Saussure could study langue only with the help of parole, because langue was not objectively verifiable. Saussure designated the basic unit of parole as 'sign.' A sign has two parts—a sound image which he called 'signifier' and a concept which he called 'signified' (*significant* and *signifie* in French respectively). The bond of cultural agreement between the two parts is so strong that as soon as a word is uttered, the concept associated with it is immediately evoked. But that does not mean that there is any logical basis in their relationship. It is merely arbitrary. Saussure also differentiated between synchronic and diachronic study of language, while bestowing his favour on the synchronic aspect. His choice was obvious, as only the synchronic study could lead him to analyse and understand the internal relationship between the elements in
a given structure, while a study of the diachronic aspect would focus on the origin and evolution of the structure.

The Saussurean model of linguistic study was adopted by Claude Lévi-Strauss who was a French cultural anthropologist. He found striking similarities between the working of language as expounded by Saussure and the working of culture. He applied this model to explain the habits, customs, and rituals underlying a culture. His opinion was that scientific precision in discussing these matters could be achieved by adopting the methodology of the Saussurean linguistics. For reasons alike, Structuralism has been adopted by disciplines like anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and history.

In the field of literary criticism, Structuralism freed the text from the tyranny of extra-literary scholarship. On this point it has akinness to the New Criticism. However, unlike the New Critics, the Structuralists went on to study literature in terms of 'signs' which Saussure considered the basic unit of utterances. Interpretation or meaning-making was not their concern. They wanted to study the conditions that made meaning possible. So their aim was to construct a poetics of literature. Instead of giving priority to the uniqueness of a work of art, which is an aspect of its parole, the Structuralists tried to construct a grammar that would make possible the existence of a work, even those works which will be written in the future. Their advocacy of multiple meanings or polysemy brings them close to the New Critics who embraced the doctrine of Empsonian ambiguity so enthusiastically. However, the Structuralists shook the rock under the New Critics' feet by their blatant disregard of the organicity of the work of art.

The doctrine that is seen to be diametrically opposed to the New Criticism is Marxism. The interest of the New Critics was primarily in the form of a work of art, and they believed in the inseparability of form and content. But the Marxists’ attention was focused on the content of
It should, however, be remembered that Marxism did not originate as a theory of reading and understanding literature. When Karl Marx floated his opinions about the history of human society, he had in mind the dream of establishing a classless society, based on economic parity. Himself a man of diversified knowledge, Marx’s thinking was shaped more or less along economic and political lines. However, though the economic system was the ‘base’ in Marxist philosophy, there was also a ‘superstructure’ which consisted of philosophy, art, politics, and religion. This materialistic ideology based on the values which governed the existence of men in a society had a special place in Marxist theory. In the Marxist scheme of things, literature would reflect the dominant ideology prevailing in a society, and also work towards furthering the interests of that society. One of the responsibilities of good literature is, what Seturaman says, “to expose the falsities of bourgeois culture” (Seturaman 28), and work for the establishment of a society based on economic parity. However, Marx was well aware of the timelessness of literature, the reason behind the fact being that literature is enjoyed by readers beyond the boundaries of the country in which it is produced as well as the time when it is produced. Otherwise, how could the Greek art avoid the impact of the ideology of the slave-owning oligarchy, or Shakespeare’s art, the impact of the bourgeois capitalism? Anyway, the production of literature is best explained in Marxist thinking as the result of the same circumstances as those in which the contemporary readers are placed. Hence the need for an aesthetics that would help in evaluating works of art in their proper perspective. It should be obvious that the thrust in Marxist theory is on content. Form is looked upon as merely the way order is imposed upon the content which in itself is formless and disorderly.

Georg Lukács opened up a new role for literature. He was of the view that alienation and fragmentation in modern society was the result of the prevalence of the bourgeois capitalist
culture. In such a situation, the function of literature would be to penetrate the superficial existence and realistically bring out the inner struggles, tensions, and the inherent contradictions in society. Lucien Goldmann's opinion was that every work of art reflected the world view of a group or class that depended upon a trans-individual mental structure which was always in the process of evolution. Althusser's contention was that the experience embodied in works of art was similar to ideological experience. Pierre Macherey added a post-structuralist dimension to the discussion. According to Macherey, there is no transcendent value attached to literature. The inner contradictions within a literary work postpone the arrival at a definitive meaning, leaving the work open to multiple interpretations. A literary work is the production of a particular historical epoch. So when it is read in a different period, it is altogether reproduced. The duty of the critic is to locate contradictions that are inherent in the language of a literary work because of a built-in contradiction between the dominating and dominated ideologies. So from labelling a work of art as merely progressive or reactionary, the Marxists have travelled a long way to discovering the inherent conflict within it.

Another school of criticism that thrives on the analysis of the content of literature is the Psychoanalytical School. The foundation of this school was laid by Sigmund Freud. He was greatly interested in the working of the unconscious impulses of the human mind. In literature he found a fertile field to indulge in his interest. Literature becomes enjoyable because people find in literature the reflection of their common emotional experiences. In Freud's opinion, the most common impulse that is shared by all men is the desire to make love to one's mother (in case of a woman, to love one's father) and kill one's father who is a potent rival in one's erotic adventure. This erotic impulse which remains usually repressed in our social life gets communicated in literature. However, in the process of communication it also gets transformed as it is channelized
through the imaginative mould. Freud’s endeavour to bring out universal psychological truths led him to concentrate on the content of literature, in exclusion to the formal aspect. He was, however, well aware of symbolic potential of the beliefs and ideals nurtured by the human mind. And it was only the intuition of an artist that provided him with a rare insight into the human mind, denied to others.

Adler and Jung built on the psycho-analytical concepts of Freud in two different ways. Adler replaced Freud’s concept of ‘sex’ with the concept of ‘power.’ According to Adler, it was not the race for sex, but the race for power that primarily motivated human beings. He, accordingly, substituted ‘superiority and inferiority complexes’ for ‘Oedipal and Electra complexes.’ Jung went a step further and brought in the concept of the ‘collective racial unconscious.’ Derived from his dabbling in dreams and myths, Jung looked upon the literary artist as a priest speaking to his tribe in their language. This added an anthropological perspective to the psycho-analytical theory.

The New Criticism brought in a change in focus. The attention shifted from the author to the reader. This change also affected the psycho-analytical theory. Freud treated the work of art as a kind of fantasy which provided an opportunity for the wish-fulfilment of the author or the reader. Norman Holland elaborated on this concept. For him, the work of art is a field where the author and the reader are in collusion with each other. The text offers the reader an opportunity to hear the expression of his secret desire. Jacques Lacan’s equating unconsciousness with language and its uncertainty brought the psycho-analytical theory to the threshold of post-structuralism.

The New Critics’ dependence on the text for empirical data that provided a kind of stability to interpretation was lost in the wilderness with the appearance of the poststructuralists
on the critical scene. **Poststructuralism** had started its historical journey with the presentation of Jacques Derrida's paper, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" at John Hopkins Humanities Center in October 1966. Derrida’s concept of what has come to be known as ‘deconstruction,’ which is at the foundation of poststructuralist thinking, is woven around what he describes as ‘différance’ and ‘decentering.’ ‘Différance’ is a portmanteau word made of two words: ‘difference’ and ‘deference.’ The first one is a spatial term and refers to the unreachability of the appropriate interpretation of the sign — which consists not in a positive existence of the sign, but in its difference from other signs. The second term is a temporal one; it hints at the fact that the structure of a sign gets eternally postponed. In this way Derrida proves that the ‘sign’ which Saussure took to be the basic unit of a discourse on which the structuralist aesthetics was to be built is only an illusory trace.

In the structuralist scheme, there was the concept of a presence, a centre — which would determine the boundaries for the signifiers. By his notion of ‘decentering,’ Derrida has rocked the foundation of the structuralist poetics. The structuralist critic’s desire to locate a centre for the discourse is, for Derrida, nothing more than a wish-fulfilment. There is no centre, and the text is not a closed system. This opening up of the text by the approach of ‘decentering’ has resulted in an endless indeterminacy. The text which was considered to be a reliable and stable entity by the New Critics and the Structuralists has been reduced to a slippery and unstable narrative. As M. K. Ray contends, “The text is not a closed system but an open one into which we can have access through many different entrances, none of which can be claimed as the main one. . . . A text is no longer seen as a veil hiding a meaning, but a web without a centering spider, free play without closure” (Ray, *Studies* 26). The basic New Critical contention that close attention to the words on the page can produce positive knowledge has been put in question.
CHAPTER TWO

(C)

Weaknesses of the New Criticism

The New Critics made a commendable effort to validate the study of English as a distinct discipline and professionalise the study of literary theory. In the process, they prioritised one particular definition of literature, inevitably excluding most of the conventional definitions prevalent at the time. Their concentration on literary norms for the evaluation of literature had its inbuilt difficulties, which they struggled hard to bring to a resolution.

(i) The Problem of Reconciling Poetic Autonomy and Poetic Relevance

The New Critics were advocates for the autonomy of literature. In their view a work of art was an autonomous aesthetic object. So our experience of it would be an aesthetic experience. They also claimed that aesthetic criteria alone were necessary for the evaluation and judgement of literature. Thus they were able to disengage literature from extra-literary considerations which, according to the New Critics, not only hampered the proper appreciation of literature but also made literature a handmaid of other disciplines, like philosophy, history, and sociology. The New Critics’ reliance upon aesthetic criteria alone for the analysis and judgement of literature made their approach unarguably monistic. The development and practice of their critical method was concerned with their view of a work of art as a self-sufficient, autonomous object in which the component elements were interdependent and formed an organic whole.

The New Critics’ insistence on the formal elements that made a work of art what it was helped evolve the view of literature as a self-sustaining object. Their focus on one aspect of
literature implied exclusion of other aspects which demanded equal attention. Literature, for its holistic appreciation depended not only on form, but also on content. Though the New Critics claimed that form and content were inseparable, they did not pay sufficient attention to the content. Literature, say a piece of poetry, is made of words. The words not only refer to themselves but also point to the world outside. A poem is an aesthetic object as well a cognitive discourse. Words are not merely self-referring units of an art-object; they contain meanings which refer to the world beyond the spatial existence of words. This aspect challenges very patently the attempt of the New Critics to look upon the literary object as enclosed within a space, as is evident from Cleanth Brooks's characterisation of a poem as "well-wrought urn."

Words tell us something about the human experience in general. They give us knowledge of the world at large. So they cannot be alienated from the outside world. The New Critics, while drawing attention to the self-contained nature of literature, specifically ignore its referential context.

The basic weakness of the New Criticism thus comes to this: the New Critics were faced with the problem of reconciling their view of poetry as an aesthetic object with the view of poetry as a cognitive discourse. To put it in another way, they could not resolve the tension that emerged from their judgement of literature by aesthetic criteria, to the exclusion of its non-aesthetic values. The point can be clarified with the help of an example. The following example is from Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*, Act II, Scene ii.

"Amen stuck in my throat."

What is the value-judgement attached to the line? Is it merely because the line is aesthetically sound and satisfying that the readers enjoy it? If we locate the line in the context of the play, it will be found to have a meaning which is verifiable from its situational context. The line has its
significance in view of the morally degenerating situation in which the speaker is placed. So the
contextual reference has to be taken into account while passing a judgement on its value as an
aesthetic object. If aesthetic value alone could judge the greatness of a work of art or the lack of
it, in that case Swinburne’s poetry would have the highest reckoning in the estimate of the
readers. On the other hand, the poetry of Shakespeare or Eliot or Owen would find a very lowly
place in the scale of value-judgement.

The opposite claim is equally disastrous. As the evaluation of literature cannot be done
on the basis of aesthetic criteria alone, the judgement on the basis of its content only also cannot
bring out the complete significance. The tendency of the sociological, especially the Marxists
critics, to chaff out the content from the form in which the text is couched offers only a biased
knowledge. Such evaluation of literature totally ignores the literary value, and imperils the
existence of literature as literature.

Besides, a work of literature may also have moral effects on the readers. The idea of
literature as having the capacity to delight and to teach at the same time is a result of this focus
on its moral function. It may not be possible to demonstrate objectively how literature can have
salubrious effects on human acts. But it has been argued, time and again, that literature can move
human beings to the highest and excellent truths. In Plato’s ‘Republic,’ only those poets who
could morally uplift the readers could find their place. Moreover, a work of literature may have
indirect moral effects. It is possible that the reading of poetry may quieten the fretted nerves of a
jaded reader. Such a moral effect actually flows from the aesthetic effect. Hence greater aesthetic
value would entail the capacity to provide greater moral satisfaction. However, it must be kept in
mind that a work of literature is primarily an aesthetic object; and the moral effect of literature, if
any, is only a bye-product.
So it may be safely concluded that a purely aesthetic analysis is not adequate for a total evaluation of a literary work. The function of literature as offering knowledge has also to be taken into consideration. This obviously leads to a consideration of its ontological entity, that is, a description of its nature and function — whether it offers merely aesthetic satisfaction or it also offers knowledge; and if it offers knowledge, what the nature of that knowledge is. All these are aspects of the ontological question on which Ransom, the best-known of the New Critics, pays so much attention. Aesthetic criteria may not be adequate to resolve this ontological question. Once a poem is found aesthetically sound, the critic should apply cognitive criteria as well to offer a holistic judgement. In other words, the critic must not restrict himself to the monistic approach, and must deploy the pluralistic principles of criticism.

(ii) Objectivity, though a Highly Desirable Ideal, Cannot Be Realised in Practice.

The twentieth century critical scene is marked by the emergence and development of a number of critical approaches. Some of them had their thrust on the formal aspect, while others had their focus on the content of literature. These approaches were not distinctively individual. There were some inevitable influences and counter-influences, resulting in their overlapping each other. The most remarkable development was, however, the emergence of the New Criticism. The principles of this new aesthetic and critical movement were already drawn up in the 1920s and 1930s, though the term, 'New Criticism' gained currency only after the publication of *The New Criticism* by John Crowe Ransom in 1941. Some of the basic tenets of the New Criticism were derived from the critical theories of T. S. Eliot who, along with I. A. Richards and William Empson, was considered a major influence on the New Criticism. It had been Eliot's consistent effort "to divert the attention from the poet to the poem," and he also
dictated that "honest criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry" (qtd. in Ray, Studies 2).

The New Criticism broke new grounds in a number of ways. The so-called New Critics set as their aim the objective analysis of literature, and the methodology they adopted for achieving their goal was the scientific study of literature. However, it should be borne in mind that while their approach was scientific, they rejected scientism in the strongest terms. They held up literature as providing a unique sort of knowledge, different from and superior to science. As Allen Tate declared unambiguously, "Poetry is not only quite different from science but in its essence is opposed to science" (qtd. in Wellek 6: 152). One of the reasons for the emergence of the New Criticism was the inroad of science and technology against which they tried to preserve the eternal values of literature. Moreover, literary criticism had lost its way as it had become meshed up with philosophical, historical, biographical, and impressionistic criticisms which brought in non-literary considerations for the evaluation of literature; and the proper object of literary study — the poem itself — was lost. Ransom characterised such literary criticism as "shapeless miscellany," and expected that the New Criticism would be "as definitive as the new physics or the new logic" (Ray, Studies 2).

In their attempt to attain objectivity in literary criticism, most of the New Critics and their sympathisers insisted on a close study of the work's formal structure. In the second chapter of their book, Theory of Literature (1949), René Wellek and Austin Warren write that a literary work is a "highly complex organization of stratified character with multiple meanings and relationship" (qtd. in Ray, Studies 3). They also accord a special ontological status to the literary work which gives us knowledge of its own kind. Blackmur also gives importance to close
reading as the most acceptable mode of literary analysis, amply exemplified in the collection of his essays in *The Double Agent* (1935) and *The Expense of Greatness* (1940).

In line with the dictates of T. S. Eliot, the New Critics try to see the poem as in itself it really is. They claim that a poem, or a literary work for that matter, is an external object, easily observable by others. They isolate this object for scientific analysis and evaluation. Their primary contention is that literary criticism must be literary and not something else; it must not be dominated by biographical, historical, and philological scholarships. However, setting objectivity as their aim, the New Critics found themselves floundering in the face of two major problems. The first was concerned with the nature of literature. A literary work is not merely literary in nature. It is written with words, and the words contain ideas. So, besides being an aesthetic object, a literary work is also a cognitive discourse. It is not possible for any critical approach to completely ignore the ideas contained in a literary work. *The Divine Comedy* is considered a great work not merely because of the aesthetic pleasure it gives to millions of readers; but more importantly it enunciates a philosophy which is marked by its richness and which is equally enjoyed by the readers. Shakespeare's immortal sonnets owe their immortality as much to the technical innovation he introduced into sonnet-writing as to the ideas that are embodied in the words. Take, for example, the following lines from his Sonnet No. 116:

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks

Within his bending sickle's compass come;

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,

But bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom: — (Palgrave 17)

Are these lines enjoyed only because of their technical perfection as a work of art? Who can ever ignore the idea of the immutability of love that is expressed so beautifully in these lines? Of
course, the couching of the lines in an aesthetic mould makes them more palatable. It would not have been so had the idea been explained in a matter-of-fact way. This obviously calls to mind Alexander Pope's well-known dictum of “What oft was thought, but never so well expressed.” Again, who could have relished the following lines from T. S. Eliot's “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”:

When the evening is spread out against the sky

Like a patient etherized upon a table

(Green 185)

without taking into account the debilitating and demoralising effect of the modern civilisation?

The second problem towards the attainment of the goal of objectivity lies with a human predicament. The critic is a human being. He has his personal likes and dislikes, his predilections and prejudices. All these traits of his personality come in the way of his delivering an objective and unbiased judgement. It is not possible for anyone to shun these attributes which are inherent in one's personality. So a critic can never hope to attain mechanical objectivity in literary criticism. The matter is well borne out in the critical practice of the prominent New Critics themselves. They set out with the grand hope of focusing their attention on the words on the page, but soon find themselves landing in other areas. Blackmur takes the help of biography in explaining “The Later Poetry of W. B. Yeats.” In seeking to elucidate the poetry of Emily Dickinson, Allen Tate resorts to the knowledge provided by her biographical details. Yvor Winters also vows his allegiance to moralistic criticism in unambiguous terms when he writes: “We regard as greatest those works which deal with experiences which affect human life most profoundly” (qtd. in Ray, Studies 5). The New Critics also did not have agreement among themselves in using some terminologies. There were sharp differences between Ransom and Tate in the use of some terminologies. Scientific objectivity requires that each and every term is used
in a precise way. It should mean the same thing to everyone. But perhaps in the world of aesthetics where much of the effect depends upon the connotative value of a word, it is too much to expect this precision which is a special feature of scientism where only the denotative character of words is recognized. Moreover, as has been alleged by critics, perhaps most vociferously by Terry Eagleton, that the New Critics had their own ideological attachments. They valiantly defended the agrarian civilisation of the American South in the face of the growing industrialisation in the North. This ideological allegiance of the New Critics which was political in nature was subtly shifted to their literary career, and they could never shun their conservative outlook completely.

We can do best to conclude this topic with the words of M. K. Ray: “To attempt objectivity in literary criticism is like moving along an asymptote, the mathematical curve that ever approaches but never reaches. To say that objectivity is unattainable is not to suggest that it is not desirable. It is, in fact, a highly desirable ideal but it can never be completely realized in practice” (Studies 7).

(iii) Poetry and Belief

The third weakness of the New Criticism arises from the influence and counter-influence of poetry and belief. This can be considered more or less as a corollary of the previous weakness. There are several aspects to this relationship between poetry and belief.

Firstly, a poem is not an isolated aesthetic object. It is also a cognitive discourse, which means that something is stated in the poem. It is different from the sound of a cuckoo in terms of the fact that nothing can be made out of the sounds of a cuckoo bird, whereas a poem is made of
words, and the words convey sense. The poem makes a statement. It contains a thesis. Belief is a part of the cognitive character of the poem. The poet, as a human being, may have different kinds of belief. He may have political beliefs, social beliefs, religious beliefs. These beliefs may be embedded in the body of his work. The reader may or may not agree with these beliefs. If the reader’s beliefs are congruent with the beliefs of the poet, there is a possibility that the work will be over-valued. The reader will not be able to see the negative, if there is anything, in the thesis of the poem. For instance, a reader who has been initiated into the Marxist ideology may be tempted to eulogise *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or W. H. Auden’s poems simply because of their orientation in Marxist ideology. Again, if the reader’s beliefs are incongruent with the poet’s, there is also a possibility that the thesis enunciated in the work will be undervalued. The belief may appear to be a hackneyed and commonplace statement, and may not hold any special significance for the reader.

Secondly, the reader may not share the beliefs of the poet, the beliefs embedded in the text of the poem. It, however, does not mean that it will adversely affect the reading of the poem. Differences of creed in the writer and his reader may have nothing to do with the enjoyment of the text. T. S. Eliot espoused, by his own declaration, Royalism in politics, Classicism in literature, and Anglo-Catholicism in religion. Such a belief may be considered outmoded by most of the readers of his poems. But that does not pose any hindrance to the enjoyment of his poetry. And it has also to be kept in mind that in spite of his so-called outmoded beliefs, his poetry, especially *The Waste Land*, along with James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, is supposed to have heralded the era of Modernism in English literature. Again, someone who does not believe in Marxist ideology will equally enjoy *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as his fellow Marxist reader, for there is an aesthetic appeal of the text which does not require that the reader should necessarily share the
beliefs embedded in the text. Neither is it necessary for a modern reader to believe in Milton's cosmology or his scheme of Heaven and Hell for an aesthetic appreciation of *Paradise Lost*. Similarly, a reader who does not share Wordsworth's belief in pantheism will have his share of aesthetic enjoyment in reading his poetry none the less.

Thirdly, the personal beliefs of the writer and the beliefs or ideologies enunciated in the text may be at variance with each other. John Milton is a case in point. He was a Puritan to the core in terms of his religious practice. But in *Paradise Lost*, his *magnum opus*, he portrays the character of Satan, the devil, on a grand scale, with all the heroic qualities attributed to him — which has very pertinently resulted in the debate about Satan being the hero of the epic. Again, the life-like portrayals of the villainous characters in Shakespeare's plays does not mean that Shakespeare would deem those attributes positive. He portrays equally well the characters who illustrate the eternal virtues of life through their speeches and actions. The point is that it is the demand of aesthetics that requires that poets and playwrights inculcate the quality of what Keats termed 'negative capability' and merge their personality in the personality of the character he is portraying — a quality which Shakespeare had in great measure. We have also the opposite case of Gerard Manley Hopkins who found it hard to reconcile his personal beliefs as a priest — a vocation that demanded restraint and renunciation — with his creed as a poet, though it ultimately led to his restoration of faith in Lord, the Almighty, as is evident in his sonnet, "Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord."

Fourthly, every literary work is produced in a particular time and place. However, it would be wrong and quite simplistic to conclude that all literary works should reflect the social, economic, political, and religious beliefs of the age or the society in which they were produced. As V. S. Seturaman says, "The quality of Greek art and of the works of Shakespeare, for
example, is far superior to the quality of the civilizations which produced them. Greek art had little to do with the slave-owning oligarchy that produced it even as Shakespeare’s plays had little to do with the bourgeois capitalism” (29). And not only that. A great work of art appeals equally to the readers who may not share the beliefs of the particular country or time in which it was created as to the contemporary readers. This is a unique feature associated with a work of art, and it is this feature that makes it a timeless product without any spatial boundaries. Side by side, we have also the novels of Charles Dickens — the novels that depict so vividly and poignantly the sufferings of the people, sufferings that resulted from the evil effects of industrialisation in the eighteenth-century England. However, the inclusion of the eighteenth or nineteenth century beliefs in Dickens’s novels does not preclude their enjoyment by the twentieth-first century readers.

Fifthly, when it comes to the business of criticism, the critic must be aware of the nature of the belief that is there in the text. A critic of literature should be well-read and should be aware of the various kinds of belief prevalent in society. Otherwise, he will not be in a position to appreciate properly and precisely the work at hand. His approach will be lopsided and narrow. For example, a critic who ventures to criticise a Tagore poem composed in the perspective of Buddhism or an Eliot play on Catholicism cannot be relied upon to do full justice to the work, unless he or she has sufficient knowledge of the teachings and practices of Buddhism or Catholicism.

The entire problem boils down to the problem of reconciling the problem of poetry and belief — the enjoyment of literature and the belief espoused by the reader or the writer, and also the way the belief is presented in the text of the poem or the play or the novel. The beliefs may be presented in the form of propaganda, as in the plays of Bernard Shaw; or it may permeate the
entire writing, as it happens in the plays of Sophocles or Shakespeare. The New Critics hankered after objectivity in their critical practices. In their effort to capture the aesthetic being of the work, they ignored its ontological status as a cognitive discourse. This ultimately placed them on the horns of a dilemma which they could never resolve satisfactorily.

(iv) Poetry and History

The New Critics have often been accused of de-historicising the literary text, that is to say, divorcing or separating the text from its historical context. Paul de Man, a prominent post-structuralist critic, observed that de-historicisation of the text was a major limitation of the New Criticism. In respect of the de-historicisation of the text, the first allegation against the New Critics is that their focus on the bounded space of the text divests the text from its power to refer to anything in the world. Thereby the literary text loses its social and historical context; and without this location in such an extra-textual context, critics like Paul de Man assert, the text cannot function meaningfully. So a criticism of a poem like Shelley’s “England in 1819” on the lines of the New Criticism which focuses only on the system of the use of language, to the exclusion of its origin in particular historical circumstances will not help the reader to explicitly appreciate its poetic significance either. The New Critics’ unwillingness to locate a text in its historical context also does not allow them to appreciate the power of a literary text to challenge and disturb the social structure and its ability to bring about a change in the social attitude. The second allegation is that the New Criticism itself had its origin in a historical context. It was ideologically rooted in the agrarian civilisation of the South, insulated from the industrialised and capitalist set-up of the North. So the emergence of the New Criticism as a critical practice was merely a transfer or re-location of a conservative political ideology, which was historical in
nature, in a different sphere. As Terry Eagleton observed with vehemence, "... New Criticism was the ideology of an uprooted, defensive intelligentsia who reinvented in literature what they could not locate in reality" (Eagleton 40). In other words, the New Critics themselves were not ideologically innocent enough to claim insulation from socio-historical context.

What is overlooked in the above allegations against the so-called de-historicisation of the literary text by the New Critics is that the New Critics were not against the historicity of poetry. They were actually opposed to the academic historical scholarship that thrived on surrounding a literary work with historical information, and considered encumbering the literary work with facts as tantamount to interpretation. As Allen Tate protested on a caustic note: "...the historical method has disqualified our best minds for the traditional functions of criticism. It ignores the meaning of the destination in favor of the way one gets there" (qtd. in Wellek 6: 147). So it was rather a rejection of a particular kind of academic historical scholarship that concentrated more on history and less on poetry. It should not, however, be taken to mean that the New Critics uprooted the text from its historical circumstances. Rather, these critics have always sought to enlist the help of the historian in the elucidation of many poems, especially those of the seventeenth century, poems that are replete with references to history. If the poet does not know the meaning of a word, he has to take the help of the lexicographer. Similarly, if a poet uses proper nouns, it will demand from the critic a sound knowledge of history for the proper elucidation of the text. For example, for the interpretation of a poem like Andrew Marvell's "Horatian Ode," one is supposed to have some familiarity with the names of Oliver Cromwell and Charles I, and some prior knowledge of the contemporary history. So history is used by the New Critics as, in the words of René Wellek, "a strictly subordinate contribution to the elucidation of a poem" (Wellek 6: 148). In other words, the New Critics' view of the use of
history is rooted in the traditional conception which looks upon poetry as the finished product and history as supplying the raw material. It can be illustrated from the way Shakespeare collected the raw material from the Scottish history, and used it to perfection in his play, *Macbeth*. It is not that Shakespeare used everything he found in history in his play. He rejected many of the incidents that were not relevant to his purpose and selected only those materials which would fit into his scheme of things. It goes without saying that the quality of a poem depends much upon the quality of history, how it is used in the poem, how it suits the poesy—that is to say, how it is integrated into the scheme of the poem. Eliot’s remark in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that Shakespeare derived more history from Plutarch than one can from the British museum only helps to prove the level of deftness that a playwright of Shakespeare’s stature had in moulding the material of history for the purpose of his craft. And it is remarkable that Shakespeare derived material for no less than four of his plays—namely, *Titus Andronicus*, *Coriolanus*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Julius Caesar*—from a small history-book of Plutarch. The material of history, when it is used in poetry, is re-shaped and improvised upon so that it fits into the fabric of the imaginative vision of the poet. Again, the moment the facts of history are used by the poet, their purity is lost, and the facts, touched by the imaginative vision of the poet, become what Nietzsche terms as the interpretation of facts. It follows Aristotle’s poetic theory that whereas the historical truth is bound to what actually happened, the poetic truth illustrates what might or should have happened.

Besides evincing their keen interest in history in the elucidation of poems, the New Critics revised the history of English poetry, modifying the poetic canon to a great extent. It was more or less guided by the New Critics’ preference for short, lyrical poems which would lend themselves readily to classroom teaching. Consequently, there was a revival of interest in John
Donne and other metaphysical poets, and in Dryden and Pope. Among the Romantics, Wordsworth and Keats were given preference to Shelley and Byron. The poetry of Hopkins and Yeats was held in high esteem as it signalled a break with the Victorian and Edwardian conventions. Much importance was also given to the appreciation of contemporary poetry. On the other hand, reputation of poets like Milton suffered a jolt in the hands of the New Critics.

The New Critics always tried to extract the essence of history in the interpretation of literature. History, for them, had a special role to play in the appreciation of modern literature. The depiction of the fragmented, alienated self of the modern man receives an added meaning when seen in the perspective of history, according to the scheme of the New Critics. For example, when reading the war poems of Wilfred Owen, the New Critics would not bother about the date and place when and where a particular war happened. They would rather absorb themselves with the havoc that the modern man had undergone under the impact of the historical events. It may be useful to note that Allen Tate was specially interested in the dramatisation of the alienation of the human self in the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Hart Crane.

The New Critics' vision of history was guided by T. S. Eliot's. They wistfully longed for the ordered existence of Dante's world, with the Eliotesque 'unified sensibility' at the core of it. This world-view was lost as industrialisation and secularism set in, bringing in their wake the 'dissociation of sensibility.' It was the belief of the New Critics that the integrity of the human civilisation could be revived only by a defence of the agrarian society, surviving on myths and religious beliefs and by a rejection of the technological civilisation. Thus the New Criticism, in the words of René Wellek, "... embraces a total historical scheme, believes in a philosophy of history, and uses it as a standard of judgement" (Wellek 6: 148).
(v) Poetry and Philosophy

The issue of the relation between poetry and philosophy is old as Plato. Plato admired philosophy and denounced the poets vehemently. For Plato, philosophy gives us the essence of knowledge which alone can reveal the ultimate truths. Poetry, in contradistinction to philosophy, tells lies and creates a world of fiction. Moreover, the knowledge incorporated in philosophy is universal in nature, dealing as it does with the generalised theory and formulations applicable to all human beings. Poetry, on the other hand, deals with the particular instances only.

Aristotle, in an important departure from the Platonic stand, affirms that poetry presents the universal. So, while Plato denounces poetry for not dealing with the universal, Aristotle praises poetry because it presents the universal. Not only that, Aristotle devises the concept of the concrete universal. According to Aristotle, poetry resents the universal philosophy that is embedded in a particular character, event or occurrence. He goes on to point out that while philosophy talks about theory in generalised terms, poetry demonstrates philosophy. In other words, by enacting philosophy in poetic or dramatic terms, poetry shows the philosophical theory in action, and thereby it is easily appreciated by the audience.

In the ancient Roman period also, people like Plutarch were concerned about the relative importance of poetry and philosophy — whether poetry is superior to philosophy, or whether a piece of poetry should contain philosophy. When we come to the Renaissance period, Sidney convincingly upholds the point that poetry is superior both to philosophy and to history. According to Sidney, philosophy deals with theory, and history is concerned with facts or the practical instances of the theory. Poetry presents the theory as well as the facts. Therefore, it combines the merits of both philosophy and history, without suffering from the defects of either.
This is the stand that Sidney takes, and this stand runs through the major part of the Western critical culture.

But gradually certain complications arose — complication that led to a conflict between the poetic value of a poem and the philosophical value of a philosophy that is embedded in a poem. To put it differently, how far the philosophic value of the idea embedded in a poem affects the poetic value of a poem. Or, to put it in still simpler terms, whether the profundity of the philosophical theory can make the poem profound. That is to say, what is the dynamics of the relationship between poetry and philosophy? Does poetic value depend on the philosophical value of the philosophy embedded in a poem? Or, is poetic value independent of philosophy?

Again, there are two kinds of poetry. One kind of poetry contains a philosophical thesis, whether explicit or implicit. Another sort of poetry is not concerned with philosophy at all; it merely narrates an experience, without referring to any philosophical idea. The question of the relation between poetry and philosophy does not concern those poems which are completely foolproof to philosophy and do not demonstrate any philosophical idea. But what about those poems which contain reference to philosophical ideas — for example, a poem like “The Extasie,” “The Retreat,” “The Prelude,” “God’s Grandeur,” “Sailing to Byzantium,” “The Waste Land”?

For the New Critic, philosophy, like history, is used by the poet as material for his poetry. The point is whether the philosophy that is included in the poem is essential to the poem, and secondly, whether it contributes to the value of a poem — not the philosophical value, but the poetic value of the poem. Eliot was also of the view that the philosophic value was important for a poem. If a poem has to be a great poem, it has to incorporate philosophy. Otherwise, a poem may be a good poem, even enjoyable at that — for example, “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” but it cannot be a great poem. On the other hand, The Divine Comedy is great
because it has a philosophy behind it, and the philosophy enhances the poetic value of the poem. In other words, the profundity of a poem directly corresponds to the profundity of the philosophy embedded in the poem. This was what Eliot perhaps alluded to when he said that aesthetic criteria must be complemented by cognitive-moral criteria.

Another point to note is how the philosophical thesis is stated in the poem. It can permeate the poem, or it can arise out of the different strands in a poem. The moot point is whether it is integrated into the poem poetically. If the philosophy hangs loose and stands separated from the poetic texture, the poem will suffer. The philosophy must be organically incorporated into the poem. That is to say, philosophy and poetry should not be seen as separate entities; philosophy must be a part of the poetic texture. The plays of George Bernard Shaw are a case in point. Bernard Shaw often uses his plays to enunciate the philosophical ideas he holds dear. For Shaw, the plays are the means or the instruments he adopts for his philosophical propaganda. His purpose is to highlight his philosophical notions. So, most of the Shavian plays suffer from the inclusion of philosophy and they do not have much dramatic value, though they may be important as illustrating the Shavian philosophy.

So the New Critics' obvious stand was that a poem has to be judged as a poem. The philosophic value may or may not contribute to its poetic value. The philosophic value may affect the poem favourably or adversely. The philosophic value should be taken into account only if it is integral to the poem. The focus of the New Critics is on the poem. Philosophy contributes to its richness as a poem. The philosophical elocutions of Macbeth or Hamlet come out spontaneously from their mouths as part of their natural reactions to the flow of events in the respective plays. They bring to focus the vision that permeates the sequence of actions in the play. When Macbeth, for instance, soliloquises in Act 5, Scene 5:
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (24-28)

we do not take it as an isolated example philosophical wisdom; it comes, instead, as a natural outburst of a tortured mind. Such incorporation of philosophy follows the principle of 'decorum' that Horace considered so much important for the composition of poetry. Therefore, the philosophical vision or thesis must not be superimposed upon the poem. It must be absorbed into the matrix of the poem. When Eliot includes the Upanishadic philosophy of Datta, Dayadhya, and Damyata in The Waste Land, or the principle of 'detachment' as illustrated in the Gita, it enriches the poetic vision exemplified through the poems.