

Scholarship, Inc.

Joseph North, *Literary Criticism:
A Concise Political History*
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It has become something like accepted wisdom in the US academic humanities that literary studies is unique in possessing no standard, agreed-upon account of itself as a discipline. Sceptics would say that this condition is the product of three or four decades of decline, invoking the “rise of theory,” the demolition of the canon, and the decline in the cultural prestige of the humanities. Enthusiasts would counter that the seeming impossibility of policing the borders of the discipline is cause for celebration, testifying to the diversity and richness of the field and of the many adjacent disciplines that literary studies helped to found or renovate. In either case, the multifariousness of literary studies as to its objects, methodologies, standards, and aims is taken as a given.

Joseph North’s important and bracing *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* demonstrates that, however much this consensus describes obvious features of literary studies in the present, the apparent diversity on display—however assessed—masks a deeper and thoroughgoing unity. Histories of the field, such as Gerald Graff’s *Professing Literature* (1987), tell us that the central division in literary studies since its incorporation as an academic discipline was that between “critics” (who sought to intervene in culture) and “scholars” (who analysed it). North argues that, for the past four decades or so, scholarship has come to entirely dominate the field, while criticism has been abandoned, mistakenly tied to the conservative politics of figures like F. R. Leavis and the American New Critics. The dominance

of scholarship is expressed in what North terms the “historicist/contextualist paradigm.” Despite the ostensibly progressive politics that motivate much work in the field, the total shift to *scholarship*—the production of knowledge about culture—has in fact marked a political retreat that is entirely in accord with neoliberal trends in the Anglo-American university. What has been lost is a *critical* paradigm, originated by leftists and left-liberals like I. A. Richards and William Empson, that at its best sought to tie academic research to secondary and primary school curricula, to address a broad public, and to put into practice “an institutional program of aesthetic education—an attempt to enrich the culture directly by cultivating new ranges of sensibility, new modes of subjectivity, new capacities for experience—using works of literature as a means” (6). North’s ultimate aim is the recovery of such a paradigm.

The story of *Literary Criticism* spans the 1920s to the present. It shows how the current state of affairs came to be, traces routes not taken, and sifts the historicist/contextualist paradigm of the present for the seeds of a new, or renewed, critical paradigm. With the proviso that its compass is more limited than it may at first appear, *Literary Criticism* is a remarkable book that, like a key turning a lock, brings into alignment a number of seemingly incommensurable received ideas to produce a compelling “strategic history” (viii) of literary studies past, present and (perhaps) future.

In the standard account, literary studies was founded by Leavis and the New Critics. In that account, they pursued a fundamentally conservative project that developed close reading as a central method only to dissolve in the crucible of the 1960s, giving way to the progressive strands of academic work that characterised the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s: deconstruction, feminism, Black Studies, queer studies, postcolonial critique, New Historicism, and others, united under the term “Theory.” (What would come after Theory was a hot question in the early 2000s that never receives a satisfactory answer in this story.) North offers instead a three-part periodisation in which developments in literary studies track developments in Western political economy: first, a period between the world wars in which “the possibility of something like a break with liberalism, and a genuine move to radicalism, is mooted and then disarmed”; then “a period of relative continuity through the mid-century, with the two paradigms of ‘criticism’ and ‘scholarship’”; and finally a crisis in the 1970s which birthed Theory and with it “the . . . dominance of the ‘scholar’ model in the form of the historicist/contextualist paradigm” (17) under which we still live.

The standard account has always felt somewhat incoherent, particularly in its latter phases, and North's exposition and correction of its shortcomings is revelatory. It entails a revaluation of some major figures, none more so than I. A. Richards, who emerges as this story's hero. The first of the book's four chapters argues that Richards—especially in *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924), rather than the more familiar *Practical Criticism* (1929)—began to develop a materialist aesthetic philosophy and a practical criticism that aimed to intervene in society. (Empson is invoked repeatedly in connection with Richards, but his work does not receive the same attention, presumably because his left sympathies are better-known.) In Richards' program, "criticism" names the progressive attempt "to set literature to work on the aesthetic sensibilities of readers, with the aim of bringing about some larger change in the culture as a whole" (35). In North's account, Leavis, Cleanth Brooks, and John Crowe Ransom (whose 1937 "Criticism, Inc.," it is worth noting, offered a justification) were in fact engaged in the co-optation of Richards' and Empson's works, keeping its close reading method but bolting it onto an elitist and idealist aesthetics, in the service of a conservative political project that the field's founders would have rejected.

The response to criticism's move to the right was what a second chapter terms "The Scholarly Turn." Here the key figure is Raymond Williams. North suggests that Williams shared with Richards and Leavis a commitment to the idea that literary intellectuals should aim to shape culture. But, seeing the aesthetic after Leavis as serving only an obfuscatory and ideological role, Williams aimed explicitly at its debunking in favour of "cultural analysis" (72). It was Williams's fate to set the stage for literary studies' turn to pure scholarship and the evacuation of aesthetic criteria from its program. But it is also in his work that North finds a promise of renewal, in what he terms Williams' two "saving clauses": the first being Williams' affirmation that the *history* of the aesthetic was "in large part a protest against the forcing of all experience into instrumentality ('utility'), and of all things into commodities" (74), and the second, that his own critique of the aesthetic should be understood as a "clearing operation" (79), after which a new materialist aesthetics and a renewed role for criticism might be constructed.¹ The rehabilitation of the aesthetic that would follow on Williams's diagnosis has remained a road not taken.

Instead, in the field's third period, literary studies has settled into a historicist/contextualist paradigm, foregoing the possibility of political intervention in the broader

1 North expanded on his discussion of Williams in an exchange with Francis Mulhern in *New Left Review*. See Mulhern and North 2019.

culture in favour of the production of knowledge *about* culture. What is in fact a neatly bounded scholarly project has proven entirely assimilable to the structure of the university under late capitalism, and despite frequent claims to political relevance and even radicalism, has really constituted a retreat from politics. The first two chapters are mainly historical; in the third North's analysis shifts to the work of prominent figures still active in the field. Having fairly rigorously and at length established the contemporary paradigm as one in which "works of literature are chiefly of interest as diagnostic instruments for determining the state of the cultures in which they were written or read" (1), here at the book's midpoint North allows that paradigm to speak in its own voice, in the form of a long series of excerpts from some twenty works of literary scholarship spanning the last forty years. Having been prepared for it, it is nonetheless arresting to see, in works ranging from Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) to Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011), the same rhetoric of cultural diagnosis via textual analysis deployed again and again.

Here it is worth emphasising, though, that North's discovery of the surprising homogeneity of the contemporary paradigm also throws into relief the quality and interest of so much of the work produced under that paradigm. *Literary Criticism* is not a debunking, even as its polemic proceeds by means of the kind of close readings to which literary scholarship itself is rarely subjected. North has taken care to offer the strongest version of many positions with which he clearly disagrees, with the result that *Literary Criticism* enables a real appreciation of how this work holds up to scrutiny. (This care with argument heightens the effect of the book's agonistic moments, including a section devoted to Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher's Introduction to *Practicing New Historicism* [2000] [86–100].) It might be too much to say that the scope and depth of the field's actual achievements are in fact *more* appreciable when those achievements are viewed as products of a shared paradigm, rather than as so many reinventions of the wheel—but only slightly too much. In any case it is not the way we are accustomed to thinking about the underlying story of literary studies, and it is clarifying to be shown the paradigm, even as the aim of *Literary Criticism* is to overturn and replace it.

The book's fourth and final chapter evaluates the extent to which resources for doing so can be found in contemporary critical developments. Organised roughly on the lines of Williams's model of the residual, dominant, and emergent, here North surveys a wide range of work that has tested the limits of the historicist/contextualist paradigm. He looks at attempts to revive an idealist aesthetics in a liberal or left vein

in the (now little-noted) “new aestheticism” of the 1990s and the “new formalism” of the early 2000s. A strongly affirmative reading of the work of Isobel Armstrong is particularly compelling and welcome here. North explores other boundary-pushing forms of the dominant paradigm in Eve Sedgwick, D. A. Miller, and Berlant, drawing out moments in which foundational figures of scholarship edge toward more properly critical interventions: ways of reading and writing about literature that aim to invent or transform different publics. And he looks at inchoate trends breaking down some of the institutional constraints on new kinds of work: world literature, turns to ethics and narrative medicine, and para-academic publications like *n+1*, *nonsite.org*, and *Public Books*. Done right, and brought into contact with social movements outside the university, North’s argument goes, these incipient tendencies might propel what Richards himself sought: “a programmatic commitment to using works of literature for the cultivation of aesthetic sensibility, with the goal of more general cultural and political change” (3).

Literary Criticism’s verdict, that these tendencies represent at best “partial successes” (193) and the best that can be hoped for under a single dominant paradigm, is compelling as far as it goes, and should not be surprising at this point. Yet that verdict does seem limited if one looks even a short distance outside the bounds of literary studies—really, as readers will have gathered, outside of English specifically. Both the introduction and conclusion to *Literary Criticism* state that its intended audience includes not only academics but also the activist left outside the university, and that one of its goals is to demonstrate these two constituencies’ shared interests. North is certainly correct that the two are farther apart than literary academics often seem to think, but viewing them as entirely distinct does require looking past fields like Black Studies and queer theory. Literary scholars have played important roles in these more public-facing fields, and in recent years both have only become more engaged with publics outside of the academy. (Indeed, the three critics that North reads as pushing most powerfully against the constraints of the dominant model could also be considered founding figures of queer theory.) North downplays these fields’ significance somewhat, noting fairly enough that “the discipline tends to manage dissent by incorporation and evaporation” (182). And literary studies is, to be sure, a distinct venture. But given the obvious impact of these near-adjacent fields on university curricula (and administration) and on public discourse around race and gender, they seem to demand more attention if one is interested in the cultivation of “new subjectivities and collectivities” (204). Questions the book then raises

include whether literary studies' "partial successes" have already fuelled more substantial interventions outside of literary studies narrowly defined, and what might be gleaned from this about the political stakes of the aesthetic.

This is really to say that while the "political history" of *Literary Criticism's* subtitle is convincing and benefits from the book's restricted scope, that same restriction might make more difficult the attempt to see around present conditions. Fortunately, the book has provoked a great deal of commentary, including forums in various publications and a dedicated roundtable at an MLA convention.² One question that these discussions have all addressed—is there "a scenario in which something like criticism is reborn?"—is taken up by North in the book's conclusion, which imagines possibilities aligned with three possible fates of neoliberalism itself: continuation, metamorphosis, or "terminal crisis" (201). It is not yet clear to which of these possibilities recent developments belong, but the now-total collapse of the US market for jobs in academic literary studies will play a role. The historicist/contextualist paradigm, which North's book brilliantly chronicles across the period of its greatest purchase, fit hand-in-glove with the professionalisation of literary studies. Even if they can be restrained, the processes of de-professionalisation that are now underway will (among other, more obviously malign effects) generate new paradigms. Whether those paradigms can then be connected to forces that would help to preserve a field to receive them remains to be seen.

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2 See Mulhern, North 2018 and 2019, and Ryan January 2018 and July 2018.

REVIEW

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