Rene Wellek's The New Criticism: Pro and Contra

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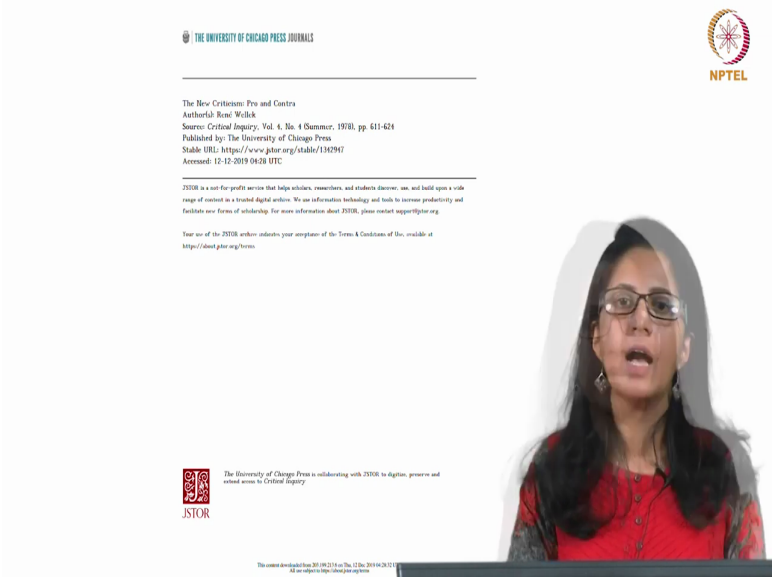

Hello and welcome to today's session. Today we focus on this particular essay by Rene Wellek, it is titled "The New Criticism: Pro and Contra". This is one of the rare essays which has tried to defend the notion of New Criticism. Let me also give a very quick background to the idea of New Criticism. Eliot incidentally is considered as one of the precursors, one of the progenitors of New Criticism though the term had not gained much currency during the time of his own writings. In 1929 when I. A. Richards published his much celebrated work, *Practical Criticism*, New Criticism began to gain much currency.New Criticism was nothing but a formalist school of theoretical scholars, they focused only on close reading and they focused particularly on this genre poetry. And it also encouraged looking at literature as a self-referential aesthetic object alone, which also meant that the other social-historical considerations were not of much importance when one was engaging in a close reading of a literary text.

I. A. Richard's *Practical Criticism* was a collection of a series of readings done by university students without any reference to secondary material or any reference to any biographical details and it engaged with the text purely as an aesthetic object. So, that was the kind of notion on which the entire idea of New Criticism was based. And obviously in the coming decades it also drew a lot of flak because many were also of the opinion that literature will

lose its value, its inherent value if it is looked at merely as an aesthetic object, completely devoid of any other extra literary concerns.

And there were of course multiple viewpoints floating around about the idea of New Criticism and also about employing that as one of the methods for literary reading and literary judgment. And this was also one of the ways in which Reader Response theory was also getting wide currency.

And we also find a move in the early twentieth-century, particularly towards the middle decades of the twentieth-century, a very pertinent move from the liberal humanist approach towards formalism. There were a lot of discussions going around about this. And Rene Wellek wrote this very well-structured essay, "The New Criticism: Pro and Contra" to take stock of what New Criticism was and also give a very objective judgment of the ways in which New Criticism needs to be understood; and more importantly, the ways in which New Criticism had been misunderstood in the critical sphere.

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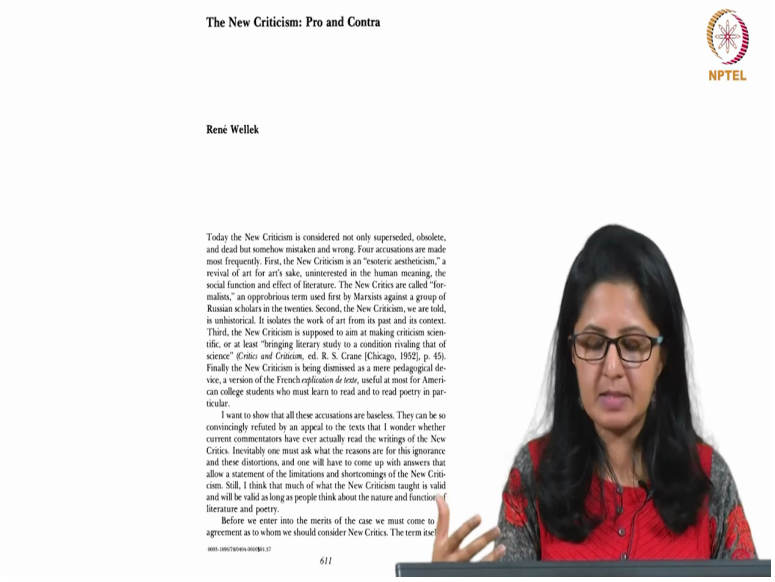

Here we start with the essay. "Today the New Criticism is considered not only superseded, obsolete and dead." That is what happened to New Criticism after few decades, "but somehow mistaken and wrong". This essentially, in the first statement itself, you realize that Rene Wellek is trying to defend New Criticism, looking at this particular school of thought, if we may call it that, as a set of notions which were also terribly wronged.

“Four accusations are made most frequently”. He makes a list of these four at the outset. “First, the New Criticism is an “esoteric aestheticism,” a revival of art for art’s sake, uninterested in the human meaning, the social function and effect of literature.” So, one of the criticisms was that there was something very private about this kind of evaluation, it could not be considered as a universal yardstick. It could not be considered as an objective yardstick, because close reading also meant that each individual will be engaging with the literary work in his or her own way and that cannot be considered as entirely individualistic or entirely objective.

So the New Critics are called formalists and formalism incidentally was mostly considered as a pejorative term when it was coined, “an opprobrious term used first by Marxists against a group of Russian scholars in the 20s.” Second Criticism: “Secondly we are told, it is unhistorical.” New Criticism is unhistorical. “It isolates a work of art from its past and its context.”

“Third, the New Criticism is supposed to aim at making criticism scientific or at least “bringing literary study to a condition rivaling that of science.” We saw that in the essay that we recently took a look at, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” where Eliot is using a scientific analogy, the analogy of chemical reaction in order to talk about the aesthetic processes which are at work. And finally, the fourth criticism is that, “New Criticism is being dismissed as a mere pedagogical device, a version of the French *explication de texte*, useful at most for American college students who must learn to read and to read poetry in particular.”

These are the four notions which almost sounded the death nell of New Criticism. And Rene Wellek is trying to situate New Criticism in a more historical sense and trying to make a case for New Criticism wherever it was unjustly wronged against. “I want to show that all these accusations are baseless”-- these four accusations primarily—“They can be so convincingly refuted by an appeal to the text that I wonder whether current commentators have ever actually read the writings of the New Critics.”

So, it is a historical survey of the ways in which New Criticism had emerged and also looking at the various frameworks within which the ideas of New Criticism were situated. Rene Wellek attributes this to the ignorance of some critics who are entirely unfamiliar with the series of works which were produced during that time. And he also believes that New Criticism is valid and will be valid as long as people think about the nature and function of

literature and poetry. Because we also know how New Criticism, ever since I. A. Richard's *Practical Criticism* in 1929 came into existence, we know that it had a very major influence in the ways in which literature was beginning to be taught within universities, within schools.

Rene Wellek very appropriately positions this discussion; and he begins by asking us to take a look at who are the New Critics entirely. We must come to an agreement as to whom we should consider New Critics.

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He gives a historical sense of this by quoting from different works which were produced from the early twentieth century, from the 1920s onwards. And he says, in 1941 J. C. Ransom, "John Crowe Ransom, who was the founder of *Kenyon Review*, he wrote a book *New Criticism* in 1941, which seems to have established the term in common usage. Even though the book was far from being a celebration of the *New Criticism*. Ransom discusses there not contemporary American criticism in general but only three critics." So, this book which was published in 1941, identifies only three critics as New Critics per se: "I. A. Richards, whom he criticizes sharply, T. S. Eliot against who's views on tradition he makes many objections and Yvor Winters whom he rejects in the strongest terms. It earned him a virulent reply in Winter's *Anatomy of Nonsense*." We shall not be going into those details but the important thing to be noted over here is that, as Rene Wellek tells us, it is important for us to know who

could be considered as a New Critic and what are those elements which makes this sort of a definition possible.

So, in the initial stages only three of them were considered, and with whom J. C. Ransom, the author of the book also did not quite agree with, but these three critics were of course I. A. Richards, T. S. Eliot and Yvor Winters. And now, he is trying to look back from that moment in 1941 when Ransom's book was published and look at the terms and conditions under which the notions of New Criticism had begun to be described. He says, "One can best observe that gradual emergence by thinking of them as reaction against the then prevalent trends in American criticism." So, this is seen as most other schools of thought, as most other new ways of criticism. This was also a reaction against certain prevalent notions of critical frameworks. Without too much simplification, we can distinguish four main trends in American criticism before the advent of the New Critics. And here we also find that there is a movement that literary criticism has made from England to America.

And there is a certain way in which, as Eliot also encouraged us to think about it in that way, there is a certain way in which the entire mind of Europe and by extension the entire idea of literature is coming together in order to talk about particular kinds of trends and frameworks. And the first one he says was a type of aesthetic, impressionistic criticism, a type of appreciation, ultimately derived from Walter Pater. And the second one, the Humanist Movement, and there he locates critics such as Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More and in the 1930s he also talks about the great public commotion around this idea and these sort of critics. And then the third group of critics who attacked the "genteel" tradition, the American business civilization, the "bouboisie," and propagated the naturalistic novel, Dreiser's in particular. And finally, he talks about the Marxists or the near Marxists who flourished during the great depression in the early 30s.

These are the four milestones that he locates with respect to the emergence of New Criticism in America. And whichever kinds of works that he surveys, it is very evident that the influence of T. S. Eliot was very decisive and also I. A. Richards'. So, Eliot's works, he says from 1920 onwards and Richard's *Principles of Literary Criticism* from 1924 onwards, they had in certain ways, in multiple ways, laid the foundations of this new school of thought which later came to be known as New Criticism. But before we get too comfortable in calling this New Criticism as a school of thought, Rene Wellek also warns us that one cannot perhaps refer to this entire group as a homogenous group. If we look at this list of names, we soon

discover that the group was far from unified, there was hardly anything homogeneous about this group. Ransom, Tate, Cleanth Brooks and R. P. Warren may be grouped together as Southern critics.

Burke and Blackmur stand apart and Yvor Winters was a complete maverick. “I could collect and quote a large number of their pronouncements wildly disagreeing with their supposed allies and show that they hold often quite divergent and even contradictory theories.” So this complexity about New Criticism was not something which was highlighted when Practical Criticism became a big movement, became a big thing, almost determining the ways in which literature can be taught in universities. So, what Rene Wellek does at this point is, he is trying to unpack this entire tradition and show us that there were a lot of divergences within this seemingly homogeneous group and this complexity helps us to take a closer look at, a more serious look at New Criticism and engage with it in serious terms as Wellek also wants us to.

Rene Wellek is here clarifying to us in very clear terms that the view that the New Criticism represents a coterie or even a school is mistaken. He is encouraging us to take a look at many complexities which are inherent within this seemingly homogenous group of critics who are collectively known as the New Critics.

“With the evidence of disagreements among these critics, which it would take too much time to develop in detail, it may seem wise to conclude that the concept and term should be abandoned and these critics discussed each on his own merits. I have done so in the forthcoming fifth volume of my *History of Modern Criticism*, where I give individual chapters to each of these men. Some chapters in preliminary versions on Ransom, Blackmur, Burke, Brooks and Wimsatt”. Rene Wellek even goes to the extent of looking at each of these critics separately rather than clubbing them together under this common umbrella term, under a common rubric, New Critics. And of course, it does not mean that we cannot group them together, Rene Wellek is coming to that in the following passage.

“Something tells us that there is some sense in grouping these critics together. Most obviously, they are held together by their reaction against the preceding or contemporary critical schools and views mentioned before.” So, this is one major thing which brings them all together that they were all departing from the traditions which were prevalent until that point of time.

“They all reject the kind of metaphorical, evocative criticism practiced by the impressionists, Tate, Blackmur, Burke and Winters contributed to a symposium highly critical of the neo-humanists.” While pointing out how they were similar, how they could be grouped together as a set of critics who also shared certain kinds of critical judgments and critical frameworks together, Wellek further points out, “Furthermore, they were almost unanimous in their rejection of Marxism, with the single exception of Kenneth Burke, who in the 30s passed through a Marxist phase and, anyhow, his first book moved away from his neo-critical beginnings.”

Wellek is being very practical over here when he is talking about how these set of critics are very varied and there cannot be a homogenous way in which they can be kept together. He is also trying to address this question of how they are unanimous in certain ways as in the rejection of whatever kinds of traditional critical frameworks which were prevalent during their time and also in their rejection of Marxism which was indeed a big thing from the 1930s onwards as we know. And then Wellek gives a certain background, a personal anecdote which is also important for us to understand how this discipline began to emerge, how literary criticism as a different, distinct discipline began to emerge and what were the challenges and how it had to compete with literary history for that matter. And this understanding is extremely important for us to situate literary criticism within a historical framework, within a chronological framework.

And I read to you from this essay, “I remember that when I first came to study English literature in the Princeton graduate school in 1927, fifty years ago, no course in American literature, none in modern literature, and none in criticism was offered. Of all my learned teachers only Morris W. Croll had any interest in aesthetics or even ideas.” He is also trying to tell us that there is a certain trajectory, certain academic as well as historical trajectory that literary criticism as a discipline had to go through. It was not as if criticism was always taught and criticism was always at the forefront in academies. It had to go through a certain historical trajectory in order to find a place for itself as a distinct discipline, just like literature is today. “Most of the New Critics were college teachers and had to make their way in an environment hostile to any and all criticism.”

This is also very important for us to understand that in the 1920s and in the 1930s, even at that point of time when they were all writing about different kinds of literary frameworks and

the need for different aesthetic yardsticks, there was a hostility from these academic settings as well.

It was not as if criticism was always already welcome into the academic fraternity. “Only Kenneth Burke was and remained a freelance man of letters though he taught in later years occasionally at Bennington College and briefly at the University of Chicago. But he very early deserted the New Criticism. It took Blackmur, Tate and Winters years to get academic recognition often against stiff opposition, and even Ransom, R. P. Warren, and Cleanth Brooks, established in quieter places had their troubles. Ransom’s paper “Criticism, Inc.” pleaded for the academic establishment of criticism.”

This move is extremely important, the academic establishment of criticism, which is why it is also important for us to pay attention to these different trajectories—how in the early twentieth-century criticism began to be seen as a creative thing in itself, as an important output in itself, not as a secondary thing which was less important than the creative genius who was creating literature.

“And thanks to him and others criticism is now taught in most American colleges and universities, but it was an uphill fight. I still remember vividly the acrimony of the conflict between criticism and literary history at the University of Iowa, where I was a member of the English Department from 1939 to 1946.” So he is giving a very clear description, a graphic description of the personal struggles that he had and how he witnessed this academic establishment of criticism within English and American academies. And Wellek is also further pointing out another similarity that he has noticed among these New Critics. “The New Critics with one voice questioned the assumptions and preoccupations of academic scholarship with different degrees of sharpness. The wittiest and most pungent was Allen Tate. In the lecture, “Miss Emily and the Bibliographer”, Tate exposed the vain attempts to emulate the methods of science by tracing influence conceived in terms of forces, causes and effects, or biological analogies of growth and development, or by applying psychology, economics, and sociology to literature.”

We may or may not agree with this preposition but it is important for us to notice that this is one of the points of convergences which also enables us to bring all the New Critics together. And he also tells us about one of the important phases that criticism had to go through. As he points out, the professors who engage in “serious” literary study - bibliography, philology,

textual criticism, and related disciplines - not only hold criticism in contempt and do their best to suppress it in the universities, but also Winters tells us bluntly, “were fools and where they still flourish they are still fools”.

So there was this ongoing acrimony in these different frameworks of literature, each trying to compete with the other before a distinct place was accorded to the study of criticism as a separate discipline altogether. And in the following passage he goes on to challenge this claim that New Criticism had entirely rejected historicity, this is how this passage begins:

“Still, one should understand that this rejection of academic historical scholarship must not be interpreted as a rejection of the historicity of poetry.” And this is perhaps a misconception which also had led to a lot of criticism being leveled against, lot of charges being leveled against New Criticism as a framework. Cleanth Brooks has in many contexts mostly in interpreting seventeenth-century poems shown that the critic needs the help of the historian - all the help he can. The critic, he argues, “obviously, must know what the words of the poem mean, something which immediately puts him in debt to the linguist”. So there are these different disciplines coming together. Contrary to the belief that New Critics did not want literature to engage with anything else. And since many of the words are proper nouns, in debt to the historian as well.

“In order to interpret the “Horatian Ode” of Andrew Marvell correctly we must obviously know something of Cromwell and Charles I and the particular historical situation in the summer of 1650 to which the poem refers. But historical evidence is not welcomed only as a strictly subordinate contribution to the elucidation of a poem.” So, this clarification is extremely important given that New Critics were perhaps unjustly seen as been hostile to historicity entirely. But with these examples, Rene Wellek is also showing us that, that was not the case. That historicity, whenever it was needed, and as Cleanth Brooks also tells us, whenever help from the historian was needed, the critic was advised to get all the help that one could.

And now further putting this in context, particularly within the historical context, Wellek argues, Brooks and all the other New Critics reinterpret and revalue the whole history of English poetry. So that is one of the major contributions that is being highlighted over here which was also ignored by most of the other critics who were vehement critics of the New Critics.

And he tells us how there is an act of historical imagination which is found to be at work and this also led to the revision of "the history of English poetry; to exalt Donne and the Metaphysicals, to reinstate Dryden and Pope, to sift and discriminate among the English Romantic poets, preferring Wordsworth and Keats to Shelly and Byron; to discover Hopkins, to exalt Yeats, and to defend the break with Victorian and Edwardian conventions as it was initiated by Pound and Eliot."

So this historical imagination, this new historical framework which had emerged was indeed the result of the close reading which was encouraged by the New Critics. And to sum up this point, Wellek very clearly argues, "I would argue that New Criticism embraces a total historical scheme, believes in a philosophy of history and uses it as a standard of judgment."

It would not be wrong to say that it was a very simplified version of New Criticism which was being presented and that was a version which was being critiqued vehemently as well, that New Critics entirely rejected historicity. That while privileging close reading they were also sidelining the historical aspects which are also important for the understanding of the poem.

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History is seen substantially in the terms of T. S. Eliot. There used to be once a perfectly ordered world, which is, for instance, behind Dante's poetry. This world disintegrated under the impact of science and scepticism. The "dissociation of sensibility" took place at some time in the seventeenth century. Man became increasingly divided, alienated, specialized as industrialization and secularism progressed. The Western world is in decay, but some hope seems to be held out for a reconstitution of the original wholeness. The total man, the undivided "unified sensibility" which combines intellect and feeling, is the ideal that requires a rejection of technological civilization, a return to religion or, at least, to a modern myth and, in the Southern critics, allowed a defense of the agrarian society surviving in the South. The basic scheme has a venerable ancestry: Schiller's *Letters on Aesthetic Education* (1795) was the main source for Hegel and Marx. In the American critics, particularly in Tate and Brooks, the scheme is drawn from Eliot's view of tradition. In Eliot the "unified sensibility" comes from F. H. Bradley, who knew his Hegel. Brooks is confident in focusing on Hobbes as the villain; Tate singles out Bacon, Gibbon, and La Mettrie as the destroyers of the old world view. Ransom puts out a different version blaming "Platonism," which means presumably any generalizing abstracting view of the world. Tate praised Spengler's *Decline of the West* (*Nation* 122 [1926]: 532) and gave the scheme a peculiar twist in his practical criticism. He was most interested in poets who come at the point of dissolution of the original unity, who dramatize the alienation of man: Emily Dickinson and Hart Crane in particular. Tate sees poems always within history and echoes Eliot saying, in 1927, "My attempt is to see the present from the past, yet remain immersed in the present and committed to it" (*The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate*, ed. John Tyree Fain and Thomas Daniel Young [Athens, Ga., 1974], p. 189).

The role of criticism is great for the health of poetry, of the language, and ultimately of society. The charge of rejecting history, of having no "sense of the past" (voiced even by Lionel Trilling, in *The Liberal Imagination*) is easily refuted. Its refutation has already answered the other main accusation, that of aestheticism, of an art-for-art's-sake view of literature. It is based on the insistence of the New Critics that the aesthetic experience is set off from immediate practical concerns: from rhetorical persuasion, bare doctrinal statement, or mere emotional effusion. The aesthetic state of mind can be induced only by the coherence and unity of a work of art. These views have an ancient lineage long preceding the art-for-art's-sake movement. The distinctions among aesthetic contemplation, scientific truth, morality, and practical usefulness were most elaborately drawn in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790), and the idea of the coherence, unity, and even organicity of a work of art is as old as Aristotle. It was modified and amplified by the German critics around 1800, from whom Coleridge drew his formulas, and Coleridge is

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the most immediate source for English and American critics. One may raise doubts (as Wimsatt has) about the metaphor of organism if it is pushed too far in application to a work of art, but there seems to me a simple truth in the old view that a successful work of art is a whole in which the parts collaborate and modify one another. Much of the "close reading" practiced by Cleanth Brooks and followers demonstrates this truth even on recalcitrant material. But this insight is grossly distorted if it is supposed to lead to the conclusion that poetry is cut off from reality, is merely self-reflexive, and that it is thus only an inconsequential play of words. When Brooks combats the "heresy of paraphrase" he objects to reducing a work of art to a statement of abstract propositions, or to a moral message, or to any literal verifiable truth. But this emphasis on the specific "fictionality" of all art, its world of illusion or semblance, cannot mean a lack of relation to reality or a simple entrapment in language. Tate, for instance, emphatically condemned "that idolatrous dissolution of language from the grammar of a possible world, which results from the belief that language itself can be reality, or by incantation can create reality: a superstition that comes down in French from Lautréamont, Rimbaud and Mallarmé to the Surrealists, and in English to Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens, and Dylan Thomas" (*Essays*, p. 406). Poetry is turned to the world, aims at a picture of reality. It cannot be absolute or pure. It remains impure, like anything human, a theme eloquently developed in R. P. Warren's essay "Pure and Impure Poetry" (1942).

Both Brooks and Ransom uphold a version of imitation, of *mimesis*. Brooks asserts that the poem, if it is a true poem, is a "simulacrum of reality" (*Well Wrought Urn* [New York, 1947], p. 194) or "a portion of reality as viewed and valued by a human being. It is rendered coherent through a perspective of valuing" (*Literary Criticism* [New York, 1957], pp. 737–38). In Ransom poetry is a display, a knowledge and restoration of the real world: a celebration of the beauty of nature, even a "representation of natural beauty" (*Poems and Essays* [New York, 1955], p. 171). None of the New Critics could have believed in the prison-house of language. This supposed consequence of any view of the unity, self-reflexiveness, and integration of a work of art has been debated thoroughly, for example, by Murray Krieger in *The New Apologists for Poetry* (1956) and by Gerald Graff in *Poetic Statement and Critical Dogma* (1970), but it poses a false dilemma. A poem may have coherence and integrity without losing its meaning or truth. The very nature of words points to the outside world. In *A Window to Criticism* (1964) Murray Krieger speaks of a "miracle," but such a gesture toward the irrational seems unnecessary unless we consider the reference of almost every word a "miracle." It points to or may point to an object in the outside world and at the same time is part of a sentence, of a phonemic and syntactical system, of a language code. The parallel to painting is obvious: a painting is enclosed in a frame, is organized by a relation of colors and lines,

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So, Wellek very clearly and succinctly argues that that was not the case. And he also gives us the example of T. S. Eliot who had these engagements with history if you look through his poems, the historicity of the modernist Period, and the significance of the past is very much over there. Even in the essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' we see that he emphasizes on the role of the past in order to make sense of the present. So, the close reading and the labor with which art needs to be engaged with, that is seen within a very pertinent historical context which is heavily rooted in the past.

And Wellek goes on to give us many examples in favor of his argument that New Criticism did not reject historicity, that it was very well in alignment with the kind of history that was important to understand literature, that was important to make sense of particular kinds of poems. So we will very quickly skip to the next session. Now he is responding to the

criticism that, the New Critics were obsessed with form alone. He says, “In the writings of the New Critics, the coherence of a poem is not studied in terms of form as the label “formalism” suggests. Actually, the New Critics paid little attention to what is traditionally called the form of a poem.” So, this is another fresh point that Wellek is trying to make. But he says, the New Critics rejected the distinction of form and content. They believe in the organicity of poetry and in practice constantly examine attitudes, tones, tensions, irony and paradox, all psychological concepts partly derived from Richards.

So this close reading, it is not just about the words which are there on the page, words which together come to form a poem. It is also about engaging with these various dimensions which are part of this work of art. So, in close reading, it is not the compromising of the various other elements which eventually happen. But in close reading what eventually happens is an engagement with these multiplicities which come together to make the poem. And again he sums up quite rightly, “The New Critics are overwhelmingly concerned with the meaning of a work of art, with the attitude, the tone the feelings, and even with the ultimate implied world view conveyed. They are formalists only in the sense that they insist on the organization of a work of art which prevents its becoming a simple communication.” So, this clarification comes across as very handy because we tend to simplify the many yardsticks which are put forward by the New Critics and we tend to look down upon them as being mere formalists.

But we also realize over here that form has an important connection with the meaning that the poem is conveying. So in that sense, the New Critics, we understand that they are really concerned about the meaning of the work of art which they are engaging with and it is not just about making sense of the words but also about the general attitude and even about the world view which the poem tries to communicate with its readers. And responding to the criticism, that New Critics wanted to see literary criticism as a science, he finds that very claim, very preposterous, that allegation very preposterous, and he says it might have emanated from “those who felt hurt by their attack on “appreciation”, on lose impressionism and mere self-indulgence in ‘adventures among masterpieces’”. So all that the New Critics wanted to do apparently was perhaps to bring a certain kind of a structure and order to this entire process of criticism. So that it is not seen as an exercise without any kind of firm boundaries, any kind of firm frameworks.

So, Wellek again tells us a contrary and goes on to argue in favor of that saying actually the New Critics are enemies of science. “Science for Tate is a villain of history, which has

destroyed the community of man, broken up the old organic way of life, paved the way to industrialism and made man the alienated, rootless, Godless creature he has become in this century. Science encourages Utopian thinking, the false idea of the perfectibility of man, the whole illusion of endless progress."

Tate says bluntly, and here Wellek is quoting him, "poetry is not only quite different from science but in its essence is opposed to science." So this close reading that Wellek is now undertaking, the way in which he is engaging with the series of texts which have come together to contribute to our understanding of New Criticism, Wellek is actually trying to tell us that New Criticism is not what many thought it was.

In fact, it needs to be engaged with in most serious terms in order to refute the many allegations put forward against it and in order to understand the historicity, the historical trajectory within which New Criticism as well as the New Critics were situated.

And Wellek also says that, maybe when they were trying to bring in some kind of objectivity into this exercise of criticism, they could have been misunderstood as taking over scientific methods. Like he says, "If they sometimes spoke of criticism as a systematic, rational discipline, they could not mean a modern value-free social science, for they always stressed the necessity of judgment, the qualitative experience poetry gives us." Maybe in terms of method, in terms of the structure and order, they perhaps wanted certain kinds of scientific methods also to be employed but at the end of the day, it was not a value-free objective neutral kind of approach or a response that they had to literature.But it was very inherently a qualitative experience which was very subjective as well.

And Wellek also remembers to show how the New Critics were different from the Romantics. That it was not just a visionary romantic thing that they were putting forward, he clarifies "this is not a claim like that of the Romantics for some visionary power, for some special insight into a world beyond, which might lead to an obscurantist theory of double truth.It is rather a view of knowledge as "realization", as full awareness in the sense in which we can say "you do not really know what it is like until you have lived through it". It is ultimately a version of the unified sensibility of T. S. Eliot, the union of feeling and intellect achieved in poetry." And these are the places where we find that Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" as an essay which brings us closer to the ideas of New Criticism. "Criticism cannot

be neutral scientism; it must respond to the work with the same totality of mind with which the work is created."

It cannot be entirely scientific, on the contrary it needs to move away from the methods of science in order to achieve that kind of qualitative, subjective judgment that, New Criticism is also trying to highlight. "But criticism is always subordinated to creation. Its humility contrasts precisely with the aggressions, the impositions of science." So it is a very gentle, modest point that Wellek is trying to make over here about making criticism as a subordinate category when compared to actual literature, actual creative work.

And here he says, the entire argument, the scientific argument also falls flat because the humility with which the critic approaches a work of art or criticism approaches a work of art. It is in stark contrast to the aggressive way in which science engages with things.

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And now talking about close reading further, Wellek says that the method of close reading was the most important pedagogical weapon of the New Criticism. One should grant that the proliferation of explications became later a dreary industry, but it is a mistake to consider close reading a new version of *explication de texte*. Close reading as practiced by Cleanth Brooks was clearly different from this French method which only focused on the text. And towards the end of this argument, Wellek also tells us that, close reading did not alienate the text from its extra literary word. Close reading did not alienate text from the surroundings within which it was produced.

On the contrary, although the process of reading is inevitably temporal in criticism, we must try to see a work as a totality, a configuration, a gestalt, a whole. That was what close reading

also eventually tried to achieve to see the text as a whole, as a gestalt in order to lead one closer towards the meaning making process. And then he says he hopes that he has succeeded in refuting the common misconceptions about New Criticism, "but I have studied the history of criticism long enough to know that there must be reasons for the fact that New Criticism is currently so in disfavor."

So like I mentioned earlier, Wellek is very practical in his approach. He is not blinded by his arguments in favor of New Criticism. On the other hand, he takes a very balanced view. First, he talks about four major misconceptions which he thinks should be entirely dealt with, should be defended against. And in the second half, towards the end of this essay, he also tells us about the reasons that he has come across which he believes had brought much disfavor to New Criticism as a critical practice.

First, he talks about the influence of the Chicago Aristotelians as one of the important movements which must have led to the New Critics falling out of favor. The Chicago Aristotelians, who exalt, plot character and genre, strongly disapproved of the New Critics' concern for language and poetic diction. So language and poetic diction was considered as inferior compared to the bigger and stronger elements of literature such as plot, character or genre. And Chicago Aristotelians were also followers of Aristotle's *Poetics* who wanted to bring back the Aristotelian, the classical tenets back into criticism.

And he says the New Critics fared badly in their hands. This sort of criticism was not something that the New Critics could really survive and while advocating a rational, systematic study of poetics, which is what the Chicago Aristotelians did "even though their insistence on strict genre conventions and neutral analysis were unacceptable to the New Critics concerned with the nature of poetry in general and with criticism as evaluation."

So, that is one of the major historical movements that Wellek sees as having led to the New Critics falling out of favor within the critical circle, within the critical tradition. And the next one he says, perhaps is the emergence of myth-criticism. "Myth as a system of metaphors or symbols is a central device in much of New Criticism but in a myth-critics it becomes the one overriding concern."

Poetry is simply and I think wrongly identified with myth, and myth is used so broadly that includes any theme, any story you can think of. Myth-criticism allows a discussion of content apart from the poem. And that is also something which had contributed, in a very negative

way, to New Criticism. And New Critics were also very directly, very heavily rejected by the critics of consciousness. Those were the Geneva School of Critics and we find that it also had a very adverse effect on New Criticism. Then with these multiple groups embracing Marxism and also bringing in Marxism and its tenants into the literary frameworks, we find that their distancing from New Criticism was more and more obvious and the end of New Criticism was almost inevitable and quite sure.

And finally, he says, even the religious preferences, the overt religious preferences of some of these New Critics also must have led to the decline of the New Criticism. "Surely, one of the reasons for the demise of the New Criticism is the distrust many feel toward the political, religious views of the main new critics towards T. S. Eliot's Anglicanism, which is shared for instance by Cleanth Brooks, or toward the Roman Catholicism of Allen Tate or William Wimsatt, as well as toward the participation of three Southern Critics, Ransom, Tate and R. P. Warren in the so called Agrarian movement, formulated in the symposium, *I will Take My Stand*."

We find that their religious, political preferences which were not in alignment with the emerging trends, also had struck a very severe blow to New Criticism. And we also know that Eliot's criticism was very Eurocentric, it was very white, very male and it was also politically very conservative and it also promoted a certain kind of Christian conservatism which got infused into the literary traditions and the yardsticks as well.

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And this combination of religion and literature, this infusing of literature with spirituality or certain kinds of religion did not really go down well when the close reading became one of the major things that the New Critics became concerned about. Because the critics of New Critics also thought that, that would have a very lopsided view of literature in general because it would tend to privilege certain kinds of world views and certain kinds of literary views and literary yardsticks over the other.

And he sums this up in this short passage: "If one rejects this version of history, one can see the justification of a new turn in poetic taste. The revival of the English Romantics as the Visionary Company centered in Blake and the current attempts to dismiss T. S. Eliot both as poet and critic and to reduce the role of all modernism imply a rejection of New Criticism also in the everyday matters of selection and ranking of poets and poems.

The one advantage of Rene Wellek's essay is that, he is able to look back at these four to five decades and then see how the historical trajectory had taken New Criticism through. And he is also at a very advantageous position when he is able to have a very balanced as well as pragmatic approach towards this evaluation of New Criticism as a critical practice. And finally, he also gives a personal touch to this criticism and he says one of the limitations was the lack of any kind of comparative framework.

"They are extremely anglocentric, even provincial.They have rarely attempted to discuss foreign literature or if they have done so, their choice has been confined to a very few obvious texts." Dante, and we know that even Eliot had preferred to discuss Dante whenever he wanted to talk about anything outside of England. And in the world outside of England was just Europe for him, it was a very Eurocentric perspective. Here Wellek is even more compulsive in his criticism and he says it was a very anglocentric world view, anglocentric critical view that was being promoted by the New Critics.

"Dante is discussed by Allen Tate; he also comments on passages in *The Idiot* and *Madame Bovary*. Winters admires the poems of Paul Valery. Blackmur, late in his life, he wrote on Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Flaubert. A recent excursion of Kenneth Burke into Goethe seems most unfortunate. That is about all." So it is a very limited literary world that the New Critics were willing to explore. The close reading was limited to an anglocentric perspective.

And even when some of these foreign writers were discussed, the comparison was largely based on the Anglocentric and the Eurocentric frameworks which were always already in

place. Wellek sticks to his point and continues to consider this as a very serious limitation of New Criticism.

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And having come to the final passage, there is a certain kind of tribute that Wellek offers to New Criticism. He says, he cannot deny his conviction that New Criticism had reiterated many literary truths to which we will keep going back to, like "the specific nature of the aesthetic transaction, the normative presence of a work of art which forms a structure, a unity, a coherence, and a whole, which cannot be simply battered about and is comparatively independent of its origins and effects."

"The New Critics have also persuasively described the function of literature in not yielding abstract knowledge or information, message or stated ideology and they have devised a technique of interpretation which often succeeded in illuminating not so much the form of a poem as the implied attitudes of the author." So, it is not entirely about the text, it is also about the world view, the attitudes which the poem conveyed. And the New Critical framework is certainly one framework that has helped us to develop tools which will bring out these many aspects which are hidden within a poem.

And only this kind of a close reading will enable us to do that. And of course the charge of elitism is something that we cannot get out of and that continues to be there. But he says, a decision between good art and bad art remains the unavoidable duty of criticism. So, elitism is a charge that no criticism can perhaps escape and that is inevitable, Wellek says. And of course, since the 1960s with structuralism and later post-modernism, we have come to this

understanding that there is no kind of objective evaluation which could be placed in terms of good art and bad art, in terms of high art and low art.

But at the same time Wellek writing in the 1960s says, that is perhaps the business of criticism, to help us distinguish between good and bad. And even today, when we think about the disciplinary frameworks, the kind of texts that are taught within classrooms, the kind of text which do "stand the test of time", there is a certain way in which we continue to use a lot of the yardsticks in order to differentiate good art from the bad art.

The humanities he says, would abdicate their function in society if they surrender to a neutral scientism. So, New Criticism is not about scientism at all. It is about very subjective reading, experiential reading and experiential evaluation of literature. "And indifferent relativism or if they succumbed to the imposition of alien norms required by political indoctrination". So, there are certain merits that Wellek continues to see in the New Critical approach, that it is devoid of any kind of scientific neutrality and it is devoid of any kind of political intervention which he says is important within this field of humanities in order to sustain the value of literature, the inherent power of literature.

And in these two terms, he says, "particularly on these two fronts, the New Critics have waged up a valiant fight which, I am afraid, must be fought over and again in the future". He ends this very practical essay on this positive note that New Criticism, while it lasted, had left behind a great legacy which he sums up in these two aspects:

One is the inability, the refusal to surrender to neutral scientism and indifferent relativism and secondly to stay away, to stay strong in the midst of any kinds of political indoctrination, in the face of any kind of imposition of political indoctrination. I hope this essay will also encourage you to see New Criticism in a different light altogether and also understand the historical role that they played in the emergence of literary criticism. I thank you for your attention and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.