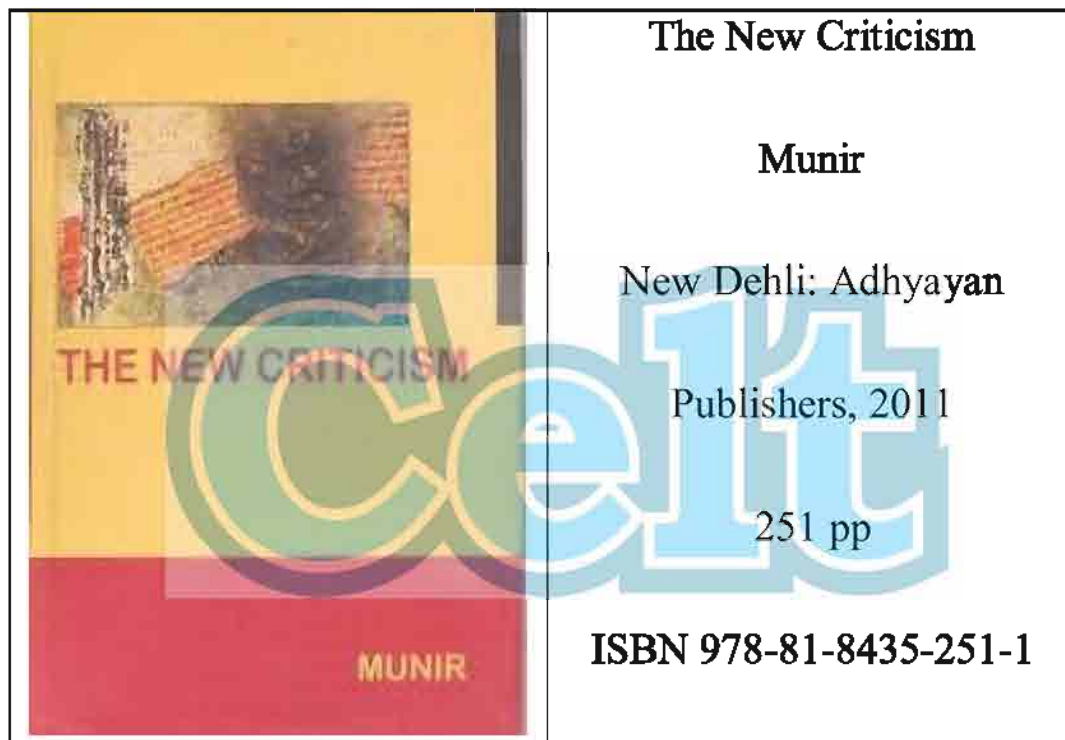


A BOOK REVIEW: THE NEW CRITICISM



Reviewed by Jonathan Moore¹

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In his book *The New Criticism*, Indian author Munir explores the complicated critical perspective of the same name that developed by American and British writers of the 1920s through the 1960s. Rather than explore the motives or intent of the author of a text or using the text's social or historical context to attempt to explore it, New Criticism Critics focused exclusively on the text itself. Over time, such close reading resulted in its own unique critical process as well as perspective. Authors such as John Crowe Ransom, W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley gave shape and definition to the major tenants of the perspective. Munir, over the course of eight chapters helps clarify both the ideas and the major works of several New Criticism writers.

Munir's book opens with his interpretation of how authors such as T.E. Hulme, Ezra Pound as well as T.S. Eliot, I. A. Richards and William Empson helped lay the literary and philosophical foundation for what would become New Criticism. Perhaps it is because offering an explanation of context naturally goes against the basic foundations of New Criticism; Munir seems reluctant to delve too deeply into the subject. "I am, therefore, constrained to deal with their views and principles before plunging headlong into the New Criticism," he explains (1-2). Despite this, he does offer his longest chapter to setting the stage for this new breed of critics giving the reader at least a brief introduction to the ways that these five critics' views shaped and, to some extent, predicted New Criticism.

Other than a short introductory chapter to New Criticism in which Munir explores the evolution of New Critics from Fugitives to Agrarians and begins introducing the reader to the basic, core values of New Criticism, *The New Criticism* walks through the writings of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, Richard Palmer Blackmur and W.K. Wimsatt. Although there is some variation in the emphasis taken by the individual critic, the

New Criticism aesthetic resonates throughout each. Munir provides clear explanations of the terms introduced as well as application to individual poems. Following each chapter, rather than at the end of the entire text, Munir includes his extensive list of references. Helpful to those reading the book incrementally, this format has the effect of making the text feel broken and divided, more like a collection of related papers rather than a unified text. Similarly, as a reference to students or scholars attempting to glean *The New Criticism* for additional research into their own projects, the format offers a small stumbling block.

Moving from Ransom, whose own book which is also titled *The New Criticism*, through the works of his students and contemporaries Munir's guide gives a solid, broad map to those exploring New Criticism but Munir is careful to place an emphasis not just on the characteristics of the theory but on the end goal. This goal of "psychic organizing and harmonizing," discipline, self improvement reflection (book jacket), for instance, is called attention to in the book's third chapter when Munir highlights Ransom's *God Without Thunder*. Ransom, he explains, views myth (and by extension, poetry) is required "restore and organize the human psyche and give full knowledge to it" (76). Other New Critics would eventually build off of, adapt and reshape Ransom's ideas but all with the same goal of using a close reading of the text (including identification of tension, ambiguity, paradox, and irony as well as the measurable meter and rhythm) to provide definable meaning to a poem. Munir's *The New Criticism* illustrates how, to whatever extent possible, New Critics were attempting to give certainty to poetic interpretation.

If there is a major problem with *The New Criticism*, it is not with the content he includes. Munir thoroughly analyzes and documents his subject matter. His research is extensive. He provides solid definitions and explications. His ideas are well thought out and organized in what is as solid of a single text on his

research material has could be hoped for. But after providing such exhaustive examination, things are still missing.

Munir fails to give the same level of explanation and thoroughness as to the reasons why New Criticism fell out of favor. A concluding chapter on demise (or at least “diminished popularity of”) New Criticism would provide some resolution and an aesthetic bookend to “Precursors to the New Criticism.” Why is it that former students of New Criticism, such as Stanley Fish, began to criticize the theory? How has New Criticism evolved? Or has it at all? In what ways have other theories and perspectives used to the ideas and processes of New Criticism in the creation of their own movements? A chapter response to some of these or other questions regarding “Post-New Criticism,” even he felt “constrained” to do so, would have benefitted the book greatly.

Additionally, while there are certainly limits as to who should be included in any conversation, I was surprised to see names such as Robert Penn Warren, Robert Heilman, Monroe Beardsley and Robert Stallman given only brief mention. I was unable to find other New Criticism notables such as Caroline Gordon or Ray B. West, Jr. in either the Index or on the reference pages.

Finally, despite his explanation he wrote this book with the hopes of making it easier for Indian university students to research New Criticism, the book’s “Index” is poorly edited. Whether the fault of the author, his editor or publisher; the number of simple mistakes reflects poorly on an otherwise very well written book. Mistakes such as “Kew Words” rather “Key Words” and Donne’s vqaediction: for bidding morning” (248) might not seem significant but the sheer quantity of errors in the index is problematic, especially for a researcher skimming through it while trying to determine if it would be worth using in one’s research.

Despite its minor flaws, I would thoroughly recommend this text to any student or researcher delving into world of New Criticism. It would be especially useful to anyone looking for more information about one of the chaptered authors (Ransom, Tate, Brooks, Blackmur or Wimsatt) but also to anyone looking for broad perspective on this particular type of criticism. What Munir most effectively succeeds in doing in *The New Criticism*, is in shining a light on the belief of the New Critics that by analyzing the minutia of a poem, by putting it under the microscope without the distraction and noise of author intent or cultural criticism, a person might find order.

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