Introduction

Louis Menand and Lawrence Rainey

For readers over the age of fifty, modernism and the New Criticism are not just terms that refer to a remote and distant past, not just names that stretch across a map of venerable but vanished empires in the history of literary criticism. They evoke places where we have conversed with colleagues, or hours spent with books that still rest upon the shelves, only slightly discoloured with age. New Criticism has perhaps slipped more irretrievably into the past of professional literary studies than modernism, which continues to play a pivotal role in contemporary cultural debate as the governing term in discussions about the notion of 'the postmodern'. But for a history of literary criticism that is devoted to modernism and the New Criticism, the personal associations of both terms can easily undermine a dispassionate account. The subject extends into the present and lacks the corrective of a tranquil and healing hindsight. Moreover, situated at that troublesome crossroad where professional literary studies (New Criticism) meet with the broader cultural and social transformations of the twentieth century (modernism), it is a subject that engages some of our most passionate views about art and society, intellectuals and public culture.

The ongoing contemporaneity of these subjects inevitably affects the kinds of narration that one might offer, for several reasons. One has to do with the logic of historical insight, its foundations in differing temporal indices. Descriptions of the past are grounded in temporal perspectives derived from the future, or as Jürgen Habermas has expressed it: 'The historian does not observe from the perspective of the actor but describes events and actions out of the experimential horizon of a history that goes beyond the actor's horizons of expectations.'[1] Yet insofar as we ourselves are still actors whose horizons of expectations include much that was encompassed in the New Criticism and modernism, it is not immediately self-evident which interpretive framework, which new set of horizons, might best furnish a meaningful historical account of those subjects.

It is true that the New Criticism can be integrated into an essentially

[1] Jürgen Habermas, 'A Review of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*', in Fred R. Dallmayr and Thomas A. McCarthy, eds., *Understanding and Social Inquiry* (Notre Dame, 1977), p. 339.

whiggish and necessarily schematic account of the development of 'theory', an account that often underlies our everyday sense of professional literary studies' development during the last decades. In this view the New Criticism constitutes an initial stage which, along with its reshaping of 'practical' criticism and pedagogical practice, eliminates authorial intention and context as reference points for discussions about the meaning of literary works; that stage is followed by structuralism, with promise of more positive insights into the logic by which textual artifacts function; and structuralism, in turn, is followed by deconstruction, in which the radical instabilities of language, formally acknowledged but effectively suppressed in the structuralist account, are brought to the fore and elevated into a paradigm for all textual operations. Finally, as deconstruction is assimilated to various currents of feminist, psychoanalytic, and Marxist criticism, the New Historicism absorbs and supersedes all its predecessors, so providing a comprehensive framework in which to situate a narrative of New Criticism's rise and fall. Yet such an account would slight the sheer velocity that has marked these developments and the unforeseen consequences which have followed. (One can measure the speed of change by Jonathan Culler's books: his classic presentation of *Structuralist Poetics* appeared in 1975; his subsequent book, *On Deconstruction*, was published in 1982; yet it was in the same year that Stephen Greenblatt was coining the term New Historicism.)[2] The increasing rapidity with which one critical mode has yielded to another has tended to delegitimise the developmental narrative of ideas as an adequate way of accounting for critical change; unfolding intellectual debate is replaced by a chronicle that merely registers a succession of discrete and ultimately incommensurable events. 'The history of criticism', both as an intellectual concept and as a genre, gives way to the interim report that increasingly reads like a chronicle of *haute couture*, in which a catalogue of vertiginous changes reveals only the benumbing uniformity of factitious novelty. We are no longer confident that changes in criticism or literary theory exhibit the kind of developmental coherence once postulated in the notion of a history of literary criticism; such a purely internalist account of literary theory, while giving due attention to the philosophical background that has informed the evolution of theoretical protocols, risks losing sight of why such protocols have been deemed necessary at all.

To recognise that accounts of twentieth-century literary criticism must also consider the social and institutional pressures that have affected the formation of professional literary studies is not, however, to find a definitive solution to the difficulties that face a contemporary 'history of literary criticism'. Instead, it merely transposes the dilemma of contemporaneity

[2] The coining of the term is detailed by H. Aram Veeser in the 'Introduction' to his anthology *The New Historicism* (New York, 1989), p. xiii.

from one field to another, from the cooler heights of intellectual history to the more concrete but no less contested terrain of social history. Professors of literature today, after all, are part of the same institution in which the New Critics once worked, and, despite the many changes that have recently affected universities, a continuum of experience seems to bind us to our predecessors. But younger scholars especially are aware that a profound change has already begun to alter the terms of discussion: the incessant expansion of higher education that characterised the entire arc of the twentieth century, and particularly the period following World War II, is possibly at an end. To the extent that professional literary studies have adopted theoretical approaches that are increasingly hermetic or animated by political ambitions at odds with the sympathies of even the liberal and well-educated public, they risk a crisis of significant proportions, an unprecedented erosion of public support. That prospective crisis casts a fresh though colder light over the formative moments of modern literary criticism, the early development of the New Criticism. The rise of professional literary studies can no longer be traced solely in the coherent evolution of a theoretical corpus progressively purified of its connections with social reality and increasingly committed to linguisticality.

Although it is a commonplace to assimilate modernism and the New Criticism to one another, sometimes treating the latter as if it were merely a more systematic, more philosophical, or more academic articulation of formalist undercurrents within modernism, much is lost in assigning to either term the kind of monolithic coherence such a claim presumes. This is especially true for modernism, a term which has been the subject of intense discussion during the last two decades as the spread of debate about 'postmodernism' has put increasing pressure on the prior term to which it remains tethered, whether chronologically or conceptually. Much of the debate has centred less on modernism than on its relations with the avant-garde and with postmodernism, a function in part of the influence of Peter Bürger's widely discussed *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. For Bürger, the avant-garde project 'can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society', or, as he further clarifies it, an assault aginst 'art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men'.[3] This attack takes place not at the level of contents or thematics in any particular work, but rather in how avant-garde works as a whole function, how they are produced, and how they are received. Insofar as they reintegrate art and life practices, insofar as they negate 'the category of individual creation' by, for example, using arbitrarily chosen mass products (e.g., the urinal of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917)), and

[3] Peter Bürger, *The Institution of the Avant-Garde* (1974), tr. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, 1984), p. 49.

insofar as they require or suggest participatory responses on the part of audiences, avant-garde art works reject the basic constituents of autonomous and bourgeois art.

Though Bürger's thesis explicitly concerns the historical avant-garde, it has furnished the impetus for subsequent arguments that postulate a rigorous distinction between the avant-garde and modernism, most notably those of Andreas Huyssen. According to Huyssen, '[i]n modernism art and literature retained their traditional 19th-century autonomy from every day life; ... the traditional way in which art and literature were produced, disseminated, and received, is never challenged by modernism but maintained intact'. In sharp contrast, '[t]he avant-garde ... attempted to subvert art's autonomy, its artificial separation from life, and its institutionalization as "high art"'.[4] For Huyssen, though, the force of this distinction derives less from questions about the notion of aesthetic autonomy than from the pressing reality of mass culture. 'Mass culture has always been the hidden subtext of the modernist project.'[5] Within that project, Huyssen argues, popular culture is gendered as female, construed as a threat of encroaching formlessness, and held at bay by reaffirming and refortifying the boundaries between art and inauthentic mass culture. Huyssen does not contend that avant-gardists were less sexist than their modernist contemporaries, but that the avant-garde's 'urge to validate other, formerly neglected or ostracized forms of cultural expression created an aesthetic climate in which the political aesthetic of feminism could thrive'.[6] Since feminism is a crucial component of recent developments in postmodernism, and since postmodernism is plainly an effort 'to negotiate forms of high art with certain forms and genres of mass culture and the culture of everyday life', it follows that postmodernism is the legitimate heir of the avant-garde.[7] The avant-garde and postmodernism share a genuine historical and ideological continuity, which turns upon the question of popular culture and firmly distinguishes them from a modernism that consequently seems little more than a reactionary or elitist fear of popular culture.

Bürger's and Huyssen's arguments offer welcome recontextualisations of modernism and the avant-garde. Bürger's thesis, for example, is useful in reestablishing a continuity of concerns between fin-de-siècle aestheticism and the historical avant-garde in debates about 'art and life'; Huyssen calls attention to a thematics that was plainly of concern to any number of modernist writers. Yet in tying his arguments about the 'institution of art' to a purely conceptual category, Bürger may lose much in the way of historical specificity, ignoring, for example, the development of a particular set of institutions which were essential to modernist production

[4] Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington, 1986), p. 163. [5] *Ibid.*, p. 47. [6] *Ibid.*, p. 61. [7] *Ibid.*, p. 59.

– the little reviews, the deluxe editions, a corpus of patron-collectors and investors, and specific groups of smaller publishers such as Alfred Knopf, Horace Liveright, and Ben Huebsch (to use the United States as an example). Similar, Huyssen's effort to distinguish modernism from the avant-garde achieves its schematic clarity at a cost to historical complexity. When he cautions that 'there are areas of overlap' between the avant-garde and modernist traditions, instancing first 'vorticism and Ezra Pound' and then 'radical language experimentation and James Joyce', scholars of Anglo-American literary modernism are likely to feel uneasy, having found that two of its three major figures (assuming that Eliot is the third) are now exceptions to the rule. Huyssen is doubtless correct to urge that 'it makes little sense to lump Thomas Mann together with Dada', but his dilemma might be more easily solved by declaring that Mann, whose lifelong ambition was to forge a style that would replicate the prose of the later Goethe, may not be a modernist at all, rather than by erecting a brittle distinction that misses as much as it includes.

Still, the most questionable aspect of the arguments of Bürger and Huyssen is their appeal to an oppositional paradigm, the presupposition that modernist or avant-garde art can be genuinely such only if it stands in an inimical relation to the ensemble of values found at large in the dominant culture, the culture of capitalism and the bourgeoisie. The paradigm's effects are especially apparent in their selection of subjects. Thus, Bürger's account of the historical avant-garde treats Dada and Surrealism but neglects the preceding development of Futurism – even though Marinetti had explicitly argued for the necessity of destroying the concept of art as early as 1912.[8] Dada and Surrealism, needless to say, nurtured political commitments more in tune with those of the historical left. Likewise, although the response to popular culture is Huyssen's touchstone for distinguishing modernism from the avant-garde, he offers no discussion of Marinetti's famous attempt to transform the music hall into a resource for the production of a new anti-art, nor does he treat the ambivalent outcome of the project, discernible already in 1914, when Marinetti performed at what was then the largest music hall in the world, only to be roundly jeered.[9]

In conformity with the opposition paradigm that informs the work of Bürger and Huyssen is a narrative that increasingly structures current accounts of modernism, reappearing especially in accounts of its relation to postmodernism. One sees its spell at work when Huyssen discusses

[8] See, for example, 'The Technical Manifesto of Futurism', originally published in May 1912, in R. W. Flint, ed., *Let's Murder the Moonshine: Selected Writings of F. T. Marinetti* (1971; rpt. Los Angeles, 1993), pp. 92–7.

[9] See Lawrence Rainey, 'The Creation of the Avant-Garde: F. T. Marinetti and Ezra Pound', *Modernism/Modernity*, 1 (September 1994), pp. 195–219.

modernism's decline in prestige and remarks that 'the administered culture of late capitalism' has 'finally succeeded in imposing the phony spell of commodity fetishism even on that art which more than any other had challenged the values and traditions of bourgeois culture'.[10] In a similar vein, it is urged that the twentieth century has witnessed two distinct revolutions in the field of culture, the first, a 'real' revolution, in which artistic activity was urgently politicised and innovation swept through all the arts, the second an equally important if less noted revolution in which universities and other institutions appropriated modernism's formal repertory, canonised its works and artists, and sapped its political energies.[11] Such accounts rehearse a fall narrative, in which an Edenic state of subversive energy imperceptibly yields to appropriation, assimilation, and containment by 'late capitalism' or its cultural instrument, academic criticism. In doing so, they merely re-articulate a variant of the concept of aesthetic autonomy which the modernists or avant-gardists are held to have destroyed, reinscribing the divorce between art and social reality that was already presupposed in the notion of aesthetic disinterestedness – but reinscribing it in the moralistic assumption that aesthetic virtue and commerce are antithetical. That assumption, in turn, rests upon a conception of the arts that has been distilled of material complexity and bears no relation to the realities of cultural production within complex, modern societies. The case of 'The Waste Land' should warn us against oversimplifications of this sort. During the course of discussions in 1922 about where to publish the poem, Eliot gave equal consideration to expressions of interest from three different journals: *The Little Review* (often deemed 'avant-garde', circulation 2,500), *The Dial* (usually considered 'modernist', circulation 9,000), and *Vanity Fair* (generally considered a 'commercial' publication, circulation 92,000). During the same period, all three journals were not only competing for 'The Waste Land', but were publishing new works by the same artists, among them Brancusi, Wyndham Lewis, and Ossip Zadkine.[12] Such competition suggests that there is little ground for sustaining a programmatic distinction between the avant-garde and modernism. The avant-garde was not located outside of or against the institution of modernism, but was firmly situated within it – just as the institution of modernism was not poised wholly outside or against the changing economy of the new consumerist and professionalist society which surrounded it, but was engaged in a more complex and ambiguous dialogue with it.

[10] Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, p. 160.
[11] See, for example, Charles Newman, *The Post-Modern Aura* (Evanston, Ill., 1985), pp. 27–35.
[12] Lawrence Rainey, 'The Price of Modernism: Publishing *The Waste Land*', in Ronald Bush, ed., *T. S. Eliot: The Modernist in History* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 90–133.

In this volume, therefore, modernism and the avant-garde are not treated as antithetical projects, but as interchangeable terms for overlapping institutions located firmly within the changing society of which they form a part. Without minimising modernism's radical reformulation of the formal repertory of the arts, and while acknowledging that many modernist writers repeatedly focused on common themes – the interaction of 'art' and 'life', the spread of mass culture, or issues such as gender, nationality, primitivism, technology, or the boundaries of subjectivity – we have tended to view modernism less in strictly formal or ideological terms and more as a social reality which was in continuous transformation, a complex reality which is effectively erased by ascribing to it a monolithic nature or essence that works to conceal, rather than analyse, the contradictions that stood at the heart of the modernist project. Modernism is not a subject which can be adequately treated by listing its loyalties, rehearsing its dogmas, or cataloging its formal devices. It is the outcome of a complex situation from which it can scarcely be disengaged; it is above all an overlapping set of institutions, a confirmation of agents and practices that coalesced in the production, marketing, and publicisation of an idiom, an identifiable language that was both shared and shareable, a serviceable tongue within the family of twentieth-century languages.

The key figure in the conventional assimilation of modernism and the New Criticism is T. S. Eliot, and the viability of this assimilation is a function of the complex of roles associated with him: the parts that Eliot himself wished to assume, the roles his contemporaries assigned him, and the roles in which he has been cast by subsequent critics. All these were, in reality, extremely fluid, and changed a great deal over the course of several decades. There was the inventive body of criticism that Eliot wrote between 1917 and 1924; the ways in which it was worked up into a corpus of acceptable interpretive techniques by I. A. Richards, among others, in the years immediately following; the brilliant exercise of those techniques by Richards's student William Empson; the renegade variant of Cambridge English established by F. R. Leavis and the group surrounding *Scrutiny* in the 1930s and 1940s; the way these various influences fed into the work of the American New Critics, such as Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren, a group with its own distinctive intellectual roots in the American South; and the gradual establishment of the New Criticism as a powerful critical orthodoxy within American universities, a development epitomised by Brooks's move from Louisiana State University to Yale in 1947. The rest, as they say, is history: the dominance and the increasingly ossified formalism of the Yale school as represented by W. K. Wimsatt (*The Verbal Icon* was published in 1954), and the assimilation of New Criticism to Continental

structuralism, Saussurean linguistics, and phenomenology in the work of René Wellek, whose multi-volume *History of Modern Criticism* began appearing in 1955. The figure of Eliot as tutelary spirit hovered over the work of nearly all these figures, invoked to support any and (nearly) every viewpoint.

Yet in many ways the cultural prominence Eliot acquired, his peculiar role as a totemic figure whose prestige could be invoked to justify any number of views, may have skewed our understanding of modernism and its relations to the New Criticism. As a poet, Eliot represented an extremely limited segment of the spectrum of literary practices encompassed by modernism: his style adhered more closely to the aesthetics of symbolism than that of almost any other modernist, including Pound, Joyce, Stein, Lewis, and Moore. And his neoclassicism stemmed from a commitment to tradition and traditionalism far deeper, and far more radical, than anything adopted by most of his contemporaries. Pound's reckless embrace of fascism, Joyce's heady descent into the night-world of language, Stein's insistent pursuit of pure sound – these were alien to Eliot's temperament. They also, for the most part, stood outside the circle of his admirers' interests. One can read the entire corpus of major works by the principal New Critics and find not a single extended discussion of James Joyce. When Joyce became an object of interest for Anglo-American scholars, it was through the advocacy of critics firmly outside or opposed to the New Criticism – such as Harry Levin and Hugh Kenner, to cite only the most prominent examples. As for Gertrude Stein or Wyndham Lewis, a reading of the principal New Critics might leave one in doubt that they had ever lived.

But the New Criticism was, in America, the movement that successfully introduced literary criticism – the interpretation and evaluation of literary texts – into the university; and for all the limitations of its scope and ultimate influence as a doctrine of poetry, it established a pattern of institutional adjustment and legitimation which has been imitated by every critical movement since. This means that a history of modernism and the New Criticism is inevitably a history of the rise of the modern university as well.

The comparative history of the university reveals how intimately its morphology is bound up with the different histories of different nation-states. Generalisations useful for understanding German academic practice are not transferable to British universities or French universities. The American university is instructive in our context, though, because its roots are shallower, and its transformation, from the smaller liberal arts college to the large research institution, is consequently chronologically and philosophically stark. Understanding how literary criticism adapted itself to the new scholarly system in America – or the new scholarly system

adapted itself to an activity such as criticism – is a way of understanding many of the changes internal to the history of literary criticism that are traced in the separate chapters in this volume.

The American research university was a creation of the late nineteenth century. It accompanied, and was itself a product of, the social phenomenon of the professionalisation of occupation. The modern professions – medicine, engineering, architecture, the law, and many others – first took the form they have today in the second half of the nineteenth century, when 'qualifying associations' and other accrediting agencies came into being to help distinguish certified practitioners from amateurs, dilettantes, and other unqualified types. The rise of professionalism was a response to the increasing complexity of advanced capitalist economies and the increasing volume of available knowledge in an age of science – developments that created a need for a range of workers expert in a range of specialised fields. The university constituted a response to this development in two senses. First, it operated as one kind of certifying institution, by training and conferring degrees upon future members of the professions. And secondly, it professionalised knowledge, organising its specialists by discipline – that is, by academic department – and assuming a virtual monopoly over the business of producing scholars.[13]

A field of knowledge in this new university system faced two requirements: it must constitute an independent area of study, with a clearly delineated subject matter and methodology; and it must be able to present itself as a sufficiently 'hard' discipline – that is, as an area of study in which measurable advances, on the model of the natural sciences, could be made, since the research university is specifically designed to facilitate and reward the production of new knowledge. Literary criticism, defined as the evaluation and appreciation of works of literature, has a hard time qualifying as an academic discipline under these criteria, and the campaign in the American university to establish criticism as a legitimate academic activity (as distinct from literary history, textual studies, and other clearly scholarly pursuits) was a long one, not fully successful until the 1940s.[14] So that a university-based person with a critical interest in literature during the first half of this century confronted a challenge that has no precedent in the history of talk about writing: he or she needed to conceive of the criticism of literature as an autonomous discipline with

[13] See Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America:* (New York, 1976), Bruce A. Kimball, *The 'True Professional Ideal' in America: A History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), Magali Sarfatti Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis* (Berkeley, 1977), and Laurence Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago, 1965).

[14] The story is told by Wallace Martin, in this volume; see also Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago, 1987).

some claim to contributing to the accumulation and progress of knowledge.

It is easy enough to see, therefore, why Eliot's literary criticism, suitably interpreted, held a particular appeal for young academics, such as Richards, Empson, Leavis, and F. O. Matthiessen, and to young critics who would eventually be drawn into the academy, such as R. P. Blackmur and the American New Critics. For Eliot's criticism was ostensibly formalist, insisting on the recognition of literature as an object of study on its own terms; it was anti-impressionistic and almost scientific-sounding; it had the look of being theoretical rather than journalistic or belletristic. 'Image' connotes impression; 'objective correlative', though it is, at root, the same concept, sounds theoretical and analytical. Eliot's criticism seemed a deliberate departure from the sort of appreciatory criticism the turn-of-the-century man and woman of letters produced, and thus an ideal model for an academic literary criticism. It had rigour.

But although a professionalising economy and an intellectual culture obsessed with the promise of pure science pushed the university toward a research mission and a vocational mission in the decades around the turn of the century, there was also, thanks to the growing numbers of college students, a non-utilitarian demand on the academy. Introduced to the world of the arts, greater and greater numbers of people began to look to experts to help them discriminate among the products available. Consider the title of a book published in 1871 by Noah Porter: *Books and Reading: Or, What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them?* The title may strike us as the literary equivalent of a blunt instrument; but the year the book appeared, its author was made president of Yale. Charles William Eliot's 'Five-Foot Book-Shelf', the Harvard Classics, was addressed to the same need. Having created a new intellectual class of accredited scholarly experts, the American university was in a position to provide cultural guidance. The obvious question was, Why not integrate the introduction to an appreciation of culture into the vocational training provided by the modern college? And there occurred, in the first decade of the twentieth century, a reaction in America on behalf of 'liberal culture' against the professionalisation of scholarship and the utilitarian approach to education that characterised the early research universities – a reaction that led, among other things, to Charles William Eliot's replacement as president of Harvard in 1910 by A. Lawrence Lowell.

The modern university thus has a dual function: it trains, but it also liberalises. And the liberalising function provided an obvious point of entry for literary criticism into the academic world – as Leavis, for instance, would argue persistently in England (often to visiting American ears), and as Richards would argue throughout his career, first at Cambridge and later at Harvard, where he helped to write the famous 'Red