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## Collecting to the Core -- Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

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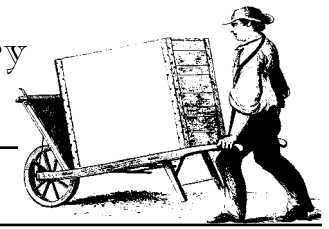
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# Collecting to the Core — Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism



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**Column Editor's Note:** The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at: <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject specialists will introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

It is somewhat difficult, from the perspective of current college curricula and library collections, to keep firmly in view the foreshortened history of modern literary criticism. There have been, since classical antiquity, writers engaged in the systematic consideration of the nature and quality of literary writing. But what we generally understand as the undergraduate curriculum in literary studies is itself a 20th century invention and goes hand-in-hand with the development of particular ways of reading, studying, and teaching literature in its various genres: novels, stories, poetry, and drama. Retrospective views of literary criticism are further complicated by the proliferation in the 1970s and 1980s, and the trenchment in the early 1990s, of literary theory as the dominant mode of criticism within the academy. The dominance of theoretical criticism since the 1980s has tended to obscure an earlier phase of modern criticism, the New Criticism, which arose in the 1930s and supplanted both the philological approach of the 19th century and the bibliographic, literary-historical, and biographical modes which dominated early 20th century study.

The New Criticism flourished partially because it was an extremely effective pedagogical method, requiring of literature students neither extensive historical knowledge nor an elaborate theoretical understanding of literary function. Instead, the New Critical method aimed at the close reading of particular literary works as autonomous, self-sufficient aesthetic formations, in which meaning inheres and from which it can be extracted by careful, critical reading, alert to patterns of symbolism and word choice. The thoroughness with which later, more theoretical, critical methods have supplanted the New Criticism is more than simply the end result of shifting academic fashion, as has sometimes been charged by an older generation of academics. The successive waves of structuralist, poststructuralist, feminist, cultural-materialist, semiotic, New Historicist, postmodern, ecocritical, and psychoanalytic criticisms have since the 1970s reshaped standards of scholarship, undergraduate curricula,

departmental rosters, and importantly, the academy's understanding of what literature is and what it means to read it. These critical methods explicitly align themselves with other disciplines or subdisciplines, drawing strength and structure from entire swaths of philosophy, political theory, sociology, history, or gender studies. While this has sometimes lead to a formulaic imposition of conceptual frameworks on various literary works under consideration, it much more often has had the energizing effect of requiring literary interpretation both to explicitly consider the terms under which it makes judgments and to own up to the extent to which literature functions within the world, rather than merely on the page or in the mind of the reader.

Nevertheless, the near-complete superseding of the New Criticism both in the undergraduate classroom and in the pages of scholarly journals poses a dilemma for library collections: to what extent, and for what reasons, should works of literary criticism that are no longer frequently referenced remain part of a core collection? An examination of two such works, once near universally revered but now either "classics" or simply passé, may help answer this question.

The 1925 publication of **I. A. Richards'** *Principles of Literary Criticism* is often identified as a significant milestone in the development of modern criticism, as well as the founding work of what would later come to be regarded as the New Criticism. In it, **Richards'** explicit purpose is to correct what he sees as the failure of critical endeavors since **Aristotle**: "The central question, What is the value of the arts, why are they worth the devotion of keenest hours of the best minds, and what is their place in the system of human endeavors? is left almost untouched."<sup>1</sup> In a series of brief, intense chapters, **Richards** proceeds to address literary structures, the psychological functions necessary for the scholar of literature, and theories of value which would allow a reader to rank some works as better, more important, or more literary than others. Poems (and it is largely poetry that he addresses, though side excursions are made to consider the visual arts) can be read critically, in large part because a common human psychology is engaged in reading them. The ability to say something meaningful and empirically verifiable about the reading mind is one of the main charges of **Richards'** work and the foundation for judgments about the relative worth of individual works of criticism (as in one of the work's most famous chapters, "Badness in Poetry"). *Principles of Literary Criticism* remains relevant as more than merely a milestone in the history of criticism largely on the basis of **Richards'**

stringent, probing, and disciplined attempts to clearly formulate an explicit basis for critical judgment, enabling the endeavor to rise above the level of mere opinion.

At the further end of the New Critical spectrum from **Richards** stands **Cleanth Brooks'** magisterial book *The Well Wrought Urn*, a staple of undergraduate English courses for at least three generations after its publication in 1947.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to **Richards'** careful elucidation of the theoretical grounds for literary judgment, **Brooks'** work is a renowned example of New Criticism in action. In ten chapters, **Brooks** explicates and interprets canonical poetic works by **Donne**, **Shakespeare**, **Milton**, **Pope**, **Wordsworth**, **Keats**, **Tennyson**, **Yeats**, **Thomas Gray**, and **T. S. Eliot**. The importance of **Brooks'** work for contemporary students lies not so much in the interpretations he offers of the individual poems (though re-reading the work after more than twenty years provided some surprising illuminations), but in the execution. While the New Criticism is hardly the only critical method to rely upon close reading of the text, there is a particular style of close reading and an accompanying style of self-confidence in literary judgment embodied in *The Well Wrought Urn*, which is immediately recognizable to those who studied English as undergraduates between 1950 and 1990. In the course of examining the individual poems, **Brooks** launches two of the signal critical concepts for the following generation of critics: ambiguity and paradox.

There are, I would argue, three possible rationales for including works of literary criticism in a core undergraduate collection. Though no longer applicable to **Richards** or **Brooks**, one rationale posits a work in the collection that is widely used in the classroom or helps inform the assumptions and methods encountered there. Works such as these speak to the ways in which undergraduates are being taught to read, think about, and discuss texts. The second rationale is that a work deserves a place in an undergraduate collection because it is a monumentally important predecessor to the kinds of works covered by the first rationale. If we think of constantly changing critical methods as neither shifting fashions nor successive epistemic coups, but rather as slow, dialectical growth, then the question of devoting shelf space and budget to the acquisition and retention of works no longer frequently cited becomes more palatable. A subset of this justification might be selection on the basis of the *history* of literary criticism, an attempt to maintain a range of past critical work as examples of how literature was studied in the past. The final rationale for inclusion of a work of literary criticism, and

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# The Grass is Often Greener — Settling In



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In July of 2010, after a period of unemployment occasioned by the corporate buyout of my former employer, I had the good fortune to be hired by a college library untroubled by my unconventional resume and imaginative enough to see the advantages of bringing a former sales rep into academia. After nearly thirty years as a commercial traveler for three different book vendors, I had learned a thing or two about the industry and the folks who inhabit it, and I was about to use that experience in the service of **The College of New Jersey**.

My plan in this series of articles is to reflect on my transition from an itinerant peddler to a stationary buyer, hoping to inform and even reassure others contemplating a move either to or from the commercial sector.

## Settling In

My arrival at **TCNJ** was a bittersweet time for the acquisitions staff. My predecessor, **Marilyn Apelian**, fondly known to many readers of *ATG* as a regular attendee at the **Charleston Conference**, had been absent on a long medical leave. When **Marilyn's** illness ultimately proved fatal, there followed the usual bureaucratic wait to determine if (would there be an exception to the hiring freeze?), then how (should the head of acquisitions be a faculty-status librarian?), and then by whom (the extended search) the position should be filled. The upshot was a department in stasis for nearly two years, struggling mightily to keep up with their workload but without the time or experience to introduce newer technologies or workflows.

I took my place at **TCNJ** much to the relief of a harried staff who have been uniformly welcoming, helpful, and open to new ideas. I am particularly grateful to **Ann Wittik**, our acquisitions supervisor, for holding the department together under very difficult circumstances and for her patience and wisdom in my first few months.

## The First Project

Coming from the world of monographs, I was interested early on in reviewing how **TCNJ** did book buying. The **TCNJ** library is a **Voyager** shop and had begun to take advantage of the features of its acquisitions module. The acquisitions department was importing **OCLC** records to pass on to cataloging and beginning to use **EDI** to transmit orders and receive invoices from some vendors. But they were still relying on **3x5** cards to track

orders from the selectors. I saw what I thought would be an easy target: eliminate the **3x5** cards by taking advantage of systems offered by our vendors and streamline our workflow by shifting manual processes to automated ones. Thus began my first lesson in library land.

In a way, the fundamental work of a vendor rep or an acquisitions librarian is quite similar: we solve problems. In sales, though, the problems are sometimes hyped or even manufactured. We've all seen bloated or overly complicated solutions being marketed to remedy minor inconveniences. Incremental improvements in library processes are regularly heralded as revolutionary and indispensable. Sales often relies on the grand generality, the vague reassurance that all will work out fine once the deal is done. Details are relegated to customer support, those great, unsung heroes of any successful enterprise.

In acquisitions, it seems the opposite is true. We are blinded to potential advancements by entrenched habits and comfortable workflows. Problems may exist we barely recognize. Sometimes it takes a fresh set of eyes. As a new acquisitions librarian, I saw that we really didn't need to manually key in orders, that we could order from our book vendor's web site, that the vendor could send us order confirmation records which we could load into our system. But it wasn't enough to assert that I could help to make all of these things happen, and it wasn't as easy as the sales folk would have you believe. The devil was, indeed, in the details.

My first challenge was getting the confirmation records to load correctly into **Voyager**. Note the operative word "correctly." With the help of our extremely patient systems librarian who was the local **Voyager** administrator, we were able to get the records to load in fairly short order. Now, I had heard the term "bulk loader," but had not entirely grasped its significance. Our systems librarian had not encountered the process before and, eager to gratify the brash new acquisitions librarian, assumed that all record loads are created equal. The problem was, we were loading order confirmation records into the cataloging module. This did not please the catalogers.

Bruised, but undaunted, I set about digging through manuals (not something a brash new acquisitions librarian, particularly a male one, does eagerly) and took to shamelessly imposing

upon various friends and contacts within the industry (something *this* brash new acquisitions librarian does do eagerly). I learned the correct loading process. When this finally worked as promised, I was elated. But this wasn't the entire solution.

Since we are not a research library and most of our book buying is of newer imprints, it occurred to me that some of our obsessive, pre-order duplicate checking was, shall we say, inefficient. I wanted to adjust our workflows accordingly, but also wanted to be fully confident of our systems. In the course of the aforementioned manual reading (ugh!), I discovered that our vendor's Website offered openURL linking to our catalog. This would enable us to directly confirm whether or not we held a title offered on the vendor's site. "Aha!" I thought, "Let's set this up."

Here beginneth the second lesson: Unless one explains one's needs very clearly to systems people in language replete with their arcane jargon, one must be prepared to ask the same question multiple times. It took me a few weeks to make myself understood by our link resolver service, and the results are still not exactly what I'd prefer, but, as someone once said, "Good enough is usually good enough."

The third lesson I learned in this process was perhaps the most important. It's also something I should have already learned: Don't be too quick to make assumptions. I assumed that the duplicate checking function I was setting up was a two-part operation. We would check our holdings and we would check our open orders. I didn't realize that in **Voyager** the **035** field would be retained and used as a key part of duplicate checking. I was making things harder than they needed to be.

My work isn't done yet in this project, but the major hurdles have been overcome. There are still areas of monographic acquisitions that are not amenable to the processes I am putting in place (subsequent editions, for example, are problematic), but I can see things getting wrapped up. **Ann** and I will need to write up some procedures and the upcoming addition of a notification plan will, no doubt, bring some complications. Still, it feels good to have one success under my belt and to have the satisfaction of both learning and teaching a new trick.

Next time: the notification plan and thinking about eBooks. Stay tuned. 🐼

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the one which seems best suited to **Brooks** and **Richards**, is precisely that it is *not* crucial to current critical discourse. It is likely that a majority of contemporary works of criticism will be viewed as dated, no longer relevant, or passé within a few years. This in no way means libraries should avoid collecting such works, which remain crucial to scholarly work and more indirectly to undergraduate teaching, but librarians should have a clear view about

the overturn of contemporary criticism. Works such as *Principles of Literary Criticism* or *The Well Wrought Urn* are important not merely because of the weight they bear within the history of modern literary study, nor because they serve as exceptional examples of how critics once worked, but despite those facts. Having survived the winnowing effects of relentless disciplinary change, they represent something of the distilled insight of the New Critics and thus can, and should, be retained in the college library collection on their own merits, rather than the degree to which they conform to current critical opinion. 🐼

## Endnotes

1. **Richards, I. A.** *Principles of Literary Criticism*. 1925. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Javonovitch, 1985. \*
2. **Brooks, Cleanth.** *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. 1947. New York: Mariner, 1956. \*

\*Editor's note: An asterisk (\*) denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries*.