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Collecting to the Core -- Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Marcus Elmore
Resources for College Libraries, marcusp02@gmail.com

Anne Doherty
CHOICE / ACRL, adoherty@ala-choice.org

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Collecting to the Core
twentieth-century
literary criticism

by Marcus Elmore (Librarian, US EPA Region 8 Technical Library; General Language and Literature Subject Editor, Resources for College Libraries) <marcusp02@gmail.com>

Column Editor: Anne Doherty (Resources for College Libraries Project Editor, CHOICE/ACRL) <adoherty@ala-choice.org>

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 modern period is more than simply the proliferation in the 1970s and 1980s, and the entrenchment in the early 1990s, of literary theory as the dominant mode of 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 teaching of specific 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 Historicism, 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 swathes of philosophy, political theory, sociology, history, or gender studies. While this has sometimes lead to a formulative 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.” 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. In contrast to Richards’ careful elucidation of the theoretical underpinnings 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 establishes the grounds for literary judgment, Brooks’ 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...
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 staff member, and open to new ideas. I am particularly reassured 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-union 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 orders and receive invoices from some vendors. 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.

Brused, but undaunted, I set about digging through manuals (not something a brash new acquisitions librarian, particularly a male one, would do 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. 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.