English: Journal of the English Association, 2018, vol. 0 no. 0, pp. 1–4

BOOK REVIEW

Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History. By Joseph North. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017. ISBN 9780674967731. 272 pages. Hb. £31.95.

Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History is a short polemic that aims to overturn everything you thought you knew about the history of academic literary studies and the state of the discipline today. Joseph North begins his story, conventionally enough, with I. A. Richards and the invention of close reading in the 1920s. From Richards onwards, North tells us, literary studies was animated by the tension between 'scholars', for whom 'works of literature are chiefly of interest as diagnostic instruments for determining the state of the cultures in which they were written or read' (p. 1), and 'critics', for whom literature is an instrument 'for the cultivation of aesthetic sensibility, with the goal of more general cultural and political change' (p. 3). But in or around 1980, the scholars won, giving way to what North calls 'the historicist/contextualist paradigm' (p. 1), in which 'half of the discipline' – the critical half – 'is all but gone' (p. 2). Since the 1980s, literary studies has produced ever more sophisticated analyses of culture, whilst retreating entirely from the ambition to transform it. Thus, the rise of contextualized analysis, attentive to particularities of gender, sexuality, race, and culture, though it 'has generally been understood as a local victory for the left over the elitisms of mid-century criticism', was in fact 'a small part of the more general victory of the right' (p. 3). In this sense, the 'political' of the book's title is a deliberate provocation to the 'scholars', who mistake politicized analysis for political intervention.

North advances this decidedly unorthodox and provocative account with a great deal of wit, nuance, and verve; with every twist and turn in its narrative, *Literary Criticism* presents startlingly new insights. Perhaps the most intriguing is the reassessment of the New Critical reception of Richards. North suggests, rightly I think, that Richards's experiment of presenting his Cambridge undergraduates with poems to be analyzed without reference to the author or period of composition was not so much 'the opening salvo in the New Critical war on context' as 'an attempt to examine as precisely as possible the actual relationships existing between works of literature and their most important context: their readers' (p. 32). But where Richards was at

pains to emphasize, contra Kant, that reading literature was not divorced from other modalities of experience (most obviously morality and desire), the New Critics reinstated the Kantian insistence on the disinterestedness of aesthetic experience. For North, the conflation of the projects of Richards and the New Critics in contemporary disciplinary understanding has had the drastic effect of placing the possibility of recovering what he calls 'a genuinely critical relationship to the literary' (p. 170) further out of reach.

As its subtitle suggests, this is a surprisingly slim book. Distilling its essential arguments into less than 300 pages gives the polemic a lean muscularity and pleasing punch, but it also involves no small amount of risk. Methodologically, *Literary Criticism* eschews the tedious listing of critics in favour of focusing on one or two specific figures by which 'to take the temperature of the broader tendencies' of a field (p. 128). The danger of this strategy is that any doubts about a characterization of a single critic threaten to undermine the very large claims that North is attempting to prosecute. To take a salient example, Cleanth Brooks is made to bear much of the burden of the New Criticism, and his role in North's account is to exemplify the exclusion of the reader as a critical consideration. Yet, in his magnum opus, *The Well Wrought Urn*, Brooks says things like: 'The last stanza evokes an intense emotional response from the reader'.[1] Conversely, the 'lost critical paradigm' (p. 194) of the 1920s really seems to be just Richards (even William Empson does not get much of a look in).

Quibbles of this kind raise more serious doubts about the degree to which a 'paradigm' usefully describes the field of literary studies as a whole. Anecdotally, in the half-dozen departments of literature in which I have studied and taught, historicist/contextualist approaches are certainly dominant, but hardly characterize all or even most of the work being carried out there. North's reluctance to name critical allies – after Richards, only parts of D. A. Miller's *Jane Austen and the Secrets of Style* are described approvingly – is part of a wider absence of a positive vision of a critical future. As Bruce Robbins points out, when reading *Literary Criticism*, 'it's considerably easier to see what criticism is not than what it is'.[2] This reticence is all the more surprising given that North castigates Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick for her 'refusal of method' (p. 168).[3] The book would have benefited from a more detailed

[1] Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*, revised edn (London: Dobson, 1968) [1947], p. 159.

[2] Bruce Robbins, 'Discipline and Parse: The Politics of Close Reading', review of *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History*, by Joseph North, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, (2017). https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/discipline-and-parse-the-politics-of-close-reading/ [accessed 11 January 2018].

[3] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (London: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123–51.

account of 'criticism' that demonstrated the sensibility-cultivating potential North claims for it. As with all critics who make large claims for the political or ethical efficacy of close reading, one wonders: if the goal is political intervention, is literary criticism really the best way of going about it?

These slight criticisms reflect the great value of North's book – its provocation to rethink and reassess widely held ideas about literary studies in the present and recent past. Despite my doubts about the extent to which paradigms describe the work being carried out by most critics, North's description of the discipline as operating within a contextualist/historicist paradigm is resoundingly convincing, as is his claim that the most apparently political critics seem to have retreated from any ambition to intervene in culture rather than only analyze it. *Literary Criticism* is one of those few books that have the potential to change how a discipline thinks and talks about its everyday praxis. It deserves the very widest readership.

doi:10.1093/english/efy017 DOUG BATTERSBY

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Doug Battersby has recently completed a PhD in English Literature at the University of York, writing his dissertation on the relationships between knowing and feeling in late modernist fiction. He has previously published on Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, Samuel Beckett, John Banville, and Ian McGuire.