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# NEW ENGLAND BEYOND CRITICISM

*In Defense of America's First Literature*

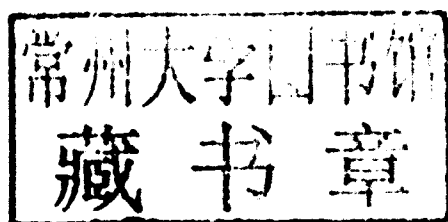
Elisa New

WILEY Blackwell

# New England Beyond Criticism

*In Defense of America's  
First Literature*

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## **Praise for *New England Beyond Criticism***

"Elisa New is a refreshing voice among critics and historians of literature. She has a keen sense of the nature of New England and its deep spiritual resources, reaching back to the Puritans, moving through the great nineteenth-century expressions of interior landscapes and visions. Her readings strike me as passionate, original, and very much at odds with a good deal that is now being said in academic circles. To say she is eccentric means, quite literally, that she stands outside of the center. In this, she seems in keeping with her Puritan fathers and mothers, those dark visionaries who gave birth to Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, Dickinson, and others. This is a book I welcome and celebrate."

*Jay Parini, Middlebury College*

"Elisa New's book is a remarkable achievement. It is very rare that a critic manages to ask what seem exactly the right questions, then to answer them in a lively, brilliant, evocative, and supremely intelligent prose. New recognizes the force of criticism's critiques of traditional claims for the importance of New England writing in the shaping of America's images of itself. But she also recognizes how criticism tends to be limited by its academic protocols, so it cannot fully address the urgency of this writing to appeal to the full human being, hungry for meaning and idealization and passion challenged continually by that social reality on which the critics concentrate. New develops a critical stance fully responsive to what she calls the texts' 'powers' as they seek to come to terms with demands for conversion, challenges to imagine how people produce values, and the constant worry that these very ambitions may lead imaginations to cross borders where terror seems the dominant affective register."

*Charles E. Altieri, University of California*

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<i>New England Beyond Criticism</i>	Elisa New

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Most of the insights in this book originated in the classroom. One’s best teachers, and critics, are always the students one teaches – or teaches with. Animated discussion – or stony stares – these must be critics’ best guide to validity in interpretation. The list of those whose insights, sometimes years and years old, continue to detonate or evolve in my mind is very long. But it must include Gina Bloom, Jeremy Sigler, Jim Dawes, Jennifer Jordan Baker, Mike Magee, Bernie Rhie, Hester Blum, Dan Chiasson, Katie Petersen, Odile Harter, DeSales Harr, Jim von der Heydt, Emily Ogden, Erica Levy, Adam Zalisk, Andrew Goldstone, Adam Scheffler, John Radway, Ingrid Nelson, Martin Greenup, Sharon Howell, Andrew DuBois, Lauren Brozovich, Dave Weimer, Kaye Wierzbicki, Maggie Doherty, Cara Glatt, Leah Reis-Dennis and Orli Levine.

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Finally, a different sort of thanks must go to my husband, Larry Summers, for first inviting me to visit, and then inviting me to share with him, James Russell Lowell's – the Harvard President's – house, Elmwood. As I describe in my Epilogue, living at Elmwood and with Larry changed my whole literary disposition; changed the way I see the meaning of what we do as teacher and scholar. No matter where our adventures take us, Larry and I will always share our very own Harvard, along with everything else.



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# Introduction

## *New England Beyond Criticism*

Once, in the mid-twentieth century, children all over North America learned that a nation was born in Plymouth, Massachusetts. On bulletin boards outside classrooms across the continent, Pilgrims, cut out of black and white construction paper, were displayed to represent the purposeful beginnings of the nation. Orange and brown Indians stood by to assist the United States find its destiny. In the classrooms of secondary schools and institutions of higher learning, and in the public culture, the legacy of the doughty Pilgrims furnished the academic, and also the civic, curriculum for the nation. From New England, this curriculum taught, came America's founding rituals and folkways, its most enduring democratic practices, and its greatest, classic works of literary art.<sup>1</sup>

There are surely classrooms where this story is still being told. But the prestige of New England, in professional literary circles at least, has never been lower. Among the highest priorities of critics working in American literature in the second half of the twentieth century was the unseating of Protestant New England as the capital

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## *Introduction: New England Beyond Criticism*

of American literary culture. As late as the 1960s, it was still axiomatic that the origins of American culture were to be found in this one region, its area extending north and east of Boston to the Canadian border, west and south of Boston to the Connecticut Valley, a region whose civilizational outline was already distinct by the end of the seventeenth century. Never mind this region's size relative to the vastness of the eventual United States. With its twin epicenters at Harvard and Yale, its links to high culture and high office, its roster of Adamsses and Websters striding the national stage, this region of subcultures, frequently quite distinctive and frequently quite parochial – Separatist, Federalist, Abolitionist; Cantabridgean, Brahmin, WASP – somehow came to represent the quintessentially American.

But by the time a New England (San Francisco born) icon, Robert Frost, got up on a January day in 1961 to offer poetic tribute to the New England born (Catholic) President, this era was nearly over. Starting in the 1970s, and gathering force through the 1980s and 1990s, a rigorous and exciting revisionist scholarship began to expose the cultural processes and ideological interests by which Pilgrim grit was identified with the national Spirit, the Protestant mind with the national idea, and the New England classic with literary excellence. Distinguished critics joined forces to show how, through sermons, pedagogy, and print networks, through academic dynasties and intellectual oligarchies and self-reinforcing ideological formations, New England's primacy and representativeness were invented, established, and packaged for wide distribution.

Such scholars pointed out the obvious – that New England, an English outpost on a continent the French and Spanish had already explored, was not in any sense “first,” and so could not have struck the template for all American culture. The Americanness of New England literature was revealed as a fiction, a back formation, or, in the catchall phrase, an ideological construction. Indigenous peoples had long populated the “wilderness” which Spanish, French, and English settlers laid claim to, and those settlers were themselves proud subjects of European kingdoms. For its first one hundred and

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fifty years, New England was in every sense colonial: geographically removed, culturally in thrall. Early modern explorers might have found it expedient to call densely populated Indian lands “howling wilderness,” as, in subsequent decades, and then centuries, their descendants would find it similarly convenient to wrest national integrities, to claim national destinies, out of circumstances even more ambiguous. One simply had to overlook sea trade, slave trade, book trade, and sundry other transatlantic, trans-hemispheric, and transnational complications to claims of discrete and integral nationhood.

New England was always cagey about its associates (bankers in London; middlemen in Africa; sugar planters in the West Indies), self-conscious about its provincialities, insecure about its innovations, and, in the case of literature, deliberate when not outright desperate to show off its local product. Just as early “American” literature’s founding texts had been written by the King’s loyal subjects, written not only in the language but within the cultural orbit of Europe, so as late as seventy-five years after the Revolution many of the authors best known for establishing New England’s primacy – Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, Longfellow, Stowe – remained completely dependent on publishers and readers in London, Philadelphia, and New York. As New England mills relied on Southern cotton produced by African slaves, so the idea of New England’s literary primacy depended upon networks of European distribution and approbation, on transatlantic and also intra-American pirating and reprinting. The premium the Virginia-raised Edgar Allan Poe sought in claiming his first book of poems authored by “A Bostonian” was (as Poe shrewdly surmised) more hype than reality, but it certainly lent cachet.

The academic revisionists who expressed skepticism about New England as founding region were naturally also interested in how New England’s special prestige had been constructed; by whom, and to what ends. To be sure, to read the early literary histories of America, especially the criticism produced from the 1880s through World War I, is to encounter learnedness mingled quite noticeably with partisanship. A national literature commensurate with so great

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a nation had long been wanting, long sought and sometimes despaired of in the period between the 1790s and the 1890s. And so it was perhaps not that surprising that by the turn of the twentieth century the first Ivy League canon-makers would have been delighted to find the requisite materials so close at hand: the canon right outside their windows. But could it *really* have been the case, as Professor Barrett Wendell of Harvard intimated at the turn of the century, that virtually all of the nineteenth-century poets meriting attention should have had addresses along Brattle Street; that virtually all of the “major” writers of prose could have belonged to that cozy set that drank each other’s claret in Cambridge, dug each other’s gardens in Concord, and, when summer came, carried each other’s picnic baskets up Berkshire summits? Could it have really been, as the critics of the 1930s to the 1950s who founded American Studies as a branch of New England studies implied, that the most salient literary challenges to Massachusetts hegemony should have come from no further than Connecticut, from a set of Hartford and New Haven based “New Lights” (headquarters: Yale) whose major difference from Boston’s coastal, more liberal, Christians amounted to their yet fiercer determination to guard orthodoxy’s flame? Or that the rigorous clerical literature of frontier Deerfield and Stockbridge was actually more productive of the American spirit than the vigorous and virile writings of Virginia’s Tidewater? Could it really have been the case, later revisionists were justified in asking, that an entire national culture should have depended on the lucubrations of a few generations of Congregationalist ministers, Edwards to Emerson, Mather to Niebuhr, their ranks filled out by ministerial womenfolk – Rowlandson, Phelps, Stowe? Not to forget, either, the way these women had, despite immense readerships, received short, and invariably patronizing, shrift. The romanticization and canonization of the homiletic writings of certain Massachusetts Bay, Narragansett, Stockbridge, and New Haven ministers, and then the critical partiality to writers of “lyric” and “romance,” all white men, effectively left out Rowlandson, Stowe and Warner, Child and Sedgwick, left out Wheatley, left out Du Bois, left out Occum; left out race

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and gender, class and caste; left out slavery and the women's "sphere" and the ubiquitous sway of capital.

Fair enough, then, for critics of the 1980s and 1990s to pursue the question of whether those professors who discovered the roots of American culture in New England had not been themselves somewhat blind to how parochial they were, how chauvinistic even, creating America's canon in their own, in their region's – and, of course, in their gender's – image. White, male, Protestant, and overwhelmingly holding posts in the Ivy League, these had enjoyed a bit too much, and written a bit too much about, the world in which they were ever so comfortably ensconced. The critics who heralded the development of the New England literary tradition as a "flowering," a "renaissance," who not only described – but embraced – the idea of New England's "errand" – evinced excessive confidence in their own labors – the professing of literature – and excessive willingness to use the curriculum to shape the very souls of their students. With agendas extending beyond the literary into the civic, they presumed to impose two-semester courses in New England writers, and they had intimated that those who took those courses would be better people, and Americans, for having heard the lectures. Regarding teaching as more than a profession, they had endeavored more than the fostering of aesthetic pleasure – but also less than the inculcation of critical thinking. They had presumed to try to change people, and to change them for good.

Even if one granted their benign motives, were not the methods deployed by these earlier champions of New England themselves part of the problem? Partial to organic unities and pat typologies (delighting in designs and patterns, ready to cut through historical difference in order to suture Pilgrim Fathers to Minute Men to the Greatest Generation) and, what's more, moving with disquieting facility between lectern, pulpit, and Washington DC, had not these canon-makers missed how even the most liberal and dissentient discourses are co-opted by power? Had they not failed to discern that the New England literature they extolled for its rare capacity to preserve ambiguity, complexity, and nuance was, in fact, readily

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co-opted, and that the premium they placed on spiritual, aesthetic, intellectual, formal, and moral excellence was itself exclusionary, pushing to the “margins” (as came to be said) discourses just as, or more, central and revelatory, if sometimes less refined? The very practice of close reading (its meticulous and time-consuming rhythms indispensable in the classroom) and the discipline of the History of Ideas (its largeness of scope and rhetorical sweep easily pasted verbatim into State of the Union addresses) were Ivory-Tower/Halls-of-Power practices – practices giving undue primacy to highly privileged forms of culture and eventuating in a national canon remarkably unrepresentative. This canon that had pushed other literatures to the margins, this tradition imposed on college students and school children, this region whose values so drowned out other values – if these had circumvented general criticism, literary criticism would put them in their place.

The title of this book, a provocation, is meant to raise the question of whether academic literary criticism can, or should, be left to play that role. Its subtitle – another provocation – is meant to authorize rereadings in the texts of New England fully alert to their claims of cultural priority, yet still open to their primary power. Claims to priority were, from the beginning, constitutive of this tradition fully invested in the text, the Word, as a sort of prime mover: in literature’s generative capacities. New England writing is committed to the charisma, the magnetism, and the force of print on a page, and it vests meaning in reading as a revelatory and inspiring experience. This is writing, moreover, that reserves a key cultural role for that literate interpreter (whether minister, essayist, novelist, poet, or professor) who opens the text to others, rehearsing and applying, animating and revitalizing its meaning. Whether they practice homiletics or metrics, write essays or historical narrative, or, even, criticism, these interpreters do not dissolve into or disappear behind the literature of New England: they often emerge as full-bodied artists of, and characters within, this canon they strove to establish. Thus it is that this book, *New England Beyond Criticism*, hails many a forgotten, superseded, or rejected critic along its way. Although these pages will adjure readers to risk a re-encounter with



the New England canon “beyond criticism,” it will also, by its last pages, have embraced a larger than usual number of critics not much read anymore, the out-of-print and out-of-favor interpreters of remoter periods of literary history. Living and dead, symbols of the passé mingling with stalwarts of the Modern Language Association (MLA) – the critics of New England will receive in these pages attention both critical and uncritical.

Now it is obvious that each scholarly generation brings its own, and its particular historical epoch’s, biases to what it reads. It is probably also true that the relatively accelerated history of America’s ascent among the cultures of the world lent urgency to the project of canon making, providing fertile conditions for ideological distortions. That the distortions of one period are rarely legible until the next is an argument for the value of vigorous review, for a scrupulous and empirical attitude to prior claims, for a criticism ready to vet and correct. Or so the disposition of our own epoch tells us – an epoch in which the experience of American literature is mediated by the protocols of university research and the exactions of literary scholars, rather than, say, by the tastes or enthusiasms of a large and engaged readership.

Our own biases are best exhibited in, and announced by, the rarely questioned prestige of the very term “critical” – an assurance of probity and care, though not one aspiring to impact, outreach or even accessibility. A fitting term for an ethos rigorous, restrained, and insular, the function of the “critical” is to ground reading, to preserve it from enthusiasms too flighty (aesthetic or pedagogical, institutional or political) and from apprehensions amateurish or personal. This grounding, just as it sounds, safeguards soundness. The prestige of the critical certainly does not require us to cauterize all the surplus feeling that literary texts might evoke (indeed, the classroom functions, for a great majority of literary scholars, as a space of joyful unrestraint, and sometimes a refuge from the strictures of their critical lives). But the latitudes permitted by pedagogy are deemed problematic in criticism – where the task is to delimit and incise, not amplify, the power of the literary text; to contextualize