

Guide to the William Kurtz Wimsatt Papers

MS 769



by Linda B. Billingsley

July 1977

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Collection Overview

REPOSITORY: Manuscripts and Archives
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CALL NUMBER: MS 769

CREATOR: Wimsatt, William K. (William Kurtz), 1907-1975

TITLE: William Kurtz Wimsatt papers

DATES: 1935-1975

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: 26.75 linear feet (64 boxes)

LANGUAGE: English

SUMMARY: The papers are entirely professional including a small amount of correspondence, teaching materials, unpublished speeches and writings, copies of his published works, subject files and notes. Wimsatt's teaching materials, which contain bibliographies, notes on his readings, and outlines for class presentations, make up more than half of the papers. Copies of almost all of Wimsatt's published work together with the related correspondence are also in the papers. His advocacy of the New Criticism and his prominent place in American literary criticism drew letters from Monroe C. Beardsley, Northrop Frye, Marshall McLuhan, I. A. Richards, Allen Tate and Renée Wellek. There are a few biographical items, his own student notes and papers, but no personal papers. His interest in Catholic affairs is represented by some miscellaneous correspondence and items in the subject files.

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Key to the container abbreviations used in the PDF finding aid:

b. box
f. folder

Administrative Information

Immediate Source of Acquisition

Gift of Mrs. William K. Wimsatt, 1976.

Conditions Governing Access

Wimsatt's correspondence to his parents is closed to research at the donor's request. The rest of the materials are open for research.

Conditions Governing Use

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Preferred Citation

William Kurtz Wimsatt Papers (MS 769). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

Biographical / Historical

William Kurtz Wimsatt, Jr., scholar, critic, and teacher of literature, was born on November 17, 1907, in Washington, D.C. From 1924 to 1929 he attended Georgetown University, where he earned his A.B., *summa cum laude* in 1928 and his M.A. in 1929. While studying at Georgetown Wimsatt contributed reviews, essays, poems, short stories, and translations to the *Georgetown College Journal*. He was on the staff from 1925 to 1928 and served as Managing Editor in 1928.

From 1929 to 1930 Wimsatt taught Latin at Gonzaga High School in Washington, D.C. From 1930 to 1935 he served as Head of the English Department at Portsmouth Priory School, Rhode Island, where he taught both English and Latin. In 1935 Wimsatt served as an assistant instructor in English at Catholic University of America while doing graduate work in Medieval Latin, Old French, French literature, and English literature.

Wimsatt continued his graduate education at Yale University, where he studied Old English, English literature, and bibliography. His poem, *Shapes from Dusk and Winter, I-XV*, won the Yale University Cook Prize for Poetry in 1938. He received his Ph.D. in 1939. His doctoral dissertation, *The Prose Style of Samuel Johnson*, was written under the direction of Frederick A. Pottle and Chauncey B. Tinker and later published as Volume 94 of *Yale Studies in English* (1941). It announced a life-long interest in prose style.

After graduation Wimsatt joined the Yale University English Department faculty as an instructor. In 1943 he advanced to assistant professor, in 1949 to associate professor, and in 1955 to full professor. In 1965 he became the first Frederick Clifford Ford Professor of English. In 1974 he was named Sterling Professor of English.

Wimsatt was active in many learned organizations. He served as Chairman of the English Institute (1954) and edited three volumes of Institute essays: *English Stage Comedy* (1965), *Explication as Criticism* (1963), and *Literary Criticism: Idea and Act* (1974). He served on the Executive Council of the Modern Language Association (1955-1958) and edited *Versification: Major Language Types: Sixteen Essays* (1972) for the Association. He was President of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences (1969-1970). He served on the College Section Committee of the National Council of Teachers of English and as Chairman of the Executive Committee for the Catholic Committee on Intellectual and Cultural Affairs. He was also involved with many scholarly journals and editions. He was a consultant to the Catholic Renaissance Society (publishers of *Renascence*), an advisor to the Yale Edition of the Private Papers of James Boswell, and a member of the Editorial Committee for the Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson; he also lent his name and support to less well-known publications, for example, *Style* and *Concerning Poetry*.

During his career Wimsatt received many honors. He held a Guggenheim Fellowship (1946-1947) and a Ford Foundation Fellowship from the Fund for the Advancement of Education (1953-1954). From Georgetown he received the John Carroll Award (1957) and the Alumni Association Educator's Testimonial. The National Council of Catholic Men cited him, along with three other men, for "intellectual excellence" (1963). In 1965 he was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He received honorary degrees from Villanova University (1962), the University of Notre Dame (1963), St. Louis University (1964), LeMoyne College (1965), and Kenyon College (1970). On his sixty-fifth birthday former students and colleagues published *Literary Theory and Structure: Essays in Honor of William K. Wimsatt* (1973).

Wimsatt was an eminent scholar of eighteenth-century English literature. After his dissertation on Johnson, he wrote two more books on eighteenth-century subjects: *Philosophic Words: A Study of Style and Meaning in the Preamble and Dictionary of Samuel Johnson* (1948) and *The Portraits of Alexander Pope* (1965). He edited *Alexander Pope: Selected Poetry & Prose* (1951) and *Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare* (1960). He co-edited *Boswell for the Defence, 1769-1774* (1959) with F. A. Pottle and *Samuel Johnson: Selected Poetry and Prose* (1977) with Frank Brady. In addition he wrote numerous articles on eighteenth-century subjects, such as "One Relation of Rhyme to Reason: Alexander Pope" (1941), "Rhetoric and Poems: The Example of Pope" (1949), "The Augustan Mode in English Poetry" (1953), "In Praise of *Rasselas*: Four Notes (Converging)" (1968), "Imitation as Freedom, 1717-1798" (1970), and "Belinda Ludens: Strife and Play in *The Rape of the Lock*" (1972).

Wimsatt wrote on a variety of subjects outside the eighteenth century. He produced several articles on Edgar Allan Poe, two on T.S. Eliot, and one on chess problems. His interest in prosody led him to collaborate with Monroe C. Beardsley on "The Concept of Meter: An Exercise in Abstraction" (1959). To answer the questions raised by their initial article they wrote: "On the Objectivity of Meter" (1962) and "Rhythm and 'Exercises in Abstraction'" (1962). Wimsatt further clarified his theory of prosody in "The Rule and the Norm: Halle and Keyser on Chaucer's Meter" (1970). Wimsatt's interest in comedy as a special problem for the literary theorist led him to edit *The Idea of Comedy: Essays in Prose and Verse: Ben Jonson to George Meredith* (1969).

Wimsatt's most important contribution to literary studies was in the area of theory. His contribution began with two polemical essays written in collaboration with M. C. Beardsley: "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946) and "The Affective Fallacy" (1949). He later collaborated with Cleanth Brooks to articulate the history of and theory behind the New Criticism in *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (1957). Wimsatt consistently argued for the art object as an organic whole and as the proper center of critical interest. He summarized and extended earlier theories of tension, irony, and metaphor in such essays as "The Structure of the 'Concrete Universal' in Literature" (1947), "The Substantive Level" (1951), and "Poetic Tension: A Summary" (1958). He expressed his theory of literature and the nature of criticism throughout his practical criticism, reviews, and debates with other critics (e.g., "The Chicago Critics" [1953], "Northrop Frye: Criticism as Myth" [1966], and "Battering the Object: The Ontological Approach" [1970]). René Wellek has written: "I would argue that Wimsatt will be remembered mainly as a theorist of literature. His work

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can be viewed as the culmination or summary of the New Criticism." His writings on the mimetic, moral, and religious aspects of language and literature (e.g., "In Search of Verbal Mimesis" [1976], "Poetry and Morals: A Relation Reargued" [1948], "Poetry and Christian Thinking" [1951], the Epilogue to *Literary Criticism: A Short History* [1957], and "Day of the Leopards" [1969] reflect his concern with and attempt

to define the relationship between literary and other kinds of experience. He collected some of his essays in three volumes: *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (1954), *Hateful Contraries: Studies in Literature and Criticism* (1965), and *Day of the Leopards: Essays in Defense of Poems* (1976). *The Verbal Icon* was especially important in popularizing the New Criticism.

Wimsatt died of a heart attack on December 17, 1975.

1. This information on Wimsatt's involvement with the *Journal* comes from an unpublished essay by Frank Mita. The essay, written for an undergraduate American Studies Seminar at Georgetown, discusses whether Wimsatt's college writings foreshadow his later critical writings. The essay also provides an interesting portrait of Georgetown in the 1920's. In a supplement to the essay Mita discusses a visit he had with Wimsatt in March, 1975. For a copy of the essay, supplement, and some correspondence, including a list of Wimsatt's contributions to the *Journal*, see: Series V, SUBJECT FILES, Frank Mita.

2. René Wellek, "The Literary Theory of William K. Wimsatt," *The Yale Review*, 64 (Winter, 1977), pp. 178-179. The article provides an excellent survey of Wimsatt's contribution as a literary theorist.

Scope and Contents

The William Kurtz Wimsatt Papers reflect Wimsatt's interests and contributions as a scholar and teacher from 1935 to 1975 and his involvement with the New Criticism. Wimsatt's student notes and essays, his students' essays, and his teaching notes make it possible to examine the impact of the New Criticism on pedagogical methods.

Correspondence is filed by subject throughout the collection. Most of the correspondence is incoming. Wimsatt usually wrote a note about his reply on the incoming letter itself, but there are few full drafts or copies of Wimsatt's outgoing correspondence. Except for a brief note about Wimsatt's "Comment on 'Two Essays in Criticism'" (1942), there is no important correspondence with Cleanth Brooks, nor is there any with Robert Penn Warren in the collection. There are many short, informative notes from René Wellek and several letters from Allen Tate, especially in his capacity as editor of *The Sewanee Review*. There are occasional notes from I. A. Richards, Marshall McLuhan, and Northrop Frye. There are also many notes, either asking for or acknowledging advice, from Wimsatt's former students. The collection contains a large body of correspondence from Monroe C. Beardsley. Wimsatt's and Beardsley's complete correspondence with and about Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, who objected to their article on "Intention" (for the *Dictionary of World Literature* [1943]), is of special interest, as is their later correspondence concerning prosody. The incoming correspondence in response to controversial articles, such as "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946), "The Chicago Critics" (1953), or "Northrop Frye: Criticism as Myth" (1966) is an index of contemporary critical attitudes and responses to the New Criticism. The collection also contains correspondence concerning specific research, for example, Wimsatt's extensive correspondence with Thomas O. Mabbott about Poe and with a variety of scholars on subjects such as Joyce's aesthetic theory, the relation between pleasure and pain, and the use of value terms in criticism. In Series II the largest body of correspondence is in *Theories of Poetry*, especially in the last quarter of this section. In other series the folder captions signal the presence of correspondence. The collection as a whole reflects the close relationship between Wimsatt's teaching and scholarship. It contains almost no biographical or personal information.

The papers are arranged in five series: Series I TEACHING MATERIALS; Series II STUDENT NOTES AND ESSAYS; Series III UNPUBLISHED SPEECHES AND WRITINGS; Series IV PUBLICATIONS; and Series V SUBJECT FILES.

Series I, TEACHING MATERIALS, contains extensive bibliographies and notes on primary and secondary materials, offprints of relevant articles (often with Wimsatt's annotations), and Wimsatt's class preparations (i.e., outlines, notes, and questions). Wimsatt frequently used his own student notes in teaching, thus most of his early notes on Chaucer, eighteenth-century English literature, bibliography, and literary theory, for example, can be found in this series. Since he used the working papers for his books in teaching, many notes and drafts for *Literary Criticism: A Short History* and his work on eighteenth-

century literature will be found here. Series I also contains essays, written by his students, which Wimsatt considered excellent or especially informative.

This series is divided into five sections: *Freshman English*; *Studies in Literary Form*; *Sophomore English and Representative English Authors*; *The Age of Johnson and English Poetry from Pope to Blake*; and *Theories of Poetry*.

Series II, STUDENT NOTES AND ESSAYS, contains all the essays that Wimsatt wrote and saved as a graduate student. The notes in this series concern either subjects which he had no occasion to teach or information which he did not find directly useful in preparing his own classes.

Series III, UNPUBLISHED SPEECHES AND WRITINGS, consists of speeches which Wimsatt did not revise for publication and some occasional writings. The following lectures may be of special interest: "The Religious Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins" (1934), "McCarthyism" (1954), and "Reminiscences of Portsmouth Priory" (1966). Lectures which formed the basis of later articles are filed with their respective articles in Series IV.

Series IV, PUBLICATIONS, contains offprints of almost all Wimsatt's published work. It includes some of his occasional writings, such as a chess anecdote for the *Silliman News* (1974). Several reviews of *The Yale Literary Magazine* (1940-1942, 1948) and comments on questions such as "Is Catholicism Anti-Democratic?" (1950) represent his contribution to *The Yale Daily News*. The file on each publication includes a list of people to whom Wimsatt sent copies. The correspondence about the New Criticism and rival critical attitudes is especially interesting. Wimsatt's "A Distinguished Professor: Reality into Art" (1966), a memoir of John J. Toohey, S.F., and examination of Wimsatt's undergraduate story about him, may have some biographical interest.

Series V, SUBJECT FILES, includes mainly routine correspondence and pictures of famous art works. This series contains some material of biographical interest: Frank Mita's correspondence with and essays on Wimsatt, Wimsatt's survey of his work (1945?) for his Guggenheim application, and a brief memoir of Gonzaga High School (to which a former student replied with a description of Wimsatt's arrival on the first day of class). In his responses to Frank Sheed's and J. M. O'Neill's questions about Catholic students in secular colleges, Wimsatt briefly described his own educational experience. The extensive correspondence concerning the English Institute may also be of some interest.

Arrangement

Arranged in five series: I. Teaching Materials. II. Student Notes and Essays. III. Unpublished Speeches and Writings. IV. Publications. V. Subject Files.

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b. 1, f. 5	Understanding poetry: assignments and notes re: terms used in discussions and individual poems
b. 1, f. 6	Meredith. <i>The Ordeal of Richard Feverel</i> : notes re: family relations and themes
b. 1, f. 7	Hawthorne. <i>The Scarlet Letter</i> : notes re: structure of novel, Puritanism as theme, relationships between characters, symbolism
b. 1, f. 8	Bronte. <i>Wuthering Heights</i> : notes re: chronology of story, narrator, use of nature imagery
b. 1, f. 9	<i>Short Stories for Study</i> : assignments, paper topics, bibliography and notes re: individual stories
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b. 27, f. 371	Second assignment, paper topics, bibliography and notes re: comedy of manners versus comedy of humours, mixed way (i.e., wit and humour), theory of humours, 18th century attitudes toward laughter, shift in focus from tragedy (i.e., Aristotle) to heroic play or poem (i.e., Dryden), definition of heroic play and its relationship to other dramatic forms (e.g., opera, masque, French classical drama and earlier English drama), Dryden's five heroic plays and <i>The Rehearsal</i>
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b. 30, f. 415	Poetic diction: bibliography and notes re: attitudes toward, definitions of and theories of clichés, relationship of clichés to periphrases, examples of how clichés can be used
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b. 42, f. 5	"The Religious Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins" (Catholic Teachers' Conclave): text and draft, undergraduate paper on Hopkins and clippings from conference English	1934 May 11
b. 42, f. 6	Prospectus for dissertation, <i>The Prose Style of Samuel Johnson</i> : text	[pre-1939]
b. 42, f. 7	"Wit" (intended for <i>Dictionary of World Literature</i>): text and notes English	[1943?]
b. 42, f. 8	Letter of the Editors of <i>Commonweal</i> re: Conway's review (1948 Apr 6) and comments on atheism and Christianity	1948 August 13
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b. 53, f. 160	Review of R. M. Schmitz, <i>Pope's "Windsor Forest"</i> , 1712	1953 July
b. 53, f. 161	Review of W. Shumaker, <i>Elements of Critical Theory</i> : correspondence and draft	1953 October
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b. 53, f. 165	Review of J. C. Ranson, ed., <i>The Kenyon Critics</i> : correspondence, notes and draft	1954 June
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b. 53, f. 169	"Croce and Art for Art's Sake": reply to J. C. Maxwell's objection: correspondence and notes English	1956 July
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b. 55, f. 208	Review of J. Thompson, <i>The Founding of English Meter</i> : correspondence and draft	1963 June
b. 55, f. 209	"The Bodleian Portrait of Alexander Pope" English	1963 July
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Subjects

Criticism
Educators
English drama -- History and criticism
English literature
Literature -- History and criticism
Poetry
Versification

Names

Beardsley, Monroe C.
Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. (Ananda Kentish),
1877-1947
Frye, Northrop, 1912-1991
Mabbott, Thomas Ollive, 1898-1968
Mita, Frank
O'Neill, James M. (James Milton), 1881-1970
Schorer, Mark, 1908-1977
Sheed, F. J. (Francis Joseph), 1897-1981
Tate, Allen, 1899-1979
Wellek, René, 1903-1995
Wimsatt, William K. (William Kurtz), 1907-1975

Corporate Bodies

Catholic Church
Catholic Renaissance Society
Yale University. Department of English
Yale University -- Faculty