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THE "NEW CRITICISM" AND THE STUDY OF POETRY

by

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B.A., Whitman College, 1953

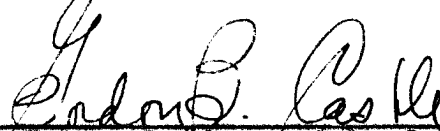
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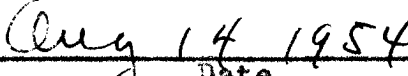
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INTRODUCTION

Within the last quarter century new methods of evaluating and studying poetry have been propounded and discussed. New critical approaches to poetry have been offered --approaches which challenge many of the former bases upon which evaluation and criticism of poetry were founded. A number of the modern critics have been classified as "New Critics," and it is with the background and development of this "New Criticism" that Chapter I deals.

Two poetry anthologies, for use in college, which reflect and embody "New" critical practices are the main concern of this paper: Reading Poems (1941), edited by Stuart G. Brown and Wright Thomas, and Understanding Poetry (1950), edited by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. As a means of comparison between the more modern ways of teaching poetry and the older, traditional ways, A Book of English Literature (1942), edited by Franklin B. Snyder and Robert G. Martin, is described and commented upon.

This paper is not designed to "prove" anything; rather it is written to point out the important role which the "New Criticism" has played in making the study of poetry a more effective and worthwhile pursuit for the college student.

CHAPTER I

THE "NEW CRITICISM"

The group generally known as the "New Critics" are far from being homogeneous; among them there exists much agreement as to direction, but they pursue many different routes and differ in their aims, methods, and opinions. In the opinion of Ray B. West: ". . . it is best to view modern criticism as a house with many rooms, its occupants living in an uneasy but on the whole respectful relationship to each other. . . . it is impossible and misleading to see it as a fixed belief or an organized crusade."¹

However, it has taken some time for modern criticism to build itself this "house." Following World War I there was a growing feeling of discontent with the prevailing fashions in literature--the Genteel Tradition and post-Victorianism were beginning to seem outmoded to some. Then in 1924 T. E. Hulme appealed successfully for a change in literary standards.

In his crucial essay, "Romanticism and Classicism," he states that the time had come for a return to the classical tradition in art. He identifies liberalism with

¹Ray B. West, ed., Essays in Modern Literary Criticism (New York, 1952), p. 117.

romanticism ("the view which regards man as a well, a reservoir, full of possibilities. . . .") and the orthodox religious attitude with classicism ("the one which regards him as a very finite and fixed creature. . . .").² The romantic convention had become meaningless; it had reached its period of exhaustion: "We shall not get any new efflorescence of verse until we get a new technique, a new convention, to turn ourselves loose in."³ To break with the romantic tradition and foster classical poetry would necessitate recognizing that "accurate, precise, and definite description" is a legitimate object of verse, that verse can be confined to the earthly and definite, that "man is always a man and never a god,"⁴ and that "beauty may be in small, dry things."⁵

Central to his essay is the statement that "in the verse which is to come, fancy will be the necessary weapon of the classical school."⁶ To define "fancy," he first gives his opinion of what constitutes the positive fundamental quality of verse: ". . . the particular faculty of mind to see things as they really are, and apart from the

²T. E. Hulme, "Romanticism and Classicism," Critiques and Essays in Criticism, ed. Robert Stallman (New York, 1949), p. 5.

³Ibid., p. 7.

⁴Ibid., p. 10.

⁵Ibid., p. 12.

⁶Ibid., p. 14.

conventional ways in which you have been trained to see them."⁷ When this quality is used in the realm of the emotions it produces imagination; when the quality is used in contemplating finite things it produces fancy. The subject matter is unimportant; what is important is that the object be contemplated with a "real zest," that it be an actually realized visual object, and that it be precisely expressed by "new metaphors, that is, by fancy."⁸ This will result in the highest kind of verse if "the whole of the analogy is necessary to get out the exact curve of the feeling or things you want to express."⁹

Yet, Hulme maintains, more must be done than just the writing of poetry in the classical tradition. A new critical atmosphere has to come into being:

. . . while romanticism is dead in reality, yet the critical attitude appropriate to it still continues to exist. . . . For every kind of verse, there is a corresponding receptive attitude. . . . At the present time I should say that this receptive attitude has outlasted the thing from which it was formed.¹⁰

That these ideas were influential can be seen by studying the poetry which has been written since 1924 and by reading the criticism which has accompanied it. In Robert Stallman's phrase, Hulme "is important . . . because of his

⁷Ibid., p. 9.

⁸Ibid., p. 14.

⁹Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 9.

influence upon those who have dominated and largely directed the course of contemporary criticism."¹¹

One of the most compelling "dominating and directive" individuals in modern poetry as well as in modern criticism has been T. S. Eliot. In his poetry Eliot practiced what Hulme preached, and in his criticism he was instrumental in helping to create a "receptive attitude" for modern poetry like his own--poetry in the "classical tradition." In 1932 F. R. Leavis stated that it was mainly due to Eliot that no serious poet or critic of that day could fail to realize "that English poetry of the future must develop along some other line than that running from the Romantics through Tennyson, Swinburne, A Shropshire Lad, and Rupert Brooke. . . . He has made a new start and established new bearings."¹²

The "Impersonal Theory" which Eliot gives in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" supports Hulme's call for an escape from Romanticism. He maintains that ". . . the poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways."¹³ He advises that the poet's business, in working

¹¹Robert Stallman, "The New Critics," Critiques and Essays in Criticism, p. 493.

¹²F. R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry (London, 1932), pp. 25-26.

¹³T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," The Sacred Wood (3rd ed.; London, 1932), p. 56.

with this "particular medium," is to work ordinary emotions up into poetry in such a way that feelings are expressed which were not in those emotions at all: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality."¹⁴ The logical result of this theory would be the transfer of interest from the poet--his life and his personal emotions--to the poetry itself, to the recognition of ". . . significant emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet. The emotion of art is impersonal."¹⁵

Eliot's discussion of "Hamlet and His Problems" gave him occasion to further define the emotion of poetry:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.¹⁶

A poet following this formula would have no tendency to fly "away into the circumambient gas."¹⁷ A critic discussing and evaluating the emotion expressed in a poem would not, with this theory in his mind, credit as valid "pure" emotion,

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁶Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," The Sacred Wood, p. 100.

¹⁷Hulme, "Romanticism and Classicism," Critiques and Essays, p. 592.

personal emotion, or "overflows" of emotion.

The seventeenth century Metaphysical poets became important to the modern critics, for their poems seem to exemplify best the qualities demanded by both Hulme and Eliot. One critic says: "It is Donne who has dominated our poetical and critical climate. . . . For the new convention modern poetry drew upon the school of Donne and . . . the school of the French Symbolists. . . . The New Criticism was created out of this new convention--to explain it and make it accessible."¹⁸ Eliot gave impetus to this concentration on the Metaphysical poets. He considers them to be intellectual poets, as opposed to reflective poets such as Tennyson and Browning, who think but do "not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose." On the other hand, "a thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. . . . When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience."¹⁹

Many of the "New Critics," following Eliot, have formed their standards for great or permanent poetry from what they have found in the Metaphysical poets. Cleanth Brooks takes from them his standard of a poetry which joins widely divergent and conflicting elements in imagery that is

¹⁸Stallman, "The New Critics," Critiques and Essays, p. 5.

¹⁹Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," Critiques and Essays, p. 51.

functional rather than decorative and in this way achieves the desired union of emotion and thought.²⁰ Brooks admires the Metaphysicals on the standards which Hulme set for "the highest kind of verse."

John Crowe Ransom states that "all true poetry is a phase of Physical Poetry" (poetry concerned with physical things as contrasted to that dealing mainly with ideas-- Platonic Poetry.)²¹ Metaphysical poetry is a branch of Physical Poetry, but it alleviates the tedious realism of the purely Physical poem by the introduction of the "psychological device of the miracle." His explanation of this feat is that "the miraculism arises when the poet discovers by analogy an identity between objects which is partial, though it should be considerable, and proceeds to an identification which is complete."²² Here again is heard an echo of Hulme's criterion for a Poetry of fancy, for poetry in the Classical tradition.

Robert Stallman refers to this new centering of interests as the "New Critical Revolution"; he sums up one trend of the "revolution" as consisting chiefly in a return to the Metaphysicals and "hence in a repudiation of their heretical deviators: the Augustan Neo-Classicists, who regarded metaphor as a decoration of poetic thought-content;

²⁰Stallman, "The New Critics," Critiques and Essays, p. 501.

²¹John Crowe Ransom, "Poetry: A Note in Ontology," Critiques and Essays, p. 34.

²²Ibid., pp. 45-56.

and the Nineteenth Century Romantics, who discredited irony or wit . . . and regarded poetry as an elevated way of expressing elevated beliefs."²³ Three good examples of those who effected (or at least aided) this repudiation are Eliot, Ransom, and Leavis.

Eliot believes that in the seventeenth century "a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered; and this dissociation . . . was aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden." Under the leadership of these poets the language became more refined, but the feeling became more crude. Eliot attributes a further dissociation of sensibility to these poets: "The sentimental age began early in the eighteenth century, and continued. The poets revolted against the ratiocinative, and descriptive; they thought and felt by fits, unbalanced; they reflected."²⁴

Ransom also makes his repudiation in the light of a standard formed from Metaphysical poetry. He considered the power of the Metaphysical poets to be in their forceful use of metaphor:

Clearly the seventeenth century had the courage of its metaphors . . . and just as clearly the nineteenth century lacked this courage, and was half-heartedly metaphorical or content with similes. . . . One period was pithy and original in its poetic utterance, the other was prolix

²³Stallman, "The New Critics," Critiques and Essays, p. 501.

²⁴Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," Critiques and Essays, p. 52.

and predictable.²⁵

Leavis, in his discussion and ultimate repudiation of Shelley, analyzes the emotions in the poems and finds no "objective correlative" for them: they are unattached emotions. He remarked that "there is nothing grasped in the poetry--no object offered for contemplation, no realized presence to persuade or move us by what it is. . . . The effect is vanity and emptiness . . . as well as monotony."²⁶ He makes the objection that in these poems the feelings are divorced from thought, and that "Shelley, at his best and worst, offers the emotion in itself, unattached, in the void."²⁷

It can be seen that many of Eliot's theories and formulas have been incorporated into the critical processes of other modern critics. Less tangibly but just as effectively can the influence of Hulme be traced through the years that followed the publication of his essay on "Romanticism and Classicism." That there has come to be a critical attitude receptive to verse in the "classical tradition" is well illustrated by the standards of judgment and the resultant opinions of the three critics mentioned in the preceding paragraph. Since the main purpose of literary criticism is to enlighten and instruct the reader (with the

²⁵Ransom, "Poetry: A Note on Ontology," Critiques and Essays, pp. 43-44.

²⁶Leavis, "Shelley," Critiques and Essays, p. 166.

²⁷Ibid., p. 168.

purpose of creating the proper "critical atmosphere"), the "New Critics" have formulated critical theories as well as actually practicing criticism itself.

Modern critical theory considers poetry as such, not as science or religion. However, opinions differ as to what exactly poetry really is: Ransom and Tate say that poetry is knowledge, while I. A. Richards states that it is communication of an experience. Yet all of these critics are concerned with poetry as poetry no matter on what different theoretical bases their analyses, elucidations, and judgments are founded. Their main interests do not lie in the sociological, historical, or moral backgrounds and implications of the poems; they are concerned with what the poet said, not why he said it. It would seem that the majority of the "New Critics" agree with Richard's statement: "What poetry communicates and how it does so and the worth of what is communicated form the subject matter of criticism."²⁸

Practical Criticism, by Richards, has been influential in stimulating many of the "New Critics" to view poetry from a pedagogical standpoint. Richards states that one of the aims of the book was "to prepare the way for educational methods more efficient than those we use now in developing discrimination and the power to understand what we hear and read."²⁹ The first part of the book contains Richards'

²⁸I. A. Richards, Practical Criticism (New York, 1929), p. 11.

²⁹Ibid., p. 3.

record of student criticisms of thirteen poems; he analyzed the criticisms and discussed the ten main defects of reading exhibited by these students. Their chief difficulties were (from the simplest to the most complex):

1-making plain sense of the poetry, 2-sensuous apprehension (form, movement, rhythm of words), 3-imagery, 4-mnemonic irrelevancies, 5-stock responses, 6-sentimentality, 7-inhibition, 8-doctrinal adhesions--beliefs, 9-technical presuppositions, 10-general critical preconceptions.³⁰

To overcome these difficulties Richards recommends that improvements in training should be based on "a closer study of meaning and of the causes of unnecessary misunderstanding . . . an inquiry into language . . . a direct study of interpretation."³¹ As for using critical maxims in teaching poetry he feels that "the whole apparatus of critical rules and principles is a means to the attainment of finer, more precise, more discriminating communication. . . . Value cannot be demonstrated except through the communication of what is valuable."³²

A practical application of some of Richards' ideas has been made in several recent poetry anthologies intended for use in college courses, including Reading Poems, edited by Wright Thomas and Stuart Gerry Brown, and Understanding Poetry, edited by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren.

³⁰Ibid., p. 3.

³¹Ibid., p. 337.

³²Ibid., pp. 11-12.

These editors regard the ability to read and understand poetry as a skill which can be acquired through training. They stress direct interpretation of the poem.

One particular problem which Richards and the editors mentioned above found many readers burdened with was the problem of belief; to appreciate a poem must the reader share the specific belief of the poet as stated in the poem? Many of the "New Critics" concur with Eliot's answer: "When the doctrine, theory, belief, or 'view of life' presented in a poem is one which the mind of the reader can accept as coherent, mature, and founded on the facts of experience, it imposes no obstacle to the reader's enjoyment. . . ."33

They feel that when a particular "doctrine" is isolated from the context of the poem an independent status is thereby assigned to it; this locates the poem in the historical process and forces upon the poetic subject matter a correlation with the world it represents.³⁴ Too often false correlations are forced upon poetry--doctrinal, historical, sociological. Much of modern criticism operates on the theory that the way to avoid this difficulty is to isolate the "meaning" of the poem in terms of form--to judge the meaning only as aesthetic meaning.

Systematic aesthetic studies have been furnished by

³³Eliot, "Shelley and Keats," The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (London, 1833), p. 96.

³⁴Stallman, "The New Critics," Critiques and Essays, p. 503.

Ransom and Allen Tate. Both Tate and Ransom attack the positivist's position; they maintain that the aesthetic and the practical are opposites and that though art and science are equally valid categories of experience, they are directly opposed in method and goal. This theory allies them with Hulme in their common assertion that one of the greatest pitfalls of literary criticism is the confusion of two categories; the "aesthetic vision" which is concerned with quality and the "scientific vision" which is concerned with quantity.³⁵

This aesthetic criticism has given rise to new terms--terms which can only be identified with the "New Criticism." Ransom's system is built around the words "texture" and "structure": "A poem is a logical structure having a local texture."³⁶ He explains this formula by making an analogy between a house and a poem. Just as there is a functional structure to a house (the framework and the plaster) so there is an "ostensible substance or structure to a poem" (anything at all which words may signify).³⁷ To a house you add an "increment of irrelevant local substance" which constitutes the "texture." There is no necessary logical relation between the structure and the texture.³⁸ To Ransom

³⁵Ibid., p. 493.

³⁶Ransom, "Criticism as Pure Speculation," The Intent of the Critic, ed. Donald A. Stauffer (Princeton, 1941), p. 110.

³⁷Ibid., p. 105.

³⁸Ibid., p. 110.

then "the intent of the good critic becomes to examine and define the poem with respect to its structure and texture. If he has nothing to say about its texture he has nothing to say about it specifically as a poem but is treating it only insofar as it is prose."³⁹

The word "tension" was added to the vocabulary of the "New Criticism" by Allen Tate. He formed it by removing the prefixes from two terms used in logic: intension, meaning denotation, and extension, meaning connotation. In his essay on "Tension in Poetry" he explains that each poem has a "distinct quality as the ultimate effect of the whole"; this quality he labels "tension." He goes on to say that this "whole is the 'result' of a configuration of meaning which it is the duty of the critic to examine and evaluate."⁴⁰ He, along with the majority of the other "New Critics," maintains that good poetry not only can bear a close, literal examination of every phrase but is thereby made much more valuable to the reader.⁴¹ Tate's close "examination and evaluation" operate from his belief that "good poetry is a unity of all the meanings from the farthest extremes of intension and extension . . . the meaning of poetry is its 'tension,' the full organized body of all the extension and intension that we can find in it."⁴²

³⁹Ibid., p. 111.

⁴⁰Allen Tate, "Tension in Poetry," Essays in Modern Literary Criticism, p. 267.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 269.

⁴²Ibid., p. 272.

A more orthodox use of the word "tension" is made by Warren in his essay on "Pure and Impure Poetry." He says that a poem to be good, must earn itself; it must involve resistances such as the "tension between the rhythm of speech; between . . . the concrete and the abstract; between the elements of even the simplest metaphor; between . . . ideas; between the elements involved in irony. . . ."43 These tensions are what the "pure" poem lacks: it is a poem "without issue, without conflict, a poem of unconditional surrender."⁴⁴ The "impurities"--tensions and resistances--are what involve the participation of the reader, or as "Coleridge puts it, they make the reader into 'an active creative being.'⁴⁵

Two other terms which have been incorporated into the vocabularies of the "New Critics" are "paradox" and "ambiguity." Cleanth Brooks states that "there is a sense in which paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable in poetry. It is the scientist whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox; apparently the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox."⁴⁶ He feels that the language of poetry, as contrasted to the

⁴³Robert Penn Warren, "Pure and Impure Poetry," Essays in Modern Literary Criticism, p. 263.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 256.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 264.

⁴⁶Cleanth Brooks, "The Language of Paradox," Critiques and Essays, p. 66.

language of science, tends to be disruptive rather than stabilizing; the terms continually modify each other, and thus violate their dictionary meanings.⁴⁷ The paradoxes "spring from the very nature of the poet's language: it is a language in which the connotations play as great a part as the denotations,"⁴⁸ as Tate also says.

As for "ambiguity," William Empson wrote a book entitled Seven Types of Ambiguity wherein he discusses the kinds and values of the different ambiguities found in literature. The first paragraph of his work includes the statement: "I propose to use the word in an extended sense, and shall think relevant to my subject any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language."⁴⁹ He does not consider that an ambiguity is satisfying in itself, nor does he say that it is a thing to be consciously worked for: "It must in each case arise from, and be justified by, the peculiar requirements of the situation."⁵⁰ The ambiguity must serve a purpose; it must heighten or emphasize some meaningful aspect of the poem.

From this limited discussion of "New" critical procedures, it can be seen that modern criticism, both in

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 70.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 69.

⁴⁹William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity (New York, 1949), p. 1.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 238.

theory and in practice, tends to force attention back to the text of the work itself. It is the poem which is important--not its relationship to the poet, his personal interests, or his times. The results of this practice have shown that close textual reading and careful study of the words of a poem can open the way into an elucidation of the larger symbolizations on all levels of the poem.⁵¹

Hulme's plea for a new critical atmosphere seems to have been fulfilled--there has been an increasing receptivity to the "dry," the "limiting," and the "classical" in poetry. This reaction to Romanticism, though it has restricted the range of poetry's emotional expression, has expanded the range of material from which poetry can be made: ". . . nothing that is available in human experience is to be legislated out of poetry,"⁵² ". . . things are not poetic per se, and conversely, . . . nothing can be said to be intrinsically unpoetic."⁵³ This outlook has arisen from the practice of regarding a work of art as autonomous and isolating its meaning only in terms of form--criticizing it on the basis of its structural properties.

⁵¹Stallman, Critiques and Essays, p. xix.

⁵²Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition (Chapel Hill, 1939), p. 11.

⁵³West, Essays in Modern Literary Criticism, p. 265.

CHAPTER II

DESCRIPTION AND COMPARISON OF THREE POETRY TEXTS FOR COLLEGE USE

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The two poetry anthologies, with which this paper is primarily concerned, are in quite general use in American colleges. Understanding Poetry was first published in 1938, revised in 1950. Reading Poems was published in 1941 and has had no revisions. To legitimately refer to these two books as "new" or "modern" it has seemed necessary to use some more "conservative" or "standard" college anthology of literature as a basis for comparison. One such volume which has been in wide use for some time is A Book of English Literature edited by Franklin Bliss Snyder and Robert Grant Martin. It has had four editions: first edition, 1916; revised and enlarged edition, 1924; third edition in two volumes, 1932; and fourth edition in two volumes, 1942. It includes both prose and poetry but stresses the poetry.

The first section of this chapter includes brief descriptions of the three books (using the most recent editions) in terms of: one, the goals or purposes of the book as indicated by the editors or as shown by the book itself; two, the organization--how the poems are presented,

their order, and what is included; three, the type of commentaries or analyses which are made by the editors.

The second section of this chapter is a discussion, first, of the main points of difference found between the "standard" text and the two more "modern" ones; and, secondly, some of the differences between the two newer texts.

A Book of English Literature

The goals in the minds of the editors of this anthology are unmistakably shown by the text itself. In the preface to the 1942 edition Franklin Snyder states, with reference to World War II:

But nothing has happened to shake our faith in the continuing value of humane letters, or our belief that a knowledge of the great documents in the literature of the English-speaking peoples is, and will continue to be, one of the foundation stones of a liberal education.¹

The purpose of this two volume work is to present "great documents" of literature in such a way as to show their historical, sociological, cultural, and biographical backgrounds. The guiding idea seems to be that of "historical limitation"--to fully understand the literature, one should have a fairly comprehensive knowledge of the times in which it was written.

The works are divided according to historical periods. Each of the sections has a forty to fifty page introduction which states and briefly discusses the important characteristics of the period. Typical matters considered are: political and historical data, social

¹Franklin B. Snyder, ed., A Book of English Literature, Vol. I (fourth ed.; New York, 1942), p. v.

conditions, morals, philosophical trends, art, religion, science, influential people, important literary works and their authors, and the sources. These sections are heavily illustrated with sketches, portraits, and cartoons of leading literary figures, and with drawings of famous landmarks and sites of literary interest. Under each illustration is a quotation either by or about the subject of the picture.

On the end-papers in the front of the first volume is a map of London in 1593 and in the second volume a map of the British Empire in 1912. At the back of each volume is a literary map of the British Isles.

A short biographical study, general critical remarks, and a bibliographical note preface the work of each author. Also preceding some of the poems are brief explanatory comments concerning, for example, the source materials, the content, the form, facts about the composition, or pertinent details of the poet's life.

At the end of each volume is an article by Snyder entitled "A Note on English Prosody," an elementary study of various types of rhythms found in poetry, which is followed by a list of terms and definitions used in discussing versification. The volumes close with historical tables--events of national and of literary importance.

The selections are chronologically ordered--both the authors and the works. If both prose and poetry of one author are included, the poems usually precede the prose. The only exception to the chronological pattern is the

grouping together of many poems of a similar form regardless of their dates, for example, Wordsworth's sonnets.

The selections are traditional--the most famous poets and their most famous poems. The five periods covered in the first volume are: The Anglo-Saxon Period ("Beowulf" to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle), The End of the Middle Ages (Layamon to Sir Thomas Malory), The Elizabethan Age (Sir Thomas Wyatt to John Webster), The Seventeenth Century (John Donne to John Dryden), The Eighteenth Century (Daniel Defoe to William Blake). There are three main sections in volume two: The Early Nineteenth Century (William Wordsworth to Thomas de Quincey), The Victorian Age (Walter Savage Landor to William Ernest Henley), The Contemporary Period (Gerard Manley Hopkins to Stephen Spender).

Various kinds of comments are made on the poets and the poems, and these are found in three places. The paragraphs under the illustrations in the period introductions give information about physical and social characteristics, amusing and/or perceptive character declinations, or simply comments on the writer's personality. For example, under the picture of John Donne is a paragraph quoted from Isaac Walton's Life of John Donne which includes comments on Donne's looks and temperament plus a brief eulogy by Walton. A quotation from Boswell's Life of Johnson follows the portrait of Oliver Goldsmith; Boswell in defending Goldsmith's intelligence gives his personal estimate of him. A caricature of Swinburne illustrates John Masefield's

anecdote about Swinburne's habits in the reading-room of the British Museum.

The comments on the poets and their works in the historical introductions are of necessity quite general; they deal with the prevailing interests of the times, the source materials used, the larger trends which marked the period, and the relative influence or success of the artists. They are not particularly critical, but are meant to give background and general elucidation to the reader. These purposes and means of achieving them are exemplified by the following quotation from the introduction to the Early Nineteenth Century:

First, it is clear that the poets were in search of a philosophy and a view of life. . . . By and large the poets fall into three groups. . . . The first group includes those poets who strive to make a philosophy from nature; the second includes those poets whose chief interest is in the progress of humanity; the third includes those poets who find the answer to the riddle of life in a philosophy of beauty . . . in each of these groups there was a leader. . . . Wordsworth is obviously the chief of the poets of nature . . . of course, he achieved beauty in his poetry but it was a by-product. . . . The poets who placed their main emphasis upon the progress of humanity were Byron and Shelley. . . . Almost but not quite alone was Keats in his enunciation of his doctrine that beauty was the highest good and included all else.²

The remarks in the biographical prefaces are a bit more specific. Commenting on Wordsworth's poetry, the editor says:

² Snyder, A Book of Eng. Lit., Vol. II, pp. 30-38.

. . . the objective . . . of his later period is always the same: an affirmation of the spiritual greatness of man. As a result of this high endeavor, his work is notable for elevation of theme, for moral grandeur, and, as a natural consequence, for its lack of the lighter elements such as wit and grace.³

These introductions deal largely with the philosophical beliefs with which each poet worked. There are few comments on style or technique.

About a third of the poems are prefaced by short comments; often these include remarks by the author of the poem. These comments deal usually with the meaning of the poem but may give facts about its composition and background or indicate the main trends of the thought of the time which it reflects. The following are some complete examples of the different types of comments:

Expostulation and Reply
Wordsworth

This poem is a favorite among the Quakers, as I have learnt on many occasions. It was composed in front of the house at Alfoxden, in the Spring of 1798.--W.⁴

When We Two Parted
Byron

This poem, written in 1808 but not published until 1816, was probably addressed to Byron's early love, Mary Chaworth.⁵

Ode to a Nightingale
Keats

The enduring nature of beauty has perhaps never

³Ibid., p. 47.

⁴Ibid., p. 62.

⁵Ibid., p. 180.

been more beautifully set forth than in this ode. Particularly in the last two stanzas Keats set for himself a high standard of accomplishment which is the more astonishing when we recall the youth of the poet.⁶

Dover Beach
Arnold

The poem reflects Arnold's own experience in losing the sure faith with which he had been born, and in finding his consolation for that loss in human love.⁷

⁶Ibid., p. 323.

⁷Ibid., p. 709.

Reading Poems

The goal of Reading Poems is clearly set forth in the first paragraph of the Preface:

This book is intended, in general, for anyone who wishes to develop the skills needed in the intelligent reading of poems, and, in particular, for teachers and students in undergraduate courses in English and American poetry who may wish to emphasize the skills of reading rather than the history of poetry.⁸

The book is organized so as to put as much emphasis as possible on the poem, to make the reader's first contact be with the work itself.

The poems are presented in seven sections and are grouped, in generally accepted categories, by types rather than by historical periods or by authors. They are titled and are numbered consecutively throughout the book, but the names of the authors do not appear with them. The names are found only in the notes in the tenth section because it was the hope of the editors that "reputation will not be allowed to interfere with a reader's experience or judgment before he has actually read the poems."⁹

Section eight is entitled "The Creation of Poems"; in it are four illustrations of the labor expended in creation.

⁸Thomas and Brown, Reading Poems (New York, 1941), p. v.

⁹Ibid.

The 1833 version and the revised 1845 version of "The Lady of Shalott" are printed side by side for easy comparison; the manuscripts of "The Eve of St. Agnes," Spender's "The Express," and Auden's "'Where do they come from?'" illustrate the painstaking revision which accompanies creation.

Part nine is a one-hundred page section of notes:

The purpose of each of the explanatory and critical notes is to help the reader to come to a more complete comprehension of the poem, after he has read the poem as a poem--that is, in the plain text. A perfect reader needs no notes; others may find them useful tools with which to work.¹⁰

The notes do not give extensive information, rather they deal critically with selected poems through discussions, suggested comparisons, and questions. The author of each poem is given as is the date of publication; some poems have no more notation than this.

Part ten is an essay by Thomas and Brown, "On Reading Poems," in which they explain and discuss the principles basic to their approach to poetry. They recommend that the essay be read by the student before a systematic study of the book is begun. They say that when they speak of a "poem" they mean "the experience which the reader creates in his own mind by using the words of the poet," and when they speak of "reading" they mean "the process by which he created the poem."¹¹ The distinction which they want to make clear

¹⁰Ibid., p. 637.

¹¹Ibid., p. 743.

is that a "poem" is not "poetry"; each poem is a "particular experience communicated through words, and it is only a poem when someone is reading it."¹² They make a final summary statement by saying:

The test of a good poem . . . , then, is that it shall communicate a true and interesting experience in a manner which is pleasurable to the ear and to the imagination. . . . A good poem is so absolutely a whole that no separation can be made between the experience and the language which communicates it, the one is a direct function of the other.¹³

Following this essay is an Appendix; the first part of it includes a section on the terms of versification, and the second part is a short essay by Gerard Manley Hopkins entitled "Notes on Versification."

In general, the sections of poetry range from the more simple to the more complex. Part one, Lyric Poems, includes twelve groups, each with a number of poems on a similar "subject." This arbitrary grouping is done not "to indicate that the poems are alike, but, on the contrary, to enable the reader to discover that the 'subject' is a very poor indication of what the poem is."¹⁴ The remaining sections are: Part Two--Sonnets, Part Three--Narrative and Dramatic Poems, Part Four--Satirical Poems, Part Five--Pastoral Poems, Part Six--Poems of Serious Wit and Symbolism,

¹²Ibid., p. 748.

¹³Ibid., pp. 758-759.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 637.

and Part Seven--Poems of Religious Experience.

Many modern poets as well as the majority of the more famous traditional poets are represented. Since neither authorship nor historical importance is emphasized, many single poems by lesser known authors are included; for this same reason there is no necessity of presenting a representative sampling of any author's works.

In Part Nine, prefacing each of the sections of notes for the different parts, is an introduction discussing the particular type of poem there dealt with. The form and development of the sonnet, the conventions of pastoral poetry, the problems posed by poems of satire, with, symbolism, religious experience--such matters are explained and commented upon in the introductions; the reader is counseled to watch for peculiarities of treatment, mood, or other difficult poetic elements which appear.

Some of the notes in Part Nine are quite extensive; many are made up completely of questions designed to guide the reader into thinking out a poem for himself:

William Shakespeare, 'Fear no more the heat o' the sun,' 1623. From Cymbeline, written about 1610. A dirge to be sung. What are the themes of each of the first three stanzas? The same themes are in "The Garden of Proserpine." Compare the two poets' attitudes toward them. How do the images and use of quality of sound in 'Fear no more' help to communicate the quality of feeling? How deeply felt are the ills of this world? The last two lines of stanzas 1-3 are a sort of refrain, with variations; do the three couplets carry different tones of feeling? Would the poem be better without the last

stanza?¹⁵

With a poem such as "prothalamion" by Spenser, where the story behind its creation is a worthwhile supplement to the understanding, a brief resume is given of the circumstances out of which it arose. Strange words and less familiar references are explained.

Some explanatory notes written by the author about his own work (e.g., Eliot's notes on "The Waste Land") and some by outside commentators are included. Helpful supplementary quotations also appear: to help explain Housman's unusual use of "darkness" in "For My Funeral" a passage is given from the book of Job which clarifies the problem; to show the elements of the typical structure of a pastoral elegy which Milton, Shelley, and Arnold followed, the text of "Lament for Bion" by the third century B.C. poet, Moschus, is used.

There are many cross-references in the notes pointing out poems on similar themes, mentioning differences in poems using the same forms, and making other suggestions for profitable comparisons.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 642.

Understanding Poetry

The first edition of this poetry text came out in 1938; the revised, "complete edition" of 1950 is the one examined here. In a postscript to the Letter to the Teacher, which also prefaced the 1938 edition, Brooks and Warren discuss the reasons for changes which they made in the revised volume. However, the conviction which motivated their first edition had not changed: ". . . our fundamental approach to poetry remains the same. We still believe that poetry is worth serious study as poetry"¹⁶: if poetry is worth teaching at all it is worth teaching as poetry.

The principle upon which this book is devised is that the poems should be viewed through a sharp critical focus, supplemented, where necessary, by other literary resources.¹⁷ They feel that this method should eliminate the two main pitfalls which the student of poetry often encounters: (1) substitution of other materials, which should be used only as means and not as ends, for the poem itself (paraphrases of logical and narrative content, extensive study of biographical and historical material, or inspirational and

¹⁶Brooks and Warrn, ed., Understanding Poetry (rev., complete ed.; New York, 1950), p. xxi.

¹⁷Ibid., p. xxi.

didactic interpretation); (2) inadequate presentation of the poem as an object in itself (vague and impressionistic examination, or study of the technical aspects in isolation from other aspects and from the total intention.)¹⁸ A few of the basic misconceptions quite generally formed by the student of poetry are pointed out: "message hunting," viewing poems as "pure realization" or as a "beautiful statement of some high truth."¹⁹

They maintain that to overcome these difficulties:

1. Emphasis should be kept on the poem as a poem.
2. The treatment should be concrete and inductive.
3. A poem should always be treated as an organic system of relationships, and the poetic qualities should never be understood as inhering in one or more factors taken in isolation.²⁰

The entire book is organized on a scale of ascending difficulty and with the intention of studying poetry and its problems systematically but at the same time as an organic whole; that is, not stressing problems on isolation but stating and solving them in such a way that each new theory adds to the effectiveness of the last in the student's knowledge of critical methods and value perception. Therefore, the seven sections which include poems and analyses are divided according to types of problems or particular poetic techniques; the first sections treat fairly simple,

¹⁸Ibid., p. iv.

¹⁹Ibid., p. xii.

²⁰Ibid., p. ix.

but basic, matters, and the poems and commentaries become more complex in the later sections.

Each section is prefaced by a foreword which prepares the student for the particular problem under discussion. When an analysis is given, it immediately follows the poem, or poems if several are being compared. Both in the comments and in the exercises comparisons are made and suggested. The seventh section has no analyses or exercises; it is entitled "Poems for Study: Old and New" and includes both simple and complex poems for the student to study entirely on his own.

The last three sections discuss special topics. The rather technical yet important functions of "Ambiguity, Added Dimension, and Submerged Metaphor" are explained and illustrated in Section Eight. The next aspect of poetry investigated, commented upon, and illustrated is in the ninth section: "How Poems Come About: Intention and Meaning." The editors state: "What we can learn about the origin of a poem may, if we do not confuse origin and poem, enlarge our understanding and deepen our appreciation"; in other words, a distinction must be made and kept between the process and the materials of a poem.²¹ The section includes several authors' statements concerning the ways in which they have created poems; there are sections of manuscripts to illustrate the pains of creation.

²¹Ibid., p. 592.

In the postscript to the Letter to the Teacher, it is pointed out, in reference to the first edition that:

Some teachers have felt that Understanding Poetry implied a disregard for historical and biographical study. Others, who did not misunderstand the editors on this point, nevertheless have indicated that the relation of criticism to other kinds of literature study needed to be spelled out rather than merely implied. They have rightly pointed out that this relationship is not simple but intricate and rich.²²

In the tenth section, "The Poem Viewed in Wider Perspective," detailed consideration is given to Wordsworth and eight of his poems, Eliot and "The Waste Land," and Marvell and the "Horatian Ode." Each of these three commentaries illustrates a method of discussing the poet and his works in relation to other fields. The section on Wordsworth endeavors to illustrate how one goes about studying the work of a poet as a whole; essentially this involves the study of certain basic themes and techniques which recur in his writings. The reader studying the section on "The Waste Land" is told that the elucidating material given is valuable and interesting, but that such a discussion is to be regarded only as a means to an end: "the imaginative apprehension of the poem itself."²³ The treatment of the poem by Marvell, "An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland," is used to illustrate how history can validly be brought into literary criticism:

²²Ibid., p. xxi.

²³Ibid., p. 645.

. . . the editors would be the last to deny the intimacy of the relationship between specifically critical studies and historical studies, and they would agree that for a great many poems, a knowledge of the historical references is a fundamental requirement.²⁴

Following this section is the Glossary in which cross-references and definitions are given, as well as a "Note on Versification and Metrics" which discusses and illustrates relevant terms. The final two page section, "A Practical Note of Scansion," explains the simplified method of scanning used throughout the text.

The index of stanza forms, at the end of the book, provides easy reference to other sections of the volume; it was designed especially to supplement the section on metrics.

As was mentioned before, in each section the poems present increasingly difficult examples of the problem or technique dealt with. Section One emphasizes Narrative Poems, Two--Descriptive Poems, Three--Metrics, Four--Tone and Attitude, Five--Imagery, Six--Statement and Idea, and Seven--Poems for Study. Every section contains poems by both older and modern poets. As to the modern poets, the editors say that they are not chosen at random on the grounds of current fashion but are "intended to represent some of the various lines taken in the development of poetic method in this century."²⁵ A few bad or uneven poems are included in hopes

²⁴Ibid., p. 667.

²⁵Ibid., p. xix.

that "they will contribute to sharpening the critical instinct of the student."²⁶

In the commentaries, as in the rest of the book, the early sections include fairly simple and incomplete accounts of the problems; as the student is provided with more critical apparatus and becomes accustomed to the method, the analyses become more extensive. Most of the analyses are quite thorough; often the comments cover a series of poems, noting various similarities and differences. In the words of the editors:

The analyses are intended to be discussions of the poet's adaptations of his means to his ends: that is, discussions of the relations of the various aspects of a poem to each other and to the total communication intended.²⁷

The aim of these commentaries is to give the student the critical perception to read poetry well. The analyses are of no value taken in isolation: the goal is to make the student aware of inter-relationships, to make him realize that "any poem whatsoever would finally raise the questions associated with all these topics."²⁸

However, the majority of the poems have no analyses, but have short exercises designed to encourage the student to follow along the lines laid out in the discussions of previous poems. The following is an exercise for Frost's

²⁶Ibid., p. xiii.

²⁷Ibid., p. xvi.

²⁸Ibid., p. xi.

"The Death of the Hired Man," from the Narrative section:

1. The problem in this poem, as in 'Michael,' is to present the pathos of the old man's condition, cleanly and sharply, without any mawkishness or too easy pity. Has the poet succeeded in doing this?
2. What is gained by keeping Silas off the stage?
4. What is gained by the use of realistic detail and natural and 'unliterary' words and conversation?²⁹

From the second section, Description, this exercise is for

"All But Blind" by De La Mare:

What functions do the following words fulfill in the poem: fourclawed, twirls, and blunders? They give a sense of sharp perception to the description. But do they have a further function?³⁰

Included in the section of Metrics are separate discussions of Rhetorical Variation, Quantitative Variation and Onomatopoeia, Rime, and Stanza Forms.

Cummings' "The Season 'Tis My Lovely Lambs," is among the poems in the Tone and Attitude section--the exercise:

1. What is the tone of this poem? Relate to the tone the poet's puns, forced rimes, slang expressions, and irreverently used cliches.
2. Does the poet merely delight in disfiguring whatever stuffed shirts conveniently present themselves? Is his satire briskly irresponsible? Or does it stem from a positive set of values? How would you justify the satiric method used here?³¹

The exercise suggested for "Death," by Donne, in section

²⁹Ibid., p. 43.

³⁰Ibid., p. 85.

³¹Ibid., pp. 219-220.

six, Statement and Idea, shows to what degree the student is expected to have progressed by this time:

Using the analysis of "If Poisonous Minerals" for a model, write an analysis of this sonnet. In writing your analysis, take into consideration the following: (1) the personality of death implied by the nature of the poet's argument with him; (2) the variations in meter; (3) the use of paradox.³²

³²Ibid., p. 387.

Comparison of the "standard" and
the "modern" texts

A Book of English Literature was made up with a purpose quite different from that of the other two books. It was obviously designed for use in a "survey" course where the emphasis is on an over-all view of a literature; there the interest lies mainly in the content of the works and in literary history not in the more technical aspects of one particular type such as prose, poetry, drama, or the essay.

Logically, in view of the goals of the book, the first aspect which strikes the reader is that the Snyder and Martin text places much emphasis on the historical and biographical correlations to literature; the selections are presented within the cultural framework of the period. The organization of the book naturally follows a historical and chronological pattern and the poems are commented upon in the light of all these factors.

This is the predominant difference between the texts. The editors of the other two books explicitly state their objections to methods such as those employed by Snyder and Martin. Brooks and Warren give this basis for their objections:

. . . even if the interest is in the poem as a historical or ethical document, there is a

prior consideration: one must grasp the poem as a literary construct before it can offer real illumination as a document.³³

Before 1938, when *Understanding Poetry* was published, there were no college texts which approached poetry critically. There were selective anthologies and volumes along the lines of Snyder and Martin's, but there were none designed expressly to teach the student to read poetry well, to read it with an understanding of the manifold possibilities inherent in good poems.

The newer volumes stress: having the student work first with the poem and its component elements; leading him to study the functional techniques which make poetry effective; and encouraging him to work out his own analyses and upon them found his opinions. The historical and cultural milieu from which the poem emerged is not discounted or invalidated, but the student is warned to keep the history of the poem and the materials of the poem separate; only a minimum of biographical and historical information is included.

A Book of English Literature is published in two volumes, and each is heavily illustrated and rich with a variety of information. The other two books are in single volumes and not illustrated; they include little other than the poems and direct critical or analytical commentaries thereon. As was stated in the description of the Snyder and

³³Brooks and Warren, Understanding Poetry, p. xi.

and Martin work, because so much factual material is included and because it was not the purpose of the editors, little analytical and almost no technical explanations or constructive criticisms are found in the introductions or notes; these types of commentaries, of course, make up most of the discussions in the other texts.

The purpose of the standard anthology for a literature course is to give a representative sampling of influential, major writers, to present the "great documents" of a literature to the student for his general cultural betterment. This limits the inclusion of works, no matter how valuable in themselves, of unimportant or relatively unknown authors. Understanding Poetry and Reading Poems were compiled with no obligation to "represent" anyone--the poem not the author was the determining factor.

Comparison of the two "modern" texts

Between Understanding Poetry and Reading Poems there are more points of general likeness than of difference. Their goals are similar: to help the student learn how to read poems intelligently, thoughtfully, profitably, and with a maximum of enjoyment.

They differ mainly in the general plan of organization. The divisions in Reading Poems are according to traditional types of poetry; those in Brooks and Warren's text fit the purposes of the book in that they progress by emphasizing technical problems rather than in terms of conventional literary forms or particular subjects.

The practice followed in Reading Poems of putting both the names of the authors and the notes on the poems in a separate section at the end of the book seems almost to be carrying the ideas of non-emphasis on the poet and non-interference of outside comments to an extreme; it would be interesting to know whether or not this is successful in making the student a more independent reader.

Each volume has a section on the creation of poems, and each has comments on versification. Exercises for studying the poems are less frequent in Reading Poems; furthermore, the Brooks and Warren text has more extensive

detailed textual analyses than does the other, which has more, but shorter, comments.

One section in Understanding Poetry for which there is no parallel in Reading Poems is the part dealing with "The Poem Viewed in Wider Perspective," wherein Brooks and Warren illustrate their recommended method of incorporating other literary studies (literary history, biography, source study) with literary analysis and evaluation. One reason for the omission of such a section in Reading Poems may be clarified by the statement made by Brooks and Warren in the Postscript (1950) to the Letter to the Teacher explaining the addition of this section in their revised text:

A decade ago the chief need was for a sharp focus on the poem itself. At that time it seemed expedient to provide that focus, and to leave to implication the relation of the poem to its historical background, to its place in the context of the poet's work, and to biographical and historical study generally. The years that have followed have indicated that these relationships could not safely be left to implication.³⁴

These two books are in some ways experimental, yet judging from their popularity, Understanding Poetry especially, it seems to be a successful experiment.

The purpose of this chapter has been to show that the methods of presenting poems to students have undergone some major changes. The last chapter shows how these changes are related to, and, in some cases, are products of the "New Criticism."

³⁴Ibid., p. xxi.

CHAPTER III

THE "NEW CRITICISM" AS PRACTICED IN READING POEMS AND UNDERSTANDING POETRY

Modern criticism, particularly the "New Criticism," is an integral part of these two modern poetry anthologies for college students. Thomas and Brown state in the Preface that Reading Poems "has grown out of several years . . . of study in modern criticism." They say further:

Among critics we are most deeply indebted to Mr. I. A. Richards and Mr. T. S. Eliot. In particular from the former we have borrowed the laboratory method of studying poems as though their authorship were anonymous; and from the latter we have borrowed and attempted to extend and develop the idea of the 'objective correlative.'¹

The editors of Understanding Poetry, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, are themselves leading "New Critics" and, consequently do apply their own and other's theories in this book.

It is not the purpose of this paper to say that one particular critic "influenced" any portion of these texts; rather, the aim is to show the practical application of

¹Thomas and Brown, Reading Poems, p. vi.

"New" critical theories and methods to pedagogy, specifically, to show the "new look" given to poetry anthologies by the incorporation of modern critical standards. Both books are good examples of these modern critical processes; however, Understanding Poetry utilizes the "New Criticism" to a greater extent, and in the opinion of many, in a more effective way than does Reading Poems. Although Reading Poems puts some of Richards' and Eliot's practices into more obvious use, in view of the material to be discussed in this chapter Understanding Poetry, as a whole, offers better opportunities to see the "New Criticism" in action. Therefore, the following comments are centered around the Brooks and Warren text with the understanding that many of the comments also apply to Reading Poems.

In 1932, F. R. Leavis expressed the opinion that there was a real need for improvement in the presentation of poetry to the reading public:

Without a public poetry can hardly continue, and the ordinary cultivated reader is ceasing to read poetry at all. The current anthologies are proof enough of this: the complete absence of standards that they reveal implies also the absence of an educated public.²

The new receptive atmosphere which Hulme felt needed to be established could finally come about only by exposing many people to critical standards different from those generally held. This would entail educating them along a particular

²F. R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry (London, 1932), p. 211.

line with a specific goal in mind; logically, this education could best be done in the schools, using the critical approach which, at that time, was beginning to be advanced and in some circles advocated.

The results of the experimental work done by I. A. Richards, described and analyzed in Practical Criticism (1929), support and justify the pronouncements of Hulme and Leavis: by and large, the students who wrote the "protocols" did not know how to approach or deal with poems effectively. Their judgments were hindered by many factors.³ Richards, too, stressed the need for better educational methods:

A large proportion of even a picked public neither understand the kind of importance that attaches to the movement of words in verse, nor have any just ideas of how to seize this movement or judge it.⁴

In the Letter to the Teacher, from the 1938 edition of Understanding Poetry, Brooks and Warren give examples of some comments and exercises appended to poems in current and popular anthologies; these examples well support Leavis' condemnation of the existing anthologies. Furthermore, if Richards' students were taught poetry from such books, many of their difficulties are understandable. Brooks and Warren criticize these comments and then give the standards for their book which they hope will assist college students to better understand poetry.⁵

³See list on p. 11.

⁴I. A. Richards, Practical Criticism, p. 225.

⁵See p. 33.

The "New Criticism," as we have seen, is based on the belief that poetry has an organic nature; a poem is not made up of elements which can be removed, examined, and commented upon separately. This is not to say that there are not separate elements which make up a poem; the idea is that these elements are fused into an inseparable whole--it is the interactions and relationships between them which combine to make a succession of lines into a poem. In the same way, one problem of a poem cannot be discussed without reference to other parts of the poem; any attempt at poetic criticism or analysis upon just one element or from just one viewpoint is discredited. For these reasons, it is necessary that a student of poetry have at his command, knowledge of the working parts of a poem.

Brooks and Warren try to give this ability to the student by emphasizing, not isolating, some important element in each section of Understanding Poetry. The student is told that each of these sections deals with only one of the many factors which make up a poem's total effect. Critical terms, methods, and theories are given in a way fashioned to make each supplement and broaden the use of the last. A paragraph written by John Crowe Ransom shows why a text, written with the intentions of the "New Criticism" in mind, stresses such a comprehensive knowledge of poetic elements and critical theories:

Good critical writing is always more or less empirical in method, which means that the

critic looks first and last at the poem, while he tries to determine what poetic theory will be the one to accomplish its analysis. Each poem is a new poem, and each analysis is probably the occasion of a new extension of theory in order to cope with it. Poetic theory will never become final and complete in that sort which is the aspiration of most sciences.
. . .⁶

The emphasis which is placed on the organic nature of poetry, of learning to understand poetry by acquiring knowledge of its component parts, explains the method of organization and presentation of Understanding Poetry. When a poetry text is divided into sections stressing, in turn, narration, description, meter, tone, attitude, imagery, statement, and idea, it is not logical that attention would be paid to historical or chronological factors.

As was pointed out in Chapter I, the "New Criticism" has formulated a language of its own. Words, when used by a "New Critic," may be quite altered from the usual meanings. Some words, not before associated with literary comment, have been appropriated and given precise meanings in the context of a "New" critic's writings. Many terms, long a part of the language of literary analysis, have been given different slants and used for different purposes.

The Glossary of Understanding Poetry includes many key words of the "New Criticism" to which the student is referred throughout the book in connection with the analyses and commentaries. The definitions are, of course, in accord

⁶John Crowe Ransom, "Ubiquitous Moralists," Kenyon Review, III (Winter, 1941), 96.

with the "New" critics' use of the terms. Some of the more important ones are:⁷

A word brought into critical usage by Empson:

Ambiguity: . . . In expository prose, ambiguity is a defect, for what is wanted is clear, unequivocal meaning. An ambiguous statement is one which is doubtful or obscure. A better term for poetic ambiguity is richness.

Atmosphere: The term is obviously a metaphor in itself. It refers to the general pervasive feeling which may be said to condition the treatment of any literary work. . . .

Two words important in the critical aesthetics of Tate and Brooks:

Denotation: The denotation of a word is its specific signification. . . . But the word also has a large number of Connotations, of implied meanings and associations.

Focus: The term is metaphorical. Just as a burning glass concentrates and unifies the rays of the sun, so a poet may, by various means, concentrate and unify various elements of a poem.

Intensity: . . . intensity is a result of the highly organized form of poetry. This implies, not simply a loose emotionalism or a preoccupation with thrilling subject matter, but a meaningful relationship among all the factors involved in a poem.

The term emphasized by Brooks:

Paradox: A statement . . . on the surface contradictory, but which involves an element of truth. Since there is an element of contrast between the form of the statement and its real implications, paradox is closely related to Irony.

Brooks and Warren explicitly state that "the special senses

⁷Brooks and Warren, Understanding Poetry. All of the following definitions are from the Glossary, pp. 683-694.

in which such terms as realistic, romantic, and classic are used by many critics do not appear in the book." Such words as these are, of necessity, used by all critics at one time or another, and would, therefore, have too many particularized meanings to be included here. Most of the words in this list came to have their limited meaning through the writing of one person and are specific enough that they are not too controversial--a critic would not use these particular terms if he did not agree with them.

A term whose definition here is in keeping with Eliot's "Impersonal Theory":

Sincerity: This term is often used in two senses. . . . The first sense refers to the poet's attitude, in his private life, toward a subject which he treats in a poem. This sense may have no reference to the critical judgment to be passed on a poem, for a poet may be thoroughly sincere in this personal sense and yet produce a very bad and sentimental piece of work. The second sense in which the term is used really refers to the degree of success which the poet has achieved in integrating the various elements of a poem. . . . Such a judgment is irrelevant to any biographical information concerning a poet.

A term for one of the main difficulties in reading poetry successfully, found in Richards' students:

Stock Response: The general uncritical response made on conventional or habitual grounds to a situation, subject, phrase, or word. . . .

Three other terms which often appear in the analyses in Understanding Poetry are "form," "structure," and "style." The terms have long been considered almost synonymous but in the vocabularies of the "New Critics" there are important

differences:

Form: . . . Usually when people use the term they mean Metrical Form or Stanza Form. But since metrical form, or stanza form, describes an organization of the rhythm of a poem, and since rhythm is only one element contributing to the poetic effect, it is obvious that the consideration of the form of a poem must, finally involve the discussion of the organization of other elements in relation to the whole effect. . . . Though the poet must finally work out a form for each particular poem this does not mean that he may not make use of elements of form handed down from other poets--elements such as metrical patterns, symbols, and ways of relating images to a theme, etc. . . . A poet may properly make use of conventional patterns of all sorts, but, in so far as he is successful, he must relate the conventional elements to the total form of the individual poem.

Structure: In its fullest sense the structure of a poem may be said to be synonymous with the form but in practice there is a tendency to use the term with special reference to the arrangement of, and the relationships among, episodes, statements, scenes, and details of action, as contrasted with the arrangement of words, for which the term style is usually employed.

Style: This term is usually used with reference to the poet's manner of choosing, ordering, and arranging his words. But when one asks on what grounds certain words are chosen and ordered, one is raising, of course, the whole problem of form.
. . . .

Of the forty-eight analyses the majority are very thorough examinations of technique. Naturally they become more complex as the student acquires more material with which to work. From the first, close attention to the text is required of the reader. As is the practice of the "New Critics" close textual reading is stressed: it could not help but give the student a respect for words and some sense of their complexities and possibilities.

Other effects of the "New Criticism" are also apparent: many poems by the Metaphysical poets and a good number of modern poems are included; questions concerning the psychological aspects of poems are in the exercises following the poems. However, the most important effect of the "New Criticism" on the study of poetry has been mentioned before. It can well bear repeating--the poem itself is the prime concern of the book. Because of the seriousness with which the poems are discussed, it is doubtful that a student could emerge from a course in which this text was used without a hearty respect for poetry.

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