THE MODERN SCHOOLMAN, XX, No. 4 (May, 1943).

THE MEANING OF THE "NEW CRITICISM"

In that [the Italian], as well as in every other language, the easiest books are generally the best; for whatever author is obscure and difficult in his own language, certainly does not think clearly. This is, in my opinion, the case of a celebrated Italian author, to whom the Italians, from the admiration they have of him, have given the epithet of *Il divino:* I mean Dante. Though I formerly knew Italian extremely well, I could never understand him: for which reason I had done with him.—Letter of Lord Chesterfield to his son.

BETWEEN THE last war and the present one, someone has been tampering with the springs of Helicon. Hippocrene and Aganippe are scarcely considered so limpid as they were once reputed to be. A new criticism has brought tools to probe well below the surface and has found toad skins, fenny snakes, blind worm's stings, and general sediment enough to discredit the opinion that the springs of poetry in their depths run entirely clear. All this has puzzled or even troubled a good many persons who have wondered from a distance what the engineers in charge of the recent investigations have been about. This much is certainly true: Messrs. I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, William Empson, and the rest of the group active for the past two decades or so at the University of Cambridge, with Mr. T. S. Eliot as an invaluable semi-professional consultant, have undoubtedly evolved a criticism as genuinely new as such things can well be and have demanded some radical revisions of common views of poetry. It matters little that the metaphysician has ignored these common views together with most of the customary trappings with which criticism had for some time been hung. The wholesale sloughing of large sections of a quite basic outlook, however gradually and quietly accumulated, is likely to be of concern to him.

The present paper is an attempt to answer some of the questions concerning the new criticism which the metaphysician might raise.

Although Mr. Eliot, somewhat differently situated than Mr. Richards, is of equal importance, Richards is recognized as the central figure around whom most of the "new criticism" revolves. He takes his own philosophical bearings more closely and turns more frequently and decisively to philosophical speculation than the others of the school. The position which he occupies is undoubtedly due in large part to his astuteness as a reader, his ability as a teacher to inspire others, and his mastery of a prose style built upon the English language and its idiom and metaphor. And in his rôle of philosopher this last in particular is important, for it gives Richards' philosophical excursions, which have become more and more lengthy and important, a life and urgency long absent from a more artificial tradition. But Richards' special appeal—and his appeal is admitted even by those who profess an initial dislike for his work[1]—is his knack for asking and answering the pertinent questions, the questions which at this time seem particularly important. Such a knack is a matter of the philo-

[1] For example, John Crowe Ransom in his *The New Criticism* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1941), p. 4.

sophical milieu into which one is born and of one's own special background of interests within that milieu. With the philosophical milieu, then, as it manifested itself some years ago in criticism and poetical theory, and with the general place of the new criticism in that milieu, we can begin.

Literary Cartesianism

Not only philosophy, but the study of poetry and of all literature has had its Cartesianism too. The coloring of the first modern philosopher's thought is visible in almost every current flowing into our century from the early eighteenth, when the Cartesian dichotomy, having poisoned the sources of thought "in the high bogs of the mountains," was running into all the valleys below and seeping by little and little into the entire land. To filter out the suppositions which the dichotomy has introduced everywhere is a long and tedious process and not always successful. Many of us still have penance to do for viewing St. Thomas through glasses steeped in the Cartesian dye.

The starting within (however we got there) and working out, with the consequent disjunction of "mind" and "matter," led inevitably to a treatment of "ideas" which was to have its effect on poetical theory and literary criticism, and all the more so because of the quite human weakness for the over-simplification which Descartes proposed. Often before, the idea and not being itself had taken the measure of knowledge, only now it was to enjoy its most phenomenal success of all time, first as part of a method soon destroyed by Locke and then as persisting in its implications even among its destroyers.[2] And poetical theory, never very strong philosophically, deriving in great part from medieval logicism and in part more directly from the Cicero-Quintilian grammatical confusion, was quite ready to soak up whatever Cartesianism it could.

There is a general suspicion abroad that the rhetoric and literary criticism in the schools of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was dry to the point of being dusty, and a cursory examination of the classroom texts confirms the suspicion. Matters were rather distressingly obvious, and somehow distressingly wrung with logic. Much of this can be traced to the all-pervading influence of the Cartesian idea, which we must remember was sired in mathematical unfeeling. Blair, for instance, the dean of the late rhetorical tradition, gives us some evidence:

> Simple expression just makes our idea known to others; but figurative language, over and above, bestows a particular dress upon that idea; a dress, which both makes it to be remarked, and adorns it.[3]

The loose connection with the idea which the "dress" implies exists as a function of the mind-body relationship of Descartes. Blair in

[2] See Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937) and *Réalisme thomiste et critique de la connaissance* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1939). These two books have been fallen back on throughout the following discussion.

[3] Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. by Abraham Mills (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, n.d.), p. 147. These *Lectures* were originally published in 1783.

general adopts what we may call a moderate position: figures are not unnatural, they express something. But there is no close inter-action between them and ideas. They are dress. Similarly, an American author, who tells us in his preface that he follows Blair, Whately, Beattie, Campbell, and Watts, writes in an 1846 textbook:

> *Q.* What do you understand by poetry?
> *A.* Lively and striking combinations of thought, expressed in language arranged, for the sake of harmony, according to certain rules.[4]

Here again the dichotomy asserts itself: thought combines not with language but with thought; language has its own rules.

I do not propose to make these writers ridiculous. Blair held a highly respected position and read his lectures for twenty-four years in the University of Edinburgh. His influence persisted pretty directly for over a hundred years after the publication of the *Lectures* in 1783, and the book remains useful in many respects. But critical writing in this tradition appears singularly incompetent to come to grips with any other than the abstract meaning of the poem. In a passage which will be recognized as typical, commenting on King's exquisite "Exequy on the Death of a Beloved Wife," Boyd has such things as this to say:

> What a "*last* good night" is this! and oh! what a *one* "good morrow!" to last for eternity, when such partners awake from the same bed, in the resurrection of the just! Is there the "man born of a woman," who has loved a woman, and lost whom he loved, and lamented whom he has lost, that will not feel in the depth of his spirit all the tenderness and truth of these old-fashioned couplets! I dare not offer a comment upon them, lest I should disturb the sanctity of repose which they are calculated to inspire![5]

Faced with the complexity of organization in the poem, the commentator throws up his hands. Instead of explaining the poem, he tries registering an emotional reaction, rather less successfully than the poem itself does.

This kind of comment is not universal, but it is the staple of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century criticism. When discussion of poetry rises above this in this period, it does so by shifting its attention elsewhere, not by any minute account of poetic organization. Works which have gained reputations for themselves, such as Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* and Wordsworth's preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* or Shelley's *Defense,* have little value as explanations of poems. For the Cartesian mentality prevails: although the doctrine may be whispered and sometimes only supposed, the absolute and ultimate referent of meaning is the idea, not being. Poetry is strung down from ideas, and emotion or sense-knowledge, admittedly present in the poem, come in somewhat surreptitiously, being inexplicable under the terms in which the ideas are analyzed. To speak of these other things as integral to the organization of the ideas themselves would be profanation of the intellect and perversion of language.

[4] James R. Boyd, *Elements of Rhetoric and Literary Criticism* (8th ed.; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1887), p. [113]. From the number of editions we can judge the popularity of this textbook.

[5] *Ibid.,* p. 156.

The critics' success—for the better commentators must have met with success—came because the audience stood on the same ground as they did. This was the age of ideas, clarity, and definition; it would have thought strangely of Thomas Aquinas' persistent and calculated use of judgments, such as *quod quid est esse* (the what it is to be) in place of a simple term. In the reduction of the judgment to a mathematical equation, the very heart had been taken out of any understanding of the eduction of the intelligible from matter. Such an understanding does not depend merely on recognition of the fact that concepts are associated with phantasms. The understanding is defective if it does not observe that, however they may be handled in mathematics and minor logic, the most abstract abstractions always come to us in ways which reflect their origins out of material existents. They are not things hung together on pieces of string, but things found in judgments, the predicate of which always comes as form (more abstract) to its subject as matter (more concrete). Abstractions cannot be preserved and packaged, but are known and used only as they are being drawn in some way or other out of matter.[6]

There is a tempting simplicity in dealing with things the Cartesian or idealistic way, where a thing is simply its definition,[7] because of the intellectual clarity and manageability thereby had and because of the easy distinctions we can make between our "ideas" considered as dependent upon definition. But this tempting clarity and distinctness are not goals to be achieved equally by all concepts, nor for that matter by all judgments, if we regard the real origins of these things. Clarity and distinctness are variable as between concepts and with reference to any one concept, growing less as we keep closer to matter and increasing as we move away. For prime matter, which forms the basis of distinction between material things, is the principle of unintelligibility and hinders intellectual clarity and distinctness. (It is precisely the distinction, based on matter, between this individual and that individual of a species which I have difficulty in grasping intellectually and for which I fall back on the senses.) Conjunction with and separation from matter come about variously, but always in so far as there is conjunction, there is some confusion and indistinctness between concepts, some intellectual unmanageability, and in so far as there is separation, there is distinctness and clarity. Moreover, since *entia rationis* originate with material things, although we can consider other points about them than their persistent material reference, to consider *entia rationis* entirely and adequately, we must remember

[6] See St. Thomas Aquinas, *In I Periherm.*, lect. 8: "Praedicatum comparatur ad subjectum ut forma ad materiam; et similiter differentia ad genus: ex materia autem et forma fit unum simpliciter" (the predicate is related to the subject as form to matter; and similarly [specific] difference to genus: and from matter and form there results an absolute one); see also *In I Periherm.*, lects. 5 and 10; and cf. *S. T.*, I. 58. 2. resp.; *Sum. c. Gent.*, I, 55; *S. T.*, I-II. 113. 7 ad 2; *In I Sent.*, d. 19, 5. 1, 2. Cf. Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to Logic*, trans. by Imelda Choquette (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1937), pp. 90-92, 86-90; and Bernard J. Muller-Thym, "The *To Be* Which Signifies the Truth of Propositions," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, Vol. XVI (1940), pp. 230-54.

[7] Gilson, *op. cit.*, pp. 153 ff.

their connections with matter and their consequent varying in clarity and distinctness. We must remember, for example, that the concept of man had by an adult differs from that had by the same person when he was a child as by greater experience it is in various ways freed from the matter of the existents from which it originates. Likewise, two concepts of species in different genera are more clear and distinct than concepts of the two genera themselves because genus is achieved by generalizing abstraction, which regards the concept and ultimately the thing in function not of its formal or unifying principle but rather of its material or diversifying principle—the principle which looks to what reference the thing has to that which is unlike it. In this way my concepts of rational animal and of the American elm are more clear and distinct from one another than my concepts of animal and plant. Moreover, a concept of a chimpanzee can be further developed or perfected than that, let us say, of a yeast plant, because the anthropoid apes are higher in the hierarchy of being and thus less submerged in matter. Concepts, therefore, may be undeveloped and indistinct or developed and clear, or they may be generic and indistinct or specific and clear, and they may represent things more or less knowable in themselves and thus be capable of attaining more or less clarity and distinctness. In all this their various relations with matter are in evidence.

But our concepts have far more traffic with matter than this. Not only are they used in judgments, which reflect inevitably in their structure the origin of our knowledge in things made up of matter and form, and not only are the concepts in such judgments variously related in themselves to matter, but a further special relation with matter is set up artificially by the use of the spoken word. A large number of our abstractions are made and much of our knowledge is achieved under the guidance of speech. But concepts are not carried *on* words. They are submerged in the matter of words and must be re-abstracted from them, reclaimed from this new matter. The study of the use of words, of communication or symbolism or semantics, involves *the study of an abstractive process.*

Induction and the Ultimate Determination of Meaning

The Cartesian-Kantian dualism had obscured the fact that concepts and judgments cannot be prepared in one mind and handed like tokens to another. In their movement from intellect to intellect, they must pass through matter *en route:* the vehicle which bears from intellect to intellect the judgment compounded of logical matter and form is itself a material thing and, being such, can present any meaning, any signification, which it may have only as something to be abstracted from it. Definition cannot relieve us of this necessity, for ultimately the communicative value of any utterance is derived not from definition but from induction. I can push the inductive process back, as I might do by defining photosynthesis as the "formation of carbohydrates in the chlorophyll-containing tissues of plants exposed to light," and each of the resulting definition components can be again defined, and each of the resulting components again. At any point, however, I may find it practicable to break off this process and substitute one of pointing, and at some time or other I must do so. For instance, I might show a series of plants in sufficient quantity for

you to know what the word "plant" in my definition meant by your performing some sort of induction. I could even have substituted for the definition in the first place by showing the process of photosynthesis—not, it is true, an easy thing to do. Definition is often, as here, the simplest way to exhibit the meaning of a word, but definition must stop somewhere and means nothing at all unless it does stop. Somewhere or other, in establishing the meaning of my terms, I must simply point and say that "this and this and this and this" or "what you see here and here and here and here" is what this word means. And it is only in terms of such pointing that every word in a definition has its significance and that definition is possible at all.

Because of the increased complexity of connections, this process of abstracting meaning from words is much more involved and devious than other abstraction. We may form the concept of a man directly by abstracting from beings with which we come in contact. But we attach meaning to words by dropping out successively parts of contexts in which the words occur. Let us suppose ourselves learning the meaning of the word "man" for the first time by the inductive process on which all meaning depends. Hearing the sound, supposing that we realize the speaker's intention to use it significatively, we will know in the first instance that it refers to something in the context, taking this as the whole set of things to which we can at that time be attentive. The next time the word is repeated, the context has changed in great part, and in our seeking after meaning we can eliminate whatever does not recur in the second context. Man will be included always in what possibilities for meaning remain, but so will many other meanings. There will be a time, perhaps, when we will know from an accumulation of contexts that the word includes in its designation a man without being sure that it does not designate a clothed man or a tall man, as "boor" designates a man who behaves in certain ways. It will be only after a long succession of separate contexts that we know the more limited meaning of the term. Here is a movement from the less determined to the more determined, but the movement does not follow the way of abstractions which are had from things and not from words. In dealing with words I am moving from the less determined to the more determined by freeing my concept from a set of material things with which it is surrounded quite haphazardly. These haphazard surroundings cling to the word and are only gradually eliminated.[8] They can only be recognized as irrelevant to the meaning by the fact that they sometimes do not occur when the word is used; for definition is not ultimate, induction is our last resource, and therefore, ultimately, I cannot *tell* you which things are irrelevant. If, after the meaning of a word is more or less fixed, certain elements of the context tend to recur with the word, the meaning of the word will inevitably shift, for these are our clues, and we must follow them.

Moreover, since apart from their significative connections words have existences of their own, the relations of the sounds of words among themselves and with other things enter into the context as determinants of meaning. This is especially true when we are dealing with words which signify other than physical objects and which

[8] See I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), pp. 11 and 34.

must therefore receive their determination by complex indirect ways of pointing. Thus "flimmer," independently of its use as a word, is associated in sound with "shimmer," "glimmer," "slimmer," "dimmer," "flimsy," "swim," "skim," and the whole *fl*-group of "fluid," "flow," and so on.[9] Consequently, if we use the word "flimmer" in a sense like "flicker," we will find ourselves unable to hold it to the exact meaning of "flicker" because the "shimmer-glimmer-slimmer" group of words, forming always a part of the context, will exert their pull. "Flimmer" will always point to them, and "flicker" to "flick," "nick," "quick," "prick," "tick," and so on. And because meaning has developed for us from a less to a more determinate thing and there is no particular place for it to stop, as long as there are clues for determining meaning further, we will follow them.

Since words thus form parts of contexts for one another, they hold their meanings to a certain extent by a kind of balance of power. The introduction of new words will disturb this balance and cause a shift in the signification of all related words. If the word "flimmer," for instance, began to be used to any great extent, the meaning of "flimsy" would undoubtedly shift somewhat. The kind of tyranny exercised over our intellectual life by these connections is extreme. Certain concepts simply cannot be expressed, as we know, in one language or another: every word or group of words we select is pulled out of line by uncontrollable parts of the context. Moreover, many if not most of our concepts are developed under the discipline of the material parts of words, because we often form or perfect concepts as words call for them, with the result that we tend even to order concepts among themselves according to the whimsicalities of the words with which they are associated.

I am aware how shocking this is to the dictionary mentality, which, growing up with the dictionary itself after the Cartesian success, regards meaning as cohering to words by definition, whereas more often it coheres by a more or less direct pointing process. The dictionary mentality leads to the butchery sometimes done in the name of denotation and connotation. For example, "flimmer," being defined by the dictionary as "to glimmer; flicker,"[10] must, to this sort of mind, signify directly (denote) these things or, at best, a generic meaning which they share, and must signify anything else indirectly (by connotation). If, on the other hand, we allow signification to rise more directly from the senses, "flimmer" does not mean directly either "glimmer" or "flicker," and, though it means something like both, its meaning is far more specific than what generic meaning they may share. But for the Cartesian mind, again, this traffic with the senses would be betrayal of the intellect.

All this is not to deny that by a special effort we can, of course, handle words as strictly symbolic for purposes of abstract thinking, although the amount of effort necessary and the notable failure of many attempts at this use of language should not be minimized. Fixed by firm convention and shored up by the long series of definitions which are the first supports of any scientific discussion, this language

[9] "Flimmer" is Richards' example, *op. cit.*

[10] *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language* (2nd ed.; Springfield, Mass.: G. and C. Merriam Co., 1941), p. 967.

is as determined, as invariable, as high in formal and as low in material content as it is possible to make it—so much so that we can afford to disregard its material content and study the workings of concepts and judgments by the logic of demonstration. But even this language exists ultimately in terms of pointing and is notably more manageable in the physical and mathematical sciences, where the pointing can be carried off easily, than in philosophy, where it must be far more skillfully managed.

Moreover, the very abstract meanings of words have their own way of entering into other relationships with material existents through their connections with the person uttering them. Thus, the fact that under certain circumstances I express certain things is itself pregnant with meaning dependent upon the abstract—as well as other—signification of what I give utterance to. Here again the concept becomes less intelligible, less clear and distinct in meaning as it is submerged in the material existents surrounding it. Its meaning in this way holds itself in terms of these existents and this meaning to become intelligible must be abstracted again. Thus the fact that I remark about the coldness of the weather may mean in its whole material context that I am anaemic or hypersensitive or a meteorologist or interested in garden produce or nervous about something to say. The abstract sense of my statement about the weather becomes ambiguous, that is, loses in intelligibility as it is pushed down into the material context, though a new meaning of the whole is abstracted. In this way dramatic situation enters poetry.

Some words are used only for such communication as this and consequently retain an indetermination and lack of intellectual clarity in themselves. Interjections, for instance, such as "Well!" or "Indeed!" are not used in themselves for an abstraction, but are rather imbedded in a whole set of material circumstances so that, if you will, you may make an abstraction from the whole set and conclude by this abstraction that the man who utters them is shocked or delighted or surprised or agrees with you or thoroughly disagrees with you, as the case may be. And as words other than expletives are used more or less for expletive purposes, they partake more or less of this function.

The Logic of Poetry

Now because concepts exhibit these various connections with matter in the intimate ways we have observed, poetry is possible. The unity of a poem, which comes home to us at least from time to time as we read poetry, is not explainable in terms of the organization of the "ideas" in their own right. Such a unity as we know in reading a poem would, if it were strictly idealogical, require the strong (necessary) connections of the logic of demonstration, for in terms of this logic abstractions find their organization. The logic of rhetoric is more slippery, less unified: the rhetorical syllogism is an enthymeme, a syllogism which argues from probability and does not come to an absolutely certain conclusion, but to one conclusion where another or others are possible. The enthymeme has its unification in being ordered to the unity of a concretely realized act rather than in a strictly logical structure. The logic of poetry is still more sliding, for the concepts here are merely juxtaposed, united as St. Thomas

says by our supposing (*existimatio*).[11] We have not in poetry even the justification of the historian for uniting concepts. The historian lacks logical necessity but has contingent actuality on his side: Washington *need* not have been president, but he was. In poetry we have a very weak analogue of logic and no contingent actuality at all, for it makes no difference in our poem whether the man we call president existed or not. How, therefore, are we justified in setting down a judgment, let alone in setting down several judgments and expecting them to cohere? And if the abstractions in a poem do cohere—and we know they do because we have direct experience of a poem's unity—how do they? The answer, of course, is that the poem holds abstractions in its unity through their connections—intimate, as we have seen, and manifold—with the more material elements which enter into it. Ultimately, as the logic of rhetoric is unified by being resolved into action, the logic of poetry is unified in a particular act of contemplation, an act peculiar to man and involving, in unusually close cooperation, the interplay of the sensory and the intellectual that is necessary for the kind of knowledge which must be had by a being dealing with the intelligible existing in matter.

Throughout all the steps in communication traced here we must remember the importance of the imagination as the internal sense giving the highest organization on the sensory level to the perceptions with which our awareness of things begins. Every time the intelligible is brought forth from matter in any way at all, the imagination plays its part not merely as accompanying the concept but as forming the direct material out of which the concept is drawn. In its reproduction of the outside world, it shares in its own way this world's ambiguity and unintelligibility, but serves also as a point at which, on an infra-intellectual level, the conceptual can be made into a kind of unity. Hence its importance in the poetic economy.

But neither this notion of the imagination nor any of the other notions involving the interplay of the material and the intelligible can be assimilated to the Cartesian intelligence whose suppositions—perpetuated by the devotion of the nineteenth century criticism to Platonism—have entered so deeply into the thought of the past two centuries.[12] Only for him who sees the emergence of the intelligible out of material being, who realizes that the principle ***nihil in intellectu quod non prius aliquomodo in sensibus*** is to be understood ***simpliciter et non secundum quid,*** that the ***nihil*** means ***nihil,*** that the abstract concepts which words represent, and the knowledge that words do represent the concepts, and the very connections of the strictest logical sort are first, in some way or other, derived by the senses from material things and maintain always some commerce with the material—only

[11] See Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I. 2. 1356a-b; Thomas Aquinas, *In I Anal. Post.*, lect. 1.

[12] The intellectual climate might be invoked to explain the Scotism of Gerard Manley Hopkins mentioned, among other places, in G. F. Lahey, *Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), pp. 131-32. In a person of Hopkins' intellectual vigor, his Scotism can hardly be regarded as simply an aberration. With the artist's interest in saving the individuality of things (cf. his "inscape"—and his correspondence is full of this interest), when Hopkins saw the individual perishing in the Cartesian-idealistic chill, he turned to the only other alternative which then offered and became Scotist.

for him who realizes this when he embarks on poetical criticism can poetry be other than either an inexplicable movement of matter or an exercise in dry logic. Richards and his generation were born into a world where a large residue of Cartesianism had blocked the approach to poetry which such a realization would have made possible. But the residue was being eaten away. Like all partial representations of reality which propose themselves as complete, it wore poorly in contact with being for whose contact it was not prepared. Aspects of things not manageable by the old dichotomy or the occasionalism and materialism and idealism to which it gave rise were beginning to assert themselves. One of these was the problem of poetic organization. The particular pertinency of the inquiries of Richards and his colleagues comes from the fact that they took up the question of "meaning" but turned their investigations toward the neglected material side under the discipline of the now successful laboratory psychologies at a time when the Cartesian breakdown enabled them to flirt with the possibility of there being more to reality than materialism would allow—or at least to act as though there might be.

Reorientation under the "New Criticism"

Since dualism had hoisted the idealistic balloon well out of sight and mind, it was necessary to start from the ground again. Because the problems of poetic organization, as we have seen, are concerned to a large extent with infra-intellectual activities, the neurologist's acquaintance with the sense life provides a starting point for a solid analysis of poetry. Neurology and allied psychological sciences were paramount among Richards' early interests, and at the very time when his appeal was growing among one group of readers, his concern with "attitudes" and "impulses" was annoying those who recalled the material polarity, the brashness, and the vagaries of the laboratory psychologies. Richards has since moved far from the neurological substitute for metaphysics. As Mr. Ransom has remarked, he is "essentially, or ultimately, an honest reporter," and "honest nominalist-positivists in the course of their careers will come to have more commerce with the metaphysics than they had contemplated."[13] Because the new criticism grew out of the laboratory, it could consider problems of poetical unity, and it was not long before the investigators following these problems, where connections between the material and abstract are so much in evidence, found themselves outflanking the assumptions of the materialist and idealist. Thus Richards appeals in 1929 for "a closer contact with reality, either directly, through experience of actual things, or mediately through other minds which are in closer contact," and in 1935 he offers his book in the dedication "for help in preferring the actual to the abstract."[14] Richards owes much to his persistent interest in Coleridge's theories of the imagination, and his two latest books[15] give the strongest confirmation to those

[13] *Op. cit.*, pp. 10 and 6.

[14] I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929), p. 251, and *Coleridge on Imagination* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1935), dedication, p. [v].

[15] *How To Read a Page* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1942) and *The Republic of Plato: A New Version Founded on Basic English* (New York: W. W. Morton and Co., Inc., 1942).

who have long believed they discerned in his thought the direct vision necessary to the metaphysician.

As the "new criticism" took over the direction of affairs, the subjects made to bear the weight of its investigations were such things as metaphor, "meaning" in its largest sense and various manifestations, meter considered not as a mathematical abstraction but as a nervous stimulant, ambiguity in poetry, and the behavior of words in conversational usage—with questions of imagery running through all these things. These subjects lie on the borderline between sensory apprehension and intellection, and thus, although its separate parts have other aspects, in its new respect for the organization of poetry in terms of "total meaning"—that is, in terms of its total communication, sensory and intellectual, regarded as a unit—the new criticism differs from what had gone before and becomes a single movement. Changes in the critical evaluation of existing authors and in particular the dethronement of Milton and his "architectural" style and of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century romantics, as well as the recovery of "metaphysical" poetry, can, it seems to me, be related to these interests of the new criticism, as can much of Eliot's critical theory.

All the critical parings scattered about by the new thought yield in point of practical importance to Richards' "four kinds of meaning," which have through various text books become quite common property, and which pretty well include many of the other subjects of the new investigations. The "four kinds of meaning" are (1) sense or abstract meaning, (2) feeling or the attitude of the speaker toward his material, (3) tone or the attitude of the speaker toward his audience, and (4) intention or aim, conscious or unconscious.[16] In the second and third, and to some extent in the fourth of these meanings, Richards in dealing directly with the infra-intellectual components of words. The four meanings or functions, as their discoverer sometimes designates them, are important because they include the total meaning[17] of discourse (sensory or concrete and intellectual meanings taken together), grouping the concrete handily around two referents and giving a special place to the speaker's intention or ultimate purpose. Having placed under "sense" the function of words in communicating abstract meaning, Richards considers in Functions 2 and 3 the direct or non-abstractive communications of language, grouping under "feeling" the "whole conative-affective aspect of life—emotions, emotional attitudes, the will, desire, pleasure-unpleasure and the rest" as these things are conveyed when they are not the subject of the abstract meaning of the discourse. Similarly, under "tone" he considers the speaker's or writer's "sense of how he stands toward those he is addressing." In either tone or feeling, abstract meaning may play an indirect part as a component in the whole context which effects the communication, but in considering tone or feeling we hold in our direct view the discourse as a whole—as affording not only words from which conventionally established abstractions may be made, but a complex

[16] *Practical Criticism,* pp. 179 ff., esp. 181-82 and Appendix A, pp. 353-57. The precise meaning of intention as distinct from feeling and tone is not so very clear; one's intention may not be communicated, and if it is, it seems to coincide with feeling or, more probably, tone. See Ransom's discussion, *op. cit.,* pp. 63-65.

[17] *Practical Criticism,* p. 357.

texture or "total meaning" from which, together with these conventional abstractions, other abstractions as well as various sense knowledges may be had.

Taken in themselves, feeling and tone, under one name or another, form a part of the field of almost any criticism. Richards' functions are new only in presenting themselves not as satellites of a system of abstractions projected from the mind, but as integral parts of a system of communication of which one aspect is abstract knowledge. Because he recognizes abstract meaning itself as imbedded in the matter of discourse and especially of non-scientific discourse, he provides for the understanding of poetic organization which makes the new criticism.

Total Meaning and the Functional Character of Poetic Elements

In terms of total meaning imagery, dramatic situation, and meter become mechanisms of organization—not ornaments, but a part of the complexity out of which the knowledge of a poem grows and in which its simple sense exists. The new criticism rightly regards these things as functional, refusing, for example, to consider seriously meter as a mathematical abstraction because when it is so considered, its value as a unifying agent is unpredictable apart from an individual context.[18]

Metaphor, understood in the sense of the early rhetoricians as the transfer (μεταφορά, *translatio*) of a word from one meaning to another, holds a preeminent place in the new criticism because of its importance as a kind of concentration point at which abstract meaning and sensory apprehension receive a plenary organization. In metaphor, one word is to do the duty of two: at first one abstraction is made, and then, this one being referred again to the context, another meaning is drawn forth. In the process of the second abstraction, all sorts of gymnastics may be resorted to: the transference of meaning is to be made from genus to species, from species to genus, from species to species, or on the basis of any analogy,[19] and we must cast about to see which of these things must be done. Discussing metaphor with reference to Shakespeare's Sonnet LXXIII, which begins,

> That time of year thou may'st in me behold
> When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang
> Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
> Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang,

Empson does some casting about, enumerating some of the ways in which the boughs may be choirs (I paraphrase):

Ruined monastery choirs:

are places in which to sing;
involve sitting in a row;

[18] There are countless references to these items, and a few may be listed here besides those already mentioned: Richards, *Coleridge on Imagination* (for imagery); for dramatic situation see Ransom, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-63; for meter, Richards, *Practical Criticism*, esp. pp. 225-34, and "Gerard Hopkins," *Dial*, LXXXXI (1926), 195-203: "When will prosodists seriously ask themselves what it is that they are investigating?" (p. 203).

[19] Aristotle, *Poetics* 21, 1457b.

are made of wood, carved into knots, etc.;
used to be surrounded by a sheltering building, whose clustering columns and vaulted arches suggest forest trees;
are now abandoned by all but the grey walls colored like the skies of winter,
etc.[20]

These are some possibilities for connections, although how far they must be rationalized is going to vary. As Mr. Ransom remarks, the poem here manages "to come off faster" than rummaging through these meanings would allow. And yet we can hardly say that these meanings are not present in the whole. It is evident that in accepting a metaphor such as this, we deal through the imagination with meaning in the concrete, with total meaning in which these abstract meanings are contained. Metaphorical meaning is more tied to the material than meanings which are conventionally determined; it is fixed by a close dependence upon context, for if it becomes permanently attached to a word, we no longer have metaphor. Thus the metaphor lays stress upon the relation of the sensory and the intellectual. This explains its poetic importance as well as Richards' insistence on the interaction of "tenor" (new meaning) and "vehicle" (the meaning on which the new meaning is conveyed) as being the thing desired by the poet rather than the simple conveyance of the tenor itself.[21]

The question of ambiguity and its relation to the new criticism arises here with metaphor, and again, it seems to me, the key to the understanding of the relation is the new criticism's emphasis on total meaning. Ambiguity is on a par with metaphor in the critical literature. Empson has written on seven types of ambiguity in a book by that title which curiously dramatizes his subject by having no table of contents, no chapter headings, no running heads, and no index. Mr. Empson apparently had something to say, went through with it, and stopped. But what he said has been important, and it comes from a consideration of total meaning, where one finds the submergence in matter which alone makes ambiguity possible.

People are accustomed to judge automatically the forces that hold together a variety of ideas; they feel they know about the forces, if they have analyzed the ideas; many forces, indeed, are covertly included within ideas; and so of the two elements, each of which defines the other, it is much easier to find words for the ideas than for the forces. . . . I wish only, then, to say here that such vaguely imagined "forces" are essential to the totality of a poem, and that they cannot be discussed in terms of ambiguity, because they are complementary to it. But by discussing ambiguity, a great deal may be made clear about them.[22]

The forces are indeed complementary to ambiguity, for they are unifying forces, and ambiguity itself is not. But ambiguity, an evil in strict logical discourse, may serve a purpose in a poem, where unified variously and accidentally, two concepts may serve better if communicated by one word. Such communication wrecks the machinery of demonstrative logic, which proceeds by necessity and, being abstract,

[20] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1930), p. 3; see also Ransom, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-31.

[21] See Ransom, *op. cit.*, pp. 65 ff., and the references to Richards there, and see especially Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, pp. 116 ff.

[22] Empson, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

must hold its judgments as all judgments are held by man, one at a time; but the same kind of communication may render real service within the economy of poetry. Here, too, we can hold abstract judgments only singly, but because we regard matter so closely, other judgments are never far away and we are often moving from one to another with great rapidity. We are close to the potency, the multiplicity of matter: our judgments are ready to give way to one another quite readily. Now the choirs (boughs) are places where singing goes on, now they are things once sheltered by churches (trees). Or, more likely, we are satisfied with a more or less sensory knowledge of the resemblance from which any one of many meanings or all successively may be drawn. Thus the interest in metaphor and ambiguity, as well as in imagery, which is so closely concerned in all movements from matter, is once again interest in total meaning: meaning as related to specific material contexts.

This interest in total meaning finds expression in statements such as Mr. MacLeish's

> **A poem should not mean**
> **But be,**[23]

which are endlessly multiplied and amplified in writings influenced by the new criticism. Such statements show an awareness in some form or other of the connections of the poem with matter—these sounds, these resemblances—which are so essential that to abstract is to destroy. Thus Empson says, "You must rely on each particular poem to show you the way in which it is trying to be good; if it fails you cannot know its object."[24]

The "New Criticism" and "Metaphysical" Poetry

At this point the connection becomes apparent between the new criticism, Eliot's critical theories, and the interest in "metaphysical" poetry which has grown up with the new criticism and found in Eliot its most expressive champion. The poetry of wit, called "metaphysical" perhaps not so ineptly as we are sometimes led to believe, is poetry which Eliot says "involves, probably, a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible."[25] This is the poetry of many-sided meanings, the poetry which manipulates language so as to utilize to the greatest possible extent the total meaning of words. It gives full play to the connections between our concepts deriving from the material of words so that its interest in words is not mere virtuosity but something sincere and rather scientific. The metaphysical conceit, a comparison instituted between disparities, is a comparison which resists strict logical organization. It is given its organization within the total meaning of the poem. That is to say, metaphysical poetry in cultivating strange conceits is boasting its non-logical nature and making all the more demands on "texture" for its unity, for outside the poem the far-fetched comparisons are awkward and meaningless.

[23] Archibald MacLeish, "Ars Poetica," *The Oxford Anthology of American Literature*, ed. by William Rose Benét and Norman Holmes Pearson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 1501.

[24] *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

[25] "Andrew Marvell," *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1932), p. 262.

In general, the poetry which the new criticism advocates, that in the "main line" of the English tradition—with varying emphases authors such as Shakespeare, Donne, Crashaw, the two Herberts, Vaughan, Marvell, King, Pope, Hopkins, Eliot may be enumerated—is poetry which exhibits a strong texture or non-abstractive organization and thus resists the simpler forms of abstract analysis. How this is true in detail there is no room here to show, and we must leave the demonstration of the point to the reading of the poetry and of the more relevant criticism. Those who have read will know. The dethronement of Milton and his "architectural" style is a part of the converse of the picture and occurs together with a rejection of academic classicism in favor of Jonson's classicism that manifests itself in his "rooted and racy Englishness."[26] For Jonson's devotion to the Latins and Greeks is found in his poetry embedded in the economy of the English language. The more academic classicism, faced with our incapacity at our present two thousand year distance to reconstruct tone and even feeling in the classics except very imperfectly even with the most exhaustive scholarship, turns to some extent to the reading of classical language poems for their abstract conceptual content and for such things as meter considered pretty much in the abstract, with the result that coarseness of poetic organization or faulty total meaning comes after a while to be no longer recognized. When Milton, for instance, writes "L'Allegro," he makes a thing almost indistinguishable, as seventeenth-century lyrics go, from "Il Penseroso." The abstract denotations of the words in the two pieces differ, but the emotions and the total meaning which are further imbedded in the material of the poem and outweigh the denotations a hundred times, are almost the same in the one poem as in the other. "L'Allegro" is far off the mark hit by Shakespeare in *"As You Like It:*

> It was a lover and his lass
> With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino,
> That o'er the green corn-field did pass,
> In the spring time, the only pretty ring time.

The simultaneous rejection by the new criticism of Milton's classicism and many of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century romantics occurs for the same generic reason—the poetry's lack of respect for the interaction of material and abstract meaning. In Leavis' discerning examination of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," the critic objects to the introduction of imagery which leads to abstractions that, within the poem, are disrupting rather than unifying forces. Contrary to Milton, the romantics exhibit not so much a lack of organization on a sensory level as a sensory organization incapable of unifying poetically the intellectual activity to which the sensory content of the poem gives rise.[27]

Within this whole economy of interests Eliot's critical writing largely falls. Eliot has been interested in the metaphysicals, has, in fact, chiefly rescued them from oblivion. By a "sharpshooting" to

[26] F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1936), p. 17.
[27] *Ibid.*, pp. 204-208 ff.

which some have objected, perhaps because sharpshooters waste little of their powder, he has managed to pick off some of the followers of the Miltonic camp. In his own poetry the means of organization are those we find the new criticism interested in: imagery, bulking so large in his study of Dante; dramatic situation, found at the base of almost all his poems; metaphor and calculated ambiguity stretched to the apogee of its orbit; a classicism set deep within the economy of the English language. His earliest important contribution to criticism, the "Tradition and the Individual Talent" of twenty-five years ago, foreshadows in its way the doctrines of total meaning. Eliot sets each work of art in a context with all the rest, making them interact and yield meaning in a manner curiously like that of words. "No poet," he says, "no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone." And the poet

> is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living.[28]

The poet must know what remains meaningful and what does not: his material is again not "ideas" but the already organized composite left by those who have preceded him. Within this material his poem finds its existence.

Conclusion

This is not meant to be a justification of everything that has been said in the name of the new criticism. The early manifestations of the movement were often brash, attended with the bluster of the self-constituted reformer rather than the humility of the investigator. Moreover, in concentrating on the organization which regards as integral the material connections of meaning, both Richards and Eliot have been led at times to state that "absence of intellectual belief need not cripple emotional belief."[29] This is true up to a point, our knowledge of absolutes is so deviously attained and our direct knowledge so concerned with contingencies. We may forget for the moment the connections of the former and imagine that which the latter represents to be other than it is. Furthermore, it is not the abstract thought of the poem, as we have seen, which furnishes the typically poetic organization. But the complete divorce from fact which we might like a theoretical poetry to have is in fine never achieved, and we find that Eliot comes, in the last analysis, to say that it is not.[30]

The extremity of the position taken here by Richards and, with reservations, by Eliot comes undoubtedly from their awareness that it is not alone the abstract thought of the poem which furnishes the typically poetic organization. Competent readers will have a generous abhorrence for the pedestrian intellect which correlates a poem too closely with abstract utterance. This explains the insistence of the new criticism on the importance of the achievements of Gerard Manley Hopkins, "one of the most remarkable technical inventors who ever wrote,"[31] and of the later linguistic methods of James Joyce, whom

[28] "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *op. cit.*, pp. 4 and 11.

[29] Richards, *Practical Criticism*, p. 278. See Eliot's essay "Dante," *op. cit.*, pp. 218-20 and 229-31 n., and "Shakespeare," *ibid.*, pp. 114-115 and 118.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 231.

[31] F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1938), p. 159.

Eliot is reported to have called "the greatest master of the English language since Milton,"[32] as well as their careful differentiation of contemporary poems which to the cursory reader seem equally "unintelligible." Joyce's writing and Hopkins', too, represent a perversion of language on the strictly logical level but a perfection capable of rare beauty on the level of poetic organization, where the discriminations are made between poems equally undigestible to the over-logical mind.

At times the new criticism has been charged with flirting with the notion of poetry as a means of salvation. Poetry it certainly recognizes as an important manifestation of human intelligence and an invaluable acquisition of human understanding. "It is the privilege of poetry," Richards says, "to preserve us from mistaking our notions either for things or for ourselves. Poetry is the completest mode of utterance."[33] This kind of dignity can be admitted for poetry, where our knowledge is given its most satisfactory concretion; for abstract knowledge, in one way the most perfect of human knowledges, is in another way a very imperfect kind of knowing, whereas poetic knowledge, less clear because closer to matter, is also by that same token after a fashion more real. The practical if not theoretical recognition of this fact has gone far to establish much current criticism on solid ground. And if an awareness of the importance of poetry can carry Ezra Pound to aestheticism, Mr. Pound has Leavis to bring him back to earth.

Many aspects of the new criticism have been deliberately put aside to give unity to the present essay, which has attempted to show how a movement which deliberately considers the values of ambiguity and other manifestations hostile to clear intelligibility can come to any good. The answer proposed is that in so doing the new criticism sets itself the task of investigating truly poetic procedures. If it has been empirical at times, we must remember that poetry's concern with the material side of being justifies some laboratory procedures, and we should recall that service has been done in equipping the critic with pieces of vocabulary which help to elucidate a poem rather than to produce emotional effects in his readers. Those who are familiar with criticism which seeks this latter effect should welcome the new.

The new criticism deserves considerable attention and respect in philosophical circles, and perhaps in view of its origins it needs defense. It is a child of its age in rebelling against the world of Descartes and to a lesser extent against the world of Kant. But often enough this rebellion has the virtue of being philosophically self-conscious. Richards, for example, is deliberately attacking at the same time the doctrine of progress and the mind to which Cartesianism makes its appeal when he says that "The archproblem of truth is never solved once for all; though the more we know about it, the better our local decisions should be."[34] Moreover, the leaders of the new criticism have not only moved toward positions where real

[32] F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), p. 135.

[33] *Coleridge on Imagination*, p. 163.

[34] *How to Read a Page*, p. 241.

philosophy becomes possible; they have done service in helping to correct a literary tradition which in its assumptions perpetuated an impossible substitute for philosophy. At least we no longer cultivate a style like that recorded by Thomas Sprat in 1667 as the ideal of the Royal Society, a style "bringing all things as near the mathematical plainness as possible," nor do we avoid all but the "soft and gentle" metaphor which received Dryden's approval in *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* because it "does not shock us as we read it." And perhaps, then, we will not be considered devotees of the ephemeral progress ourselves if we see in the study of the mingling of the material with the abstract in poetry a way which some will follow to rescue human knowledge from the waste land of the Cartesian dichotomy and the Kantian aesthetic.

WALTER J. ONG

Regis College
Denver, Colorado