

Critics and Criticism

Ancient and Modern

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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

1952

THE CRITICAL MONISM OF CLEANTH BROOKS¹

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CERTAIN skeptical doubts which I have long felt concerning "the new criticism" have been considerably sharpened by Mr. Cleanth Brooks's latest volume, *The Well Wrought Urn*,² as well as by his recent essay on "Irony and 'Ironic' Poetry."³ I am not happy about this, since on a number of points I am in sympathy with the purposes which differentiate Mr. Brooks and the writers commonly associated with him from most of the other critical schools of the day. I applaud them for having rejected the temptation to assimilate poetry, by large analogies, to metaphysics or rhetoric or history or the spirit of the age, and for having insisted on considering it, in Eliot's phrase, as poetry and not another thing. I welcome their efforts to shift the emphasis in practical criticism from generalities about authors to particularized studies of texts; and I have only praise for their desire to rescue poetics from the dictatorship of factual science and relativism and to reorient it toward normative judgments. These seem to me valuable contributions, and, were it not for other and, as I think, more essential aspects of the philosophy common to the group, I should be inclined to let my gratitude for them outweigh my misgivings.

It is not so much the particular theses advanced by Brooks in "Irony and 'Ironic' Poetry" that disturb me as the tacit assumptions about critical theory and method which have made the questions debated in this essay seem of such crucial importance to him. On the immediate issues of his polemic against those who object to his enlargement of the term "irony" I think he is right. There is no reason why a critic who has chosen to make a common word like "irony" or "paradox" the central term of his system should not enjoy the privilege "of wrenching the word from its usual context—of at once specializing and broadening it"; all critics from the beginning have done this, and their readers can legitimately complain only when the wrenching is unsystematic or when the motive to it, as is sometimes the case in contemporary criticism, is merely ignorance of the existence in earlier literature of an equally good and, to the educated public, better-known word for the same idea. If Brooks is guilty of these faults, his detractors have not pointed it out. And he cannot be fairly

1. Reprinted, with minor alterations, from *Modern Philology*, May, 1948.

2. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, [1947].

3. *College English*, IX (1948), 231-37.

accused, either, of having so narrowed the meaning of "irony" as to deny the benefit of the concept to any poem, however apparently "simple," which he can convince himself is poetry. At all events, if there was ever substance to this charge, it is probable that few readers of his chapter on "Tears, Idle Tears" in *The Well Wrought Urn*, in which Tennyson's handling of ironic contrast and paradox is exhibited in detail, will care to press it in the future.

I do not question, either, that "irony," in Brooks's sense of the term, is a constant trait of all good poems, and I should have no quarrel with him had he been content to say so and to offer his analyses of texts as illustrations of one point, among others, in poetic theory. What troubles me is that, for Brooks, there are no other points. Irony, or paradox, is poetry, *tout simplement*, its form no less than its matter; or rather, in the critical system which he has constructed, there is no principle save that denoted by the words "irony" or "paradox" from which significant propositions concerning poems can be derived. It is the One in which the Many in his theory—and there are but few of these—are included as parts, the single source of all his predicates, the unique cause from which he generates all effects.

In this, it is true, he is not alone among the "new critics." The terms may differ, but the same tendency toward a monistic reduction of critical concepts is manifest in Allen Tate's doctrine of "tension," in John Crowe Ransom's principle of "texture," in Robert Penn Warren's obsession with symbols, above all in I. A. Richards' Pavlovian mythology concerning the "behavior" of words. The doubts which Brooks inspires thus become doubts about the general state of critical learning. I shall treat him, therefore, rather as a sign than as an individual, and I take him in place of any of the others, partly because he has expounded his position in full most recently, and partly because the position itself, as I shall indicate, is set forth in language which at once affords an easy clue to what has happened to critical theory in our age and at the same time is prophetic, however unconsciously, of new directions it may yet take.

I

It will be well to begin at the climactic point where Brooks's analysis of poetry leaves off. "One of the critical discoveries of our time—perhaps it is not a discovery but merely a recovery—" he says in his essay, "is that the parts of a poem have an organic relation to each other." It is "this general concept of organic structure which has been revolutionary in our recent criticism; our best 'practical criticism' has been based upon it; and upon it rests, in my opinion, the best hope that we have for reviving the study of poetry and of the humanities generally."⁴

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 231–32, 237.

What the concept of organic structure means for him is made clear in *The Well Wrought Urn*, the subtitle of which is *Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. We must draw "a sharp distinction," he writes, "between the attractiveness or beauty of any particular item taken as such and the 'beauty' of the poem considered as a whole. . . . Unless one asserts the primacy of the pattern, a poem becomes merely a bouquet of intrinsically beautiful items." We must describe poetry, therefore, "in terms of structure"; but the nature of the "structure" which distinguishes poetry requires careful definition. "The structure meant is certainly not 'form' in the conventional sense in which we think of form as a kind of envelope which 'contains' the 'content.'" Nor is it a logical structure or a "rational meaning" which can be apprehended adequately by paraphrasing it in prose. Poetry, it must always be remembered, is the opposite of science.

The structure meant is a structure of meanings, evaluations, and interpretations; and the principle of unity which informs it seems to be one of balancing and harmonizing connotations, attitudes, and meanings. But even here one needs to make important qualifications: the principle is not one which involves the arrangement of the various elements into homogeneous groupings, pairing like with like. It unites the like with the unlike. It does not unite them, however, by the simple process of allowing one connotation to cancel out another nor does it reduce the contradictory attitudes to harmony by a process of subtraction. . . . It is a positive unity, not a negative.

It is the presence in poetry of a structure such as this, he remarks, that accounts for his choice of key terms, and explains the recurrence in his pages of such words as "ambiguity," "paradox," "complex of attitudes," and, most frequently of all, "irony." These words may perhaps give way to other better ones in the future, but any substitutes for them will "have to be terms which do justice to the special kind of structure which seems to emerge as the common structure of poems so diverse on other counts as are *The Rape of the Lock* and 'Tears, Idle Tears.'"⁵

"The structure meant is a structure of meanings, evaluations, and interpretations; and the principle of unity which informs it seems to be one of balancing and harmonizing connotations, attitudes, and meanings." Whatever may be said of the first part of this formula, the second part will surely recall to every reader the famous passage in chapter xiv of the *Biographia literaria* in which Coleridge describes the operation of "that synthetic and magical power," constitutive of poetic genius, "to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination":

This power, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, controul . . . reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the repre-

5. *The Well Wrought Urn*, pp. 178-79.

sentative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry.⁶

Brooks prefers to talk about the structure of poetry rather than about the imagination, but the parallelism of his doctrine with that of Coleridge is none the less evident, and, what is more to the point, it has been acknowledged by Brooks himself, recently in *The Well Wrought Urn*⁷ and earlier in *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*. There he was interested in defining metaphysical poetry in such a way as to reveal its community with all poetry, or at least all good poetry; and among the pronouncements of other critics which he finds most to his purpose he singles out particularly the passage I have quoted from Coleridge and, as a "development" from it, I. A. Richards' definition of the "poetry of synthesis," that is to say, the poetry in which impulses are brought ironically—the term is Richards'—into conflict with their opposites and the apparent discords finally resolved.⁸ Brooks can hardly object, therefore, if I state my dissatisfaction with his critical method, first of all at least, in terms of its departures from the method of Coleridge.

II

The theory of poetry set forth in the *Biographia literaria* forms a coherent whole, but it is too good a theory, for all its limitations, to permit of reduction to a single principle or cause. For this reason various modern commentators, including I. A. Richards and Allen Tate, have naturally discovered that Coleridge, great as he was, had only a confused glimpse of the simple truth about his subject. The confusion, however, appears less glaring on a close reading of the text of the *Biographia* than in the pages of these recent interpreters; and much of the trouble disappears when it is observed that Coleridge had not one source for the distinctions he employs but several sources, which are nevertheless correlated in a scheme that allows him to discriminate aspects of poems as determined now by their medium or manner, now by their substance, now by their origin in the mental powers of the poet, now by their immediate or remote ends. The unity of his system derives, indeed, from the primacy of one of these causes relatively to the others: "I labored at a solid foundation," he says, "on which permanently to ground my opinions, in the component faculties of the human mind itself, and their comparative dignity and im-

6. *Biographia literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (Oxford, 1907), II, 12.

7. Pp. 17, 230.

8. *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (Chapel Hill, 1939), pp. 40-43.

portance."⁹ But the faculties of the mind, though ideally they form a hierarchy, can yet be distinguished as to their particular objects and operations, with the result that, whereas poetry can be analogized, on the philosophical level, to the other arts and to science and philosophy itself, a special consideration of it in criticism is still possible in terms of the variable factors which enter into its production.

Thus it is that Coleridge, as one can see from chapters i and xvi of the *Biographia*, as well as from many other passages, can make intelligible use of the old distinction, so abhorrent to modern critics, between the diction or language of poems and their "matter and substance." He knew from his own experience in writing verse, as well as from literary history, that the fitting of the right manner to the right objects, or vice versa, is a problem which poets actually face, and that in criticism, therefore, terms and distinctions are needed, on both sides of the disjunction, in order to formulate the degree of success achieved in its solution. The distinction is saved from becoming a merely sterile dichotomy by virtue of a further distinction, to which Coleridge himself attached great importance, but which has not been too well understood by some of the "new critics"¹⁰—the distinction, which he insists is not a division, between "poetry" and "poem." I have quoted his definition of "poetry": it is a much wider term than "poem," since, on the one hand, what is essential to poetry may be found in writings, like those of Plato, Jeremy Taylor, and Thomas Burnet, which lack not only meter but also "the contra-distinguishing objects of a poem," and since, on the other hand, no poem of any length either can be or ought to be "all poetry." The reason is that "poetry" comes into being, no matter what the medium, whenever the images, thoughts, and emotions of the mind are brought into unity by the synthetic power of the secondary imagination. The definition of poetry, therefore, is the same as the definition of what "the poetic genius" does with whatever materials it operates upon: whenever "opposite or discordant qualities" of any sort are balanced or reconciled, poetry results, though we may call it, judging by other criteria, poetry (in the narrower sense) or philosophy or pictorial art. Poetry is thus architectonic thought, but a "poem," or "poetry" in its limited meaning, is a composition in words of a special kind; it contains the same elements—afforded by the mind interacting with the things of its experience—as a prose composition, but differs by virtue of "a different combination of them, in consequence of a different object being proposed." It is at this point, with the introduction of ends, that Coleridge's criticism becomes specifically poetic, and the result

9. *Biographia literaria*, I, 14.

10. Cf., e.g., I. A. Richards, *Coleridge on Imagination* (New York, 1935), pp. 112-19; and Allen Tate, *Reason in Madness: Critical Essays* (New York, 1941), pp. 45-51.

is a definition of poem in separation, first, from works of science and history and then from such works in prose as novels and romances: "A poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its *immediate* object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species (having *this* object in common with it) it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the *whole*, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component *part*."¹¹ Or again: "It [namely, poetry in the narrower sense] is an art . . . of representing, in words, external nature and human thoughts and affections, both relatively to human affections, by the production of as much immediate pleasure in parts, as is compatible with the largest sum of pleasure in the whole."¹²

The comprehensiveness of Coleridge's scheme is apparent. "Imagination" is the key term in the sense that it designates the common source in the mind from which poetry as the balancing and reconciliation of opposites necessarily derives, along with philosophy and other things; and as are the differences in the operation of the imagination, so are the major distinctions—evident, for example, in the contrast between Shakespeare and Milton—which separate kinds of poetic genius. But poetry is also the art of making poems, and the consideration of these must take account, not merely of the imagination as the source of all excellence in thought, but of particular differences in ends pursued, objects represented, and kinds and qualities of language and verse selected for the purpose. Multiple and converging lines of differentiation are hence made possible, with the aid of which the critic—as Coleridge himself showed—can explore a wide variety of problems and arrive at solutions in which the obvious complexity of poetic composition is not obscured by the reduction of all effects to a single cause.

The scheme has a characteristically Platonic structure, but of the better sort, inasmuch as it formulates its idea of excellence in terms applicable to all synthetic activities of the mind and at the same time preserves the identity of poetry, as poetry and not another thing, by discriminating differences in ends, subject matters, and linguistic forms. It is a scheme with two levels, signified respectively by the words "poetry" and "poem," and the principle which relates the two is the principle, common to most of the Platonisms, of reflection or imitation. A poem in itself is a composite of diction with such-and-such qualities and of thought or matter determined by this or that faculty of the mind acting on the objects of human experience, the composite so organized as to produce as much immediate pleasure by its parts as is compatible with a maximum of pleasure from the whole. But a poem is likewise the work of a

11. *Biographia literaria*, II, 8–10.

12. *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor (London, 1930), II, 66–67.

poet, and as such it reflects, in so far as it is successful, the secondary imagination "co-existing with the conscious will," just as this reflects the primary imagination operative in all human perception, and just as this in turn reflects "in the finite mind . . . the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM."¹³

It is illuminating to see what has happened to this multidimensional and hence relatively sophisticated theory, to which he is admittedly indebted, in the criticism of Brooks. He has retained two of Coleridge's points: the proposition that the "imagination" reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite and discordant qualities; and the proposition that the contrary of poetry is science. But the new scheme in which these doctrines are embraced is a much simpler scheme than Coleridge's, and one capable of generating far fewer distinctions and criteria for the analysis and judgment of poems. The most obvious contrast is that, whereas Coleridge was concerned alike with indicating differences, both as between poems and other forms of composition and as between different sorts of poems (witness the beginning of chap. xiv), and with establishing the unifying basis of all these distinctions in the powers and creative operations of the mind, Brooks is concerned solely with constituting poetry—that is, poems considered collectively—as homogeneous by attributing to poetry a "special kind of structure," to be found in all poems—in the *Odyssey* no less than in *The Waste Land*, as he says¹⁴—but distinctive of poems as opposed to works of science. His problem is one of literal differentiation, and he has no need, consequently, for the elaborate "Platonic" dialectic underlying the *Biographia*. But the result of his decision to look for differences only as between poetry and other things and not within poetry itself is a notable impoverishment of poetic theory.

The nature of this impoverishment will perhaps become clear if we observe the manner in which his two major propositions have been separated from the argumentative context in which their originals were placed in chapter xiv of the *Biographia*. In that context the antithesis of poetry and science formed a part, as we have seen, of Coleridge's definition of "a poem," and the concept of the balancing and reconciliation of opposites formed a part of his definition of "poetry" in terms of the "poet." And the two definitions were philosophically distinct, the term "poetry" being a much more inclusive term than "poem." Brooks has abolished this difference, and has done so by fusing the two concepts, with a consequent loss of analytical values on both sides. His discourse is uniformly of "poems" in Coleridge's sense, that is to say, compositions in words of a special kind, and these he opposes, as Coleridge did, to works of science and other similar modes of writing. He also follows Coleridge in assign-

13. *Biographia literaria*, I, 202.

14. *The Well Wrought Urn*, p. 191.

ing to poems a peculiar kind of structure, or relationship of parts to whole. But—and this is the crucial shift—he derives his formula for this structure from what had been Coleridge's formula for "poetry" considered as the creative activity of the poet, and in doing so he decisively narrows the scope of the formula by dissociating it from the universal operations of the mind—the same, for Coleridge, wherever the highest excellence is achieved, whether in poetry, philosophy, eloquence, or science—and attaching it as a distinctive predicate to one species of linguistic objects. "Poems" thus become either all "poetry" or not-poems, and it would be an error to look for "poetry" elsewhere than in "poems."

One consequence of this is the disappearance from his treatment of poems in contrast with scientific works of Coleridge's differentiation of ends—truth for works of science, pleasure (entailing the special relationship, already noted, of parts and whole in the composition) for poems. So far as I have noticed, Brooks never treats poems in relation to the kinds or degrees of delight they afford; if the word "pleasure" occurs, it is surely only as a nonfunctional appendage to his system. It is otherwise with "truth"; being intent upon distinguishing poetry from science in terms of their different linguistic "structures," he is obliged to assume some common reference, and this turns out to be the term "truth" employed in a highly analogical sense, as one thing for the "rational" and "abstract" statements of science, and another thing for the "paradoxes" of poetry. Strictly speaking, however, poetry has no final cause, in his system, that is anyway analytically distinct from what poems read as ironic contexts "say"—even his remark that the "task" of the poet is to "unify experience"¹⁵ signifies only that the parts of a poem necessarily have an organic—that is, an "ironic"—relation to each other.

Another consequence is the disappearance of the distinction between the "manner" and the "matter," or the "form" and the "substance," of poems. The warrant of this in the *Biographia* derives from the position that "poems," as distinct from "poetry," are compositions in words possessing the same "elements" as other kinds of composition and differing only, as we have seen, in "a different combination of them, in consequence of a different object being proposed." Poems may thus be characterized and differentiated specifically in terms of the varying mental faculties operative in them and the varying kinds of phenomena, human or natural, they represent, and questions may be raised concerning the appropriateness to these of the diction and meter: the reader of Coleridge's practical criticism will recall many passages in which precisely this is done. For Brooks, on the other hand, any such procedure is necessarily suspect; it is a sign that the critic who employs it is ignorant of the principle

15. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

which essentially separates poetry from science. The distinction between language and thought is still reflected, to be sure, in his vocabulary, so that he can designate the "elements" of a poem sometimes as "attitudes," "evaluations," or "interpretations" and sometimes as "connotations" or "meanings." But the different words are merely names for different aspects of one thing—the "structure" which distinguishes poems. To treat them otherwise would be to revert to what he calls "the old form-content dualism" or to fall victim to "the heresy of paraphrase," with its implication of a "logical structure" detachable from the poem. Most of our difficulties in criticism, he remarks,

are rooted in the heresy of paraphrase. If we allow ourselves to be misled by it, we distort the relation of the poem to its "truth," we raise the problem of belief in a vicious and crippling form, we split the poem between its "form" and its "content"—we bring the statement to be conveyed into an unreal competition with science or philosophy or theology.

The most subtle examples of this error "are those which, beginning with the 'paraphrasable' elements of the poem, refer the other elements of the poem finally to some role subordinate to the paraphrasable elements."¹⁶ But the parts of a poem are related "organically," and hence there can be nothing to which any of them can be said to be subordinate except the poetical "structure" itself which balances and harmonizes them.

The definition of this "structure," as we have observed, derives from Coleridge's definition, not of "poem," but of "poetry." But it, too, undergoes a profound change in its transfer from one system to the other. In Coleridge the concept of "poetry" is not a differentia of poems (since it may appear in works of philosophy and science) but a criterion of their value, the ideal of perfection to which they, or passages in them, are to be referred. They approach perfection whenever the poetic genius, or the imagination, put in action by the will and understanding and retained under their control, succeeds in reconciling or reducing to unity any of the various "opposite or discordant qualities" involved in the substance or the diction of a poem, and they depart from perfection in proportion as such unification is not achieved. It is in these terms, for example, that Coleridge distinguishes between the beauties and the defects of Wordsworth in chapter xxii of the *Biographia*. When Wordsworth is at his best, the unity is complete—there is a perfect appropriateness of the language to the meaning, there is a union of deep and subtle thought with sensibility, there is, above all, imagination. On the other hand, the unification does not always take place, and signs of the failure may be seen, throughout Wordsworth's poetry, in the occasional inconstancy of the style, in the un-

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 184, 183.

necessary matter-of-factness of certain passages, or in thoughts and images too great for the subject.

In making what remains of Coleridge's definition of "poetry" the differential of "poems" as contrasted with works of science, Brooks has cut himself off from any such critical use of the concept as this. It is not strange, therefore, that he feels no need, as Coleridge did, for an analysis of the "component faculties of the mind and their comparative dignity and importance," or that, in speaking of poetic "structure," he introduces no distinctions that depend on a conception of the poetic process such as Coleridge expressed when he spoke of the "imagination" as being set in motion and kept under the control of the "will and understanding." Any such reference of poems or poetic values to the mental powers of the poet and their operations would be fatal to Brooks's central position, since it would derive the peculiar "structure" of poems from a cause in no way distinct from that which generates works of science, philosophy, theology, and rhetoric.

Some enabling cause of poetic "structure" must, however, be found; and what more natural—since this is the one remaining possibility—than to locate it in the poet's language as an instrument determined to poetry rather than to science or propaganda? That this is indeed Brooks's position is indicated by several passages in *The Well Wrought Urn*. Thus, after commenting on the quality of the "irony" in one stanza of Gray's *Elegy*, he remarks that "I am not here interested in enumerating the possible variations; I am interested rather in our seeing that *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." And again:¹⁷

I have said that even the apparently simple and straightforward poet *is forced into paradoxes by the nature of his instrument*. Seeing this, we should not be surprised to find poets who consciously employ it to gain a compression and precision otherwise unobtainable. . . . The method is an extension of the normal language of poetry, not a perversion of it.¹⁸

The causal efficacy thus runs, not from the poet to the poem, but from "the language of poetry" to the ironical or paradoxical "structure of poetry," which the poet's choice of this kind of language, instead of that of science, makes inevitable. But "the language of poetry is the language of paradox";¹⁹ in other words, the two terms signify the same thing, or at most different degrees of the same thing; and thus all the multiple principles which Coleridge found it necessary to invoke—in proper subordination—for the adequate criticism of poetry are collapsed into one—the single principle, essentially linguistic in its

17. *Ibid.*, p. 8; italics mine.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 10; italics mine.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

formulation, which is designated as "irony" or "paradox." Brooks, in short, is a complete monist, and, given his choice of language rather than subject matter or the poet or the ends of poetry as the unique basis of all his explanations, a materialistic monist at that.

III

The last point can be put in another way by saying that whereas for Coleridge at least three sciences are necessary for criticism—grammar, logic, and psychology—Brooks finds it possible to get along with only one, namely, grammar; and with only one part of that, namely, its doctrine of qualification. His whole effort can be described not unfairly as an attempt to erect a theory of poetry by extending and analogizing from the simple proposition of grammar that the meaning of one word or group of words is modified by its juxtaposition in discourse with another word or group of words. The paradoxes and ironic oppositions and resolutions of discrepant "attitudes" which, in his system, distinguish poetry sharply from science and other nonpoetical modes of writing are merely the more striking forms which such qualification takes when it is considered, merely qua qualification of meaning by context, apart from, and in contrast with, what he takes to be the self-contained and "abstract" meaning, not dependent on any special context, of predications of fact or universal truth, such as "Two plus two equals four" or "The square on the hypotenuse of a right triangle is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides."²⁰ To talk about the "prose-sense" of poems is to reduce them, or some part of them, to the status of assertions of this kind; and it is for the sake of eradicating this error—the source of "the heresy of paraphrase"—that he insists on finding the essence of poetry in its exclusive reliance on properties of speech which in earlier analyses of language were treated between the consideration of individual words and the consideration of linguistic wholes determined differently by the different ends of logic, dialectic, poetic, and rhetoric; as, for example, in Aristotle's discussions of ambiguity and equivocation; the modes of opposition or contrariety; the different senses of sameness and difference; the kinds of metaphor, including that which involves antithesis; amplification and depreciation in thought and words; the ways of making discourse lively and dramatic; the technique of the unexpected; and so on. Brooks has retained very little of the complexity and precision of this old "grammatical" teaching, and he presents what remains of it as peculiarly relevant to poetry rather than as applicable generally to discourse, and, indeed, as constitutive by itself of the whole of poetic theory. For all his simplification and distortion of the ancient analyses, however, it is clear that the apparatus of terms and distinctions he brings to the study of poetry is a composite of elements that can be

20. *College English*, IX, 233.

traced historically to the pre-propositional sections of logic and dialectic, the theory of diction, merely *qua* diction, of poetic, and the stylistic part of rhetoric.

His key concepts, "paradox" and "irony," reflect unmistakably their grammatical origin. They are terms that designate the mutual "qualification"—and especially one mode of it—that inevitably occurs when the meanings of individual words or sentences or passages are not fixed by prior definition but are determined immediately, in the discourse itself, by the "contexts" in which they stand. "Irony," he says, "is the most general term that we have for the kind of qualification which the various elements in a context receive from the context. This kind of qualification . . . is of tremendous importance in any poem. Moreover, irony is our most general term for indicating that recognition of incongruities—which, again, pervades all poetry to a degree far beyond what our conventional criticism has been heretofore willing to allow."²¹ And "paradox" would seem to differ from "irony" only as it signifies "irony" especially in its narrower sense—not the general phenomenon of contextual qualification (the importance of which, Brooks tells us, we, or at least the "new critics," have at last come to see)²² but the special kind of qualification, so long neglected, which involves the resolution of opposites: in short, the antithetical metaphor of Aristotle, Johnson's "heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together," and Coleridge's "imagination."

So much for the manner in which Brooks constitutes the distinctive "language of poetry." His main interest, however, is in its distinctive "structure," and this would seem, on first thought, to be something requiring formulation in different, and even nongrammatical, terms. He tells us indeed, in his recent essay, that the statements made in a poem—including those which look like philosophical generalizations—"are to be read as if they were speeches in a drama,"²³ and in *The Well Wrought Urn* he remarks that "the structure of a poem resembles that of a play."²⁴ This sounds promising—and the analogy does, in fact, as we shall see, imply one idea which, if Brooks had worked it out, might have led to a more adequate theory than the one he gives us; but the promise is dimmed when we recollect that a "drama" is after all, when considered apart from the specific emotional quality of its plot, merely a grammatical entity, that is, a sequence of speeches with conflicting contexts.

Again, he has much to say about "unity," as when he remarks that the poet "must perforce dramatize the oneness of the experience, even though paying tribute to its diversity," and that the poet gives us "an insight which preserves the unity of experience," his final task being, indeed, "to unify experience."

21. *The Well Wrought Urn*, pp. 191-92.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 233.

22. *College English*, IX, 232.

24. P. 186.

"He must return to us the unity of the experience itself as man knows it in his own experience."²⁵ But this, too, is disappointing, for it merely attributes to the poet the same necessity for "balancing and harmonizing connotations, attitudes, and meanings" which elsewhere in Brooks—and more typically—is said to follow from the nature of the linguistic instrument the poet uses, as contrasted with the fixed statement-making language of science. It is not, therefore, any special principle of unity derived from the nature of the "experience" or object represented in a given kind of poem that determines poetical structure; rather it is the presence in poems of poetical structure—i.e., ironical opposition and resolution—that determines, and is the sign of, the unification of experience. And, as Brooks makes abundantly clear, the "structure of poetry" is a structure common to all poems.

Only one alternative remains: to get the "structure" of poems out of their linguistic elements or parts. And this is what Brooks tells us explicitly that he is doing. "The structure obviously is everywhere conditioned by the nature of the material which goes into the poem. The nature of the material sets the problem to be solved, and the solution is the ordering of the material."²⁶ And again, and most plainly: "What is true of the poet's language in detail is true of the larger wholes of poetry."²⁷ But what is true of the poet's language in detail, in Brooks's account of it, is that it is a language—"of paradox," as he says—which inevitably organizes itself, when two words are put together, into "organic" relations according to some pattern of ambiguity, metaphor, or ironic contrast. And nothing less, or more, than this can be said about the total organization of parts—that is to say, of lines and passages—in the poem as a whole. Brooks devotes a short paragraph in *The Well Wrought Urn* to a familiar line of Gray's *Elegy*:

Grandeur is not to smile at the "short and simple annals of the poor." Properly speaking, of course, the poor do not have "annals." Kingdoms have annals, and so do kings, but the peasantry does not. The choice of the term is ironical, and yet the "short and simple" records of the poor are their "annals"—the important records for them.²⁸

Here is poetry, the whole of poetry, so far as its essence as "paradoxical" language is concerned, for here is ironic contrast and its resolution; and the only difference between this one line and the whole *Elegy* is merely a matter of the degree of complexity exhibited by the ironic interrelationships. We may speak, indeed, of partial "contexts" and of total "contexts," the latter being built up, as Brooks suggests in one place,²⁹ out of the former; but the two are

25. *The Well Wrought Urn*, pp. 194-95.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 178.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 192.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

completely homogeneous in their elements and structure, and the relation between them is best described as that of microcosm to macrocosm.

The limiting consequences of this radical reduction of poetics to grammar become apparent as soon as we consider what problems of criticism Brooks's system will not permit us to solve. Thus we cannot, by any legitimate extension of his principles, develop an apparatus for discriminating essentially and not solely in terms of accidents of subject matter or historical style—between poems so obviously different in the special kinds of pleasure they give us as are the *Odyssey* and *The Waste Land*, "Who Is Sylvia?" and "The Canonization," "Westminster Bridge" and Gray's *Elegy*, *The Rape of the Lock* and "Tears, Idle Tears." What is revealed, if we stay with Brooks, is merely the ironical "structure" which all these, and other, poems have in common as contrasted with nonpoetical works or bad poems. But this is to shut our eyes to a whole range of questions, turning on specific differences in poetic ends and the means suitable for their realization, which are real problems for poets writing poems and hence, one would suppose, important problems for critics. For, literally speaking at any rate, a poet does not write poetry but individual poems. And these are inevitably, as finished wholes, instances of one or another poetic kind, differentiated not by any necessities of the linguistic instrument of poetry but primarily by the nature of the poet's conception, as finally embodied in his poem, of a particular form to be achieved through the representation, in speech used dramatically or otherwise, of some distinctive state of feeling, or moral choice, or action, complete in itself and productive of a certain emotion or complex of emotions in the reader. It is thus only relatively to the form of the poem, as the representation of a particularized human activity of a given emotional quality, that the poet can know whether his poem is too long or too short, whether the things to be said or left unsaid are properly chosen, whether the parts are rightly ordered and connected, or whether the words, metaphors, and "paradoxes" are appropriate or not to the thought, emotion, character, situation, or general effect. In other words, the principles of the poet's artistic reasoning (however instinctive this may be) are always, and necessarily, ends or effects of some determinate sort to be accomplished in his poem, whether ultimately in the poem as a whole or mediately in some part of it; and the principles will differ, and along with them his decisions as to what must or can be done in constituting his action and its mode of representation, rendering his characters and their thoughts, and fashioning his diction, according as he is writing a simple lyric of feeling or a moral lyric of character, a tragedy or a mock-epic. A sign of the adequacy to its subject of any theory of poetry which aims, as Brooks's theory does, to treat poetry as poetry and not another thing, is surely the extent to which it is able to cope, in specific terms, with problems

of this nature. The construction of an adequate theory is not an impossible task, but it requires a basic analysis that will take account, as Brooks never does, of more than one among the several variable "parts" which are combined in different ways in each of the many distinguishable species of poetic works.

It would be false to say that Brooks's preoccupation with language to the exclusion of the other more controlling causes of poetry deprives his criticism of any basis for judgments of value. He insists repeatedly, in fact, that they must be made. "The Humanities are in their present plight," he says, "largely because their teachers have more and more ceased to raise normative questions, have refrained from evaluation";³⁰ and he remarks that his studies of particular poems in *The Well Wrought Urn* are based on the assumption that "there are general criteria against which the poems may be measured."³¹ The criteria as finally stated, however, turn out either to be excessively general or to have little direct applicability to individual poems. He refers to T. S. Eliot's test, which he puts in the form of the question, "Does the statement seem to be that which the mind of the reader can accept as coherent, mature, and founded on the facts of experience?"³² We must indeed ask this question about poems, but the test is equally relevant to other kinds of works, as when one says of an argument that the conclusion seems true enough, but the conception of the subject is simple-minded. Elsewhere the standard is formulated in terms of deficiency and excess. On the one hand, poems lacking in irony are vulnerable to it, and hence "sentimental" and hence bad; on the other hand, as he suggests may be true of "Who Is Sylvia?" the "complexity" may be greater "than is necessary or normal."³³ Between these extremes, a hierarchy of poems, he thinks, may be established by the test of "complexity of attitude," with poems of simple affection at the bottom and probably tragedy at the top.³⁴ In so far as this reiterates the old doctrine that the excellence of art consists in a mean, there is no difficulty. But relatively to what is the too much or the too little to be determined in any particular case? Relatively to the maximizing, without diminishing returns, of the peculiar emotional effect proper to the object represented in a given poem? Or relatively to some standard of complexity fixed apart from the poet's problems in writing an individual poem of a certain form, and hence, in some sense, absolute? Brooks does not clearly say; but his notion of a hierarchy of poems based on the quantity and "sharpness" of the ironical oppositions they subsume suggests that he means by "normative" judgments the measurement of poems by a predetermined norm assumed to have general validity for all poems no matter what their kind or intended effect. He cannot,

30. *Ibid.*, p. 212.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 198-99.

32. *College English*, IX, 234.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

34. *The Well Wrought Urn*, pp. 229-30.

in fact, hold anything else but this, lacking any premises that would warrant judgments of individual poems founded on a mean relative to their peculiar ends and forms. And he lacks such premises because he has no concept of poems as concrete wholes the unity of which requires that the parts should be of a certain quality and magnitude and present in a certain order if the desired poetic effect is to be fully achieved.

But this is equivalent to saying that he has no distinctions for dealing with individual poems otherwise than as instances, to be grammatically construed, of a universal poetic "structure." His many *explications de textes* are accordingly better described, in his own term, as "readings" than as critical studies proper. Their method is the repeated application of his central paradigm of poetry to particular poems for the sake of uncovering, in the significances which can be attributed to their statements when taken in context, hitherto unnoticed occurrences of ironical "complexity," first on the level of single words and lines, and then on the level of the interrelationships between larger passages, until the end of the poem is reached.

A typical example of the method is the chapter on Gray's *Elegy* in *The Well Wrought Urn*, from which I have already quoted a passage illustrative of the manner in which the technique works in detail. The essay considers successively, first the effect of the many "echoes" of Milton and others in making the *Elegy* an ironical rather than a "simple" poem; then the ironic contrast implied in the opening description of the churchyard; then the ironic function of the personifications, together with their "supporting ironical devices" in phrases like "homely joys," "the short and simple annals of the poor," "animated bust," the stanza beginning "Full many a gem," and the lines on Hampden, Milton, and Cromwell; then the passage on the tombstones in the churchyard, which, according to Brooks, brings together opposites so far held apart; and, finally, the poet's lines about himself and his imagined epitaph, which are said to center in the speaker's "choice" between the two alternatives of burial contrasted earlier in the poem.

Brooks is concerned, in this chapter, to put us on guard against what he fears is the common temptation "to think of the prose-sense as the poetic content, a content which in this poem is transmitted, essentially unqualified, to the reader by means of the poetic form, which, in this case, merely supplies a discreet decoration to the content." This should certainly be discouraged; but Brooks appears to have fallen victim to an equally unfortunate temptation, which his critical principles, in fact, make irresistible, namely, to disregard the "poetic content" altogether. For surely there is a kind of "content," distinctive of poems like Gray's, which cannot be reduced, by paraphrase, to any proposition or idea, and which is not so much "transmitted" as represented: it is that

which primarily constitutes the *Elegy* a complete and ordered serious lyric, productive of a special emotional pleasure, rather than simply a statement of thought. It is to be discovered by inquiring about the moral character of the speaker (as distinct from his "attitudes") and the particular problem which confronts him; about the relation between what Gray has chosen to present, namely, the calm and aphoristic but solemn deliberation in the churchyard, and the emotions which the speaker's situation and outlook had previously generated; about the sequence of his thoughts and feelings as thus made probable or necessary; and so on.³⁵ Brooks raises none of these poetic questions. The *Elegy* as he exhibits it is indeed ironical discourse, in which the "prose-sense" (that is, what is contained in bad paraphrases of the poem) is "qualified" at each step. But it is still merely discourse, with an arrangement dictated solely by the contrast the speaker is supposed to be making between two possibilities of burial and his (at least in Brooks's account) unmotivated choice between them. It has an outline, to be sure, but an outline of the kind that any sermon might have, or any serious familiar essay. The "reading" gives us, in short, not a poem but simply a piece of moderately subtle dialectic: an

35. More explicitly, I take the poetic form of the *Elegy* to be that of an imitative lyric of moral choice (see below, p. 564), representing a situation in which a virtuous, sensitive, and ambitious young man of humble birth confronts the prospect of his death while still to "Fortune and to Fame unknown," and eventually, after much disturbance of mind, reconciles himself to his probable "fate" by reflecting that none of the rewards of successful ambition can "sooth the dull cold ear of Death," which comes as inevitably to the great as to the obscure; that a life passed "far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife," though circumscribing the exercise of virtue and talent, may yet be a means of preserving innocence; and that he can at any rate look forward to—what all men desire as a minimum—living on in the memory of at least one friend, while his merits and frailties alike repose "in trembling hope" on the bosom of his Father and his God. What is embodied in the words of the poem is the final stage of this "action"—the resolution of the speaker's internal conflict (hinted at in ll. 101-8); with respect to this, his evening meditation in the churchyard on the "unhonour'd Dead" serves the double function of a dramatizing and externalizing device and, more importantly, of an analogy in his reconciling argument. He stands apart from both the great of the world and the humble rustics whose tombs are before him; but he resembles more closely, in his fortune, the latter than the former. Hence it is natural for him to infer that the advantages and consolations he finds in their lot can likewise be advantages and consolations for himself.

This is not, of course, the poem, or even a "paraphrase" of it; nor is it an attempt to state what Gray must have had explicitly in mind when he gave his *imprimatur* to the *Elegy* in its final form. It is rather an effort to formulate, hypothetically, the over-all principle of construction which appears to me to account most adequately for the detailed character and interrelations of the parts which the finished poem combines and for the effect which it is calculated to produce on a normally sensitive reader. Discussion of its value as a hypothesis in practical criticism would therefore turn on the extent to which, relative to alternative hypotheses, it, on the one hand, makes both grammatical and poetic sense out of the total succession of words and sentences in the *Elegy* and, on the other hand, receives further confirmation from repeated and independent considerations of these. The hypothesis itself is a correlation of three elements: the moral character of the speaker, the situation which compels his effort at resolution, and the steps of the meditation through which his choice is expressed; of these, only the last appears, abstracted from the others, in Brooks's "reading." Cf. below, pp. 632 ff.

inferior specimen of the genre represented—to choose an example consonant with the title of Brooks's volume—by Sir Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial*. What excitement and dramatic life the poem has, no less than its peculiar ethical quality, accordingly disappear, and we have instead an inconsequential and unmoving "theme" (largely read into the poem) on modes of burial. Why is it, if it is, a great poem? Or is it that "irony," in Brooks's view, is really a final good and not merely, as he indicates at times, a means or device?

The neglect of poetic content or form—the words here mean the same—is responsible, furthermore, for difficulties in the "reading" itself. This is inevitably so since, without a clear principle of control, in an adequate hypothesis about the poetic whole, the purely grammatical scrutiny of a poem for instances of "ambiguity," "paradox," "complex of attitudes," or "irony" is bound to lead to *contresens*. Not all of Brooks's remarks about the *Elegy* fall into this class, and the chapter contains, indeed, a number of shrewd and sensitive observations which any student will be glad to have. But I am disturbed, among other things, by his misconstruction of the thought in lines 45–76—a misconstruction which a prior inquiry into the unifying action of the poem would have prevented—and especially by his much too respectful view of William Empson's commentary on stanza 14—a masterpiece of critical irresponsibility surely unmatched in modern times, except elsewhere in Empson.

IV

I have hitherto gone along with Brooks in his contention that the qualities he calls "paradox" or "irony" are somehow peculiar to poetry, and have been content to urge the inadequacy of his theory in terms of what his exclusive concern with "the language of poetry" forces him to leave out. I now want to examine the proofs on which this major proposition of his theory—as a theory of poetry—ultimately rests.

The first step in the argument is simple enough. It consists in a division of all discourse into two kinds: that in which the statements are "abstract," in the sense that their meaning is "unqualified by any context," and that in which the statements are not "abstract" but bear "the pressure of the context" and have their meanings "modified by the context"; an extreme form of the latter is discourse which achieves "the stability of a context in which the internal pressures balance and mutually support each other."³⁶ The term "irony" applies, as we have seen, to the second type of discourse: in its "obvious" meaning to the general phenomenon of contextual qualification, in a "further sense" to the degree of qualification which is manifest when opposing or discordant meanings are fused.

36. *College English*, IX, 234.

The initial problem is to demonstrate that this division corresponds to the distinction between "science" and "poetry." That scientific discourse is made up of "denotations," that is, terms with fixed meanings, and hence of "abstract" statements, is assumed rather than proved; that poetry, on the other hand, is discourse which never contains "abstract" statements is argued instantially by presenting "readings" of various poems so chosen as to embrace representatives of the whole English tradition from Shakespeare to Yeats and of the extremes, within this tradition, of admittedly witty poems and of poems apparently "simple" and "spontaneous." All these are analyzed exclusively with a view to the manner in which single words, phrases, lines, and passages have their meanings determined "ironically" (in both senses of the term) by contexts; whence the conclusion follows that "the special kind of structure" thus revealed—a structure from which "abstract statements" are necessarily excluded by the very technique of reading—is "the common structure" of poems of all kinds, since it occurs not only in those where we would expect it from obvious signs but also in those where its presence has often been denied. And it follows, as a corollary of this, that to read poems as expressions of "rational" meanings rather than as patterns of "ironical" qualification is to do violence to their true nature and to bring them "into an unreal competition with science or philosophy or theology" or, as other passages indicate, moral rhetoric and propaganda.

If we ask, then, what the "readings" prove, the answer must be that they prove what they were designed to prove, namely, the possession by poems of a kind of structure which, on Brooks's assumptions, poems must have inasmuch as there are only two kinds of structure possible and the other is preempted by science, of which poetry is, also by assumption, the necessary opposite. He has got-himself into this difficult logical position, I would suggest, precisely because, although his analysis is set up in terms derived from Coleridge, he has insisted, unlike Coleridge, on identifying "the structure of poetry" literally with poems in the usual sense of that word, while retaining, but reducing to linguistic differences, the opposition, in Coleridge, of "poems" and "science." As a result, he is committed to saying, or at least implying, not merely that "irony" or "paradox" is universally present in poems—which, granted his definitions of the two words, is doubtless true—but that the "structure" these terms signify is the differentia of poems, the sufficient cause which distinguishes them essentially from all other kinds of works in which language is employed. If he does not mean this, then it is hard to understand why he gives instances of "irony" only from poems or why he supposes that recognition of "the concept of poetry as an organism" with its corollaries of "the ultimate importance of context and the fact of contextual qualification," is "the best hope

that we have for reviving the study of poetry and of the humanities generally.' But if he does mean that "irony" is a quality peculiar to poems, then—especially in view of the claims he makes for the novelty of the theory—we might reasonably expect him to offer some evidence that this is indeed the case. The evidence would consist in a series of "readings" of complete works other than poems leading to the conclusion that, when they are analyzed in the same way his poems are analyzed, the same phenomena of contextual qualification and "irony" do not appear. No such evidence, however, is forthcoming, with the result that what would seem to be the crucial proposition of his theory is advanced as a mere assertion, without argumentative support.

How, if he had raised the question, he could have resolved it in favor of his hypothesis, I confess I do not see. It is surely not a self-evident truth that it is only, or peculiarly, in poems that the "relevance," "propriety," "rhetorical force," and "meaning" of statements "cannot be divorced from the context in which they are imbedded," or only, or peculiarly, in poems that systematic ambiguities occur, or that "incongruities" are recognized, or extremes of opposition reconciled, or the claims of discordant and apparently irrelevant "attitudes" adjusted to one another. Merely to state the point should be sufficient, it would seem, to convince anyone that these are "structures" common not only to all poems but to all species of connected discourse—and necessarily, since all words as they present themselves to a writer are ambiguous (there being many more things or ideas than verbal symbols for them) and therefore have to have their significances fixed by the particular contexts, of whatever sort, in which they are used. There are many devices for doing this, but there are none, as far as I can recall, that have not been used indifferently in poems, essays, histories, orations, philosophic treatises, or scientific expositions. Nor is any meaningful distinction to be made in this connection, as Brooks supposes,³⁷ between "context" and "universe of discourse": the one is the grammarian's term, the other the logician's; but if we wish to talk about discourse apart from the various specific ends it serves (as Brooks talks about poetry), we must inevitably speak of contexts and of statements in relation to them, that being all that discourse, qua discourse, consists of.

Why, then, all the to-do about "irony" in poetry? Why not look for "irony" everywhere? For, if we look, it will assuredly be found. It even pervades this essay I am writing, from the "echo" in the opening phrase on through: there is no essential difference, in terms of anything Brooks's analysis can show, between, for example, my "qualification" of Brooks by Coleridge and Gray's "qualification" of the graves in the churchyard by the tombs in the church. The full and proper meaning of "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," is no

37. *Ibid.*, p. 233 n.

doubt dependent, as Brooks makes clear in some detail, upon the total context of the character and "attitude" of the speaker in Keats's ode; but it would take almost as many words to exhibit adequately the "pressure" of the context upon Gibbon's statement in his fifteenth chapter that he intended to write "a candid but rational inquiry into the progress and establishment of Christianity." And it would require many more words—Coleridge needed thirteen chapters—to trace the contribution of the context to the very rich meanings which the words "poem" and "poetry" have when they are opposed in the *Biographia literaria*.

But we may go farther than this. Brooks finds his extreme of "irony" in I. A. Richards' "poetry of synthesis"—"a poetry which does not leave out what is apparently hostile to its dominant tone, and which, because it is able to fuse the irrelevant and discordant, has come to terms with itself and is invulnerable to irony"—invulnerability to irony being "the stability of a context in which the internal pressures balance and mutually support each other."³⁸ This is excellent, but it is a perfect formula for what is achieved, more completely than in any poem I have ever read, by the dialectic of the *Phaedrus* or *Republic* or by Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. No more than for any poem can the "insights" communicated by these marvelous discourses be summed up in a "paraphrase," however elaborate: they are supreme instances of "irony" in every sense which Brooks attaches to the word; and, although it is true that his method of "reading" would exhibit only a few of their more material and hence less essential traits, it would certainly leave out no more than the same method does when applied to poems.

There is, finally, science—or rather, since the comparison must be made in terms of uses of language, scientific works. Brooks would have it that the words of science, unlike those of poetry, do not change under the pressure of the context. "They are pure (or aspire to be pure) denotations; they are defined in advance. They are not to be warped into new meanings. But where is the dictionary which contains the terms of a poem? It is a truism that the poet is continually forced to remake language."³⁹ In these statements we have the keystone of his whole position: remove it, and his account of the structure "characteristic" of poetry crumbles. And at first sight this would seem hard to do. For it is undoubtedly the case that scientists, in the physical sciences at any rate, aspire to definitions of terms which will remain constant in all the treatises or papers in which the terms are used, and it is just as clearly the case that poets, in writing new poems, do nothing of the sort. But this difference follows as a consequence from the quite different ends which poets and scientists

38. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

39. *The Well Wrought Urn*, p. 192.

pursue and is not in any sense an antecedent cause of the differences between poetry and science. And in particular it is not a sign that the principle of "contextual qualification," which evidently operates in poetry, does not also function in scientific discourse, when this is considered, as Brooks considers poetry, purely in terms of interrelationships of significations. The terms of science, says Brooks, "are defined in advance." In advance of what? Surely not of the particular framework of meanings in which they are used: the definitions of Euclid are not separate from, but an integral part of, the "context" in which all his subsequent theorems are set up, and by the "pressure" of which the terms employed in the theorems are qualified in this way rather than in that. And what, for that matter, is a definition but a qualification of a common word, ambiguous otherwise, by a context? Moreover, as the context, in the sense of the total system of meanings, shifts, so do the meaning, propriety, relevance, and so on of any term or statement. Thus the vocabulary with which Aristotle discourses scientifically about poetry in the *Poetics* is in large part identical with the vocabulary of Plato in Books ii, iii, and x of the *Republic*; the meanings of the corresponding terms and statements in Aristotle, however, are entirely different, and the difference is produced (it is recorded in part, but only in part, in explicit definitions) by a radical change in "context," which can be described in the same grammatical fashion as Brooks describes differences or changes of "context" in poetry. And the shifts go on within the *Poetics* itself, as anyone can see, for example, who will trace what happens to the word *ethos* in chapter 6. Nor is modern science an exception. Where is the dictionary which contains the terms of Newton? He, too, like any innovating poet, inherited a vocabulary; but the *Principia* is an original system of verbal and ideational "contexts"—it is more than that, of course, but so, in a different way, is any good poem—under the pressure of which all the old words and "attitudes" take on new senses, with the consequence that the traditional language is completely "remade." In contemporary physics, also, as I am informed, contextual qualification occurs whenever a statement is moved from the macroscopic level of classical to the microscopic level of relativity mechanics. It is true that the rules for such shifts, in modern science, can be explicitly stated and are well known; but even this has its analogue in poetry in the persistence of conventions and formularized techniques for getting "paradoxical" effects.

The syntheses of science, too, can be described, omitting questions of their truth, in much the same terms as Brooks uses to distinguish the "poetry of synthesis." One example will suffice—the formula in which Einstein brought together in a single unified equation the hitherto "discordant" qualities of mass and energy:

$$E = mc^2.$$

I offer this, judging it solely by Brooks's criterion for poetic "structure," as the greatest "ironical" poem written so far in the twentieth century.

The moral of all this is surely not that there is any fundamental similarity between poetry and science, or poetry and dialectic, which can be made to lead to fruitful and precise practical criticism, but simply that Brooks's attempt to differentiate "the structure of poetry" by deriving it from basic distinctions in language is self-defeating. He has assumed, in his initial divisions, with no warrant from the facts, what he has to prove, and he has thus begged the entire question.

V

His fundamental error, I suggest, is that he has begun to theorize about poetry at the wrong end—starting not with concrete poetic wholes of various kinds, the parts of which, with their possible interrelationships, can be inferred as consequences from inductively established principles, but rather with one only of the several internal causes of poems, and the cause which they have most completely in common with all other literary productions, namely, their linguistic matter: here he begins, and here also he ends. The choice is regrettable, since it prevents him from dealing adequately with poetic works in terms of the sufficient or distinguishing causes of their production and nature; but it would be unfair to blame him unduly for making it, inasmuch as it has been a characteristic methodological choice, as I have said before, in the school of "new critics" to which he belongs. Nor are the reasons hard to assign. Chief among them is what I can only call the morbid obsession of these writers with the problem of justifying and preserving poetry in an age of science. This has resulted in an extraordinary florescence of modern apologies for poesy, the majority of which, in spite of much diversity in the rhetorical topics, have turned on the antithesis expressed in the title of one of the most famous of them, science and poetry. The question of the differences between poetry and science is as old as the Greeks, but whereas, with earlier critics, it was only one among many problems—and, for most, a problem preliminary to criticism proper—it has become, for our contemporaries, *the* crucial issue upon the successful resolution of which the fate of poetry, and even of the humanities in general, is thought to depend. How, with science everywhere dominant and the method of science universally accepted as the one road to truth, can poetry still be made to seem a valuable and respectable form of mental activity, rather than merely a survival of prescientific modes of thought destined to disappear in the future? Obviously—so goes the common answer—only by returning to first principles and seeking to define afresh the nature and peculiar sphere of poetry in terms which will at once mark it off sharply from the factual and "rational" sphere of science and exhibit it as a natural, and hence permanent, effect of

causes distinct from, but no less basic in, man's life than those which operate in the scientific sphere.

It is not strange, therefore, that critics thus preoccupied with the single problem of establishing a division of labor between science and poetry should largely give up, as irrelevant to their purpose, the discrimination of particular poetic kinds and effects. What has to be saved, or reconciled with science, is poetry itself *en bloc*; and, that being the case, the inquiry resolves itself into a search for some one fundamental difference between the two which can be shown to depend, not upon the arbitrary determinations of poets or critics, but upon divergent tendencies in the underlying natural conditions from which both science and poetry spring. Such a common basis was frequently found in earlier times in the faculties of the soul (as in Bacon and Macaulay); in the twentieth century, however, this will no longer do; the golden key which is counted on to unlock all doors is now not the mind but language. It is here, accordingly, and not either in the final character of poetic works as opposed to scientific, or in the differentiation of ends or subject matters or techniques, that most of the "new critics" have sought their first principles, in the simple faith, that, because language is the instrument of both scientists and poets, the high claims of poetry can be asserted most effectively by deriving all its essential characteristics from a consideration of those potentialities of language which are left over, once the specialized use of words in science has been defined. So everything turns, for I. A. Richards, on the opposition of "referential" and "emotive" speech; for John Crowe Ransom, on the antithesis of logical "structure" and poetic "texture"; and for Brooks, as we have seen, on the contrast between the "abstract" language of science and the "paradoxical" language of poetry. The words of poetry have thus become all-important, to the neglect or obscuration of all the factors in poetic production which determine, for the poet, what the words ought to be; and poetry, ironically enough, is defended against materialistic science by arguments which attempt, materialistically, to deduce poetic form from an examination of the medium alone.

I am convinced that this has led only to a blind alley and that a "newer" criticism is needed which will not worry so much about saving poetry—this, after all, has been with us a very long time and, besides, contains within itself powerful springs of natural human interest, surely not yet exhausted—but will devote itself to a scholarly and philosophically comprehensive study of poetry calculated to refine our instinctive response to poems by giving us an adequately sensitive critical apparatus for discriminating among them. I have tried to show how Brooks, having made a false start, is prevented, by the pressure of the limited context he has selected, from developing such an apparatus. Not everything he says or implies in his writings, however, is strictly functional in

terms of his characteristic method; and among the pale ineffectual ghosts from earlier and better systems which hover, in the shapes of undefined and inoperative words, on the confines of his argument and make possible critical insights frequently much better than his theory, there are several which, if brought back to life, might do serviceable work. Among these peripheral terms we find "beauty," "unity," "propriety," "drama," "character," and, especially, "imitation." "The poem," he writes, "if it be a true poem is a simulacrum of reality—in this sense, at least, it is an 'imitation'—by *being* an experience rather than any mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction from experience."⁴⁰ If he had started here rather than with "the language of paradox," he might have got somewhere (and incidentally been able to give a better account of "irony" itself), for here is clearly a first principle by which poetry may be distinguished essentially, and not merely accidentally, from science, philosophy, history, and rhetoric, and precise consequences drawn concerning the construction and peculiar beauty of poems of different kinds. But the statement is isolated in his system: it does not follow from his theory of language, nor is it made a starting point for any significant deductions. So, too, with the other terms: they remain "irrelevant and discordant" elements, meaningful enough in other critical analyses, but never, in Brooks, subsumed under any general poetic principles. Yet the presence of such words in his exposition may be taken as a sign of his own half-conscious awareness that grammar is not enough; and at all events we may regard them as encouraging portents, suggestive of a direction which criticism might take if only it freed itself from the despotism of linguistics and the unique cause and aimed at a multidimensional theory of poetry that would be, like Brooks's, literal rather than Platonic in method, but much more adequate than his to the discrimination of peculiarly poetic values and to the development of normative judgments relative to *all* the complex problems—of object, manner, and effect as well as of medium—that enter into the various poetic arts.

To reconstruct criticism in this way would obviously be to reverse the whole tendency of critical reasoning as practiced by the "new critics." It would be to substitute the matter-of-fact and concrete for the abstract; the a posteriori for the a priori; the argument from immediately sensible and particular poetic effects to their proximate poetic causes for the argument from remote and non-poetic causes to only general and common poetic effects. It would be, in a word, to study poems as complete wholes possessed of distinctive powers rather than merely the materials and devices of poetry in a context of extra-poetic considerations. And that would be new indeed.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 194.