THE NEW CRITICISM

by John Crowe Ransom

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Preface

MR. R. P. BLACKMUR is a distinguished critic, and no other living critic is less apt to take unassimilated the formulas of the profession and apply them hastily to the poem. His critical writing gives us the sense of materials turned over a great many times, and carried into the light of the usual illuminations. (I do not mean that they are not exposed also to some illuminations made at home.) The writing is close, and a little difficult, rather than simple and systematic as it might be if the critic had been shallower and more obliging.

I say this for two reasons. First, he is one of several writers whose critical dimensions should entitle them to special chapters in this book, but who do not receive them. And second, though he is distinct, and repels the tag of any common category, he is nevertheless a "new" critic in the sense of this book. Intelligent readers when they make acquaintance with him will know that they read what could not possibly have been written earlier than a few years ago. After what I have said, it is no discredit to Mr. Blackmur to observe that he has mastered some or all of the critical systems treated in this

book; those of Richards (and his pupil Empson), Eliot, and Winters.

To prove this there are many ready quotations, and I take one that comes quickly to hand. It is "new" criticism enough:

> If we may say that in Shelley we see a great sensibility the victim of the early stages of religious and philosophical decay in the nineteenth century, and that in Swinburne we see an even greater poetic sensibility vitiated by the substitution of emotion for subject matter, then it is only a natural step further to see in Hardy the consummate double ruin of an extraordinary sensibility that had been deprived of both emotional discipline and the structural support of a received imagination.

I quote another passage, in a different manner; it is a discussion of Emily Dickinson's stanza,

> Renunciation
> Is a piercing virtue,
> The letting go
> A presence for an expectation—
> Not now.

My quotation will be incomplete:

> The words are all simple words, parts of our stock vocabulary. Only one, *renunciation,* belongs to a special department of experience or contains in itself the focus of a particular attitude, a depart-

ment and an attitude we condition ourselves to keep mostly in abeyance. We know what renunciation is; we know it turns up as heroism or hypocrisy or sentimentality; and we do as little as possible about it. Only one word, *piercing,* is directly physical; something that if it happens cannot be ignored but always shocks us into reaction. It is the shock of this word that transforms the phrase from a mere grammatical tautology into a metaphorical tautology which establishes as well as asserts identity. Some function of the word *pierce* precipitates a living intrinsic relation between renunciation and virtue; it is what makes the phrase incandesce. The two adjectives in the last line of the following quatrain exhibit a similar incandescent function.

> Rehearsal to ourselves
> Of a withdrawn delight
> Affords a bliss like murder,
> Omnipotent, acute.

It is the adjectives that transform the verbal and mutually irrelevant association of delight and murder into a self-completing metaphor. But, to return to our other quotation, the word *pierce* enlivens not only the first phrase but the whole statement about renunciation; it is the stress or shock of it that is carried forward into and makes specific the general notion—physical but vague—of letting go; and letting go, in its turn, perhaps by its participial

> form, works back upon the first phrase. The piercing quality of renunciation is precisely, but not altogether, that it is a continuing process, takes time, it may be infinite time, before the renounced presence transpires in expectation in the "Not now." It is—if we may provisionally risk saying so—the physical elements in the word *pierce* and the participial phrase *letting go* that, by acting upon them, make the other words available to feeling, and it is the word *renunciation* that, so enlightened, focuses the feeling as actuality.

Critical writing like this is done in our time. In depth and precision at once it is beyond all earlier criticism in our language. It is a new criticism, and it has already some unity of method, so that its present practitioners, like Mr. Blackmur, seem eclectic with respect to their immediate predecessors.

It is new, and I have tried to exhibit it for what it is worth. My quotations will be found to be on the copious side. I should not like to fail to present a good picture of the kinds of criticism and the kinds of critical theory that have been offered by the four writers under discussion. That was my first obligation.

But criticism is an extraordinarily difficult thing to get right, and this is a new criticism. What is new is unsure, inconsistent, perhaps raw; even this new criticism. It makes errors in strategy, just as poetry and fiction may do. It does not usually have enough back-

ground in philosophy, and may rely on perfectly inadequate formulas, under which precise thinking cannot be effected. I approach these critics critically.

And not only do I presume to rule "destructively" upon some of the practices and theories of these critics, but to offer some small "constructive" advices, perhaps to reiterate them unnecessarily. But time goes too fast to waste much of it on affectations of modesty. I am obliged to think that criticism lies before us, not behind us, and that our critical instruments are far from perfected.

Briefly, the new criticism is damaged by at least two specific errors of theory, which are widespread. One is the idea of using the psychological affective vocabulary in the hope of making literary judgments in terms of the feelings, emotions, and attitudes of poems instead of in terms of their objects. The other is plain moralism, which in the new criticism would indicate that it has not emancipated itself from the old criticism. I should like to see critics unburdened of these drags.

Mr. Yvor Winters is a victim of the moralistic illusion, but independently of that comes closer than anybody else I know to realizing what I should regard as the most fundamental pattern of criticism: criticism of the structural properties of poetry. The sciences deal almost entirely with structures, which are scientific structures; but poetic structures differ radically from these, and it is that difference which defines them. The ontological materials are different, and are such as to fall outside the

possible range of science. From Mr. Winters I pass on to a final chapter in which I try some ontological talk.

I have in advance a proper gratitude towards all my readers, but the ones to whom I shall be most grateful are those who will read these contents consecutively.

Small parts of this book have had earlier printing, and for permission to reprint I am indebted to *The Southern Review, The Kenyon Review, Accent,* and *Hika.*

JOHN CROWE RANSOM

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I. A. Richards:
THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITIC

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THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITIC

DISCUSSION of the new criticism must start with Mr. Richards. The new criticism very nearly began with him. It might be said also that it began with him in the right way, because he attempted to found it on a more comprehensive basis than other critics did. Too rarely are critics able to state their propositions in terms which are philosophical, and ultimate, but this was what Richards proposed to do. Since Richards began upon criticism there have been many distinguished critics on the scene, but the critic of criticism will generally be depressed, as he reads them, with the sense that their discourse is a little short of decisive. Most critical writing is done in the light of "critical theory," which unfortunately is something less than aesthetics. But with Richards it amounts to a complete aesthetic of poetry. Furthermore—a reassuring thing showing precaution, a

sense of the risk a critic runs—it amounts to an aesthetic system which, with adjustments such as he has shown he is prepared to make, and without losing its identity, could pass over and become a system for the other arts, such as music and painting.

His first book appearance was in collaboration with Mr. C. K. Ogden at Cambridge, in *The Meaning of Meaning*. It was published in 1923, though parts of it had already had periodical publication. In this book it is true that Richards' philosophy was rather wide, and not primarily aesthetic. It is concerned with the question of how and what we "mean" in prose discourse, such as science; but it stops to make explicit allowance for poetic discourse too. This latter may be assumed to have been even then Richards' characteristic interest, for the independent books with which he followed up have usually claimed to be in elaboration of this original position.

The philosophy furnished in *The Meaning of Meaning* was terminologically, if not substantively, a rather brash new one. I judge now that this was the quality that interested and engaged the great numbers of keen young men, which was excellent.* The two authors are

* I used to abuse Mr. Richards as a critic walking in philosophical darkness, and to want to dismiss him. For example, I have written too crudely about him in one of the essays in *The World's Body*, though I do not think that substantially I shall recant from my argument there. But a great many young graduate and even undergraduate thinkers with whom I have had dealings have defended him, and let me know they were his men. I concluded that there were merits in Richards I had not allowed for, and I have been led to make a more thorough appraisal. I remark now that I think he has done infinitely more good than harm.

men with something brand-new, and they are bold, they are witty. They are also rough and short with established philosophical reputations, which must be on the whole a good thing also.

The Meaning of Meaning is in terms of the new philosophy of language; the authors refer to the latter as Symbolism, but since their book the name of it appears to have become standardized as Semantics. It represents another attempt, made it would seem at just the right place, to "repudiate the metaphysics"; and specifically, by analysing thought in terms of the limitations and confusions of the language-process.

It is hardly in order for me to review a book of this kind, which rather incidentally legislates a status for poetry. I remark that its bias is deeply *nominalist,* and by that I mean that it is very alert to the possibility that a word which seems to refer to the objective world, or to have an objective "referent," really refers to a psychological context and has no objective referent; this bias has governed Richards' conception of poetry, for one thing, almost from that day to this. And with that bias goes—and the combination is a very common one nowadays though almost paradoxical—a *positivist* bias, through which the thinker is led to take the referential capacity of science as perfect, in spite of his nominalist scepticism; and by comparison to judge all other kinds of discourse as falling short. Nominalism and positivism are strange-looking yokefellows for undertaking knowledge, but it must be said that they may work very well

together. It may be that the philosopher as positivist will have to make some concessions as to the validity of referents not generally attended to in the sciences, and on the other hand that as nominalist he will have to entertain some misgivings as to the pure scientific referents. Between them, the two biases do at least offer a dramatic setting for a furious effort towards bigger and better knowledges. I believe they suit a sort of pioneering, start-at-the-bottom Americanism, and are an excellent strategy for us, as I idealize our national temper and prospects of knowledge. The thinker, or the group of thinkers, has all the room in the world to grow. But there is evidence for believing that honest nominalist-positivists in the course of their careers will come to have more commerce with the metaphysics than they had contemplated.

For me, the crucial commitment made by Richards in this book will appear if we examine its two companion tables showing the history of two respective ideas: the table on the meanings of Meaning, and the one on the meanings of Beauty.

Each table proceeds more or less serially from the cruder forms in which its idea has been entertained towards the more enlightened, and each exhibits sixteen forms, with sub-forms. In the table on the history of Meaning, we come to the perfect sense in No. XVI, where Meaning is defined as: "That to which the Interpreter of a symbol (a) refers, (b) thinks himself to be referring, and (c) believes the user to be referring." But

a blind alley in the history of the term's usage is denoted in No. XI, where Meaning is identified merely with the Emotion roused by the symbol.

Here Richards remarks:

> XI (Emotion) requires little comment. It is a definite sense of meaning which except amongst men of letters is not likely to be brought in to confuse other issues.

The gist of this is that Richards confines meaning in the strict sense to valid objective reference and denies it to the mere emotion that words may cause. Meaning is knowledge, not affective experience; and men of letters are not very scrupulous, or at least not very reliable, where knowledge is concerned.

But when we look at the table on the history of Beauty, as a term, we find the direction reversed: the sequence is away from those usages in which the term stands for something in the objective world, and towards those in which it stands for certain affective responses to objects. Running through the last seven meanings, which group together, we find the following progression:

X. Anything is beautiful—which causes Pleasure.
XI. Anything is beautiful—which excites Emotions.
XII. Anything is beautiful—which promotes a Specific Emotion.
XIII. Anything is beautiful—which involves the processes of Empathy.