

MODERN CRITICAL THEORY:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL  
INTRODUCTION

*by*

MICHAEL MURRAY



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## PREFACE

Throughout this book there is a playing off of my concern to deliver a much needed critique of modern literary criticism and to work toward positive new theorizing in poetics. The first concern is exercised in Parts I and II on ancient and on modern critical theories, which aim to show that the conventional image of Plato and Aristotle on the nature of poetry, and of the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition, is profoundly mistaken. In this retrieval of Plato as the deepest partisan of poetry in the ancient world, and of Aristotle as the dealer of a serious blow, we are also able to get into view many of the viewpoints, preconceptions, and suppositions of modern criticism.

Chapter III focuses on basic features of the genesis of contemporary criticism. Yet the historical inquiry is not pursued in the interest of a summary but as a cleansing operation by examination of several types of criticism, that of I.A. Richards, the New Critics, the Chicago Critics, and the Old Critics. An effort is made to uncover weaknesses and opacities in these approaches and to show in the case of the first three that all are flawed by unwillingness to take seriously the linguistic nature of poetry. Problems of a different order haunt the recently re-invigorated Old Criticism. To some extent this account involves pointing out certain facts about the influence of twentieth-century philosophy and science on critical theorists. The demonstrable theoretical obtuseness of the positivist notion of meaning, and the distinct shortcomings of the more recent linguistic conventionalism of analytical philosophy are taken up chiefly in Part II (Chapters V-VI), although not with the fullness they deserve. Care is taken to scrutinize the actual statements of critics rather than philosophers' abstracts in order to encourage dialogue between critics and philosophers. I have tried to bring some of the key themes of the critical activity into the philosophical open. Hopefully both literary critics and philosophers will find the result of interest, though not necessarily the same things in the same

ways. Critics and philosophers too often look upon one another with mutual disinterest, suspicion, and condescension, and the book strives to amend this sterile arrangement.

The positive theorizing, which is developed through an examination of contemporary phenomenology and hermeneutics, covers these areas:

The theory of the interpretive process (Part II, Chapter IV, 1-2) is phenomenologically studied, its components and their dynamic unity described. This formulation already employs and tries to secure a preliminary elucidation of components whose full sense requires the phenomenology of language and the language-arts. That, in turn, involves attempting to introduce the reader to phenomenological thought, which is the burden of Part III, Chapters VII-XII, devoted to Husserl, Ingarden, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and especially, Heidegger. (A list of further recommended readings is provided at the end of each section). These discussions establish some of the philosophical grounds and lead more radically and steadily in the case of Heidegger, into a reconceiving of the nature of poetry.

The phenomenological study concerns (a) language and meaning as such, and (b) theory of literature, and examines (i) the transcendental nature of logic, intentional consciousness and the life-world according to Husserl; (ii) the corporealization of the transcendental theme in the human body and the body of language (intersubjectivity) in Sartre and Merleau-Ponty; (iii) the strata model of the literary work designed by Ingarden, a bold and elaborate effort which René Wellek, for example, adopts as his matrix.<sup>1</sup> Although argued here that his book is an inventory, sorely deficient in reflection about the nature of language, the notion of "the metaphysical quality" represents a permanent gain; (iv) Last, in the complex case of Heidegger, whose thought is more original and often more difficult than that of his contemporaries (and yet at other times strangely more simple), who reaches the phenomena with unparallel directness, and sets forth the contours perspicuously, in his later writings poetry becomes the very center of his thought. With Heidegger, the act of poetic speech attains a seriousness which it has not had for a major philosopher since Plato, even more than Schelling, Hegel, and Kant, and rivaled only perhaps by Nietzsche, the *platoniste maudit*. The importance Heidegger discovers in poetry is one source of the excitement and controversy which his name evokes. In Chapter VI, on Logic, Language, and Poetry, some clues and arguments provide steerage, and in Chapter XI an attempt is made to gather them up and

<sup>1</sup> See passages in *The Theory of Literature* (1949), and recently, his wide-ranging remarks in *Style in Language* (1960).

augment them with the insights of Heidegger to yield a new conception of poetic speech. Six aspects are drawn to contrast and put in relief the differences among poetic speech, ordinary language, and the steno-signs of logic.

An earlier plan for this book included as a sequel to the theoretical and historical discussion two chapters of detailed interpretation of the poems of Stevens and Rilke. In this way it would oppose the pattern of such distinguished works as *The World's Body*, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, *Practical Criticism*, *The Well Wrought Urn*, and *The Curious Frame*, by devoting two parts to theory and one part to praxis. Anglo-American literary criticism suffers from an extremely underdeveloped theoretical reflection on the nature of its enterprise and its place in the landscape of the humanities. The number of important contemporary books on critical theory remains few, and there are almost none in English which present the mainstream of Continental hermeneutics in relation to Anglo-American thought. So there is more than shelfspace for a book of this form. In the course of the theoretical-historical exposition I have used the words of the poet when they advance the thought, concretize a point, indicate a relevant feature in the contours of modern poetry, or unsettle common assumptions about its nature. The essays on Rilke and Stevens, together with one connecting Turner, Wordsworth, and Whitman, will be published separately.<sup>2</sup> An earlier version of Part I appeared as "The Crisis of Greek Poetics: A Re-interpretation" in the *Journal of Value Inquiry* (Fall, 1973). Grateful acknowledgement is extended to Alfred Knopf, Inc. for permission to quote from *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*.

I would like to express gratitude and recognition to those who have continued to be a live presence in my thoughts on literature: To Frank O'Malley, a true *magister ludi*, to John Edward Hardy, Karsten Harries, and Jesse Kalin. In conversations with friends and students (they know who they are) over time the poetic exhibits its force. At several stages in this writing my wife Susan aided with her excellent literary sense and loving endurance.

I conclude with a proposal which goes against the accepted wisdom in these matters, particularized by Stevens as: the theory of poetry is the life of poetry; the theory of poetry is the theory of life.<sup>3</sup> The present work

<sup>2</sup> For the last mentioned see my paper, "Art, Technology, and the Holy : Reflections on the Work of J.M.W. Turner," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* (April, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> From *Adagia*, published in the *Opus Posthumous*, p. 178.

attempts to capture another truth from the poet, that in the poem

A figure like Ecclesiast  
Rugged and luminous, chants in the dark  
A text that is an answer, although obscure.

*An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, XIX*<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See commentary on these lines, below, pp. 183-184.

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## THE CRITICAL SITUATION· AN INTRODUCTION

The Critical Situation has several meanings. It may signify the situation of an institutionalized activity, that of literary criticism, or it may mean a situation which reaches a critical degree and marks the appearance of a crisis; while somewhere between these two senses stands "critical" in the Kantian sense as an indomitable systematically questioning approach toward subjects, opposed to both the dogmatic and the merely skeptical viewpoint. Literary criticism is always seeking after its own peculiar sense of the critical, and hence it is not strange that it should be acquainted with all these senses. We will attempt to discuss the situation of certain established forms of criticism—especially that of poetry—and to advance a critique of received theories of criticism with the conviction that a crisis must be brought to light.

If we style this a philosophical inquiry into the bases of modern criticism, and specifically poetics, it is only to prevent the discourse from being short-circuited by an otiose certainty. (While we concern ourselves with poetry, rather than the novel, drama, or short story, it is basic to the argument that the principles of poetry will influence as well as be influenced by reflection on these other modes). This theoretic openness is especially important if we are to examine accepted critical canons, but also to excavate hidden hermeneutics. Epochs of history may live out the implications of a hermeneutic whose terms guide understanding of the experience of the text and thus to an extent the content of experience.<sup>1</sup> As much as the philosophers, literary critics and theologians, Richards and Bultmann, for instance, recall us to a certain view of "the contemporary situation,"<sup>2</sup> any responsible critic knows that the situation of today is no longer what it was for Richards, Eliot, and Ransom, and he must try to decipher the reasons,

<sup>1</sup> On the concept of hermeneutics, see Chapter IV.

<sup>2</sup> Richards, *Science and Poetry*, pp. 67f.

which is an intent of this book. The task of going “behind the doctrines of the different schools and trying to uncover the basic assumptions about literature and literary study on which they are founded,”<sup>3</sup> as Crane avows, never ends; in it we are asking again the old question: What is the poem?

A way of formulating the central problematic is to inquire: What can we say about the relation between the “universe of the poem” and the “universe of man”?<sup>4</sup> Austin Warren describes the concern which gives rise to this question: “The poet’s passionate desire to perceive for himself (not to accept it as a stereotype, ‘given’, handed down) makes his final creation a kind of world or cosmos; a concretely language, synoptically felt world; an ikon or image of the ‘real world.’”<sup>5</sup> We shall define provisionally the relation between these two worlds as the domain of literary judgement which we could designate as a truth-functional one, except that up to now we have lacked a sufficient concept of truth. (See Chapter XI, pp. 176-183.) Within this region we must seek out the answer to the question about the true being of the poem and about the meaning of its being. Those for whom it is fashionable to exclude the poet from the consideration of the poem will object that the “poet’s passionate desire” is no fit place to begin. One should distinguish, however, between two forms of the question *who* is the poet. One is an empirical and factual question, e.g. “Which poet wrote ‘Lycidas’?” The other is an ontological one which asks what kind of being is the poet. Although the poet is the creator of the poem he derives his name from the reality of his work. No one is a poet who does not create poems. Yet in the ontological sense of the question interpretations as to the meaning of the poet are embarrassingly diverse. Some names are naturally more recurrent than others, but a list of names for the poet might randomly begin: lover, demi-god, prophet, teacher, historian, philosopher, medium or instrument, androgyne, vates, creator, genius, alienated soul, sophist, liar, rhetorician, entertainer, technician, maker, and lunatic. Each name or certain of them in combination contain intimations and as such clues for a theory of poetry. In the sense that these designata imply metaphysical, epistemological, and historical claims about the essence of poetry, the question *who* is the poet is intrinsic to the poem. It is but another form of the constant question: What is poetry? For his part the modern poet is no longer clear about the meaning or value of poetry. T.S. Eliot wrote in *Four Quartets*:

<sup>3</sup> *Critics and Criticism*, Preface by R.S. Crane, p. v.

<sup>4</sup> J.-D. Hubert, *L’Esthétique des Fleurs du mal: Essai sur l’ambiguïté poétique*, Chapter XII.

<sup>5</sup> Preface to *The Rage for Order*.

That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory:  
 A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,  
 Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle  
 With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.

The next question had already been anticipated at the beginning of modern poetry by Hölderlin: If the poetry doesn't matter, why then be poet?

Indessen dünket mir  
 öfters  
 Besser zu schlafen, wie so ohne Genossen zu sein,  
 So zu harren und was zu tun und zu sagen,  
 Weiss ich nicht und wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?

Meanwhile, it seems to me  
 often  
 better to slumber than live without companions like  
 this,  
 So to linger and what to do or to utter  
 I know not, or in such needy times, why to be  
 poet at all?

Even if we re-direct the question who is the poet into the question what is the meaning of poetry, an influential view, amounting almost to an Official Doctrine in contemporary criticism, will respond that this question, too, is irrelevant to the poem *qua* poem. This position received a neat motto from Archibald MacLeish's "Ars Poetica":

A poem should not mean  
 but be.

I. A. Richards lent prosaic support to this view: "It is never what a poem says which matters, but what it is."<sup>6</sup> René Wellek and Austin Warren in their *Theory of Literature* suggest that the problem of meaning in the sense of knowledge and truth is merely a "semantic" one and the issue is covered with a few platitudes.<sup>7</sup> Almost the same may be said for W.K. Wimsatt's casual aside: "Poetry is truth of 'coherence', rather than truth of 'correspondence', as the matter is sometimes phrased nowadays."<sup>8</sup> For more traditional reasons Cleanth Brooks adopts the same basic attitude. "It needs to be pointed out," he insists, "that we are moving out of the realm of literary criticism if we do this. The real point is that, though any wise

<sup>6</sup> *Science and Poetry*, p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> Pp. 21-26.

<sup>8</sup> *Literary Criticism: A Short History*, p. 748.



philosophy will probably take the greatest poetry into account, still this is a problem for philosophy or religion, not for art."<sup>9</sup> Wellek and Warren give even stronger endorsement to this conviction:

To conclude: the question concerning the function of literature has a long history—in the Western world, from Plato down to the present. *It is not a question instinctively raised by the poet or by those who like poetry*; for such "Beauty is its own excuse for being," as Emerson was once drawn into saying. The question is put, rather, by utilitarians and moralists, or by statesmen and philosophers, that is, by the representatives of other special values or the speculative arbiter of all values.<sup>10</sup>

We shall examine some theoretical contributions of modern critics more closely in Chapter III; for the present it is enough to observe some shaky presuppositions in these assertions: that Meaning and Being can be radically segregated, so that Being is in essence without Meaning and Meaning lacks status in Being; that truth is irrelevant to the essence of poetry and to the domain of literary criticism; that Beauty, to which modern aesthetics assigns poetry, is a sphere outside of and excluded by all other values. (That these are "values" and not the transcendentals of medieval or classical thought is proved by the fact that the ancient transcendentals [Beauty, Truth, Oneness] constitute a union and are identical with Being). Worth pointing out immediately is how badly the widespread critical dogma which these passages represent reflects the actual history of literary art. The question of the meaning of literature may not have preoccupied the Greek and Roman poets, although one recalls that Plato the philosopher was no mean poet and Horace the poet no slight critic. And what of Virgil's agonizing over whether to burn the greatest poem of the Latin world? Perhaps the question of the meaningfulness of art did not bother medieval poets, but there one must pause long over Dante. If there is some point left to the modern critics' claim, thus weakened by unusual qualifications, the question of the function of literature has concerned the poets coming after them to an extraordinary extent. Since at least the seventeenth century, which marks the beginning of modern poetry, this tends to become rule rather than exception. Few have been as genuinely concerned with the essence of literary art or loved it more than Milton and Sidney, Pope and Dryden, or Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, and Blake, or Goethe, Hölderlin, and Baudelaire. In a now famous remark Baudelaire declaimed

<sup>9</sup> *The Well Wrought Urn*, p. 258.

<sup>10</sup> Wellek and Warren, *op. cit.*, p. 28. Italics added.

that "it is impossible for a poet not to contain within himself a critic. Therefore the reader will not be surprised at my regarding the poet as the best of all critics."<sup>11</sup> How deeply did those pioneers of painting, Turner and Van Gogh, care about the nature and future of art, to judge only from their writings! Two of the greatest novels in the twentieth century, *Doctor Faustus* and *The Death of Virgil*, engage in revealing the most radical disquiet about the relation of art to reality, both revolving about the life of a major artist, the one a poet, the other a musical composer.

The phenomenon of concern with the essential function—to continue with this neutral but sufficient phrase—is far more, not less pronounced among great poets. And it is obligative as well as legitimate for a phenomenology of literature to begin with the central poetry and thence work out toward the peripheral instances. If what we propound about the nature of art, in critical theory or literary history, lacks bearing on the most significant works of art, we fail where it counts. Looking to contemporary poetry, we can see that the Baudelairean duality persists; the extra-poetical writings reflect an integral preoccupation of major poets such as Eliot, Stevens, Valéry, Yeats, Pound, and Auden, and of minor voices such as Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Tate, and Winters among others. "A poet today," Richards correctly sums up, "whose integrity is equal to those of the greater poets of the past, is inevitably plagued by the problems of thought and feeling as poets have never been plagued before."<sup>12</sup> Thus we must understand that it is Eliot *qua* poet who expresses the disillusion of the poetry not mattering, or Hölderlin the poet who is skeptical about poethood itself. It is but one of the paradoxes of contemporary criticism that John Crowe Ransom, an early defender of the value of philosophy for criticism, became himself a critic of philosophic largesse. When he finds the late R.P. Blackmur's discontent with "the pure aesthetic or formal values" dangerous, he rushes forward to beg the question: "Is it not possible for the critics of poetry to forget that there are substantive as well as formal values in the poem"?<sup>13</sup> Yet even with Blackmur this reproach is leveled by Ransom at the outskirts of his criticism, for in fact, as Blackmur's remarks on Richards in his anti-metaphysical and metaphysical periods show, he is substantially in agreement with Brooks and Ransom. If these New Critics are united by some common presuppositions, ones

<sup>11</sup> "Essay on Wagner" (1861), cited in the introduction to *The Mirror of Art*, p. xi.

<sup>12</sup> *Science and Poetry*, p. 94. See also Wallace Stevens, "The Figure of Youth as Virile Poet," *The Necessary Angel*, pp. 63-66.

<sup>13</sup> "More Than Gesture," *Poems and Essays*, p. 108.

shared also by the Chicago critics, a different group of critics are united by quite other principles with precedents in Romantic poetics and remote but vital lineage in the great Platonic tradition. The former and latter varieties of critics we choose to call at the expense of some violence, Aristotelian versus Platonist. To warrant and expand such designations will be the burden of the next two chapters on Greek poetics and the third on the boundaries of the New and Old Criticism.

A genuine assessment of the situation of literary criticism is possible only if we have some understanding of its nature, its potentialities and opportunities. This kind of understanding-in-advance is necessary to the make-up of any type of inquiry, and even the process of purely practical activities like interpretive exegesis. As one critic has phrased it, "there is no practice without an implied theory, a theory under construction."<sup>14</sup> If poets have sometimes grown sick of poetry, readers with cause have turned sick of criticism; and in a sense the necessity for having a critic is a lamentable one. As Blackmur tells the tale, the critic is a kind of pander, and his existence is the least essential, the most precarious of the threesome: poem, reader, and critic. He describes the place of this strange creature: "Critics and scholars are go-betweens and should disappear when the couple are gotten together, when indeed there is no room left for them."<sup>15</sup> Finally speaking, though, we lament because we have an implacable sense of the Garden, of what from its viewpoint we may call the Edenic Text.

Every working critic should know that the relationship of practice to theory is a complex affair. Theory is never a mere generalization from the "facts"; rather, as Goethe maintained, it works hand in hand with our particular seeing, and even in a way leads it. A theory of poetics designates and projects a certain sphere of the world with regard to its essential possibilities. Every interpretation, whether the theory is only implicit or overt, moves within such a domain. Every search for a common denominator as a way of finding theory-free the meaning of poetry rests on the contradiction that it cannot start without a preconception of what is sought after. The investigation necessarily moves upon a circular path, one that Heidegger has described as the hermeneutic circle of understanding; an analysis of its structure is ventured in Chapter IV. The ideal economy which Blackmur recommends as an aim is, after all, an ideal whose ideality must be taken into account. In reality it is doubtful whether we are not condemned to a *ménage à trois*, at least in a functional sense. Heidegger develops this thought

<sup>14</sup> Preface to *The Rage for Order*.

<sup>15</sup> *The Lion and the Honeycomb*, p. 184.

into the claim that the role of reader or percipient, whom he prefers to call "the preserver," is co-equal in creativity to that of the poet.<sup>16</sup> Without the preserver the truth of the work, and thus the work itself, waits in oblivion or else vanishes. Interpretation is a basic dimension of the preservation of the work. Criticism in its best sense could be defined as the creative preservation and conservation of the work of art.

The crisis in contemporary criticism, its bane and possibly its right of birth, arises partly in response to signals of a crisis in poetry. Perhaps no poetry has been brought under a more severe critical scrutiny, in a situation at once uncertain and demanding, than have the works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The often heralded difficulty of modern poetry stems in part from a crisis of art itself, the end of which Hegel had announced in the 1820's as the unique achievement of Romantic poetry, painting, and music. Since Hegel's pronouncement, which was not a prophecy but a description based upon an analysis of the Romantic form and the history of art, we have seen the relentless desire on the part of artists to bring art to an end. The modes vary, whether it be Rimbaud's giving up of poetry for gun-running, Mallarmé's transcendence of poetic language to silence, or Duchamps' exchanging the role of artist for chessmaster; plainly the theatre of Beckett is a theatre of the end. The night of madness into which Hölderlin, Van Gogh, and Nietzsche passed is another silence of art. Recent analyses have shown how the shadow of nihilism—annihilation of reality *and* of language—permeates our modern art.<sup>17</sup> These phenomena belong to what might be thought of as the eschatology of art and poetry.

An experience of Nothingness, a contrast inseparable from Reality like Silence which is the counter-field to Speech, may accord us a new experience of the things which are. With a clarity no less sharp than Kierkegaard or Heidegger, Stevens uncovers this movement of thought in *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*.

When at long midnight the Canon came to sleep  
And normal things had yawned themselves away,  
The nothingness was a nakedness, a point,

<sup>16</sup> See "Ursprung des Kunstwerkes", *Holzwege*, pp. 54f.

<sup>17</sup> Indispensable are the essays by George Steiner in *Language and Silence*, especially three: "The Retreat from the Word," "Silence of the Poet," and "The Pythagorean Genre." See further Karsten Harries, *The Meaning of Modern Art* (1968), "Hölderlin and the Limits of Language", *Personalist*, XXII, (1966); and more recently, "Das befreite Nichts" in the *Heidegger Festschrift, Durchblicke* (1970).



Beyond which the fact could not progress as fact.  
 Thereon the learning of the man conceived  
 Once more night's pale illuminations, gold

Beneath, far underneath, the surface of  
 His eye and audible in the mountain of  
 His ear, the very material of his mind.

So that he was the ascending wings he saw  
 And moved on them in orbit's outer stars  
 Descending to the children's bed, on which

They lay. Forth then with huge pathetic force  
 Straight to the utmost crown of night he flew.  
 The nothingness was a nakedness, a point

Beyond which thought could not progress as thought.  
 He had to choose. But it was not a choice  
 Between excluding things. It was not a choice

Between, but of. He chose to include the things  
 That in each other are included, the whole,  
 The complicate, the amassing harmony.

III, vi

The breakdown of human literacy, of which various symptoms are evident, the disquiet about whether poetry is any longer important or the conviction that it is not, must not be shrugged off. Rather should it sharpen our sense of the significant, of the works we choose to include—that means to interpret and communicate—in our new complications. It can be read as urgent warning against getting permanently lost in the Pedagogical Provinces, while the province itself flounders. The crisis in poetry, the crisis in criticism, and the crisis of language of which these are essential moments need trenchant illumination. The current effort concentrates itself as much as possible upon the theory and criticism of poetry, though this necessarily requires us to think about the nature of language. The loving study of literature must rejoin those areas with which it has inextricable bonds: philosophy and theology, linguistics and psychiatry, historiography and politics. The matrix of their interdependence, the gateway to their unity may very well lie through a future philosophy of language. Let us be wary of premature generalization, though not dull to the task suggested by the facts. To mention only one set: Broch's *Death of Virgil* exhibits one of the deepest explorations of the borders between art and politics, and Stevens in his poems exposes in its essential terms the relation between language and war; or equally the reverse movement is indicated by the rich attention to literary work that one finds in political thinkers like Arendt and Voegelin.