The Play and Place of Criticism

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Critical Dogma and the New Critical Historians

We may have to begin speaking officially about the Yale group of critical historians. For some time, I suppose, academic literary men have been aware of a group of critical theorists there—René Wellek, Cleanth Brooks, William K. Wimsatt, Charles Feidelson—who were pursuing a common direction. But now the first three of these, not content with searching out the theoretical basis for a significant area of recent literary criticism, have been constructing—or would their opponents say "reconstructing"?—histories to lead up to it.

The present volume is appropriately dedicated and, admittedly, is heavily indebted to Wellek, who with an impressive start on his more ambitious project has preceded Wimsatt and Brooks onto the fearfully undifferentiated field of past literary criticism. Wellek has tempered his four-volume confrontation of such multiplicity by calling an arbitrary beginning around 1750, while Wimsatt and Brooks qualify their effort only with the modest adjective "short." Both undertakings ask no further concessions from their endlessly complex subject as they seek to reduce it to order while not trimming it more severely than order demands. Hence the crucial and obvious question: to what extent should order justly demand the simplifying sacrifices of the subject, or, rather, to ask the less austere converse, to what point should one respect the integrity of a difficult subject, at whatever cost to order?

I have recently had occasion, in reviewing the early volumes of


Wellek's history, to defend at some length the primacy of theory as controlling agent in the writing of critical history. Otherwise I would be tempted to use my arguments here, since the Wimsatt-Brooks volume, however different in scope and intention, invites the same kind of defense even as, with its theoretical preoccupations, it may invite many of the same antagonists. In treating Wellek's work I claimed that, however basic his theoretical assumptions, his was still essentially a faithful history even though it carried an argument with it, one that necessarily modified his inclusions and judgments. For once we recognize the historian's obligations to theory, we must see the effective history as occupying that precarious middle position between theoretical argument historically documented and mere neutral, objective chronicle—the kind of history which, mercifully impossible to achieve completely, makes a work the more unreadable as it is approached. In effect I was accepting Wellek's claim that, despite the necessary intrusion of his theoretical point of view, he means still to write a history; that is, to treat history "in all its complexity and multiplicity, in its own right" and not to present "a thesis about the origins of modern criticism."

The present volume, necessarily so much more skeletal in its coverage, may seem to move more openly and purposefully toward historically documented argument, away from history for history's sake. But this is only what the authors have warned us about in their Introduction. Consequently, even if one would charge them with unfaithfulness to the scope and method promised by their title, he could not justly claim that they have betrayed in their execution what they explicitly intended in suggesting the more accurate, if more unwieldy, alternative title, An Argumentative History of Literary Argument in the West (page vii). Still we must note their insistence that, despite the qualifiers, it is a history they are writing.

One might, with even more cause, claim, as has been claimed in the case of Wellek, that their history goes wrong where they become deluded by the easy Hegelian trap which leads them to accept a present position as that horizontal meeting point toward which centuries of seemingly chaotic and on occasion even capricious variations have been converging. But this is what they perhaps think of as their good fortune—and history's: that they have read history aright and have dialectically found their position under its guidance, not that having arbitrarily seized upon a position out of the prejudices of their era, they have created a history ex post facto. Brooks may find himself an especially likely target of such charges since it is this sort of

Critical Dogma and Critical Historians

distortion that his approach to poetic analysis has sometimes—and sometimes semi-hysterically—been accused of. Now, his opponents may wish to argue, he has with Wimsatt compounded the sin of using theory to misrepresent the nature of our poetry and its history with the sin of using theory to misrepresent what others have said critically about this poetry. Or since Brooks and Wimsatt, like members of their critical school generally, are attacked as "absolutists," their offense may be seen to be churchly, using the typical strategy of establishing precedent and tradition for a claim to new doctrine. And in our day this is the height—or depth—of offensiveness.

Such capital charges need not for the most part be taken seriously, for we may be rightly suspicious of the premises from which they spring. But they may indicate, at least for tactical purposes, likely points of approach to a work of such magnitude and diversity as the present volume. I suppose one can understand why these impressive historical undertakings stir the resentment of historically inclined anti-new critics (and it is only they who these days use the term "new critics" with any confidence about its referent). They must view this writing of history as the latest move in a bid to take over our academic culture. Having begun with an anti-historical approach that insisted upon the discrete analysis of the isolated poem, critics like Brooks then urged a rapprochement between criticism and history, a policy of peaceful coexistence based on criticism’s need for the facts of history and history’s need for the judgments that criticism alone could supply. Now these critics, the distrustful soul may fear, not content with so reducing the realm of the literary historian, are trying to take over the writing of history themselves, but of course always with an eye out for the advantage of their theory.

It must be conceded that the apportioning of space in the Short History would seem to give comfort to such accusations of parochialism. The reader must observe with some surprise that he is finished with all of literary criticism through the eighteenth century when he is only half finished with the book, that as much remains on the last hundred and fifty years. This general disproportion is aggravated by the space allotted to our minor contemporaries—some of them with not yet a substantial body of literary work—as compared to that allotted to some distinguished older critics with extended and productive careers. Thus an Arthur Koestler, a Leslie Fiedler, a Richard Chase, is given a fuller treatment than a Hazlitt or a Lamb. We should thank the authors for guiding us through uncharted territory instead
of only retracing old ground more safely: thus we should welcome the
careful exposition and sound, unflinching judgment of such recent move­
ments as, for example, that of the “myth” critics. But it comes at a heavy cost
to justice. There may seem to be a provincialism of place as well as of time,
so that after the chapter on sixteenth century themes, in which the Italians
are treated so thoroughly, the early cosmopolitanism of the book is replaced
by a concentration on English and American critics, even in periods when
other nations assumed critical leadership, with a major and unavoidable
continental figure or theme intruding only occasionally. But the authors
faced severe limitations of space and thus, despite the promise of their title
and of their all-inclusive earlier chapters, were forced to restrict them­
selves—as they admit in their Introduction—and “to follow the main lines
of critical heritage and then draw in the story toward the end to the
immediate arena of the modern English-speaking world” (page x).

Whether their detractors like it or not, these theorists have become our
most serious and ambitious historians for now—at least of literary criticism.
And very able historians they are. It is a matter for congratulation rather
than for mistrust that Wimsatt and Brooks have made themselves so
profundly fit for their scholarly task. In the pursuit of this task they
everywhere reveal a breadth and penetration, a learning that is never unused
or misused in deference to their theoretical affiliations. If their work differs
from that of the orthodox historian, then, it is surely not on the score of
erudition. Rather, where their work does differ, it differs by reason of the
humane and witty quality of their writing, their acute responsiveness to
actual poems, and their professional awareness and depth of understand­
ing—most uncommon to professors of literature—in all matters of philoso­
phy, technical and otherwise. For such differences as these we must indeed
be thankful, since for men with so rare a combination of gifts to dedicate
themselves to so wearying a drudgery as an almost universal critical history
is a gracious act of public service which we could never dare ask of them.

It is especially surprising, in view of their candid acknowledgments in
the Introduction, to see how little their critical assumptions seem to inter­
fere with their presentation of the vast array of critics, especially through
about the middle of the eighteenth century. This group, of course, makes the
severest demands upon their scholarly resources (or at least upon Wimsatt’s,
since he claims “substantial responsibility” for this portion), but the de­
mands invariably are brilliantly met. Occasionally the narration is moment­
tarily interrupted in order for us to be told where our authors stand on a
given issue, as, for example, at the close of their treatment of Aristotle on tragedy and comedy (page 53), where in an admirably balanced statement they at once affirm the act of criticism as a rational procedure and accept its limitations in the face of the ultimate mysteries of poetry. But for the most part the flow of the narration is continuous and left pretty much to run along on its own. Or so, at least, it appears. However, though the unwary reader may not suspect it, there is a planned recurrence of certain themes which are later to emerge out of the maze of utterances to build toward the authors’ theoretical pronouncement.

Several leading themes return again and again for further development. And these are not just the usual, indeed the inevitable, subjects on which critical historians dote: literary form and content, the moral and hedonic functions of poetry, the authority of rules and classical models, the purity of dramatic genres. To be sure, these important problems are extensively considered, as they must be. But this undertaking is truly original as critical history: refusing simply to follow the older lines with their stereotyped characterizations of various periods, our authors join to the treatment of such subjects new materials—sometimes of purely antiquarian interest, it may at first seem—not before considered the sort of thing to be a functional part of the history of criticism. And thus they add new themes to fill out their account, carrying along—especially in the earlier sections where there is such an expanse of time and space to be covered—an awesome multiplicity and diversity of them that challenge but never overcome the flexible organization.

For example, we would expect especially lengthy and valuable discussions of the history of rhetoric since Wimsatt has distinguished himself as a student of this field. But we might not expect them to function so importantly in his development of the role language must be assigned by poetics. For we needed this treatment to make us aware of it. From the beginning Wimsatt sees in statements about rhetoric the need to resolve the problematic relation between word and thing in literary art. He casts Plato as the defender of philosophy who asserts reality over its pale symbolic imitation and, on the other side, casts Isocrates and Aristotle as those who, defending poets and orators, “affirm the power of the word” (page 71), its creative role in wisdom. Moving from the latter to the even more forceful Stoic doctrine of the Logos and summoning to the aid of the word the eloquence of Cicero, Wimsatt later leads us to the Middle Ages, where the emphasis on allegorical meaning, being an emphasis on things and ideas rather than on
the language that lightly veils them from us, subverts the primacy of the
word. Then, with the introduction of what he views as a new and even more
austere Platonism—the doctrine of Ramism with its absolute separation of
dialectic from rhetoric—the fortunes of the word are dealt a nearly mortal
blow for the glory of thinghood. As Brooks later shows, it is only with the
recent symbolist-expressionist philosophers that it has been restored to its
former place, indeed has even had that place heightened. For frequently,
even in the more enthusiastic encomiums to the word in our ancient past,
there was the uncomfortable suggestion of "ornamentalism" when its func-
tion was being described. But Brooks makes it abundantly clear that its role
as prime mover is completely unquestioned by our symbolic idealists.

Yet we must notice that, while the contemporary theorist must deplore
the concept of ornamentalism and thus make Plato's partly the villain's role,
our authors do not press their views in a doctrinaire way. Wimsatt has a full
and sensitive treatment of neoclassic "wit," one in which he attends with
arresting clarity to the shifting, all-important differences between concept
and term. This discussion—normally, one would expect, a candidate for a
self-enclosed exercise in the history of ideas—is converted into yet another
aspect of the relation between thing and word which, as we have seen, is at
last shown to be the controlling, if often neglected, aspect of the never
neglected relation between poetic form and content.

Finally Wimsatt reaches and dares pause upon the notorious couplet

True wit is Nature to advantage dress'd;
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd.

While properly insisting that this aphorism hardly "describes the 'meaning'
of Pope's own poetry in its fullness," he acknowledges, as he must, that it
"has seemed to the post-romantic mind an all-too-apt expression of the
superficiality of neoclassical rhetorical practice. The statement, both as
specific theory of Augustan poetry and as general theory, is in fact disap-
pointing" (page 242). But disappointing, we may assume, again to the
post-romantic mind, Wimsatt's and ours, so that the fault may be ours rather
than Pope's. He pushes a bit farther when he adds, "The element of 'dress'
(so repugnant under that figure to the romantic mind) is never quite
squeezed out of poetic theory except by a rigorous extreme of idealistic
symbolism" (page 242). Thus he asserts the almost unavoidable dualism
inherited by the available language of criticism; and an awareness of it may
cause one to concede that Pope's couplet is "a sort of token, or temporary
expression” for an idea that is better than it sounds, that Pope may be trapped by the very nature of critical terminology as well as by that of his own rhetoric. Thus, too, Wimsatt can conclude his section, after quoting prosaic and more blatant examples of neoclassic ornamentalism,

An expression of ornamentalist theory when it takes a form like Pope’s couplet means something a little different from what a less guarded expression means. And the general theory of ornamentalism means one thing when applied to the verse of Blackmore and another when applied to that of Pope himself. (page 245)

Now one must find this sort of commentary liberal, even generous, in the extreme. Surely there should be no objection to this attempt to allow sympathetic reasonableness to rule over the merely dogmatic and thus the flexible historian over the rigid doctrinaire.

And yet Wimsatt’s is not exclusively a bland acceptance of Pope’s phrasing; there does remain something in it that bothers him. Perhaps this combination of reactions, even in this single minor instance, pinpoints his special value to us. He has come through recent critical theory, and with enough sympathy for it to worry about Pope’s couplet, while making himself—at least for the occasion—historian enough to see beyond its most obvious meaning and the theoretical antagonism it perhaps ought to arouse. If a more hostile view of his presentation sees in it merely a ruthless attempt to get Pope—with whatever distortion—into the modern theorists’ club, it has missed the obvious fact that the rigors of modern critical theory have been made to give way at least as much as Pope has. And as if to reward our author for his flexibility, Pope proves his point for him by furnishing the quotation with which he can conclude his chapter: the closing lines of *The Dunciad* that startlingly reveal a profound awareness of the *Logos*, of course along with a fear, or at least a stark mistrust, of it.

*Lo! thy dread Empire, CHAOS! is restor’d; Light dies before thy uncreating word.*

Other discussions too that in other contexts might have had their scholarship as their sole justification are here pressed into valuable service. There are many views given us about the imitation of the ancients—not only as a practice to be followed or scorned, but as a precise genre—and about the related genre of translation. We move from the obvious advice of Horace and Vida to a sensitive description of Ben Jonson’s imitative theories and practices. Later we pick up the subject with Dryden, who not only redefines the same issues but adds the delicate and special problems of
imitation involved in translation. From there to the new techniques of imitative verse in Pope and Dr. Johnson. Then the principle of neoclassic imitation is seen shading off also into that of parody before the notions of the Longinian sublime and original genius bury the entire question, and neoclassicism as well. But this recurrent issue is made to shed new and striking light from a familiar but unexpected source on the still unresolved problem of poetic creativity or, to use the well-worn phrase, of tradition and the individual talent. And we are prepared for the crucial theories of imagination that follow.

One can trace also the continual return to discussions of tragedy and comedy, as our authors follow the varying extents to which past theory has intermingled the two or has kept them discrete. Thus they work their way toward a conception of genres that neither obliterates them, Crocean fashion, nor so respects their integrity as to create a theory of classes, for the latter would multiply the single poetic principle toward which the volume is directed (pages ix–x). But no matter how ingeniously handled, these and other major themes cannot give us a full idea of the variety of subjects involved in past criticism. And our authors are too dedicated to their materials in their complexity to impose a rigid scheme upon them. Thus the narrative pauses for special chapters—almost digressions, they may seem at times—which treat a single problem, one most prominent in the particular period, by running it back to its roots and projecting it forward to its consequents. If some of these chapters, like those on poetry and the other arts and on poetic diction, seem somewhat wayward, threatening momentarily to transform the book into a collection of miscellaneous theoretical essays, they enrich the book immeasurably. By maintaining so flexible an organization the authors manage to give us a far fuller sense of the diversity of critical interests than could the professional historian's over-schematized, routine recital.

I should like, however, to return to the authors' major themes, since I am troubled by their treatment of one of them—the development of the expressionism that follows from idealism. This is for them a key theme since it emerges—out of what they say about Plotinus, Coleridge, Croce, and finally the recent symbolist-expressionists—as one of the two or three "radical ideas" which they try in their Epilogue to reconcile into a workable theory. The difficulty did not arise for me until I arrived with them at the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century and at the problem of imagination, perhaps because it is not until that point that the volume seemed to get
more seriously argumentative. We have already seen that pre-nineteenth-century criticism is somehow compressed into the first half of the volume. Further, this earlier portion requires exacting scholarship in explanation. It may be that Wimsatt was just kept too busy to allow himself much leisure for theoretical dispute. Or it may be that these earlier materials seemed less urgently demanding of judgment, that the need to speak out increases as we approach our own time and its peculiar problems. Wellek suggested that the mid-eighteenth century was a good time to begin his critical history since what was said earlier was largely of "antiquarian" interest and "unrelated to the problems of our day." While Wimsatt and Brooks begin their book pretty much at the beginning, it may be that they are, perhaps unconsciously, agreeing with Mr. Wellek—much as their brilliant early sections ought to persuade them otherwise—in that they do not pursue the argumentative aspect of their work very consistently until after the time he specifies.

Wimsatt approaches the romantic and idealist conception of imagination from the associationism of the latter eighteenth century. With a characteristic brilliance of historic insight he shows an essential continuity between the power, permitted by associationism, of recombining fragmented sensory experiences and the uniting power of the creative imagination that was shortly to be asserted. The earlier, still associative faculty at rare times even had attributed to it the power of fusing—not merely adding together—ideas into a new and unique object (page 305). Indeed, we are almost led to ask what need there was for German idealism or for the Coleridge whom it spawned except, perhaps, to announce and take credit for an innovation already achieved. I found myself asking whether all this was not too brilliant, with a facility that beguiled us into moving too quickly.

The passage from the associative to the Coleridgean imagination calls for a leap from one epistemology to another, from a mechanical passivity to an organic creativity, from the concept of a mind limited by what it takes in to one whose spontaneity creates beyond its materials—in short, from what Coleridge termed "fancy" to what he termed "imagination." This kind of

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5 Elsewhere too we find Wimsatt perhaps over-anxious to establish historic continuity. For example, in his desire to connect Croce with the aesthetic movement, he calls Croce’s "a master theory of art for art’s sake" (p. 500). Shortly after, he more correctly calls his theory "the most resolutely cognitive of all modern art theories" (p. 508). This hardly suggests autotelism.
leap ultimately defies the mediating claims of historic continuity. Its effect upon literary theory is as radical: the empirical doctrine of association, for all its seeming subjectivity, could still, through its notion of the mind's essential passivity, permit of a theory of imitation—validating it from the other end, as it were. Only expressionistic doctrine could do justice to the literal creativity bestowed upon the new imagination. In Wimsatt's passage an awareness of the full impact of the organicistic revolution seems to be lacking. There may well be hints in this direction in the later writings of associationists, but logically they have no business there so long as these writers remain associationists. Our author should have more explicitly instructed us that one will have to do better—or at least differently—epistemologically and metaphysically, to earn his organicism.

This is no mere quibble. For I believe Coleridge does not come out very favorably in the chapter on imagination because Wimsatt does not give his doctrine of organic creativity its due. He refuses, for example, to see all it can do for a general theory of poetry and instead finds it "slanted very heavily toward a particular kind of poetry" (page 398), obviously a poetry romantic in style and ideas. Like D. G. James before him, he even equates Coleridge's theory with the rightly unpopular one of Ruskin, not only in its identifying the imagination with the serious and the fancy with the playful, but also in its dedicating the imagination to the "pathetic fallacy." One must grant, especially in the face of Wimsatt's impressive mass of quotations, that Coleridge was too immersed in the romantic milieu not to share in its fondness for the serious, the emotional, the vague. But I have elsewhere argued extensively—in dealing with T. E. Hulme's similar condemnation of Coleridge—that it is its organically creative aspect which gives life to his concept of imagination just as this concept has given life to recent theory, even as espoused by those who disparage Coleridge. I was, in effect, asking for the latitude and generosity of treatment which we have seen Wimsatt, with perhaps less reason, accord Pope, but which a literalism

7 One must ask whether this "theory of 'animating' imagery, of romantic anthropomorphism" (p. 400)—the investing of nature with human qualities—begins to do justice to the kind of interpenetration, of union between tenor and vehicle that the Coleridgean imagination provides for. Does the "pathetic fallacy" leave nature as nature at all, or rather is nature being ruthlessly used, to the neglect of its intrinsic qualities, in order to be assimilated to the human ideas it is to embody? This is a one-sided affair certainly.

Critical Dogma and Critical Historians

seemingly invoked for the occasion prevents him from according to Coleridge. I did concede, however, that only by rooting the creativity of his imagination in the creative resources of language more deeply and firmly than Coleridge did, can one even partly avoid the romantic extravaganza of his theory. And this describes the sort of thing many recent critics after I. A. Richards as well as those like Cassirer whom Brooks calls "philosophers of symbolic form" (pages 700–8) have been trying to bring about.

It is rather surprising that in his development of the defense of the word over the centuries, as I have already traced it, Wimsatt divorces the notion of the primacy of the word in cognition from the idealist and expressionist tradition. Surely there is something monistic about the desire to destroy the antinomy between word and thing. Nor do I think we ought to be completely comfortable to have so notorious an "ornamentalist" as Aristotle cast as the word's early champion and Cicero as his successor. The defense of rhetoric, though it ministers to the user of words by asserting the desirable union of wisdom and eloquence, is still not a proclamation of the word's creative power. It was this I had in mind when I spoke earlier of the "ornamentalism" that seemed to hover about most of Wimsatt's proposed word-centered tradition.

It is not that we can deny Plato's activities against the word, although we must remember, too, that there is a somewhat different Plato who passes down to us from Plotinus through modern idealism and expressionism. But we may wonder whether, in his desire to make the Platonic-Aristotelian opposition too clean-cut and to put Aristotle on the right side, Wimsatt has not erred in excluding expressionism from the stream of verbalistic theory. He seems uncertain himself about how purely Aristotle is to serve as the representative of "the power of the word" (page 71). For he acknowledges...

9There are some other too hasty distinctions drawn also. Wimsatt blandly accepts poetry as "truth of 'coherence,' rather than truth of 'correspondence' " (p. 748). But how can he, when he is so deeply concerned about poetry's imitative and cognitive function that poetry for him must have to do with "seeing and saying" as well as with "making" (p. 755)? Or, in an admirable attempt to classify exhaustively certain nineteenth-century tendencies, he uses for one of them a phrase that approaches oxymoron—"autonomous didacticism" (p. 425). He clearly means by this that while poetry is to teach, it is to do so in its own right, no longer as a surrogate for philosophy or religion, which it is to replace. Still it is an unfortunate phrase, forced on him by the nature of his classificatory distinctions, especially as applied to Matthew Arnold. Later Wimsatt admits that in Arnold's famous definition of poetry as a "criticism of life," "the criticism would obviously have to be somehow faithful to, or limited by, its object" (p. 491). Surely faithfulness, limitation, and an external object do not seem convincing evidences of autonomy. Nor does Wimsatt's implication that Arnold did not approach "a distinct concern for literature" (p. 451).
Aristotle as an "ornamentalist" who sees words as the attractive coloring of the poem's outline, of its soul, its plot (page 264). He uses Aristotle also as representative of the mimetic principle, "which does justice to the world of things" (page 750), although this function would seem to set Aristotle on Plato's side against the Aristotle we were told of who champions the word. And yet there would appear to be a fourth Aristotle against the world of things and words, one who represents pure formalism, the notion of structures "devoid of any meaning" (page 752). While Wimsatt is surely aware of these differences and while there is that in Aristotle to justify each of these interpretations so that reference to him is, in the context of these passages, understandable, nevertheless the contradictory nature of some of them may make one question the wisdom of using him so crucially and unqualifiedly in the early defense of the word. Wimsatt should have lined up his teams more tentatively. It seems especially unfortunate that the kind of theoretical tradition that is ushered in by Aristotle, who is after all most influentially an imitationist, must be one that is inimical to the philosophical orientation that can do most for the word—the idealistic and expressionistic. For the latter produces thinkers who are Platonic in their lineage, although theirs is not the austere Platonism that Wimsatt seizes upon to allow his early dichotomy—the Platonism of Ramus. There is a need, then, to supplement his version of Platonism, though I cannot answer it here.

Since Wimsatt does not separate some degree of ornamentalism from the verbalistic tradition, his leniency toward Pope's notion of thought and its verbal "dress" may not be so striking as I have suggested. He has told us, "The element of 'dress' . . . is never quite squeezed out of poetic theory except by a rigorous extreme of idealistic symbolism" (page 242). Since this is clearly too rigorous an extreme for him, he must be willing to put up with some degree of this "element." Apparently since he cannot go all the way with organicism (and who can?), he would like a theory part "ornamental," part "integrational." Would that it were possible to take organicism by degrees or to have words serve even slightly as decoration without destroying the uniquely cognitive possibilities of poetry. But what we saw before as generous historical breadth in Wimsatt's acceptance of Pope's couplet may from another view appear like theoretical timidity.

There is a central difficulty in idealism that concerns Wimsatt deeply, as it well ought to. When discussing it in connection with Coleridge, he says it "has haunted all idealistic theory of art from Plotinus to Croce and Susanne Langer" (page 399). If all perception is creative, in what way is
poetic creation differently creative? In more contemporary terms, how can one differentiate aesthetic symbolization from the universal symbolization needed in every mere act of human knowing? Either poetry is assimilated to non-aesthetic activity or everything is made poetry. In either case it in effect ceases to exist. If idealists cannot extricate themselves from this puzzle, it is because they have not fully enough insisted upon the need for language, the highly disciplined and formalized medium of poetry, to bring a special creative power to life, through its restraining as well as its enabling powers. A freely ranging symbolizing power cannot manage this kind of creation on its own. Only in art is there this kind of medium and thus this kind of creation. It may be that this is to call on idealists to yield somewhat to realism and to see less creativity in ordinary perception. But what is more important to us here, it calls on them to assert even more strongly the principle of the Logos with which their expressionism has led them to identify themselves, as Wimsatt should have more clearly pointed out. But his initial setting of the problem of the word prevents him from tracing their connection with this principle.

Wimsatt’s own theoretical orientation seems too antipathetic to the idealistic notion of creativity for him to appreciate its complete meaning. The pre-Kantian language of epistemological realism gives him away. Thus he can speak of such extreme idealists as Schelling and Friedrich Schlegel as having “a lofty view of the artist’s power of reshaping reality” (page 491) without recognizing that “reshaping” is far too weak, is not sufficiently creative, since it suggests only the shuffling of a full deck. Or at the end (Wimsatt is responsible for the Epilogue also) he extends himself to include expressionism in his final synthesis by using, to satisfy it, the term “seeing” (page 753). But “seeing,” with its suggestion of a something there to be seen, of mere discovery, is more a realist’s—indeed an imitationist’s—term than an expressionist’s. This is not to quarrel with realism but only to criticize this realist’s inability to give us a full sense of so important a recent theoretical strain as idealistic expressionism. Perhaps we find at least a partial source for his realist bias when we read the following in a quotation he uses from Jacques Maritain: art “transforms, removes, brings closer together, transfigures; it does not create” (page 497).

Oddly enough, it is in Wimsatt’s collaborator, Cleanth Brooks, that the idealist-expressionist doctrine receives a sympathetic exposition which conflicts at times sharply with the kind of attitude we have been observing at work. Early in his portion of the book we find Brooks opening the all-
The Place of Criticism

important and impressively synoptic chapter on symbolism with the pronouncement, "The doctrine that words create knowledge is a part of the romantic theory of imagination." He follows this immediately with a quotation from Coleridge who, in defending poetry as the mediator between subject and object, says, "I would endeavor to destroy the old antithesis of Words and Things; elevating, as it were, Words into Things and living things too" (page 584). Brooks then connects Croce, Cassirer, and Mrs. Langer with this tradition, even as he later traces the "emphasis upon organic form" back to Plotinus (page 653). At this point he includes Augustine, too, in this line of thinking, although we may remember that Wimsatt rather ranged Augustine on the anti-Platonic Aristotelian team (page 72). These identifications suggest that Brooks has a very different, and I think a more correct, sense of the relation between idealism and the belief in the primacy of the word. Surely there is little implication in Wimsatt’s treatment that Coleridge had so important a verbal interest or that his organicism has had such revolutionary effects. And where Brooks sees the local romantic weaknesses of the Coleridgean imagination, he corrects them with notions drawn from the more essential aspect of the same theory of imagination, thus testifying, as I have, to the concept’s far-flung theoretical value:

Marvell’s poetry, with its serious wit, challenges Coleridge’s distinction between the fancy and the imagination, for many of the devices in Marvell’s poetry that Coleridge would have to range under fancy are actually used to achieve effects that show the full power of the imagination. (pages 666–67)

But would not Brooks be the first to admit that his second use of imagination in this passage, as well as his first, is Coleridgean in its derivation, so that he has corrected Coleridge with Coleridge?

If in his earlier publications, however, Brooks has seemed to be somewhat unrestrained in his advocacy of organicism, complexity, poetic inclusiveness, we find him here qualifying his claims considerably, thanks either to the subduing effects of confronting history, to the influence of his collaborator, or simply to his own theoretical development. Let us note some passages:

... if there are no fixities and definites at all but only symbolic fluidity, then there would appear to be some danger that everything will disappear into froth and bubbles. (page 587)

And, citing Yeats as a corrective, but one still operating within the framework of idealism:
Indeed, we have had few poets in history who have stressed more powerfully the
density and hard particularity of the objects of the external world. In celebrating
the power of words, as all proponents of symbolist-expressionist doctrines must,
Yeats did not lose thereby his grip upon things. Or, if we were willing to
suppose with the symbolists that we could get at things only through language,
then we would still have to say that in Yeats’s poetry, language is not denatured
and diluted into a common gray “wordiness.” Words retain the sharp outlines
and individual profiles of “things.” (pages 604–5)

While Brooks believes Yvor Winters goes too far in the other direction, he
pays this tribute to him:

Winters’ bias toward the logical, the definite, and the unequivocal gives him a
certain corrective value. He has refused to be imposed upon by misty and
vague meanings, and he has been able to put his finger on tendencies toward
incoherence that have escaped the notice of many other modern critics. (page
673)

In his retreat from a pure organicism and its unlimitedly romantic
consequences, Brooks seems to carry a nostalgia for the systematic consist­
ency it would allow. While his theory is now broadened and eased, as a result
he must with other modern theorists confront the dilemma that a partial
organicism is impossible, is in effect no organicism, and that the alternative
to organicism is destructive of all that recent theory has taught us about
poetry. He seems to be not so far as he might like from the position in
which he finds Susanne Langer:

If Mrs. Langer avoids [Emerson’s symbolistic] monism, as on the whole she does,
it is because in practise she uses more referential criteria than she is perhaps
aware that she is using and more than her theory strictly entitles her to use.
(page 708)

If, despite the differences remaining between them, Brooks has moved
closer to Wimsatt, when the latter returns for the Epilogue he also appears
somewhat more moderate, as for example in the following concession:

Thus the authors of this history find little difficulty in explaining to themselves
a strong sympathy for the contemporary neo-classic school of ironic criticism
and for what it has in common with the theory that prevailed in the time of
Coleridge and the Germans. (page 742)

At the end there is a stirring note of triumph, sounded metaphorically in
terms borrowed from another and higher sphere of age-long battle. The
authors reject the all-exclusive, too spiritual monism symbolized by Platon­
ism or Gnosticism and the all-inclusive dualism and unresolved conflict
symbolized by Manichaeism in order to embrace the final affirmation that
can come as a miraculous, all-reconciling grace only after an almost total
abandonment to conflict—metaphorically "the religious dogma of the Incarnation" (page 746).

This soaring conclusion carries us in the direction of aesthetic order beyond the dramatistic theory of endless struggle, the dualistic or pluralistic—if not chaotic—theory of unresolved irony which was for some time associated with Brooks. It is now repudiated as the aesthetic equivalent of Manichaeism. If this religious metaphor could be as convincingly translated into aesthetic terms so that we could have both the internally multiplied complications of organicism and yet, somehow, finally, the responsibility to order and to the world, poetic theory would have been granted a miraculous gift indeed. But perhaps literal translation is more than we dare ask even of a metaphor used in argumentative discourse. When Wimsatt and Brooks make their only attempt at translation at the very close, they come forth with the claim that poetry unites the notion of making—the Aristotelian—with the notion of saying and seeing—the Platonic (which, be it noted, now includes the romantic and expressionistic). We cannot help noting that these twin definitions of the poet as seer-soothsayer (Vates) and as maker (Poeta) are precisely the two that Sir Philip Sidney began his Apology by coupling and distinguishing. And we may wonder whether, in their desire to do right by all that their history has revealed to them and to us, our authors have really carried us beyond those older and unsatisfactory formulas which called for the unity of form with content, of the dulce with the utile.

Perhaps the best way to tame those who pursue any divergent theoretical course that threatens to become narrow is to force them to confront the multiplicity of history. It makes for sanity, for tolerance. In transforming their anti-historicism into a desire to write history themselves, recent theorists seem as likely to be touched by history's catholic spirit as they are to alter the interpretation of history's facts. Surely our authors, for all their philosophical rigor, have been chastened by the lessons history, with its distance, gives of other doctrines and by the diversity it so prodigally displays. Indeed, confronted with the historian's task, we all are likely to give way to the temptations—yes, even the virtues—of an all-embracing eclecticism. We have heard much in recent theory about the "poetry of inclusion." Perhaps now, if the attraction to history writing continues, we are to be heading toward a similarly inclusive poetics. In their Epilogue our authors urge us to "a theory of multiple focuses," leading to "an indefinitely variable criticism of all poems" (page 750). Speaking of the unfortunate
division of aesthetic value into sensory and conceptual values, they urge us to learn "how to embrace them both and thus have a double or paradoxical theory" (page 752). But being discursive, theory may not do so well with the paradoxical as poetry can. Our authors would be the first to insist that to confound criticism with poetry is to commit again the error of the critical impressionists. How, except by moving beyond the rigors of system, is the theorist, who is philosophically aware but is newly broadened by history, to reconcile with his concern for consistency the several incompatible traditions he now feels the need to accommodate? All of this is perhaps only to say that if the critical theorist is enabled to range more freely by turning critical historian, this latter role is not likely to solve for him the problems set by the former. This critical history, then, even in its Epilogue, cannot finally show us the theorist's way, much as it opens avenues. It is not to be expected, nor would our authors, in their self-awareness, pretend to it. It may after all be necessary once again to turn away from history, to assert its limitations with its breadth, and to head—now more wisely as more knowingly, thanks to our authors—back into the narrows of theory in search for the meaning of poetry.