The Play and Place of Criticism

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[The secondary imagination] is essentially \textit{vital}, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.  
\textit{(Biographia Literaria, Chapter XIII)}
There has for some time now been little need to argue for the influence of the Coleridgean imagination on those I have called the new apologists for poetry. But the above closing sentence of Coleridge's famous definition is usually overlooked both for itself and for its special relevance to these critics. If it and its relevance were not overlooked, we would be more aware than we are of the unison with which these critics feel about subject and object, about the operation of will, and about the relation of will to the world of subjects and objects. This awareness, in turn, might take us a long way toward understanding the extent to which this critical tradition is akin, in its attitudes to self and world, to the recently flowering existentialist and personalist doctrines in its contemporaries on the Continent, with whom, in most obvious respects, it would seem to have little in common.

We learn much of what we have to learn about Coleridgean epistemology as we note his insistence that objects are dead rather than vital only insofar as they function for us as objects. Or would it not be more accurate to say only insofar as we permit them to function as mere objects, thanks to the failure of our imagination to give them their life, to create them as subjects? Here, of course, we reach the heart of the Coleridgean I AM. As the “living power and prime agent of all human perception,” the imagination is an act, a vitalizing act that inspirits the object with the subjective assertion of being, the I AM. The imagination, then, permits the object to

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1 In speaking of the I AM as Coleridgean, as earlier I spoke of his epistemology or his imagination, I of course do not mean to make any claims for the originality of these doctrines with him or to take sides in disputes about his sources in (or plagiarizing from) German idealistic philosophers and romantic theorists. These historical matters, however important, do not affect my somewhat different historical interests here.
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be—if I may use the graceless coinage—I-AM-ized. It is thus transformed from object to subject. And we recall the Idealist's struggle to destroy the antinomy between subject and object, the unforgivably Germanic involutions which Coleridge borrowed to work the union of subject and object, the involutions which he claimed for the I AM in his Thesis VI of the twelfth chapter of the Biographia: In the I AM, he tells us,

and in this alone, object and subject, being and knowing, are identical, each involving and supposing the other. In other words, it is a subject which becomes a subject by the act of constructing itself objectively to itself; but which never is an object except for itself, and only so far as by the very same act it becomes a subject.

And when this "genial" power fails, the consequences are those we witness in "Dejection: An Ode":

_I may not hope from outward forms to win_  
_The passion and the life, whose fountains are within._

_O Lady! we receive but what we give,_  
_And in our life alone does Nature live:_  
_Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!_  
_Which would we ought behold, of higher worth,_  
_Than that inanimate cold world allowed_  
_To the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd,_  
_Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth_  
_A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud_  
_Enveloping the Earth—_  
_And from the soul itself must there be sent_  
_A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,_  
_Of all sweet sounds the life and element! _ . . . _

_But now afflictions bow me down to earth;_  
_Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth;_  
_But oh! each visitation_  
_Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,_  
_My shaping spirit of Imagination._

All objects are left mere objects and dead. The poem is full of the imagery of stasis, the hushed stilling of natural and human movement. The lifeless poet, the passive viewer of a lifeless world of objects, is in effect the ancient mariner becalmed, trapped by his own creative failures and, consequently, his destructive propensities, through the death he gives to objects by failing to create them as subjects. And he is similarly cursed.

Ever since the formulations of Coleridge and the post-Kantian Germans
behind him, the poet's act of imagination has thus been seen as a liberating act that establishes his creative humanity; it is a victory over passivity, over the oppressive materiality and necessity of the formless, other-than-human world outside him. For the forms of imagination, in constituting our world, free it for human occupancy, give it the life that guarantees our own proper life, our realized humanity. Of course, as a T. E. Hulme would angrily remind us, our humanity is thus being realized by our daring to play God, through a presumptuous imitation of Genesis.

This divine-human need, at once metaphysical and aesthetic, to merge with the object and thus to destroy its objectivity is inevitably allied to the need that modern critics, in the tradition of Schopenhauer and Bergson, find central to the poet's role: his need to reject the world as an instrument of willful practicality and to cherish it as a unique and terminal object. But this very act would convert the object to subject by infusing it with the creative vitality he then can find in it. This relaxation of the practical will returns the tradition to its source in the aesthetic disinterestedness called for by Immanuel Kant.

But I want to look ahead rather than back from Coleridge. Even a professed anti-transcendentalist, anti-Germanic, and anti-Coleridgean neoclassicist like T. E. Hulme finds a common front with Coleridge in his concern about the vitalistic impulse that moves the poet. It comes to Hulme, of course, from his discipleship to Bergson. In the spirit of Bergson, Hulme urges the fluidity of experience that keeps all unique by destroying entityhood; he decries the stereotypes of thinghood that freeze organic vitality by imposing the mechanics of spatial fixity upon it. So we look upon a veil of dead universals instead of piercing through to the pulsing actualities beneath. But, he sadly acknowledges, we are all too often victims of this perceptual sloth, of this substitution of neatly stacked counters for our actual felt experience. And why? Because our will-driven need for action permits only those mechanical distortions of experience that its ruthless efficiency can make use of. So, as in Schopenhauer, the villain is still the will—or rather our propensity for action, and not for contemplation for its own sake, together with the will as the faculty summoned by action for its governance. The alternative is the suspension of will, which makes contemplation possible as an autotelic activity. Hulme's plea for us to rend the false veil of universals is of course, despite the differences between them, reminiscent of

2 On Hulme and his relations to Coleridge and Bergson, see The New Apologists for Poetry (Minneapolis, 1956), pp. 31-45.
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Coleridge's despair over "the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude," in consequence of which "we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand."\(^3\)

This tendency to celebrate contemplation and denigrate action is an inevitable response of the aesthetic impulse to the modern world's pragmatism and the child of pragmatism, instrumentalism. It is the concentration on the world as instrument, on the converting of the world to one's use, that, we remember in Coleridge, kept the object a mere object and thus dead. The aesthetic need is for satisfaction that looks no further than the object, cherishes it as alive, so that the hostility of this need to the practical intent is inevitable. It is the purposiveness, the objective, the world of means and end, of means to end, that is the enemy of aesthetic experience. Thus it was that Coleridge's master and the modern world's, Kant, could distinguish the aesthetic experience—in terms of his teleological concerns—by speaking of its finality-without-end. To deny immediacy, to move through and beyond the object to what it can be made good for, is to bring death into our perceptual world.

In part the attack upon use is linked to an almost pantheistic cherishing of the object, a love for the thing in its unique thingness that defies even the generic naming tendencies of language (or at least of other-than-poetic language). And in the fear of giving death to the object by submitting it to our ruthless service, we see the desire to restore particularity to an unpoetic, anaesthetic generic world whose singulars have had to purge themselves of their singularity as they submit to the universal. It is a desire that would have been understood by Kierkegaard, aimed as it is against the over-unified, over-universalized world-view produced by the straining metaphysical ambitiousness of a Hegel.

This is the attitude that leads to John Crowe Ransom's metaphor about

\(^3\)Biographia Literaria (New York, 1906), p. 161. See p. 210 for his rejection of a poem for being "a pure work of the will," a charge that sounds like Allen Tate's. Throughout this essay I am emphasizing and extending those tendencies toward particularity in Coleridge which are often overlooked by those who emphasize his Idealism and its consequent universalizing tendencies. But I do not mean to quarrel with his primary dedication to Idealism. Rather I fully acknowledge that his Platonic interest in universality normally predominates over his relatively minor interest which I am purposely inflating here. By pressing the consequences of his anti-objective definition of the I AM, I am trying to suggest some degree of union between metaphysical and anti-metaphysical—essentialist and existentialist—doctrines of reality. In Coleridge's "film of familiarity and selfish solicitude" and its similarity to Hulme's veil, we see the point at which these doctrines can join. Thus the higher metaphysics of transcendent Idealism can, strangely and perhaps unwillingly, end by feeding its anti-doctrine of Existentialism.
the world's body. Ransom takes the metaphor seriously—that is, literally—even suggesting, in the poet's love of this "body," a biological sanction for the poetic impulse. It seems, at times, a very little less than erotic love. The world's body, we are told, has been unfleshed by the modern habit of the loveless use which is the abuse of that world. It is the sin of the Hobbesian "naturalist":

A naturalist is a person who studies nature not because he loves it but because he wants to use it, approaches it from the standpoint of common sense, and sees it thin and not thick.

In our naturalistic world only the poet remains stubbornly to cherish the world's body by exploring its every particularity. He refuses to abandon any of those particularities "lurking" within the body, insisting on all that makes it endlessly contingent. He will not subdue the contingency for any universal that would absorb the particular to itself, thereby denying its particularity—hence Ransom's almost violent antipathy to what he calls Platonism, the universalizing force that furnishes a single archetype to account for a host of unfleshed particulars. Shifting his metaphor from love to politics, he treats Platonism as a predatory state at once loveless, totalitarian, and insatiable in its appetite for particulars. He sees it as ever on the prowl for new experiences that it must rob of the contingencies that make them unique—and the precious objects of our poetic devotion. In our day it leads to the "sciencing" of the world and its body.

Ransom's famous distinction between structure and texture in poetry follows accordingly. For him logical structure results from our predatory need to use the world and the world of language, to subdue them to our universalizing needs. We move through objects and through the words that will refer others to them. Texture results from our recalcitrant insistence, as lovers of the world and of the word—in short, as poets—on being inefficient, on lingering wastefully in order to cherish at leisure the richness of the body, those particularities which pragmatic urgency would lead us to ignore in our haste to make use of them. Ransom seems to be recalling us to Coleridge's plea against the pull of the end, of terminus and objective, in poetry:

The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by

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4 This metaphor, the world's body, is the title of Ransom's 1938 collection of essays.
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the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself. Like the motion of a serpent, which the Egyptians made the emblem of intellectual power; or like the path of sound through the air; at every step he pauses and half recedes, and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onward. "Praecipitandus est liber spiritus," says Petronius Arbiter most happily.6

The word liber makes Ransom's indebtedness to this passage unmistakable.

Structure for Ransom, then, consists of the determinacies that were there before the poet even began: the argument on the one hand and the meter on the other. Texture consists of the indeterminacies he discovers and pauses to cultivate along the winding way. They can be indeterminacies of meaning as he indulges the waywardness of anti-argument or indeterminacies of sound-pattern as he indulges the waywardness of words. We come to understand Ransom's curious justification of meter: it is the sop the poet throws to the aroused Platonism (the "Platonic censor") in his impatient reader, a sop that gives him some sort of order, of regularity, to hold onto while the poet maddeningly involutes the order of meaning.

A formal metre impresses us as a way of regulating very drastically the material, and we do not stop to remark (that is, as readers) that it has no particular aim except some nominal sort of regimentation. It symbolizes the predatory method, like a sawmill which intends to reduce all the trees to fixed unit timbers, and as business men we require some sign of our business. But to the Platonic censor in us it gives a false security, for so long as the poet appears to be working faithfully at his metrical engine he is left comparatively free to attend lovingly to the things that are being metered, and metering them need not really hurt them. Metre is the gentlest violence he can do them, if he is expected to do some violence.7

The metaphor of love is joined to the metaphor of politics: thanks to the waywardness of texture, the poem offers a democratic state of nearly autonomous elements (of objects and words) instead of the coldly marshaled totalitarian state of non-poetry. It offers this as a state of love, of a love that can cherish beyond utility value, indeed that can cherish as a gesture to non-utility, to positive irrelevance (to use one of Ransom's favorite terms). The poem becomes an affectionate tribute to reckless non-pursuit, to sampling everything in the Bower of Bliss, to lotus-

6 Biographia Literaria, p. 165. I am grateful to Emerson R. Marks for reminding me that Coleridge, in borrowing the Latin phrase, gives a systematic seriousness to what was far more casually meant in the original. In this distortion I have followed him. It is reminiscent of ut pictura poesis and the weighty history that descends from the phrase Horace tossed off so lightly.

eating as a poetic, a moral, and a political necessity, the sole necessity in a world loosed from all structural moorings. The poet is to fight always against the specter of Spenser's austere knight, the unfulrable, no-nonsense Platonist, who stands ready to force the poem back into the properly structural place of discourse.  

Allen Tate joins Ransom in the attack upon Platonism as the destroyer of poetry. With one as with the other, it is always the quest for universality, for essence, for the abstract reason of propositional certainty, that forecloses the lowly but indispensable immediacy of experiential particularity. When Tate shifts from his attack on Platonism in his early "Three Types of Poetry" to his attack on the "angelic imagination" in his essay of that name and its companion essay, "The Symbolic Imagination," it is really the same attack. It is the bypassing of commonplace, particular reality, of the world of the senses and the sense of the word, "in the illusory pursuit of essence" that constitutes aesthetic as well as metaphysical failure. The poetic equivalent of the Gnostic heresy, it is the failure of most of us most of the time in our vision as in our language. The inherently generic tendency of our language must be subverted at every point by the poet who—as Hulme had taught—cannot but resist the counters, the fixed (and thus deadened) forms of the semantic and syntactic formulae that pre-existed his poem. Each poem struggles to create its own unique language system in order to prove its adequacy to experience by demonstrating the incapacities of generic systems. We have been moving from the cherishing and cultivating of the world's body to the cherishing and cultivating of the body of language. The ruthlessness of Platonism, in its pursuit of universal ends, is said to ignore the one as it ignores the other. Just as it treats the individual object as object only, indifferently pressing its particular properties into the nearest universal, so it indifferently presses language into the counterservice of those concepts it is dedicated to "communicate." It is the use of language as tool, in the name of the god clarity, that finds its reductio in the absurd pleadings of

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8 It is no wonder that an austere moralist like Yvor Winters must attack Ransom for what Winters calls his hedonism. Of course, there is for Ransom also the crucial problem of restoring what is logically irrelevant or indeterminate to a place of relevance in a finally determined aesthetic order. This problem, which I have discussed elsewhere (see, for example, The New Apologists for Poetry, pp. 82–87), is not central to my discussion of the tradition I am tracing here.

the semanticists, the use of language as the neutral (neutered?) unclouded hustler of universalized things. It is only to be a bearer of meaning, but to fetch and carry and—no nonsense—nothing more. And—prohibited most of all—no play. Where poetry is pursued within the terms of this view of language, only that Platonic pseudo-poetry which Tate, after Yeats, termed poetry of the will can result. It is ideological, even propositional, poetry. To be sure, this pseudo-poetry can strongly—and persuasively—modify the rawness of the less disguised versions of this conceptual exploitation of language. But at every crucial point pressure is exerted from outside to overcome the internal pressure generated by the play of language within itself as it seeks vainly to become system. And the Platonic domination, the propositional structure, stands revealed: the skeleton that puritanically denies flesh, denies body—ultimately denies the singularity that permits love. Thus the sin of language is joined to the sin of metaphysics, or at least so the personalist, as well as the contextualist critic, must charge.

In the existentialist-personalist tradition—in Sartre, in Berdiaev, in Buber, in Simone Weil, in the Personnalisme of Emmanuel Mounier and the Esprit group, in Kierkegaard himself—the cardinal sin is the turning of person into thing, of subject into object, of unique into common, of end into means. It is the generic form of murder, the turning off of life. And this is precisely the failure of imagination we have seen critics speaking of from Coleridge on, whether a failure of one’s visioning of objects or of one’s creative relations to his medium.\(^{10}\) And often it is both. The failure is, finally, a failure to break through the veil, through “the film of familiarity

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\(^{10}\) I am aware that, in pressing this similarity, I am overlooking an important difference between the existentialist-personalist tradition and the tradition descended from the German Idealistic attempt to overcome the subject-object antinomy. While the Coleridgean I AM, like Ransom’s textural demands upon the poet, requires that all objects—natural and human—be transformed and vitalized by the assertive subject, the existentialist-personalist distinguishes sharply between nature and man, insisting that only the latter be preserved against objectification, be cherished as a precious and irreducible subject. The treatment of the subhuman, of the less-than-person, as object is hardly a matter for condemnation by the personalist, since things are things and only persons are to be kept from thingification. But the entire external world—all that is other-than-myself—is equally to be rescued from objectification by the Coleridgean bent on saving his imagination, on keeping his a living, breathing world. Clearly the Coleridgean seems to be making a metaphysical—or at least an epistemological—insistence, the personalist a moral one. But I am now trying to find moral elements in the epistemological claims. My point, despite the difference I am here mentioning, rests on a temperamental and methodological similarity between the two traditions: a common attack on the use that is abuse, through the assertiveness of the universalizing practical will, and a common reverence for the unique and for the notion of process with its indivisible multiplication of uniques.
and selfish solicitude” that Coleridge decried, that turns the poet of will into
the counterpart of the cursed ancient mariner. The veil that Hulme saw the
practical will cast upon reality to protect our action-ridden propensities is,
after all, the veil that our slothful and insensitive language habits cast upon
the symbolic potency of words. The world we see, conditioned by the vision
our symbolic medium permits, must in turn affect our symbolic capacities.
And the dulling, the veiling of one involves the dulling, the veiling of the
other. Hulme’s veil is the oriental and neo-Platonic veil of illusion; he takes
it from Bergson who, in turn, follows the early Schopenhauerian Nietzsche
and Schopenhauer himself. This genealogy reminds us of the profound
epistemological implications of the hatred of the veil, of the claims against
its universals as unreal superimpositions, of the oriental retreat to pure
contemplation as the alternative to the ego’s death through its too aggressive
self-assertion.

The relaxation of will and the consequent transcendent disinterest can
bring us beyond reason’s pragmatic demarcations to the fluid, ever-changing
reality that brooks no imposition of identifiable bounds, of classifiable
property, indeed of the rational notion of class itself. It brings about a
radical nominalism of unyielding particulars, none of which will give up any
particle of its autonomy to band together with any other. There can be no
adequate propositions, then, no knowledge, if by knowledge we mean more
than knowledge of discrete particulars. The existential realm is, from the
standpoint of propositional structures, a raging chaos.11

But such cognitive (or anti-cognitive) claims must have moral conse­
quences. For our very viewing of reality and of language is made to be a
moral act, calling for moral judgment: we look and speak either with the
wasteful lingering that echoes our love for the object as subject or with the
ruthless pursuit that moves beyond the object with a denial of its uniqueness
that gives death to its vitality. What seems to be the contextualist attack on
those who finally allow poems to yield propositional meaning now turns out
to be the personalist attack on those who subsume persons and their actions
within universal principles of an objective morality. The veil that the
practical will must place between us and an infinitely varied mass of unique
phenomena now turns out to be another veil as well: the veil of universal

11 I must remind the reader that this extreme position is hardly one that would
be countenanced by transcendental Idealists like Coleridge, with whom I began. But,
as I tried to show in footnote 3, above, there are tendencies in Coleridge which, if
pressed, can justify these extensions. To press them in this way, to find such
consequences in them, is a major purpose of this essay.
principles that our anti-existential need for moral order, for sanity, must place between our judgment or decision and the contradictory mass of raging and resistant particulars that make up the raw edges of our moral experience—what I have elsewhere called the Manichaean face of reality. This is the veil that organized society or organized rebellion against society—that man in his social dimension—must hold before his vision if he is to permit himself to function, to believe in the legitimacy of this functioning. He must stalwartly stare at the veil and keep from looking beyond it—as if it constituted reality, all of reality. The veil may be rent in a thousand places by the violent clawings of the rumbling reality beneath, but moral man must fix on the non-holes, not daring to see through the static comfort of his illusory universals that permit action and the confident judgment that makes decision possible. The veil of a generic, a stock language, seen by Coleridge as a veil of an imaginatively blinded vision, becomes also the veil that saves us from confronting the unique and unresolvable crises among unique persons, saves us from the paralyzing, too aware contemplation that blocks action, muddies the cleaness of decision, blurs the trim lines on the chart of universal judgment. As the veil of language prevents our symbolizing our unique experience, as the veil of vision prevents our having any unique experience, so the veil of morally binding universals prevents our daring not to judge, prevents our acknowledgment that uniqueness, with its apparent contradictions that preclude judgment, involves only the principle of automatic secession, of utter autonomy—hence the existential consequences of the recent concern for paradox and tension as the basis of poetic structure.

From the standpoint of poetry, the formal particularities are echoed in thematic particularities, the contextualist critic echoing the existentialist-personalist philosopher. The Manichaean implications of the contextualist aesthetic should now be manifest. And the reasons behind W. K. Wimsatt's quarrel with these implications are now obvious. One devoted to the rational nature of experience as a ground for universal moral judgments must have confidence in a universal language, too, in the adequacy of a discourse grounded in a propositional structure. His dogmatic metaphysic must be accompanied by his Platonic, his finally didactic, aesthetic. He must be affronted by the charge that his vision of experience is blinded by the veil of rational universals which, without ontological sanction, he has arbitrarily imposed for his comfort, so that his propositional claims for poetic language

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12 See the passages from Wimsatt in "Platonism, Manichaem, and the Resolution of Tension: A Dialogue," above.
reduce it to the universalizing and blinding veil of non-poetic discourse. Affronted—and frightened by the dangerous consequences of what he must see as a radical nominalism. Experience, always unique, is never to be seen as common, is unapproachable except by poetry; and poetry, in order to keep itself eligible to approach, resists all non-poetic sense. Life in its phenomenological fullness is the reality behind the universals that as rationalists we insist upon, though these are the veil, only the construct of our social necessities, as poetry exists to remind us when we can afford to free our vision to look. Poetry breaks through because it alone dares construct itself in freedom from the equally false, equally comforting, veils of the stock forms of language. Poetry is the only object, fixed in a final form, that does not objectify and destroy—that embodies to preserve—the object as universal subject by refusing itself to be universal.

No wonder the rationalist recoils from this heretical arrogance, especially when, as with Wimsatt, he has himself been an ally of those who foster these anarchic claims. No wonder, after he gives ground in his theory to the forces of opposition, of tension, that prevent an open and easy didacticism, he must insist on stopping short of total opposition, must insist on the final moral—which is to say propositional, even Platonic—affirmation. There must for him be thematic, as well as aesthetic, resolution. For him poetry must stop short of being finally subversive. And the contextualist, like the personalist, however he may sympathize with the order life demands if we are to live it sanely, still denies this order any existence, denies any authenticity even to assertions made most qualifiedly, to the veil applied most tentatively. For the reality of the unique is still lost to us, hidden from us, even if by the more insidious device of crypto-didacticism, what in the spirit of Ransom we could call crypto-authoritarianism.

When in the final chapter of *The Tragic Vision* I first pointed out the existentialist-personalist affinity of contextualist criticism, I was aware of no direct influence of the one tradition upon the other. Nor am I aware of any now, after several more years of looking for it. On the contrary, many of the key critics, who in their philosophical conservatism mean to be clearly anti-existentialist, may perhaps be shocked, and annoyed, by having me

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13 In the spirit of the tensional aspect of contextualism (in *The Tragic Vision* [New York, 1960], pp. 241–57), I argue for a distinction between thematic and aesthetic resolutions, claiming the need only for the latter since the former would run the risk of Platonism. And again I call attention to the dialogue with Wimsatt, above, this time to my passages.
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claim such a relation. But this relation cannot be avoided, shouts to be observed. As a dominant motive for their contextualist method and claims, the existentialist-personalist impulse of these critics turns the complaint of aesthetic formalism that is often made against them into an especially inappropriate one. The existence of such an affinity may be expressive of a bizarre intellectual unity in our dreadfully splintered conceptual atmosphere, or—more likely—it may be the consequence of common romantic sources that persist in showing themselves among very different temperaments that have made use of them.

It would seem, then, that in their professed classical allegiances and their sometime conservative affiliations with philosophical realism, these critics are properly doubted by more staunchly orthodox colleagues like Wimsatt or Yvor Winters. For the apologists for poetry who have contributed to the contextualist poetic may be seen also as embattled warriors in the romantic quest to rediscover—or recreate—imagination in spite of the dulling, leveling, and automatizing hand of technological science. Symbolists all, they are with Wallace Stevens in tracing "The Course of a Particular" ("... the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves"), in settling for a "supreme fiction" whose rich and full mythology turns reason's universals into empty myth and poetry into the caressing of the hopelessly real. In spite of the enormous and important differences in poetic theory, these critics in their daring objectives may in their special way be members after all of the company of visionary critics who seem to have superseded them.¹⁴

It is fitting that, in one of his most exploratory essays, Robert Penn Warren, student of John Crowe Ransom, should find "The Ancient Mariner" to be a poem about the hopes and failures of imagination. The contextualist tradition, like the personalist tradition, sees in the exercise of will, in the indifferent use of objects, the grand objective of the "sciencing" modern world as universalizing machine, the turning away from particularity, from imagination, from love. Our imagination, like the faithful albatross, was once free-flowing but is now dead, killed by ourselves, by the ruthless world of use. That deadened imagination is our albatross still, the curse that we, like the ancient mariner, have created out of our failure to love. We, too, must wear it around our necks "instead of the cross" we have foresworn; and we, too, must stay afloat in a world nightmarishly

¹⁴ By using the words of Hart Crane as adapted by Harold Bloom, I mean, of course, to suggest the recent restoration of romantic studies and, through these, the growing ascendancy of a mythic, apocalyptic, even utopian criticism.
becalmed by our failure to keep imagination alive, by the lack of that inspiring breeze from within which gives movement to all that is outside—the failure and the lack that Coleridge traces for us in "Dejection" as well as in "The Ancient Mariner" ("I had killed the bird/That made the breeze to blow").

Like the mariner we must earn a newly sacramental world with the surge of a revitalized imagination, a vision born of "a spring of love," of the abjuring of that ruthless use which is abuse. We must manage to take our albatross from our necks. And as poets or critics, we must tell and retell our tales. Earlier we saw Coleridge coming out of Kant's notion of disinterested interest, of finality-without-end. In a related way Schiller came away from Kant with his play-theory of aesthetics. In their anti-Platonic celebration of luxurious waste over lean efficiency, in the leisurely victory over the practical will, we have seen recent critics plead for the playful freedom of the poets—at times even using political terminology to constitute the mythology of an endlessly contingent state of love. The poet explores his freedom in his affectionate toying, his love-play with the world's body. The critic must follow in a similar spirit, disdaining the ideological adaptation, the propositional use of poems; he rather must play with them as converted objects of his love that deserve no less than his unwillful, sportive resting among them. A not-quite-poet who has been given the charter for the freedom of his imagination by the poem, the critic, like the wedding guest, is never again the same; and the freedom, the playfulness, of his vision of the world and response to it are his tributes to the poem for what it has given him. He undertakes the labor of love, joining the anti-willful crusade without a Jerusalem or rather with indiscriminate and ubiquitous Jerusalems. So this volume closes as it began: if the contextualist poet is an existentialist-personalist whose expressive act is an imitation of the creative act of an existentialist-personalist God, the contextualist critic, from his lesser place, follows the poet in the free—yet imitative—play that makes his activity creative as well. After all, as the poet, confronting the world, must transform it into an object that has become his subject, so that critic, confronting the poem, must create it as an object that has become his subject.