

The Impact of The Anglo-American School of New Criticism on Cleanth Brooks' *The Well-Wrought Urn*

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This paper explores the Anglo-American School of New Criticism, with especial reference to Cleanth Brooks' *The Well-Wrought Urn*. Its attempts to reflect on current critical reading practices of this and to arrive at a full grasp of the principles at work., The study focuses on the prominent critic Cleanth Brooks and examines the degree and scale of his affiliation to established principles of New Criticism. The paper also proposes to critique the theoretical underpinnings that inform such this critical approach. It highlights its implications to the knowledge-making process in general.

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Introduction

The rise of Anglo-American New Criticism in critical processes from the 1930s the 1950s has made a vital impact on the domain of English Studies, teaching of literature and the development of critical theory (Ransom, 1941). As responses to and manifestations of dissatisfaction with the state of English, I.A. Richard;s' *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) and *Practical Criticism* (1929), and Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's *Understanding Poetry* (1938) underline the urgency to revise and re-orient the discipline of English in terms of vision, approach and methodology. They attempt to "provide a vocabulary, and behind it a set of attitudes, that seem to change the nature of literature" (Heilman, 1947).



As an essentially text-centred critical approach, New Criticism lays a great deal of emphasis on the autonomy of the artefact, separated from both the context of production and reception (Ong, 1977). Art is conceived and conceptualised as a secluded area of inquiry, therefore, should not be contaminated by any trace of or reference to external factors to its own inner life. “A poem, in some sense, has its own life; that its parts form something quite different from a body of neatly ordered biographical data” (Eliot, 1920).

It is to be noted, that the he autonomous character of the artefact, , remarkably displays the New Critics’ belief in universal values, and reflects their idea that a literary work preserves timeless values , embraces formalist poetics and prefer symbolic poetry (Matterson 2006). “A poem is a road sign which, through the complexity and fullness of its told message, approximates the status of the garden image” (Wimsatt 1954).

As major textual modes associated with New Criticism, the “Intentional Fallacy” and the “Affective Fallacy” were developed in essays published in 1946 and 1949 by Wimsatt in collaboration with Monroe Beardsley ‘s *The Verbal Icon* (1954). The attack on both “fallacies” is in line with the New Critical belief in the artefact’s autonomy . In “The Intentional Fallacy,” it is argued that authorial intentions are “neither available nor desirable” (Wimsatt 1954) in the form of literary judgements. This critical assault on intentionality is predicated on the assumption that an author’s intentions may constitute a site of dispute, and may threaten the integrity of the literary text. In the words of T. S. Eliot: “To divert attention from the poet to poetry is a laudable aim,” and “honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon poetry” (1920). For New Critics, removing authorial intentionality is part of a strategy of sealing off the boundaries of the text and ensuring that only the “words on the page” are the true focus of critical judgment (Matterson 2006). This strategy is also evident in the attack on the “affective fallacy.” The literary text cannot be assessed, Wimsatt and Beardsley argue, by the way it emotionally affects the reader, the “affective fallacy” is a confusion between the poem and its result. The emotions aroused in the reader are considered mere “accidents of personal associations,” and should not be confused with the meaning of the text (Eliot, 1920).

In his "Preface" to *Russian Formalism and The Anglo-American New Criticism* (1971), Ewa M. Thompson makes the observation that the New Critics propose a close, detailed reading of the literary text, with little heed paid to historical or biographical investigations. “Close reading is properly a concern for literary structure” (Brooks, 1939). For such a close textual examination, they adopt an intrinsic approach by virtue of which

they observe, describe and explicate the subtleties and intricate nature of the artefact (Simpson, 1976).

Like language in Saussurean linguistics, literary text in the New Critical credo, is designated as a system of relationships pervaded by an organic unity (Guerin et al, 2009). As a result, form and content are characterised by a deep sense of inseparability; they are two faces of the same coin (Ong, 1977). Concern for interior consistency and organic unity of form and content of the literary text epitomises the New Critical belief in the powerful combination of intellect and emotion. They believe that the literary text constitutes the spawning ground for a healthy bond between the head and the heart. According to New Critics, the finest literature, provides what they call “whole knowledge” of human experience, because finding a balance between rational and emotional literature provides a world-view unavailable from other media (Matterson, 2006). The special knowledge afforded by literature “helps keep open the possibility of the transcendent knowledge of order and meaning that belongs to religion” (Simpson, 1976). In the words of Thompson: “This knowledge may be related to a certain historical event (Tate), to a general human situation (Ransom, Brooks), or to the ‘perception of the essentials’ (Brooks, 1947).

In an alignment with the Russian Formalists, the New Critics accentuate the peculiar and unique nature of literary language as opposed to functional language which is a mere vehicle of information. Pregnant with various shades of meaning and charged with unsurpassing energy, literary language, in the New Critical article of faith, operates in a qualitatively different and divergent manner from that of practical language. Besides being an effective medium of communication, literary language, as Matterson comments, provides the fullest knowledge of reality as it is a sophisticated reflection of human needs and resources, rather than only utilitarian.

“The Heresy of Paraphrase” (Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn*, 1947) is yet another remarkable manifestation of the New Critical assumption of the uniqueness and peculiarity of literary language. They strongly hold the view that literature is unparaphrasable; non-literary language can never hope to capture the spirit of the literary text with its subtle shades of meaning and intricate nature of composition. They also contend that to paraphrase a poem is to translate it from one medium into another, and therefore to substitute one kind of meaning (a meaning that arises from the poem’s organic system of relationships) into a medium in which that system does not operate. In other words, paraphrase is tantamount to the loss of the context of the poem’s system; it is a loss of the experience of the poem, and hence of the poem’s full meaning (Matterson,

2006). The New Critical stance held against paraphrase is reinforced from different perspectives. From a formalist point of view, in paraphrasing the text, such formalistic aspects as imagery, tropes and figures of speech are diminished and do not receive due attention. And as a result, the experience of artfulness is destroyed. From a pedagogical perspective, if literature can be simplified to mere words and simplistic idioms of expression, then literature complicates things, and its whole claim as a humanist discipline is only an illusion. Moreover, according to Poststructuralist thought, if the concept of “transcendental signified” or definite meaning is not possible, paraphrasing literature is not possible either. “Paraphrase is incapable of exhausting innovative meaning” (Ricoeur, 1976). Through different strategies, The New Critics tried to stabilise the polyvalence of texts, mainly by asserting the determinate structure of works (Wimsatt called poems ‘verbal icons’): ‘ambiguities’, ‘ironies’ and ‘tensions’ in the poems and plays are not considered as disruptive or chaotic, because they are seen as harmonised in the total order of the work. Cleanth Brooks asserts that ‘paradox’ belongs to the ‘very nature of poetic language’. A poem is ‘a total pattern’, able to incorporate the disparities and contradictions of experience (Selden, 1985).

Brooks' New Critique

Cleanth Brooks is regarded as one of the significant American New Critics of the twentieth century and as a prominent guide to the works of William Faulkner. His contributions are varied and highly influential. He is credited with bringing about a synthesis of the ideas of the New Critics (Handy, 1974). Together with that group, he directs attention to the text and structure of the poem. He opposes the sentimental and political as well as affective readings of poetry. In *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939) and other works, Brooks makes considerable a contribution literary inquiry and criticism.

In *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, Brooks focuses on metaphor and wit as essential elements in a successful poem (Brooks, 1939). He states his preference for Metaphysical poetry, because it synthesises all these elements. Drawing on I. A. Richards, Brooks notes that some poetry, for instance sentimental poems do not include the disagreeable side of life, presenting only what is acceptable, whether in character, action, or thought. Brooks favours the poem that excludes neither side of life; a believer in the doctrine of the Fall, he sees both the good and the evil in real life and expects the most commendable poems to include both. He is also quick to differ from Marxists and others who use poetry for purposes outside the main thrust of the poem.

Understanding *The Well-Wrought Urn*

The title of Brooks' book, *The Well-Wrought Urn*, strikes a note of the autonomy of the artefact. Art is viewed as a self-sufficient and self-contained entity, uncontaminated by other extrinsic frames of reference; the literary text is "a free-standing, autonomous object, containing meanings that are specific to the context provided by the text" (Waugh, 2006). In the "Preface" to the 1947 edition of *The Well-Wrought Urn*, the author declares: "I have taken too little of the historical background of the poem into account" (Brooks, 1947). The argument raised by Brooks is that to fix the poem in its historical context is tantamount to falling prey to relativism and regarding the poem as "merely a cultural anthropology"—"political," "religious," or "moral instrument" (Brooks, 1947). In so doing, art loses the vigour of its artfulness and its claim to universality-- "the question as to whether the poem represents anything more universal than the expression of the particular values of its time" (Brooks, 1947).

Similarly, in the "Preface" to the 1968 edition of *The Well-Wrought Urn*, Brooks' concern with the autonomy of the artefact is still more evident and vibrant. He explicates his method and considers Wordsworth's "Intimations Ode", as an independent poetic structure, even to the point of "forfeiting the light which Wordsworth's letters, notes, and his other poems throw on difficult points" (Brooks, 1947). However, Brooks is quick to reassure the reader that "the forfeiture need not, of course, be permanent" (ibid). That is, to read the poem along New Critical lines does not exclude other possibilities of reading; what the New Critics propose is but one approach to grapple with the literary text. This point perhaps reflects Brooks' broad-mindedness, he is willing to negotiate ideas outside the realm of New Criticism, and to recognise their values. For instance, Brooks upheld the contexts of production and reception::

To stress the poet is, of course, a perfectly valid procedure, and it is interesting and it may be useful to consider his ideas, his historical conditioning, his theories of composition, and the background, general and personal, which underlies his work. (Brooks, 1947)

Brooks makes reference to the Romantics to whom the poem is but a product of the genius of its maker. He also makes the observation that during the nineteenth and first part of the twentieth century, most teachers of literature adopted the method of attending to the poem via the medium of its author (ibid). As far as the context of reception is concerned, Brooks contends that reader responses are also of considerable importance to both impressionists and sociologists of literature (ibid).



In “The Language of Paradox,” Brooks argues that the language of poetry is the language of paradox, “the language of sophistry, hard, bright, witty” (Brooks, 1947). He picks up Wordsworth’s “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge” and attempts a close, textual analysis of the poem via the medium of paradox. Brooks observes that an emotionally-charged reflection upon the text does not help in accounting for its goodness, because “the grounds of nobility of sentiments soon break down” (ibid). Like other New Critics, he adopts an intrinsic approach by virtue of which he can engage with the words on the page. He believes that the power of the poem consists in the “paradoxical situation out of which the poem arises” (ibid). Overwhelmed with a profound sense of surprise, the poet, according to Brooks, sees a city which is totally unfamiliar to him. Man-made London becomes part and parcel of nature; it is lit by the sun of nature. The poetic visionary power, Brooks maintains, is not conceived in real terms; everything looks like the daffodils, or the mountains, artless, organic and completely natural. Based on his idea that paradox is the language of poetry, Brooks remarks that “it is only when the poet sees the city under the semblance of death that he can see it as actually alive” (ibid). Brooks also holds the view that to describe the “houses” as “asleep” is to imply the fact that they are “alive”, and actively participate in the organic life of nature. He further comments that Wordsworth draws on paradox in the weaving of his artefact so as “to show his audience that the common was really uncommon, the prosaic was really poetic” (ibid). To substantiate his point, Brooks makes reference to Coleridge’s comment on Wordsworth: “Mr. Wordsworth...was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day” (ibid). Brooks observes that Coleridge’s words suggest the Romantic preoccupation with wonder – the surprise, the revelation which puts the tarnished familiar world into a new light.

In an explicatory manner, Brooks draws a clear line of demarcation between the language of science and that of art. While the language of science is characterised by strict denotation, art constitutes a site in which both the denotative and the connotative levels of language interlock with each other (ibid). In art, a process of continual modification of terms occurs; the poet, Brooks continues to explain, works by contradiction and qualification. As a result, the method of art can never be direct; it is always indirect (ibid). Yet, the method of art, as Brooks asserts, is an “extension of the normal language of poetry, not a perversion of it” (ibid). All literature is enshrined in language, and language is enriched by literature. As an illustrative demonstration of his argument, Brooks takes up John Donne’s “Canonisation”. He notes that Donne here projects profane love as divine love:

The canonisation is not that of a pair of holy anchorites who have renounced the world and the flesh. The hermitage of each is the other’s body; but they do

renounce the world, and so their title to sainthood is cunningly argued. (ibid)

Brooks makes the point that it is by virtue of paradox as a serious rhetorical device that Donne is able to merge love and religion together.

In addition, Brooks engages with “Canonisation,” and comments on each part of it, while weaving its various components with the thread of paradox. According to him, the poem, opens with a note of exasperation. The addressee, “you”, is not identified; yet he or she can be understood to represent the outside world, which regards love as a silly affectation. Brooks comments that Donne, in defending his love, employs a number of comparisons, images and tropes, and provides alternatives which are of interest only to the secular world that is renounced by the lovers.

The New Critic meticulously traces the ways Donne defends his love against the external world of reality. Brooks remarks that in the first stanza, the poet justifies the sanctity of his love on such grounds as “approaching old age, ruined fortune, etc.” (ibid). According to Brooks, the second stanza is a continuation of the conflict between the real world and the lovers who are absorbed in the world of love. Unlike the real world, the torments of love are meaningful and invaluable for the lovers – “What merchants ships have my sighs drown’d?” At this point, Brooks refers to the words “chronicle” and “sonnet” of the fourth stanza: the former suggests “the secular history with its pomp and magnificence” while the latter “trivial and precious intricacy” (ibid). According to him, this conflict appears again in the concluding stanza, only to be resolved when the “unworldly lovers achieve a more intense world” (ibid).

Besides, Brooks pays close enough attention to the modulation of tone accomplished by Donne through an analysis of the love-metaphor. The poet, is fully aware of what he is trying to achieve. Conventionalized figures of the Petrarchan tradition pervade the entire part of the second stanza – “wind of lovers’ sighs, the flood of lovers’ tears, etc.” – extravagant figures with which the secular “you” is expected to tease the lover (ibid). The New Critic also remarks that Donne seems to project himself as self-conscious about the very absurdity of the jargon of love; yet, their love, in Donne’s claim, is of no harm to the world. The world goes on uninterrupted by the love world of the poet (ibid). Brooks touches on the third stanza and comments that the vein of irony of the second stanza is also maintained in the third. Despite the apparent triviality of the comparisons, “the likening of the lovers to a phoenix is fully serious, and with it, the tone has shifted from ironic banter into a defiant but controlled tenderness” (ibid).

It is remarkable to draw attention to how Brooks comments on almost every word, and explicates its hidden connection with other words, lines or stanzas. He fuses form and content, and presents his interpretation in simple idioms of expression. He does not employ a complex or technical jargon; rather he attempts to strike a greater voice. To cite an example, he comments on "...if unfit for tombs and hearse / Our legend bee-" as follows:

The lovers are willing to forgo the ponderous and stately chronicle and accept the trifling and insubstantial 'sonnet' instead; but then if the urn be well wrought, it provides a finer memorial for one's ashes than does the pompous and grotesque monument. With the finely contemptuous, yet quiet phrase, 'half-acre tombs', the world which the lovers reject expands into something gross and vulgar. But the figure works further; the pretty sonnets will not merely hold their ashes as a decent earthly memorial. Their legend, their story, will gain them canonisation; and approved as love's saints, other lovers will invoke them. (ibid)

In his engagement with the poem, Brooks touches on images and tone, as they constitute a crucial step in the development of the artistic vision. He, remarks that the tone with which the poem closes is one of triumphant achievement, as the image of the lovers as the saints, as God's athletes, paradoxically enables them to achieve what they already renounced in the first stanza of the poem—the "Countries, Towns", and "Courts" (ibid). Moreover, Brooks attempts to build intratextual connections. The phoenix, for example, is read as skilfully related to other comparisons. Like the tapers, the phoenix burns, and like the eagle and the dove, the phoenix is a bird. For the phoenix is two but one--"we two being one, are it" (ibid). Brooks further comments that the phoenix burns, not like the taper at its own cost, but to live again. Its death is life: "We dye and rise the same...." It is interesting to see how Brooks probes into words, attempting to fix them in their context of the poem, relates them to other words, and, at times, bases his arguments on certain readings of words in the larger structure of literature. For instance, he remarks that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the word "die" suggested the consummation of the act of love, which, in the present context, does not change the lovers. As a result, this is their title to canonisation; "their love is like the phoenix" (ibid).

Brooks firmly believes that it is only by virtue of paradox that Donne could say what "The Canonization" says (ibid). The New Critic alludes to such statements as "He who would save his life must lose it" and "The last shall be the first" so as to show the crucial significance of the language of paradox. "We must be prepared to accept the paradox of the imagination itself" else "we shall end with the essential cinders, for all our pains" (ibid).

“The Naked Baby and the Cloak of Manliness” commences with Brooks’ comment on the New Critical tendency to rehabilitate the Donne tradition in its use of metaphors outside traditionally-established practices (ibid). The organic nature of the literary work, and the interrelationship between image with image, and image and the entire structure of the work are considered to be the essence of the creative power of the work’s unity. Brooks contends that the “rapid flow, quick changes, and the playful nature of thoughts and images” reside at the heart of the Metaphysical tradition, especially that of Donne (ibid). In the present essay, Brooks attempts to re-read Shakespeare along the lines of the Metaphysical concern for the unity of image and thought. The New Critic argues that Shakespeare’s “extended figures are elaborated; they are ‘spontaneous’ comparisons struck out in the heat of composition, and not carefully articulated, self-conscious conceits at all” (ibid). The extended comparisons are knit together in an uncalculated fashion; this, according to Brooks, provides justification for the fact that Shakespeare bears the hallmarks of the witty Metaphysical poets (ibid).

He makes reference to Coleridge’s comment on Shakespeare’s imagery as “a series of unbroken chain” (ibid). These characteristic features, states Brooks, are emblematic of original genius only as far as they are “modified by a predominant passion,” “associated thought,” “image awakened by that passion,” or when they have the potential of reducing “multitude to unity” (ibid).

In addition, Brooks draws on Coleridge’s distinction between imagination: secondary imagination as a modifying and creative power, and fancy as a mode of memory. The New Critic explicitly applauds the nobility of the metaphor that results from the organically-related and modified images and passion (ibid). According to Brooks, the suggestion of supernatural power is reinforced by the alternative image: “heaven’s cherubim”, who is a supernatural being, appropriately “hors’d” upon the winds (ibid). Everything is depicted in terms of violence, even pity itself becomes a might. At this point, Brooks alludes to other critics in the context of the passage: “Either like mortal babe, terrible in helplessness; or like heaven’s angel-children, mighty in love and compassion” (ibid).

Despite giving credit to Miss Spurgeon for her discovery of the old clothes imagery, Brooks comments:

The crucial point of comparison, it seems to me, lies not in the smallness of the man, and the largeness of the robes, but rather in the fact that – whether the man be large or small – these are not his garments; in Macbeth’s case they are actually stolen garments.... There is a further point, and it is one of the utmost importance; the oldest symbol for the hypocrite is that of the man who cloaks his true nature under a disguise. Macbeth loathes playing the part of the hypocrite – and actually

does not play it too well. (ibid)

Brooks does not seem to leave any stone unturned. The underlying motivations to the action of the play, for instance, constitutes a vibrant thread of his analysis (ibid). He attempts to probe deep down into the literary text so as to come up with the best gems of meaning. He spares no effort to grapple with the minute details of the artwork from multiple angles of vision.

In “The Light Symbolism in ‘L’Allegro-Il Penseroso,’” Brooks’ concern for the autonomy of the artefact, its organic nature, and the inseparability of form and content is all clear. Here he begins with Dr Samuel Johnson’s comment on this double poem first as having a protagonist, who is a “mere spectator,” and who “avoids crowds”; secondly that “mirth and melancholy” in this poem are “solitary, silent inhabitants of the breast” (ibid). Brooks reads “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso” as two faces of the same poem – “the ‘Mountain Nymph’ and the ‘Cherub’ tend to merge into the same figure” (ibid). He goes on to explicate his point thus:

The more serious pleasures of Il Penseroso are so obviously ‘unreproved pleasures free’ that the poet does not even need to point out that they are unreproved; yet, on the other hand, they are hardly more ‘contemplative’ than those which delight L’Allegro. (ibid)

What strikes Brooks most is perhaps the overall unity of the artefact as the culmination of the contributions made by the various textual elements and threads – “the most important device used to bring the patterns of opposites together” (ibid). In the context of “L’Allegro-Il Penseroso,” he argues that the basic symbol of light functions as a uniting element of different strands of the artefact. Melancholy, he maintains, is born ‘of...blackest midnight’; the fancies of mirth are like the ‘gay notes that people the Sun Beam.’ He also maintains that “to have ‘L Allegro’ begin with a dawn scene and ‘Il Penseroso’ with an evening scene emphasises the significance of the light symbol in the poem” (ibid).

In his examination of “L’ Allegro-Il Penseroso,” Brooks is still consistent in his idea that paradox is the language of poetry. In the context of the poem, he remarks: “More important still, the sequence...provides a concrete realisation of the Paradox hinted at earlier in the poem; that the black of night, ‘staid Wisdoms hue’, Is merely a necessary veil to conceal a brightness which is in reality too intense for human sight. (ibid)

In “What Does Poetry Communicate?” Brooks addresses different critical issues along the continuum of literary production and reception--author, text, reader, paraphrase, etc. He commences with the question of the difficulty of modern poetry for “the reader of

conventional reading habits” (ibid). Modern poets, he contends, are untraditional and generally irresponsible. Their experimentation with form and treatment applied to subject-matter reflects the enormity of the problem that confronts the reader in grappling with them. Brooks diagnoses the nature of the difficulty of modern poetry as follows:

- 1) The poet is so snobbish that he wants to restrict his or her audience;
- 2) The poet could not master his materials and give it a form, with the result that the total experience remains chaotic and incoherent;
- 3) The special problem of modern civilisation; or
- 4) Few people are accustomed to reading poetry as poetry. (ibid)

In addition,, Brooks touches on the figure of the author, whose process of making the poem is a process of exploration (ibid). He highly commends the old description of the poet as a “maker”; the poet is not a communicator or an expositor. Rather, the poet explores, consolidates, and forms the total experience that is the poem (ibid). He or she may draw on materials from the world of actuality; but what he or she produces is a completely new creation.

The poem constitutes a second major point to which Brooks attends enthusiastically . “The poem itself is the only medium that communicates the particular ‘what’ that is communicated” (ibid). The best part of literary interpretation, according to him, should be devoted to the artefact itself; it should constitute the site with which analysis both begins and closes. It is a modality of engagement with a self-referential object--“the poem says what the poem says” (ibid).

The issue of paraphrase occupies a space along the critical continuum composed by Brooks in the essay, “What Does Poetry Communicate?” Despite the fact that he devotes a whole essay to address the problem of paraphrase in “The Heresy of Paraphrase,” he provides a glimpse of his stand with regard to this issue. For him, the analysis of a poem is not to be equated with the simplified version of the meaning of the linguistic signs on the page; critical engagement involves a process of attending minutely to the artefact, unearthing its subtleties and tackling its intricate nature (ibid). Yet, it is of interest to observe that Brooks himself attempts to paraphrase some parts of Herrick’s “Corinna’s going a-Maying.” As a matter fact, he does not call into question the whole validity of the paraphrase – “If my clumsy paraphrase possesses any part of truth, then this is still another thing which the poem communicates” (ibid) – but rather clings to it as a pedagogic strategy to facilitate comprehension.

Furthermore, Brooks seems to cast light on the notion of intertextuality. In the "Postscript", he refers to Arthur Mizener's attempt to connect some parts of Herrick's poem with certain lines or passages in Spencer and Milton. Brooks approves of Mizener's way of reading and recommends his essay to be read "in entirety and for its own sake" (ibid). "The Case of Miss Arabella Fermor" presents one crucial method of Brooks' modes of critical engagement with the literary text: comparative study. Considering Pope's "The Rape of the Lock," Brooks establishes a number of attributes of comparison between it and John Milton's "Paradise Lost":

The general parallel between the two speeches is almost complete. Belinda's true divinity, like Adam's happier paradise, is to be found within her. Pope, like Milton, can thus rationalise the matter in terms which allow him to dismiss the supernatural machinery and yet maintain the presence of a qualified supernatural in the midst of a stern and rational world. (ibid)

At the heart of this comparative analysis run the veins of intertextuality. Brooks does not seem to depend only on textual and intratextual arteries in the weaving of the texture of his interpretation; he also leans on intertextuality.

Besides employing the tools of comparative study, Brooks sheds some light on different issues like the "synthesis of attitudes", which is usually associated with Donne (ibid), "the war of the sexes" (ibid), the intricacies of the feminine mind (ibid), and the significance of myth as a uniting element (ibid). Most important of all is the role Brooks assumes himself: he is seen in many places to speak on behalf of Pope himself, describing, explaining, and expounding on the various strands of thought--"Pope is not afraid to..." (ibid), "Pope obviously agrees with Clarissa, he is neither surprised nor particularly displeased..." (ibid), "Pope also knows how artificial social conventions..." (ibid).

Brooks' concern for the autonomous entity and the artful nature of the artefact is remarkably explicit, especially in the context of "Gray's Storied Urn" – "we are not dealing with Gray's political ideas. We are dealing with what the 'Elegy' says-something that is not quite the same thing" (ibid). He delineates "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," grapples with the semiotics of its style (ibid), and addresses its various thematic strands (ibid). Unlike other critics such as Landor, who sees the "epitaph" as "a tin kettle tied to the tail of an otherwise noble poem" (ibid), Brooks pays special attention to it, and considers it "part of a context, a very rich context" (ibid). The epitaph, in his views, constitutes an essential uniting element of the different threads of the poem, and therefore, has to be read in terms of the conditions for a certain dramatic propriety set up by the context.

With regard to the literariness of the text, Brooks argues that despite the simplicity of Gray's tale, its manner of rendition and poetic structure is highly artful. The poem has a peculiar structure, which has to be critically examined as part and parcel of its totality."It is a 'Storied urn', after all, and, many of us will conclude that, like Donne's, it is a 'well-wrought urn', superior to the half-acre tombs of the Proud. (ibid)

"Wordsworth and the Paradox of Imagination" is yet another essay in *The Well-Wrought Urn*, which contributes to the crystallisation of Brooks' status as a New Critic with his ardent faith in devices such as imagery, irony and paradox being "functionally related to the theme of the poem" (ibid). Despite the fact that he acknowledges the importance of Wordsworth's spiritual biography in the context of the "Intimations Ode," Brooks proceeds with his analysis, paying no attention to any biographical element. (ibid). He tries to deconstruct various paradoxes in the "Ode", and connects them to the overall meaning of this poetic structure. Based on his argument: "the ambiguities which light and darkness take on in this poem are not confusing but necessary paradoxes" (ibid).

With the help of irony, Brooks is able to explicate different implications of certain stanzas. For example, he describes Stanza VI of the "Ode" as one of the most finely ironic, and bases his views on the grounds that the stanza "insists that the human soul is not merely natural" as one's soul brings an alien element into nature, a supernatural element; the child is of royal birth--"that imperial palace whence he came". The Earth, Brooks continues, for all her motherly affection, is only his foster-mother after all. The stanza also implies that it is the child himself who confers the radiance on the morning world upon which he looks with delight. The irony, Brooks remarks, is that "the child looks long enough at that world, becomes deeply involved in its beauties, the celestial radiance itself disappears" (ibid).

"Keats's Sylvan Historian: History Without Footnotes" exhibits Brooks' use of irony and paradox as essential instruments in the meaning-making process. The subtitle of this essay testifies to this fact; despite the claim of having no "Footnotes," it is the only essay in *The Well-Wrought Urn* that has footnotes on its first page. The foundational claim made in this essay is that Keats' "Beauty is truth" is discredited as "a blemish" or "intrusion" on "Ode on a Grecian Urn" by such critics as T. S. Eliot, Middleton Murry and Garrod (ibid). Brooks contends that such a view is the result of separating the phrase from its proper context. Thereupon, he intends to engage with the poem as a whole, and places "beauty is truth" in its context. He maintains that his analysis is designed to address the nature of the nexus between the beauty of the poem and the truth or falsity of what it seems to assert. In other words, the form-content relationship constitutes the

locus-standi of his scrutiny – “it is a question which has vexed our own generation...the problem of belief” (ibid). In this respect it is worth noting:

That is to say, one need not share the beliefs of Dante or Milton or Yeats in order to appreciate their poetry, nor on the other hand should a reader judge a poem good merely because it expresses beliefs the reader happens to share. Statements in poems are to be evaluated as dramatic utterances and tested against the poetic context in which they appear, not against philosophical, scientific, or religious criteria external to the poem. (Walsh, 1990)

Brooks notes that the poem begins on a note of paradox: the urn is not expected to speak-“a bride of quietness”; “a foster-child of silence”. He traces the paradox of the silent speech in the second stanza in terms of the objects portrayed on the vase (Brooks, 1947). The New Critic attempts a textually-detailed examination of the poem, paying close attention to the words on the page, and unearthing their hidden relationships

The ‘reality’ of the little town has a very close relation to the urn’s character as a historian. If the earlier stanzas have been concerned with such paradoxes as the ability of static carving to convey dynamic action, of the soundless pipe to play music sweeter than that of the melody heard, of the figured lover to have a warmer love and panting than that of breathing flesh and blood, so in the same way the town implied by the urn comes to have a richer and more important history than that of actual cities. (ibid)

In “The Motivation of Tennyson’s Weeper”, Brooks contends that with the use of paradox, irony and ambiguity, it is possible to grapple with and account for the profound sense of melancholy inherent in “Tears, Idle Tears”. He discusses Tennyson, and describes him as “the last English poet one would think of associating with the subtleties of paradox and ambiguity” (ibid). In his engagement with the text of the poem, Brooks holds the view that the unity of the poem is predicated upon a “principle of organisation” by virtue of which the stanzas are interconnected both at the level of thought and that of the idiom of expression – “ironic contrast and paradox do exist in the poem; they do have a relationship with the poem’s dramatic power” (ibid). He also locates the culminating paradox in “O Death in Life”, which is reinforced by the succession of words like “fresh,” “strange,” and “wild” in the different stanzas of the poem (ibid).

Furthermore, Brooks attempts a comparative analysis between Tennyson’s poems, “Tears, Idle Tears” and “Break, Break, Break”. The New Critic makes the observation that the psychological exploration of the experience of “Tears” is nowhere to be felt or seen in “Break”. According to him, this poem does not have the potential to provoke the



idea of how the past can impinge upon the present and contribute to its development (ibid).

In “Yeats’s Great Rooted Blossomer,” Brooks engages with the poet’s “Among School Children,” and shows that the situation from which the musings of the poet proceed to evolve the poem is Yeats, an elderly man of sixty, standing among school children. These children raise certain expectations, but will they become what the elders love to think they will be? Here Yeats, according to Brooks, thinks of his own beloved who once might have been like this girl or that in the schoolroom, cherub-like happy, full of spirits and gay. But she is now “hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind / And took a mess of shadows for its meat...” Brooks observes: “What youthful mother would think her birth pangs compensated if she could see at that moment her son as he is to look sixty years later? (ibid) Contrasted by this state is the “great rooted blossomer”, which stands and blossoms year after year for generations and perhaps centuries. Brooks maintains that this raises the philosophical question of “being” and “becoming” – one which has changeless existence, and the other which is subject to growth and decay--the same question which occupies the attention of Yeats in the Byzantium poems. What is the poet supposed to do in such a case? In the context of poetry and poetic criticism, it becomes a question of poetry versus philosophy. How far is the poet justified in involving him or herself in the metaphysical issues of life? After shedding light on the metaphysical question of Being and Becoming and pointing out the idleness or futility of the question, Brooks observes:

If the last sentence (of the poem) seems to make Yeats more a metaphysician than we feel he really was, one can only appeal to the poems themselves. Both are immersed in a recognition of the problem which he reflective human being can never escape-- the dilemma which is the ground of the philosophic problem; and the ‘solution’ which is reached in neither case solves the problem (ibid).

Brooks affirms the poet’s attempt to engage with the larger questions in life; but what the New Critic rejects is any attempt to offer a solution to the stated problem, because here a line of demarcation is drawn between the poet and the philosopher. The poet’s task, according to Brooks, is complete when he or she depicts or suggests through both sides of the question through imagery, metaphors and symbols. If the poet goes beyond this to indicate his or her preference or attempts to solve the problem and push the solution in the face of others, he or she transgresses his or her limits and forfeits the title to be a poet (ibid).

The concluding chapter of *The Well-Wrought Urn* comes under the title of “The Heresy of Paraphrase”. It is a doctrinal chapter, addressing some of the central tenets of New Criticism. As the title suggests, paraphrase is doomed as “heresy” (ibid).

Politics of New Criticism

The Well-Wrought Urn represents a definitive embodiment of the tenets of New Criticism and what it stands for. Through this work, Brooks emerges as an example of New Criticism. His ardent faith in the autonomy of the artefact and its organic nature, the intrinsic method of his approach, his “heresy of paraphrase” and the use of the weapons of irony, paradox, ambiguity and tone in the engagement with the artworks stand testimony to his well-grounded New Criticalness.

Here, in a variety of ways and through the patient study of diverse texts, the reader is shown over and over again the unity in diversity, the paradoxes, the ironies, the tensions--how the poem's parts tend to fly away from one another, but are nevertheless convincingly held together in the unity of the poem (Ong, 1977).

A major concern for Brooks, and of course other New Critics, is to seek to display the fact that literature is a structure of knowledge and a vehicle of truth. Literature is viewed as a fertile arena for the inquiry and search for truth. Enshrined within this quest is their belief in the intrinsic worth of the artefact, the unity of the whole of the literary work, and the moral seriousness of literature. Brooks' criticism embodies “a high, noble, and strenuous view of art and of human nature. It will remain useful and inspiring for a very long time” (Spears, 2004).

However, it is obvious that New Criticism as a text-based approach does not address many directions of thought:

1. It does not establish a link between the internal world of the literary work and the external world of reality.
2. It does not provide the reader with an epistemic space to address larger socio-cultural questions.
3. It does not view literature as a site for negotiating wider cultural poetics and politics.

On account of their firm faith in the autonomy of the artefact and their intrinsic reading practice, the New Critics do not enliven the experience of reading literature with such dynamic elements as discussing matters of meaning and relevance to the readers' own lived and felt experiences. Rather, the New Critics focus exclusively on the “words on the page”, with little heed paid to issues that are of paramount significance to the



empowerment of the reader as a social agent, aware of responsibilities and rights alike. In so doing, this critical approach does not help develop an integrated individual, armed with a consciousness of realities around one in life.

As a consequence of this solely text-based theory of literature, the New Critics diminish the wider cultural horizons that literature can provide the reader with. Moreover, this reading strategy restricts any attempt to take advantage of the inexhaustible potential of literature. The literary text here is represented as divorced from any associations and affiliations, and is, thus, a decontextualized and dehistoricised object bereft of relevance to the context of reception as a whole. The New Critical idiom reduces the rich experience of exploring literature into a few rhetorical devices or tropes, resulting in the diminishing of the borderless zodiac of literature.¹

Having thus examined the nature of New Criticism, it is obvious that this critical idiom is punctuated by the politics of the status quo. Being conservative, it is the politics of neutrality that deprives the reader of many an opportunity to grow and understand the challenging questions of the external world of reality, and to interact critically as well as creatively with the logic of the time. Informed by the status quo, the New Critical style of engagement with the literary text does not stimulate critical thinking skills, nor does it initiate the reader to address questions of transforming and revising the existing models of thought or fashions of thought. Such a politics does not prepare the reader to emerge as an individual with sufficient knowledge of his or her commitment to the well-being of the self, or the welfare of society.

Conclusion

As stated above, the reader needs to acquaint him or herself with a critical approach by striking the vision in which the literary text is viewed as a crucial site for the exchange of intellectual horizons and dialogue across wider cultural parameters. Such an approach is not consistent with New Critical strategies of reading as argued above. The critical task ahead for us is to search for an alternative critical tradition that can take into account the foregoing considerations at an in-depth level.

¹ For further elaboration on this point, see Roland S. Crane's "Cleanth Brooks; or the Bankruptcy of Critical Monism". *Modern Philology* 45 (1948): 226-45.



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