

DOCTRINES OF IMPERFECTION: THE ANGLO-AMERICAN NEW
CRITICISM

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A thesis submitted for examination for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2018

Abstract of Thesis

Doctrines of Imperfection: The Anglo-American New Criticism

This thesis identifies common critical strategies among six Anglo-American New Critics and shows how each demonstrates what I term a *doctrine of imperfection*: a strategy designed to undermine what is perceived as utopian or scientific thinking in modernity through the advocacy of a cultivated classicist position that prioritises incompleteness or uncertainty and is reflected in the value ascribed to specific literature. My original contribution is to demonstrate this consistency of method among the distinct thinkers of the New Criticism and across the course of each of their careers, something which has been generally overlooked as a possible unifying definition for the thinkers identified as “New Critics”. I also contend that this definition connects T.E. Hulme to the New Criticism through a common style of critical practice.

The first chapter serves three purposes: firstly, it foregrounds the specific shape the strategies tend to take across all the work of all the critics examined in this thesis and works towards a common definition of an “imperfecting impulse” that serves as a motivating factor. Secondly, this introduction describes the cultural and creative conditions of modernism and the extent to which it was conducive for the imperfecting purposes of the New Criticism that grew out of it. Thirdly, it examines the existing critical consensus and points towards how it is inadequate and why my interpretation of the New Criticism could be of value.

The six chapters that follow are focused on examining the particular implementation of these strategies in the individual works of T.E. Hulme, I.A. Richards, F.R. Leavis, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and R.P. Blackmur. These chapters demonstrate how each thinker’s work corresponds to the strategies of imperfection described in the first chapter and the specific, idiosyncratic form that they take in the hands of each New Critic.

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Abbreviations

CAP	F.R. Leavis, <i>The Critic as Anti-Philosopher</i> (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982)
CI	I.A. Richards, <i>Coleridge on Imagination</i> (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1934)
CW	Hulme, T.E., <i>The Collected Writings of T.E. Hulme</i> , ed. Karen Csengari (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994)
DA	R.P. Blackmur, <i>The Double Agent: Essays in Craft and Elucidation</i> (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1962)
EFD	Allen Tate, <i>Essays of Four Decades</i> (Wilmington: ISI Books, 1999)
ELOT	F.R. Leavis, <i>English Literature in Our Time and the University: The Clark Lectures</i> (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969)
GWT	John Crowe Ransom, <i>God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy</i> (Hamden: Archon Books, 1965)
HA	R.P. Blackmur, <i>Henry Adams</i> (London: Secker & Warburg, 1980)
HJ	R.P. Blackmur, <i>Studies in Henry James</i> (New York: New Directions, 1983)
IAR SL	I.A. Richards, <i>Selected Letters</i> (Oxford University Press, 1990)
ITMS	Twelve Southerners, <i>I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition</i> (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006)
JCR SL	John Crowe Ransom, <i>Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom</i> , ed. Thomas Daniel Young and George Core (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985)
LAG	R.P. Blackmur, <i>Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry</i> (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961)
LC	Donald Davidson & Allen Tate, <i>The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate</i> , ed. John Tyree Fain & Thomas Daniel Young (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974)
LH	R.P. Blackmur, <i>The Lion and the Honeycomb: Essays in Solicitude and Critique</i> (London: Methuen and Co, 1956)
LP	F.R. Leavis, <i>The Living Principle: 'English' as a Discipline of Thought</i> (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975)

- ME Allen Tate, *Memories & Essays Old and New 1926-1974* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1976)
- MM I.A. Richards, *Mencius on the Mind: Experiments in Multiple Definition* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1932)
- NC John Crowe Ransom, *The New Criticism* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979)
- NSMS F.R. Leavis, *Nor Shall My Sword: Discourses on Pluralism, Compassion and Social Hope* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1972)
- PC I.A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982)
- PI R.P. Blackmur, *A Primer of Ignorance* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967)
- PS I.A. Richards, *Poetries and Sciences: A Reissue of Science and Poetry (1926, 1935) with Commentary* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970)
- RM Allen Tate, *Reason in Madness: Critical Essays* (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1968)
- SE John Crowe Ransom, *Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom*, ed. Thomas Daniel Young and John Hindle (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984)
- TC C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)
- VC F.R. Leavis, *Valuation in Criticism and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986)
- WB John Crowe Ransom, *The World's Body* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1938)

Chapter 1

Introduction

The Imperfect World

“Modernism” is an imperfect concept. As a starting point, therefore, it is highly appropriate. In the time since modernism ended, assuming it has ended, its boundaries and essential structure have been the subject of rigorous critical debate. The term itself is something of a best-fit solution. Generally, it has been allowed to serve most uncontroversially as a chronological descriptor, referring to the various artistic and literary groupings of the first decades of the twentieth century. To Chana Kronfeld, “Beyond this rudimentary labelling [...] there is little meaning about the term’s meaning and scope.”¹ Pericles Lewis is content to define the term as meaning those who, around this time, responded to “a crisis of representation”.² Sean Pryor notes that it is “notoriously difficult to define modernism in any secure or stable fashion” but senses an underlying theme in the various debates that characterised modernism in England in the 1910s and 1920s between those who sought a poetics which could redeem the world, and those who operated from a less utopian perspective.³ In both of these camps the starting point was a perception of crisis, accompanied by a patent sense of the necessity of art to respond to it, whatever that crisis might be. The discussions that were carried out in the pages of *New Age* and other “little magazines” demonstrate the uncertain premises from which these projects were beginning, and the very fundamental differences in opinion over human nature itself that could be said to underpin the modernist project. It might well be said that it is in fact this tension that itself is at the heart of early Modernism, as Pryor suggests: “modernism could not but resolve to redeem a new world of ugliness, suffering and injustice, and at the same time reflect on its failure of its inability to do so”.⁴

This is the context in which the thought of T.E. Hulme arises. What one critic has called his “ontological” view of human nature was founded on an idea of integral human imperfection, to

¹ Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 21.

² Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. xviii.

³ Sean Pryor, *Poetry, Modernism and an Imperfect World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2017), p. 19.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 2.

which he applied the creative label of original sin.⁵ Hulme defined the terms “romantic” and “classical” to explain this view of human nature which he saw as foundational, both in terms of its actual state, the “classical”, and the misguided fallacy of perfectibility which opposed it, the “romantic”. The scope of Hulme’s literary work is largely characterised in these terms. His project, artistically and critically, was to valorise those artistic works which, to him, carried a sense of their own limits or pointed to the limits of human nature. Through this he sought to reach beyond the purely aesthetic and challenge ideas of perfectibility in society and culture.

I would argue that the type of thought characteristic of Hulme did not stem from this specific context alone. A very similar view of human nature was arrived at by the various critics who would later be termed the New Criticism. Their project too was to radically reassert the essential imperfection of human nature, and the cultural and creative conditions from which they arose were starkly different to those of Hulme.⁶

The clearest starting point is to define the type of conservatism that Hulme and the New Critics shared as a “philosophy of imperfection”.⁷ This term derives from Noel O’Sullivan who offers a counter to what he calls a “mistaken prejudice”:

This is the vague feeling that conservatism is not really an ideology at all, but merely a collection of emotional and pragmatic responses to change by men who are either too indolent to face a new world, or else too complacent to risk sacrificing one which they have a vested interest in preserving.⁸

A clear definition of conservatism can in fact be offered, one which applies universally and unambiguously:

The world imposes limitations upon what either the individual or the state can hope to achieve without destroying the stability of society. Conservative ideology, accordingly, may be defined as a philosophy of imperfection, committed to the idea of limits.⁹

⁵ Nathan Waddell, *Modernist Nowheres: Politics and Utopia in Early Modernist Writing, 1900-1920* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 61.

⁶ Elizabeth Kuhn has proposed a co-emergent tradition of “anti-humanism” in which Hulme is involved, which overlapped with modernism but had its own chain of influences. *New Age*, for instance, was heavily influential in the importation of Nietzschean anti-humanist ideas into English modernist circles. “Toward an Anti-Humanism of Life: The Modernism of Nietzsche, Hulme and Yeats”, *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Summer 2011), pp. 1-20.

⁷ A roughly analogous use of the term seems to have originated simultaneously in the work of Noel O’Sullivan and Anthony Quinton, both in 1976.

⁸ Noel O’Sullivan, *Conservatism* (London: J.M Dent & Sons, 1976), p. 31.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 12.

This definition is echoed by Anthony Quinton in his 1976 T.S. Eliot Lecture, “The Politics of Imperfection”:

The main point I want to make about the theoretical interpretation of conservatism is, then, that in both its forms, religious and secular, it rests on a belief in the imperfection of human nature.¹⁰

This sense of conservatism, as stated by O’Sullivan and Quinton, is foundationally sufficient, although it certainly should not be thought of as the only theory, or the most comprehensive. It is, however, the one that most suits our purposes, and the starting point for a working definition.¹¹ Importantly it serves less as a concrete philosophy and more as an indicator of a certain type of sensibility, or even a certain type of person. It demands only that the individual in question take limitation as their watchword, and comport their views around it. In this sense it can be thought of more as a type of impulse, specifically the attitude that exists prior to the construction of a particular philosophy.¹² The varieties of thought that might derive from this starting point are manifold and potentially unlimited. They are, however, always linked by the underlying commonality of limitation or a tacit acknowledgement of imperfection in human nature.

It is possible to unpack this theory further, and identify two other primary aspects that both exist in the original definition and inevitably carry forward into its various adaptations. The first is its essentially religious character, particularly the connection to the Christian doctrine of original sin. Even an atheistic adaptation bears this legacy in its genetics, and most self-aware examples address this directly.¹³ The second key feature is its fundamental contrariness. This is a position founded on reaction, both historically and intuitively. The term “imperfection” is characterised by what it opposes, that being perfection and the philosophy attached to it.¹⁴ All conservative thought that

¹⁰ Anthony Quinton, *The Politics of Imperfection: The Religious and Secular Traditions of Conservative Thought in England from Hooker to Oakeshott* (London: Faber & Faber, 1978), p. 13.

¹¹ To suppose the existence of an active conservative tradition in this sense is to provide a counter to Trilling’s famous assertion in 1950, that “nowadays there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation”. Trilling does point to the continuance of an “impulse to conservatism”, however, but sees no meaningful application of it. Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951), p. ix.

¹² Patricia Rae says of Hulme, that his view of romanticism was that it was “less a coherent set of philosophical principles than a fundamental attribute that may shape such principles” Patricia Rae, *The Practical Muse: Pragmatist Poetics in Hulme, Pound, and Stevens* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1997), p. 49.

¹³ Although Quinton proposes a “secular tradition” of conservative thought which “does not logically presuppose Christianity”, he acknowledges that “a common basis for it is the Christian dogma of original sin”, p. 11. O’Sullivan, similarly, posits the “moral or theological vision of the world” as only one of three possible foundations, p. 22. The two cannot be easily decoupled; original sin always haunts the edges of imperfect philosophy.

¹⁴ For a broad overview of modernist interactions with the idea of perfectibility, see *Modernist Nowheres*, pp. 45-65. The standard history of perfectibility is John Passmore’s *The Perfectibility of Man* (London: Duckworth, 1970). See also Harold Coward, *The Perfectibility of Human Nature in Eastern and Western Thought* (Albany:

derives from this philosophy of imperfection operates, in effect, from an initial position of resistance or defensiveness. The type of historicising carried out by these types of thinkers, therefore, tends to reach back and recharacterise the history of conservative thought along these lines.¹⁵

It is from this definitional starting point that I wish to approach the New Criticism. Each New Critic of this study (John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, R.P. Blackmur, T.E. Hulme, I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis) begins from just such an “imperfecting” impulse, which then is defined and channelled into a more specific, practice-based form. The defensive aspect is incontrovertible, although always with a precise local character. The types of strategies that are generally pursued to carry out the imperfecting project are strikingly consistent across these thinkers. The most prominent among these strategies are the advocacy of a particular style of close reading, a particular type of religion, and a particular interpretation of history.

I have chosen to describe this impulse or philosophy of imperfection first because it is the most primordial factor in what I will define as New Critical thought. Religious belief, political action or critical approaches to texts are all secondary manifestations motivated by the impulsive sense of the world being imperfect yet not being recognised as such in modernity. John Crowe Ransom provides a concise summation of this attitude:

I believe that there is possible no deep sense of beauty, no heroism of conduct, and no sublimity of religion, which is not informed by the humble sense of man’s precarious position in the universe (ITMS 10)

Through this attitude all manifestations of the New Critical approach are combined: they share a source in the originating drive to render the world imperfect, or, at least, to convey the sense of its imperfectness. Although it would be possible to identify the consistency of an imperfecting impulse behind the varying methodologies of the New Critics, to do so solely would be a limited project. It is instead the consistency of method that arises from this original impulse, the practical strategies that

State University of New York Press, 2008) and Elliot M. Simon, *The Myth of Sisyphus: Renaissance Theories of Human Perfectibility* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007).

¹⁵ One important example is Isaiah Berlin’s idea of a ‘counter-enlightenment’ tradition, which is both a reaction *against* the enlightenment and founded on a sense of the centrality of original sin: “what the entire enlightenment has in common is denial of the central Christian doctrine of original sin [...] It is the powerful reaffirmation of this Pauline and Augustinian doctrine that is the sharpest single weapon in the root-and-branch attack on the entire Enlightenment.” Isaiah Berlin, “The Counter-Enlightenment”, in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 1979), p. 20. Zeev Sternhell identifies a comparable “anti-enlightenment” tradition but is much less favourable towards it, and he makes Berlin complicit: “His intention was to demolish the great edifice of the Enlightenment.” Zeev Sternhell, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, trans. by David Maisel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 403.

are employed to spread the doctrine of imperfection, that I will chart in detail.¹⁶ Across the entirety of the New Criticism there is a remarkable coherence of method and even, more tentatively, a remarkable coherence of motivation.

The Unromantic Image

The doctrine of imperfection arises from a sense of political or cultural urgency. As one example, several critics have tied the motivation of the Southern Agrarians to the controversy surrounding the Scopes trial.¹⁷ To think of merely one specific cause however is to do an injustice to the absoluteness of the worldview involved, as it responds to the clash of tradition and modernity. The New Criticism sees itself and its arguments in the grand scope of history, and this self-perception is evident from its early days. The defensive gesture which arises, stimulated by social or cultural exigency, finds in classicism the countering force to modern romanticism. In adopting the language of classicism and romanticism the New Critics sanction their reactionary views with participation in a tradition that is perceived to be more venerable. Art Berman argues that “They will identify their own position as a return to ‘classicism’, which may be interpreted, whatever it is named, as a reaction of steadfast English empiricism to German idealism...”¹⁸ Many of the terms appropriated by the New Critics to describe their attitudes are somewhat best-fit solutions. John Crowe Ransom acknowledges the imprecision: “Classical and romantic mean a great many things, all of them backed by good authority; there may be distinguished as many as fifty-seven varieties of either” (SE 36).

Yet all the New Critics were, for the most part, working from the same premises. Differences in critical vocabulary are only surface-deep and often signify something more general than the specific historical resonances of particular terms would appear to signify.¹⁹ Patricia Rae has pointed to this

¹⁶ In this sense, we perhaps avoid what certain New Critics might have dismissed as an Intentional Fallacy: the intention might be on our radar, but textual strategies or implementation are the foremost concerns of this study.

¹⁷ See Paul Conkin, *When All The Gods Trembled: Darwinism, Scopes and American Intellectuals* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), p. 154. See also GWT 101, Stephen Schryer, “Fantasies of the New Class: New Criticism, Harvard Sociology, and the Idea of the University”, in *Disciplining Modernism*, ed. by Pamela L. Caughie (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 157, and Donald Davidson, “First Fruits of Dayton: The Intellectual Evolution in Dixie”, in *The Southern Agrarians and the New Deal: Essays after I’ll Take My Stand*, ed. by Emily S. Bingham and Thomas A. Underwood (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), pp. 36-49.

¹⁸ Art Berman, *From the New Criticism to Deconstruction: The Reception of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 41.

¹⁹ There is, nonetheless, a recurrent issue of fuzziness and inconsistency in terminology. Do all the New Critics mean the same thing by ‘romanticism’? I have indicated that they are each in some way navigating a Hulmean Romantic / Classical duality, but is a “positivist” the exact same thing as a “utopian” or a “technologico-Benthamite”? A purpose of my study will be to negotiate the uncertainties of these terms to illustrate that, despite the confusions of vocabulary, the critics in question are largely making similar points and have devised similar interpretations of history and literature to support those points. It is necessary to retain enough

generalising tendency in Hulme's vocabulary: "by 'romanticism', Hulme means only a tendency to exaggerate the cognitive capacities of human beings".²⁰ Manuel Bilsky, similarly, has pointed to a comparable tendency in Richards' work: "'intellectual', 'scientific' and 'referential' are synonymous for him".²¹

Amongst the New Critics there is a clear consistency in the development of an initial attitude into a set of practices. We might make a general statement as follows: each, as a starting point, looked at modernity and found it unsatisfactory; each, thereafter, specifically identified the problem as a romantic one: i.e. man having an excessive sense of his own potential and, on account of it, inflicting evil on the world and, significantly, breaking with history; and each, finally, prescribes an anti-romantic solution in an attempt to slow or reverse the process.²² Literature, attended by close reading, is often (but not always) the solution offered, and the New Critics are careful to make clear that only a certain type of literature, read in a certain way, is valuable. In these general terms we have the essence of what I will call the New Critical approach.²³

In establishing these criteria of definition it is necessary to address the recurrent and dismissive perceptions of the New Criticism that have dominated critical discourse since its demise.²⁴ These tend to be comported along the lines of the classical/romantic binary that the New Critics themselves embraced, but turned on its head for maximum historical irony. Hans Eichner comments that

Several scholars, including Wellek [...] have had a field day tracing the romantic virus in New Critics who claim to be immune to it [...] Fogle, Foster, and Foakes, with some assistance

adaptability to let one word mean contradictory things between two very similar critics, or even at the two ends of one individual's literary career.

²⁰ *The Practical Muse*, p. 12.

²¹ Manuel Bilsky, "I.A. Richards on Belief", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Sep. 1951), pp. 105-115, p. 108.

²² It is in this third stage that we begin to see value of the critic-in-society: if some texts contribute to decay, and others can cure the rot, no role could be more important than the determiner of which is which.

²³ Although such a summary might have the effect of anachronistically classifying Hulme as a "New Critic", I do not find this particularly problematic. To reach back and apply a label to Hulme is perhaps comparable to something like the classification of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche as "existentialists" despite the later creation of the term itself. A comprehensive method or style can, after all, come well before the comprehensive definition of it.

²⁴ Perhaps it is only now that such a work can be carried out. As one critic states, "the reef of decades that divides us... has made it possible to conduct such investigations with less reductive and misleading animosity than that found in a work such as Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory*", James Matthew Wilson, "Representing the Limits of Judgment: Yvor Winters, Emily Dickinson and the Religious Experience", *Christianity and Literature*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Spring 2007), pp. 397-422, p. 397.

from Thorpe, Baker and Weaver (in their introduction) and Miss Nitchie, have been particularly successful in unfrocking the New Critics as romantics in their own right...²⁵

The most common and problematic assertion is that the New Critics are self-hating romantics, whose tendency to romanticise the past and sacralise texts belie their ostensibly classical sensibilities. Richard Foster is perhaps the most committed advocate of this view: “Its core principle, that poetry provides “knowledge” of a higher kind than that of reason and science, seemed virtually to give poetry the status of a form of metaphysics or revelation.”²⁶

In response to this point I wish to make a central claim of my argument. To the New Critics the text does not offer “knowledge” in the revelatory or romantic sense that Foster states. It offers instead what we might tentatively call “unknowledge”. This is the knowledge of the impossibility of knowledge.²⁷ It is an imperfecting strategy above all else, designed to remove the capacity of literature to provide romantic revelation or insight and to remove from science the claim to absolute epistemological certainty.

A similar counter can be made to the idea that New Critics approach the past romantically or are simply nostalgic. They each instrumentalise something analogous to Eliot’s “dissociation of sensibility” and point to the conceptual existence of an implied unity of sensibility existing in an implied or directly inferred historical period. But they do not see this unified sensibility as an active possibility for retrieval, or any hope of changing the future in accordance with it; there is no possibility of return. The dissociation, in each of its individual permutations, is always unmendable. The historical strategy is a pragmatic one: this type of historicising practice is useful only as a tool for making a point about man’s fixity; as such it is another imperfecting strategy. An approach to the past of this kind result in a type of attitude shift on the part of the individual approaching it, which

²⁵ Hans Eichner, *“Romantic” and Its Cognates: The European History of a Word* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), p. 487.

²⁶ Richard Foster, *The New Romantics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), p. 32.

²⁷ The term has been used by Blanchot, although my meaning here is entirely separate. To Blanchot, “unknowledge is not a lack of knowledge; it is not even knowledge of the lack but rather that which is hidden by knowledge and ignorance alike: the neutral, the un-manifest.” Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), p. 63. See also Jacques Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve”, in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 251-277. Both seem to have derived their use of the term from Bataille’s concept of non-knowledge (non-savoir), see Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. by Stuart Kendall (New York: State University of New York, 2014) and Georges Bataille, *Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, trans. by Michelle Kendall & Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

the New Critics see as beneficial, but it is a world away from the form of romantic renewal that is often ascribed to them.²⁸

To adapt a term of Frank Kermode's, I would characterise the New Critical effort, including that of Hulme, as the effort to create an unromantic image. History is central to this, and the dissociation of sensibility serves an integral means of prioritising an essential imperfection.²⁹ The unromantic image is one which foregrounds and underlines incompleteness and uncertainty. It presents an image of completeness solely for the purposes of prioritising the futility of its actual realisation. History and poetic criticism come together in this approach: the type of poetry that New Critics value is that which strives or moves towards an implied state of completeness, yet carries with it an inescapable sense of the impossibility of that occurring. This is Dante for Tate, or Blake for Leavis, as an example. In a similar sense, there is no romantic "golden age" to be reclaimed or brought about by revolution or upheaval. The unified sensibility in history serves only to provide an impossible and unbreachable gulf between it and the collapsed state of modernity. Lucy McDiarmid points to this tacit awareness amongst the English modernist poets:

In less idealistic moments, they acknowledge their fantasies as fantasies. The myth of the seventeenth century is not dogma, but only one set of ideas entertained to explain the apparent failures of civilization and the "dissociation" of the present.³⁰

In this, limit and imperfection are propelled to the forefront of New Critics' cultural critique. This is by design, and represents a primary commonality between Hulme and the New Critics in England and America. The unromantic image constitutes a direct challenge to the romantic view of the world and its operation is a specifically defensive gesture against all that these thinkers perceived to be wrong in modernity.

I would argue therefore that to define the characteristically limiting approach of the New Critics as romantic, as seems to have been the critical tendency in recent decades, would be to stretch the definition of the term so far as to incorporate its absolute opposite, effectively rendering it completely meaningless. Ronald Primeau, for example, sees no inconsistency in labelling Hulme an

²⁸ Paul A. Bove sees an inconsistency in the New Critical idea of a "unified sensibility", which points to the unity of writer and world, and its attempts to keep poetry "pure" by severing it from modern life. I would argue the inconsistency does not stand if the unity of writer and world is by design an *unrealisable* ideal. "R.P. Blackmur and the Job of the Critic: Turning from the New Criticism", *Criticism*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Fall, 1983), pp. 359-380, pp. 360-361.

²⁹ Kermode retroactively groups Hulme into the proponents of the dissociation, so I will follow his precedent and also group Hulme into the practice of its alternative form.

³⁰ Lucy McDiarmid, *Saving Civilization: Yeats, Eliot, and Auden Between the Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 36.

“anti-romantic romantic”.³¹ John Fekete counters this tendency amongst critics of Ransom: “to maintain a romanticising thesis, the evidence has to be seriously misinterpreted.”³² Nonetheless the self-hating romantic theory has, for the most part, been accepted as critical truth. Recent criticism, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, has moved towards a rehabilitation of Hulme. The received wisdom that his classicism was simply a form of unexamined and self-deluding romanticism is beginning to be questioned, and more perceptive critics have started to validate his classicism on its own terms as logically and inherently consistent. Patricia Rae has been at the forefront of this revision. More accurate accounts of the chronology of Hulme’s work have also allowed a sense of the consistency of his views to be established. Hulme is slowly being liberated from the dismissive preconceptions that have characterised earlier critical approaches to his work. The logic of my thesis follows that a philosophy and methodology comparable to Hulme’s is the central and defining characteristic of the New Critical approach; this being the case it is conceivable that a similar project of renewal and revaluation can be carried out on their behalf. The process of turning Hulme into a New Critic (or the New Critics into Hulmeans) has the potential to allow the former’s reappraisal to carry over to the latter.

“Unknowledge”

The New Critics’ consistent strategy is to carry out a means of cultivating a sense of anti-positivist “unknowledge”. This is a deliberate attempt to counter the type of scientific language that they see as the scourge of modernity due to its implications of romantic perfectibility. Their approaches to literature, religion and history are all a product of the imperfecting impulse, specifically in this type of attempt to establish unknowledge in its various forms: “ignorance”, “humility”, etc. To encourage ignorance is to encourage humility, and to and to make a poem irreducible is to render it into a defence against absolute or abstracted claims for its meaning or value. The grand aim of close reading is to make the reader humble in the face of a text that resists total comprehension. John Crowe Ransom, as an illustration, writes of “alternative knowledges”, and similar expressions can be found in the work of every New Critic (NC 294). William J. Handy identifies just such a common “generative idea” in the critical works of Ransom, Brooks, Blackmur and others:

they share one major belief in common, a belief which has constituted a major change in the way literature is regarded in the twentieth century. That belief may be stated thus: The special symbolic formulation of language which characterises the literary work is unique in

³¹ Ronald Primeau, “On the Discrimination of Hulmes: Toward a Theory of the ‘Anti-Romantic’ Romanticism of Modern Poetry”, *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 3, No. 5 (Jul., 1974), pp. 1104-1122.

³² John Fekete, *The Critical Twilight: Explorations in the Ideology of Anglo-American Literary Theory from Eliot to McLuhan* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 50.

its ability to represent a part of man's experience that cannot be represented adequately by the abstractions of logic.³³

Handy is correct in identifying a New Critical tendency to ascribe a special value to literature as a "non-scientific" means of expression, and especially acute in describing this as a principal unifying feature of the various critics. In attempting to integrate the New Criticism into a Kantian tradition, Handy overlooks the particular value of literature as "non-knowledge", instead crediting it as simply another type of knowledge. This is a fatal error for his analysis, and in following this logic Handy is simply participant in the "romanticising" summaries of New Critical thought: if literature gives us an actual revelation or insight, of whatever type, then it is involved in a romantic process. A more careful analysis needs to foreground the inaccessibility of this type of knowledge; this is the most prominent recurrent theme of New Critical analysis, and the one factor that unifies even the most disparate members of the group into what might be called an overarching pattern of technique.

One of the most perceptive and intriguing recent treatments of the New Criticism can be found in Alan Liu's *The Laws of Cool*. Liu foregrounds the New Critical axiom of unknowability as a key aspect of their practice and ties it in to his definition of an "ethos of the unknown" or, more simply, "cool".³⁴ Liu uses these terms to mean a general refusal to be instrumentalised, specifically in the modern workplace (i.e. "I work here, but I'm cool") and ties them directly to the New Critical concepts of irony and ambiguity.³⁵ As such, the New Critics, in their close reading methods, were "protesting the colonization of sensibility by what we today call the information age."³⁶ The specific form that this method of resistance takes is to remove from texts any specific claim to truth-value other than representing simply the "fact" of the absence of any truth: "the very fact that I cannot point to the truth is like the truth which never points but simply is."³⁷ This is the key of Ransom's "ontological" method, as Liu points out, but it is also a recurrent feature of a great many New Critical texts.³⁸ What we might call "unknowledge" is the fundamental feature of the unromantic image: it offers only one insight, that there is no insight to be had.

³³ William J. Handy, *Kant and the Southern New Critics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963), p. 8.

³⁴ Alan Liu, *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 383.

³⁵ Michael Szalay adapts Liu's idea to indict the New Critics for the failure to engage with the social context of the historical period they supposedly idealised. For Szalay, unknowledge is effectively a strategy to avoid addressing unpleasant implications: "Liu's ethos of the unknown is Southern Agrarian false consciousness", specifically "a vision of southern culture organised around theatrically hidden black labour." Michael Szalay, *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 68.

³⁶ Alan Liu, "Understanding Knowledge Work", *Criticism* 47, No.2 (2006), pp. 249-260, p. 255.

³⁷ Liu, *Laws of Cool*, p. 38.

³⁸ See John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problems of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

The New Criticism as Movement

It might be said that one key aspect of the New Criticism is its nebulousness and lack of definition. This perception is detectable not just among later critics, but even among the New Critics themselves.³⁹ The question of who even is a New Critic is controversial: Empson is the ideological outlier, for example, but is usually included. Similarly, Kenneth Burke and Yvor Winters are alternately enemies or adherents depending on which idea of critical history one follows, or which criteria one uses. The standard definition is that the unifying factor is in the practice of close reading. A New Critic is a close reader, therefore the Southern critics, Blackmur, Leavis, Richards and others can all be comfortably associated: they are, after all, each a close reader of texts. To some later critics the practice of close reading indicated an asocial formalism, which itself reflected a bourgeois individualism. Literary history remembers the New Critics in America as the “uprooted, defensive intelligentsia who reinvented in literature what they could not locate in reality”, mirrored in Europe by the intelligentsia who sought “to exclude the masses from culture”.⁴⁰

I find these definitions to be unsatisfactory: they do not serve to qualify the disparities between the individuals identified as members of the group. Not all of them could even be called programmatic close readers in the stereotypical “formalist” sense of the term. The essays of Tate or Leavis, for instance, are often more concerned with social or cultural issues than textual ones; the majority of essays in Tate’s *Essays of Four Decades* use literature as a starting point rather than a focus.

There is, effectively, a void between definition and actuality. My ambition (and presumption) in this thesis is to offer a new definition that might better fit. In my assessment, close reading is a secondary, rather than a primary, aspect of their practice, or a symptom rather than a cause. We might think of it as an associated practice, or tenet of New Criticism, rather than its singular motivating force.

My contention is that we might instead unify them along the grounds I have identified; principally, by an imperfecting or anti-perfectibilist instinct that leads to specific, repeated types of critical practice. Close reading is one, but so is the application of a theory of history predicated on the dissociation of sensibility, and an identification of religious faith or, more generally, supernaturalism as a means of instrumentalising limitation and imperfection. I will demonstrate the similarities in

³⁹ Ransom, in the text that introduced the group identity, *The New Criticism*, ends the movement in the text that started it by calling, in the final chapter, for a new “Ontological Critic” to supersede the tendency he is describing.

⁴⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 40, John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), pp. 16-17. This opinion is countered by Mark Jancovich, “The Southern New Critics”, in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Vol. VII: Modernism and the New Criticism*, ed. by A. Walton Litz, and others (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 200-201.

usage across each of the subjects of my study and in so doing define these practices and strategies as the underlying commonality of what we now term the “New Criticism”. For convenience, the primary shape these strategies, or “sub-doctrines”, take might be summarised as follows:

- 1) The poetic strategy
- 2) The historical strategy
- 3) The religious strategy

By the combination of these three fronts the New Critics bring about the means of dissemination of the doctrine of imperfection. In what remains of this introduction I will clarify the meaning and context of each of these three features of New Critical doctrine.

The lack of a coherent group identity was fatal for the New Criticism. It is why, despite their huge influence on English Studies, they left no followers aside from the vaguely-defined grouping of those who read closely. In this sense, their influence is endemic, as William E. Cain remarks: “It is not simply that the New Criticism has become institutionalised, but that it has gained acceptance as the institution itself.”⁴¹ That close reading became so established is no doubt a substantial legacy of the New Critics, but it is only one god among a neglected pantheon, and cut off from the original source of its power. The ideology that underpinned close reading and gave birth to it is now kept alive by approximately no-one. We might wonder, that if the New Critics had been more self-aware about their shared attitude, would the outcome have been different? Some critics point towards the inherent diversity of the group, and this seems to be the dominant view: “Modernism’s purest theoretical contraption, New Criticism was – is – rarely practiced with programmatic consistency.”⁴² My contention is that there is, in fact, a detectable consistency of programme. It simply was not recognised as such by the New Critics themselves, for the most part, or those who read them. The refusal to consistently self-identify as participant in a shared intellectual tradition is an inherent tendency of the conservative disposition: each insists instead on their own “outsiderness”.⁴³ Stefan Collini identifies this habit as an innate aspect of intellectualism, and shows how the position of ideological outsider is usually taken as an honorific, which leads to intellectuals often attempting to

⁴¹ William E. Cain, *The Crisis in Criticism: Theory, Literature and Reform in English Studies* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 105.

⁴² Ron Smith, “Old New Critics”, *The Georgia Review*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (Winter 2004), pp. 954-972, p. 955.

⁴³ Although the Agrarian habit of publishing manifestos would seem to undermine this, these publications tended to align the contributors in terms purely of their desired political outcomes. Stewart gives a sense of this: “But what was the Southern Way? [...] As Stark Young described it, it resembled in tempo and manner the supposed life of the great English county families, whereas Ransom seemed to liken it to life in the outlying villages of England. H.C. Nixon called for an ordinary middle-class society no different from that found in farming communities all over the United States, while Lytle seemed to want a return to a rough-and-ready homespun life only a little distance removed from the frontier.” John L. Stewart, *The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and the Agrarians* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 149.

negate themselves.⁴⁴ Russell Kirk, similarly, sees in conservatism a habit towards integral self-definition as unideological.⁴⁵ As such, no self-respecting conservative would ever involve themselves with the left-seeming accoutrements of a “movement”. A common refrain of the New Critics, therefore, is that there is “no such thing” as the New Criticism. One exception is made by John Crowe Ransom, in an essay on R.P. Blackmur, which seems to call for some type of group identity:

He [Blackmur] is decidedly what we should now be calling a “new critic” [...] There are violent disagreements among the new critics, but any one of these critics shows the influence of the others, and the total effort amounts to a sort of collaboration [...] Intentionally or otherwise, he is a collaborator with such other critics as Richards and Empson, Eliot, Tate, Winters, and Brooks.

Having drawn together those he views as the “new critics”, Ransom proceeds to identify the problem with their practice:

No critic can go as far as Mr Blackmur has gone ... without sensing the necessity of formulating his conceptions; without, as I believe it is called “defining one’s critical position”. It is here that critics, and even new critics, who are the best yet known in our language, are weakest.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Collini writes of how “claiming to be an outsider is also a way of laying claim to a kind of purity”, p. 414. The principle thesis of his text is that intellectuals often reject the title of *intellectual*, reaching instead for a “outsider than thou” attitude, p. 414. Although focused largely on English intellectual history, Collini characterises the American “denialist” attitude as lamenting the lack of the American equivalency to their (supposed) elevated status in Britain or Europe, p. 221; Collini ties this specifically to the New Criticism’s reverence for “tradition”, citing Irving Howe’s statement that “the provincial American need to be more genteel than the gentry, more English than the English”, p. 232.

⁴⁵ Kirk adopts H. Stuart Hughes’ formulation of “the negation of ideology” and alters its original neutral tone to an expression of value: “For the conservative impulse is the negation of ideology. Conservatives do not believe that man and society may be perfected through revolutionary politics – the conviction that lies at the heart of every ideology”. Russell Kirk, “The Cultural Conservatives”, *The Heritage Lectures*, http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/1988/pdf/hl151.pdf. Whereas Kirk saw the negation idea as one which valorises the significance of social and cultural traditions, it carries a secondary possibility as the foundation of atomising political doctrines that ascribe no value to the individual, such as that of Hayek or von Mises. See W. Wesley McDonald, *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), pp. 27-33.

⁴⁵ To Kirk, “conservatism is not a fixed and immutable body of dogma, and conservatives inherit from Burke a talent for re-expressing their convictions to fit the time”. Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (South Bend: Gateway, 1978), p. 7. Roger Scruton’s rebuttal to the “tradition among English conservatives, according to which their beliefs are essentially unsystematic” is that it leads to a simple intellectual problem: “why be a conservative in the first place?”. Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 204n.

⁴⁶ John Crowe Ransom, “Ubiquitous Moralists”, *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Winter, 1989), pp. 126-129, p. 127.

The problem is a lack of a statement of purpose and a lack of unity. Ransom is here making his clearest suggestion for the New Criticism as movement, and for the necessity, perhaps, of a type of mild manifesto.⁴⁷ More than any other New Critic, Ransom is acutely aware of the value that comes from self-definition. It is akin to the difference between an irregular militia and a well-organised regiment.⁴⁸

The Poetic Strategy: Close Reading

It is possible to downgrade “close reading” from the unchallenged, singular definition of New Criticism to a lesser role simply by foregrounding its instrumentality or service to a higher-valued doctrine. The hallmarks of close reading pioneered by the New Critics, such as ambiguity, paradox and irony, textual autonomy and the heresies of intentionality and paraphrase, are designed to serve an anti-ideological function by rendering a text irreducible to a definitive ideological interpretation; effectively these critical concepts are defensive strategies for preventing perfectible or romantic (i.e. supposedly complete) readings. The special destiny of literature (in their view) is to demonstrate to the reader this idea of satisfactory incompleteness and thereby serve as a bulwark against the modern languages of positivism or romanticism.⁴⁹ Literature is offered as a palliative (rather than expressly a cure) to a social problem; the aim is to bring the world into closer alignment with the values those texts express: “the New Critics preferred to poeticise the world rather than politicise poetry. Metaphor was the very stuff of existence.”⁵⁰ My approach to each thinker in their respective chapters is to show how they each, in their different ways, use their strategies of close reading to render the text imperfect. The idea that close reading by its nature stakes a claim to inherent neutrality is based on shaky foundations, as some critics have realised:

In the first place it is objected that nothing could be more harmless, apolitical, and undogmatic than the study and criticism of literary works; surely it is the femin-, Marx-,

⁴⁷ According to Ransom, the consequences of the lack of critical self-honesty on Blackmur’s part are a tendency towards moralistic criticism. This is a waste of potential for Blackmur, who “is not really a moralistic critic at all when he is going properly”, “Ubiquitous Moralists”, p. 127.

⁴⁸ Ransom draws his enemy in military terms: “Our vast industrial machine ... is like a Prussianised state which is organised strictly for war and can never consent to peace” (ITMS 8)

⁴⁹ The contrast between the pioneering New Critical style of close reading to what went before is explored in detail by Gerald Graff, including the dominance of philology and “the myth of Germanic superiority”, Gerard Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 63. The role of New Critics as teachers of literature is covered in detail in *The New Criticism: Formalist Literary Theory in America* ed. by Alfred J. Drake, and others, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

⁵⁰ Kenneth Asher, *T.S. Eliot and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 156-157.

structural-, and other -ists who are 'ideological' in importing their doctrines into this neutral area.⁵¹

The New Critics are not neutral readers. They certainly participate in a type of “moral” criticism, as their literary and social ambitions are moving towards a common end: texts are vessels for the imparting of, if not a dogma, then a certain type of attitude. It is important to note that this type of critical intentionality is somewhat different to ideology; the variety of textual practice carried out by the New Critics is perhaps more benign than that practiced by the other “isms” as it is focused more on cultivating a sensibility than enacting a definite agenda of political action: this sensibility usually being only a grounded attitude of humility. In this sense they are bound by the terms of own doctrine to relative harmlessness (a caveat that does not exist in more explicitly romantic ideologies). The great work of the New Criticism, such as it is, comprises the cultivation, through literature, of sense of the inherent imperfection of the world. Close reading is a means to achieve this; it is, in fact, one of the primary means, but ultimately it is only an instrument with which to do so.

It would be a stretch to call Hulme a close reader. Phyllis Rackin sees irony as “a concept which was relatively unimportant for Hulme but became, in the theory of Cleanth Brooks and his followers, the defining characteristic of poetry”. Instead, “in Hulme's view concreteness, and not irony, is the key term in any discussion of poetry.”⁵² Undoubtedly, to Cleanth Brooks irony is the pre-eminent determinative facet of poetic meaning.⁵³ The distance between Hulme and Brooks in the value they ascribe to this particular quality of poetry could be taken as indicative of a fundamental disparity between their approaches. To Art Berman the inconsistency of New Critical recommendations for specific strategies of close reading is a testament to an underlying lack of programme:

recognising that the New Critics had no more comprehensive a theory of language and self than might be legitimated by the basic the basic empiricism they inherited can lead us toward a better understanding of the confusion, ambivalence, and indecision when the critics write about the referential value of poetic statements...

However this only coheres when one takes for granted, as Berman does, that “the critics are resolutely searching for a ‘truth’ or ‘meaning’ or ‘cognition’ in poetry”. The perceived confusion

⁵¹ Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Literary Criticism 1848-1932* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 1.

⁵² Phyllis Rackin, “Hulme, Richards, and the Development of Contextualist Poetic Theory”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Summer, 1967), pp. 413-425, p. 416.

⁵³ See Joseph A. Dane, *The Critical Mythology of Irony* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), pp. 149-158.

resolves itself, I would argue, when we instead underpin the New Critical strategy of close reading with a unifying tendency towards the creation of an unromantic or incomplete reading.

The Historical Strategy: Useful Modernisms and The Mythic Past

There is, perhaps at first glance, a stark contrast between the traditionalism of the New Critics and their advocacy of the type of drastically innovative modernist art which, quite evidently, represents a break from tradition and literary convention. It might even be seen as a form of cognitive dissonance: theirs is a “conservative radicalism”, ostensibly a paradoxical formulation. The reconciliation of revolutionary artistic sensibility and reactionary politics is best understood in light of the historical attitude which gives birth to the New Critics. Their modernist sensibility and their traditionalist attitude are drawn together in the shared capacity for imperfection, and both are made so through an imaginative effort. In 1918 Van Wyck Brooks signalled the value of a search for a “usable past” in the disrupted modern age, by which one might “shame the present with the example of the past”.⁵⁴ Several critics have characterised Modernism itself in these terms. This is Ann Ardis:

The creation of a usable past was a key means of both coming to terms with and keeping at bay the pressures and the alleged chaos of the modern world at the turn of the twentieth century.⁵⁵

This encapsulates the New Critical approach to history. It is a defensive method: the past is a resource that can be adapted for the purposes of enshrining a lesson of imperfection and anti-romanticism.⁵⁶ The relationship of the New Criticism to their modernist contemporaries and forebears is best understood in the same light. It is essentially selective and pragmatic. Langdon Hammer is one of few critics to foreground this habit in the New Criticism, and describes Allen Tate’s search for “the right kind of modernism”, a process which discards those aspects of it that do not fit the “reaction formation” model of Modernism and instead takes from Eliot a sanction to carry out “the construction of new pasts to legitimate new claimants to culture”.⁵⁷ Hammer identifies this as “Janus-Faced” modernism, directed to both the past and the future.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Van Wyck Brooks, “On Creating a Usable Past”, *The Dial* (April 11, 1918), pp. 337-341.

⁵⁵ Ann L. Ardis, *Modernism and Cultural Conflict, 1880-1922* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 47.

⁵⁶ Although we might think of their particular logic as the unusable-usable past.

⁵⁷ Langdon Hammer, *Hart Crane & Allen Tate: Janus-Faced Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 6-7. For Hammer this is not only a habit of the high-modernist reactionaries, but also can be seen in movements such as the “Renaissances” of Harlem and Chicago, p. 7. Other critics have connected the “usable past” of Brooks to the Southern Agrarians, albeit fleetingly: see Susan V. Donaldson, “Introduction”, *ITMS*, p. xi, also Angie Maxwell, *The Indicted South: Public Criticism, Southern Inferiority and the Politics of Whiteness*

The New Criticism is founded on a usable interpretation of modernism; the criteria of this usefulness is its historical approach.⁵⁹ The “right kind of modernism” is a justifying apparatus and direct pipeline for the ‘right kind of history’.⁶⁰ The New Critics found in Eliot’s “dissociation of sensibility” the terminology to schematise their cultural critique. The imagined past could now be applied to the present and future as a strategy.

To the historical imagination of the Agrarians, the South is tragedy made geographical, as Miller Williams artfully suggests: “What the Southern Protestant child takes in with that air is first of all a resignation to the inability of man to save himself either by works or faith.”⁶¹ The perceived tragedy of the Southern condition was not a negative factor for the Southern New Critics. If the problem with modernity was the breakdown of traditional structures and beliefs, including religion, then the ‘backwardness’ of the South had, to some extent, insulated it from the deleterious effects of modern industrial life. Ransom mentions the unique qualities of the South’s resistance to progress, due to a “secret intuition” of life’s tragic nature, but clarifies that this is more indicative of a characteristic or part of human nature, rather than being something specifically local:

the adjective Southern is a proper name like Romantic or Gothic; it becomes a descriptive classification [...] That is, it is easier to say Southern than to name the qualities that come under the term.⁶²

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), pp. 113-118, Alan Golding, *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), pp. 90-91, Daniel Aaron, “The South in American History”, in *The South & Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha: The Actual and the Apocryphal*, ed. by Evans Harrington & Ann J. Abadie (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1977), pp. 15-17.

⁵⁸ Hammer characterises the New Critical effort to define a tradition as a prelude to a bourgeoisie power-grab in the academies and a justification for creating a new critical class: “they forged an aesthetic ideology for the coming organization of intellectual life and not (as they are frequently felt to have done) a defence of that which was passing away.” Working from this ideological angle, Hammer’s analysis fails to examine the historicising tendencies of the New Critics as anything other than the self-justifying habit of “white-male authority”. *Janus Faced Modernism*, p. 7.

⁵⁹ James Longenbach has explored the extent to which high modernist historiography is itself based on a response to pre-existing positivist history. See *The Modernist Poetics of History: Pound, Eliot and the Sense of the Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987). Seamus O’Malley suggests that the historical practices of Eliot, Pound and Yeats “have been allowed to speak for the entire modernist canon, especially regarding its relationship to historiography.” In this sense they have been introduced out of necessity into a vacuum: “Modernism as a concept was applied retrospectively to the arts and culture, but modernism in historiography was conceptualised even later, after the arrival of postmodern theory, which necessitated a term to describe what came before...” Seamus O’Malley, *Making History New: Modernism and Historical Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 33, p. 28.

⁶⁰ To Geoffrey Hartman, the reverse is true: “as the American past surfaces, only its abuses seem usable – for ideological attacks on the American way of life itself”. *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 14.

⁶¹ Miller Williams, *The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1972), p. 16.

⁶² John Crowe Ransom, “Modern with a Southern Accent”, *Virginia Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Spring 1935)

“Southern” means only the maintenance of older habits, specifically an anti-progress mentality based on a sense of man’s limitation. The south became a mythic foundation within which artistic activity could occur long after equivalent “unified sensibilities” had declined in the rest of the world, although for Tate the conspicuous absence of a sufficiently mythological religion, such as Catholicism, limited the potential of the Old South, despite its agreeably ‘feudal’ qualities (ITMS 166). In this version of history, the Agrarians are not malcontents or outsiders, but assert a claim to a (disrupted) cultural continuity. In this light we might understand the willingness of these thinkers to engage in a tacit fictionalisation of the past. It is in this activity that we arrive at a solution to the paradox of conservative radicalism. A conservative cannot by definition usually be a radical as he or she is bound to believe in the continuance of some version of the status quo; as such the “conventional” version of history binds conservatives in loyalty to its maintenance. To seek to deviate from this state is therefore fundamentally unconservative – or radical. An effective technique for a conservative to escape from this trap, and incorporate a radical position into conservatism, is to carry out a fictionalisation of history. As a result one can claim loyalty to a conservative or supposedly traditional position whilst advocating courses of action that can be extraordinarily radical when compared to the usual conservative standard. For instance, this loophole allowed Hulme’s contemporaries and associates at the *New Age*, thinkers like Ramiro de Maeztu and Arthur Penty, to advocate an extraordinarily radical form of “guild socialism” whilst sanctifying the conservatism of their views in loyalty to an apparently traditional historical position.⁶³ Hulme’s medievalism accomplishes a similar function, as do the versions of history advocated by Ransom, Leavis, Tate and others.

For the New Critics the past can be approached as a type of literary text through the process of mythologisation. The primary value of a literary text is its capacity to be irreducible, and as a result inculcate a type of humility-reaction. In this sense, the past is no different. It is a resource to be used to comport the present into a specifically different relationship with it. In “reading” the past we, the ‘reader’, experience an equivalent reaction to reading a poem. As with literature, the New Critical reimagining of history is a defensive gesture, designed to counter ‘whiggish’ or Hegelian ideas of utopianism or progress. In the case of the Southern Agrarians and their vision of the Old South the motivation for this defensiveness is fairly self-evident. As Paul A. Bove writes in a critical account:

⁶³ Ramiro de Maeztu is, in particular, notable as an enthusiastic proponent of a Hulmean worldview. In this sense, he is perhaps unique as a *disciple* of Hulme’s. See Ramiro de Maeztu, *Authority Liberty and Function: Or, The Crisis of Humanism* (London: George, Allen & Unwin, 1916), a collection of de Maeztu’s essays from the *New Age* that demonstrate the influence of Hulme (who at this point was a colleague). See also Wallace Martin, *The New Age Under Orage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967) for an account of the background of their association.

after reconstruction their history had been rewritten so as to affiliate it to the national myths of a victorious North ... To reclaim the cultural identity lost in the years after reconstruction, the Agrarians set out to rewrite Southern history.⁶⁴

The historical imagination of the Agrarians turned the South into the only remaining “European” culture, its plantations and slaves heroically reimagined into the last vestiges of the feudal system. The only academic historian amongst the twelve southerners, Frank Owsley, engaged actively in revisionism.⁶⁵ The ostensibly literary members of the group self-consciously engage in a type of mythic thinking that reimagines the past in unhistorical, but more useful, terms. Robert Penn Warren turns the Civil War into “our Homeric period... the figures loom up only a little less than gods”⁶⁶ and Tate turns Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis into Shakespearean figures of tragic and uniquely Southern heroism.⁶⁷ It is the potential of the past to teach the lesson of limitation and imperfection that most attracts the New Critics to its study. Tate and Brooks both see in Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County a mythic structure that should be treated as equal, if not superior, to literal history. Both see its specifically “tragic” resonance as its key significance.⁶⁸

One of the advantages of literary Modernism for the New Critics as a strategy of literary activity is its inherent potential for exactly the type of historical fictionalisation that they wished to engage in, particularly in relation to the nascent capacity for “mythic thinking”. Literary Modernism as a movement is a testament to a variety of methods for “doing things” with history.⁶⁹ The most influential aspect of British high Modernism on New Critical historical thought is Eliot’s doctrine of the dissociation of sensibility, itself a consciously imaginative approach to history that arguably owes a great deal to T.E. Hulme.⁷⁰ Throughout his critical work Hulme consciously alters history to cast the lesson of original sin, that man is imperfect, backwards into the grand scale of the past. In so doing the potential for a classical type of revelation on the ‘reader’ of history is increased dramatically over

⁶⁴ Paul A. Bove, *Mastering Discourse: The Politics of Intellectual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), pp. 130-131.

⁶⁵ See “The Irrepressible Conflict” in *I’ll Take My Stand*, pp. 61-91.

⁶⁶ Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), p. 82.

⁶⁷ Allan Tate, *Stonewall Jackson: The Good Soldier* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), Allen Tate, *Jefferson Davis: His Rise and Fall* (New York: Miton, Balch & Co., 1929)

⁶⁸ See Tate, ME, pp. 151-152.

⁶⁹ There are, in this instance, too many examples to list. One notable example might be W.B. Yeats: “if sometimes... I have taken such periods literally, my reason has soon recovered; and now that the system stands out clearly in my imagination I regard them as stylistic arrangements of experience” W.B. Yeats, *A Vision* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 24. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” must also be acknowledged, as well as the historical attitude of T.E. Hulme (See chapter 2). In addition, ostensibly ‘historical’ studies such as Flinders Petrie’s *Revolutions of Civilisation* (London: Harper & Brothers, 1912) and Spengler’s *Decline of the West* demonstrate that history might be ‘reimagined’ in any number of useful ways. Certainly, these texts and others like them would have been known to the New Critics.

⁷⁰ See Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957)

the possibilities of art to teach a similar lesson. Hulme is the first British Modernist to carry out this type of process, perhaps even the first in general. Hulme foregrounds the distance between the present and the past to create a sense of limitation; when modernity is compared to a valorised past it pales in comparison and a sense of humility is entrenched. One advantage of this method is that current cultural or social systems, which seem absolute due to the lack of an alternative structure, are undermined by the implied existence of a system of values in the past founded on an entirely different framework (i.e. the medievalist “classical” contrasting the “romantic” of modernity).

In summary, a dissociation of sensibility served, for the New Critics (and Hulme before them) as a strategic vision of history made purposefully analogous to original sin.⁷¹ It allows for the recharacterisation of the past as a narrative of The Fall, with modernity itself taking the role of post-lapsarian fracture. What seemed, in Eliot’s usage, as a relatively simple split between image and ideas, in the New Critical adaptations, becomes a total myth of historical rupture.⁷² I would argue that this is, in fact, more of a return to the original sense of the concept detectable in Hulme’s work, to whom, as I will show, this type of historical reimagining evolved as an another practical strategy for his doctrine of imperfection, not long after his pioneering “discovery” of original sin itself.⁷³ The connection between the two ideas, “original sin” and “the dissociation of sensibility” is therefore, in this originating sense, intricate and integral, assuming we take Hulme as the modernist “pioneer” of both. Each New Critic has their own idiosyncratic adaptation of the dissociation, with historical specificities (or vagaries) differing between them. Yet several of the key features common to the later adaptations can be seen, nascently, in Eliot’s version. For instance, Eliot writes, “the difference is not a simple difference of degree between poets. It is something which had happened to the mind

⁷¹ This seems anachronistic: Hulme could not have been influenced by the dissociation of sensibility as the idea came from Eliot. However I am using the term as a general definition of an equivalent idea.

⁷² Collini points to the distance in intentional significance between Eliot’s original usage and later adaptations: to Eliot, the idea was “a series of asides” and an “almost casual piece of provocation”. Stefan Collini, “Where Did It All Go Wrong? Cultural Critics and ‘Modernity’ in Inter-War Britain”, in *The Strange Survival of Liberal England: Political Leaders, Moral Values and the Receptions of Economic Debate*, ed. by E.H.H. Green and D.M. Tanner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 249. Similarly, one critic refers to the “mild form of dissociation of sensibility that Eliot discerns”, Sydney Mendel, “Dissociation of Sensibility”, *The Dalhousie Review*, Vo. 51, No. 2 (1971), pp. 218-227, p. 227. A contrasting view is provided by Matthiessen, to whom the dissociation was at the “very heart of Eliot’s most fundamental belief as an artist: the necessary union of intellect and emotion.” F.O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 149.

⁷³ The influence of Remy de Gourmont on Eliot’s development of the idea has been suggested by several scholars. Most prominently F.W. Bateson, “Dissociation of Sensibility”, *Essays in Criticism*, Vol. 1 (1951), pp. 302-312. See also Glenn S. Burne, “T.S. Eliot and Remy de Gourmont”, *The Bucknell Review*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (1959), p. 113. Thompson provides a direct counterargument to Bateson’s theory of Eliot’s importation of the idea from Gourmont: “The phrase in itself is perhaps an accident; but the structure of meaning behind it is not; it is a metaphysical structure to which Eliot committed himself rather early in his career. We shall not understand either the term or the structure by going merely to Remy de Gourmont.” Eric Thompson, “The Critical Forum: Dissociation of Sensibility”, *Essays in Criticism*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1 April, 1952), pp. 207-213, p. 213.

of England". In this we see a foreshadowing of the New Critical concern for the macrocosmic link between the mind of the individual poet and society itself; the poet as "bellweather". The New Critics often make clear that if, such as in modernity, a poet cannot "do poetry" in any proper sense, then it must be considered a symptom of a deep underlying sickness in society. We can also detect in Eliot's statement, of how a man "falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other", a precedent for the hostility towards specialisation that the New Critics would demonstrate in their work.⁷⁴ The very vagueness, and brevity, of Eliot's idea perhaps offered an empty vessel for later critics to fill. Although Eliot isn't specific about science as a cause in the two paragraphs that offer his theory, it is easy to see a space where it might be inserted. Mark Jancovich provides a summary of the fashion in which "science" and its attendant political manifestation, capitalism, became the historical context for the New Critical dissociation:

If science is the most immediate cause, the problem is finally, social. The dissociation of sensibility developed from the specific types of social organization associated with capitalism, and from the relationship which they established between writers and their public.⁷⁵

The varieties of interpretations of Eliot's theory among the New Critics have, most critically, underneath each of their different iterations, one key, strategic function: to use a "dissociated" history as a means of making the present, modernity, seem both relative and fundamentally broken, rather than absolute and integrally whole.⁷⁶ In this they are directly opposing what they view to be the "scientific" view of reality dominant in modernity.

In using history in this fashion Hulme (and the New Critics who later adopt similar methods) manage to skirt around the charge of romanticism by foregrounding the impossibility of the valorised past being re-established. It exists only to emphasise the impossibility of its own realisation, and make the modern individual aware of the state of his own meagreness in comparison to it. There is no hope of the present becoming anything like the idealised past. It exists beyond reach. In effect, this use of history as a type of text is a complicit fictionalisation of the past. We are asked to invest belief in an Eliotish unified sensibility (or equivalent) not because it happened, but rather because it is useful to act as if it did.

⁷⁴ T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets", in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1949), p. 287.

⁷⁵ Mark Jancovich, *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 56.

⁷⁶ It could be considered that the New Critical view of history owes more to the type of thinking behind "Ulysses: Order and Myth" than "The Metaphysical Poets", particularly in the former's sanction for the reordering of history along useful, "mythic" lines. T.S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth", *Dial*, Vol. 75, No. 5 (Nov., 1923), p. 21.

The ability of modernism to turn historical imagination into cultural exigency has attracted some degree of critical attention. Michael Bell acknowledges the “measure of arbitrariness in world-making” as an inherent part of the modernist mythopoeia.⁷⁷ He sees the modernist use of the past not as romantic escapism, but as a statement of directionality for the future. The modernist tendency towards myth is characterised “not, most typically, by nostalgic retreat from modernity but by projecting a mode of being for the future which the past, even the merely putative past, could serve to define.”⁷⁸ The actual historical frontier created by the modernist imagination need have little to do with actual history. The uses made of primitivism by Modernist writers provide further evidence of this.⁷⁹ Bell relates this ‘arbitrariness’ directly to T.S. Eliot’s dissociation of sensibility, itself a kind of self-acknowledged myth:

If tradition was Eliot’s working myth, the “dissociation of sensibility” over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is to be understood in its light. The controversial impact of this idea, and its continuing power even after it had been repeatedly exploded as an historical claim even by Eliot himself, indicates its mythic nature.⁸⁰

These exact characteristics carry over into the New Criticism and their individual ways of doing history. Even if we remove the consideration of a direct artery of historical sensibility from Eliot or Hulme to the New Critics, the arbitrariness and mythic nature of their interpretations of history do not seem to be in question.

The most significant aspect of this historicising practice, from my point of view, is the reason why the New Critics are carrying out this historical reimagining, rather than where it came from specifically. It will always remain unclear whether the idea was imported from Eliot or, for the Agrarians, developed, ab ovo in the fertile soil of the American South. The New Critics are drawn to the alteration of history because it can offer a means of making the world imperfect. If, as Bell points out, one central characteristic of modernity is “the supplanting of ‘myth’ by ‘ideology’”, then it is not inconceivable that the reconstitution of myth could undo ideology.⁸¹ This practice of conscious

⁷⁷ Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth: Belief and Responsibility in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 225.

⁷⁸ Michael Bell, “Introduction”, in *Myth and the Making of Modernity: The Problem of Grounding in Early Twentieth Century Literature*, ed. by Michael Bell and Peter Poellner (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), p. 1.

⁷⁹ See also Colin Falck, *Myth, Truth and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). On the modernist relationship with primitivism see *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism*, ed. by Ronald Bush and Elazar Barkan, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), Michael Bell, *Primitivism* (London: Methuen, 1972), Glenn Willmott, *Modernist Goods: Primitivism, the Market and the Gift* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). For John Crowe Ransom’s occasional remarks on “savages” see Chapter 5, footnotes 20 and 23.

⁸⁰ Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth*, p. 127.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p. 3.

myth-making can only take place after the collapse of a worldview, otherwise it would have no purpose. It is therefore, as Bell and others have argued, a quality of modernity itself and the product of the modernist “crisis of representation”.⁸² On this point the New Critics would very much be in agreement; the best a modern myth can do is remind us of how much better the past was. In this sense there are clear commonalities with Eliot and Hulme. The most useful point to make about this commonality is that it exists because similar individuals, in similar conditions, arrived at similar conclusions. The inclination towards myth-making can be one condition along which disparate thinkers such as these can be drawn together. As Bell notes, “myth represent[s] an important continuity of concern between writers... who are often thought to have little in common.”⁸³ The specific nature of their approach to history draws together Hulme and the New Critics in England and America as indirectly collaborative myth-makers. In each case, an individual’s impulse towards imperfection led them to turn to history as the means of realising their agenda. Modernism was the means by which the mythic tendency most adeptly came to be practiced. Whether modernism carries in its most basic structure the potential for this type of activity, or whether its presence in modernism was a direct result of the myth-makers Eliot and Hulme having such foundational roles, is perhaps the scope of another study.⁸⁴ Nonetheless, at all points the New Criticism carries with it a sense of the mythic potentialities of reading history. Along with close reading, this is a key strategy to carry out the imperfecting agenda that is, in my definition, characteristic of their practice. There is perhaps an element of irony that is generally considered supplanted by myth criticism in the chronology of twentieth century critical history.⁸⁵

⁸² Ibid, p. 11: “It is the capacity to recognise one’s own world view as a worldview that is crucial to an understanding of the creative literature of the period”. See also Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: the mythic construction of nation-state identity could only come about once “taken-for-granted frames of reference” (the universal religious community and the dynastic realm) had declined.* Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* Revised Edition (London: Verso, 2006), p. 12. See also Paul Tillich’s theory of “broken myths” in modernity: “It is a broken myth, but it is a myth; otherwise Christianity would not be an expression of ultimate concern” Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), p. 54.

⁸³ Bell, “Introduction”, *Myth and the Making of Modernity*, p. 2.

⁸⁴ On Hulme and Eliot’s approach to history, see Louise Blakeney Williams, *Modernism and the Ideology of History: Literature, Politics and the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), also *T.S. Eliot: The Modernist in History*, ed. By Ronald Bush (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Marc Manganaro, “Myth as Culture: The Lesson of Anthropology in T.S. Eliot”, in *Myth and the Making of Modernity*.

⁸⁵ See Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1983) for an account of how myth criticism supposedly played a vital role in filling the “critical void” left by the ailing New Criticism, p. 4. Lentricchia echoes Murray Krieger in making the two schools of thought oppositional, p. 19. See also Manganaro, in *Myth and the Making of Modernity*, p. 154. Frye himself seems more accommodating, as *Anatomy of Criticism* doesn’t seek to “supplant” the New Criticism, instead it sought to integrate “formalism” as one aspect of an overarching mythic method, see Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973). Frye later seems to incline more towards thinking of his work as a route away from the New Criticism: “it seems to me that the *Anatomy* was extremely useful to students of literature who felt that the New Criticism was not only getting to be a dead end, but was getting away from a sense of proportion and

The Religious Strategy: Necessary Fictions

To the New Critics, religion is useful. Perhaps more so than any other means for the propagation of a doctrine of imperfection, religion carries the potential to establish a sense of man's limitation. Hulme's original contribution is in the merging of the religious and the secular strains of the tradition of conservative imperfection into one cohesive religio-secular style. It can be defined most simply as the adoption or advocacy of religious belief for secular purposes. Hulme is participant in a secular tradition of conservative thought, as Quinton points out, and it is the original secularism that allows his "discovery" of original sin (as Wyndham Lewis dismissively describes it) to fuse the two otherwise divergent strands into one aesthetic.⁸⁶ Religion is put to use for secular purposes.⁸⁷ Hulme's criticism is a testament to this merge, and by his last work we can see the "religious attitude" fully formed in its complete, practical secularism.⁸⁸ The New Critics too are pragmatic in their approach to religion; this is a commonality with Hulme. Tate's devoted Catholicism (later in his life) is perhaps unique as the only genuine attempt at faith among the group, although even then he seems quite pragmatic about it for the most part.⁸⁹

There is a degree of ambiguity about the religious strategy. It is at once the most and least significant among the sub-doctrines of the doctrine of imperfection. On one level the doctrine in its entirety might be said to be a fundamentally religious attitude, with history and poetry serving as lesser, ministering angels for the cultivation of an essentially religious type of sensibility. Yet, of the subjects of this study, only half are fully participant in the consistent advocacy of literal religious faith as a solution to the problems of modernity. One, Tate, is motivated by his own earnest faith to missionary zeal. The other two, Hulme and Ransom, operate from a position of distinct bad faith: *God Without Thunder* is the apex of this tendency, brazenly displaying a rare honesty about motivation, and for this reason I consider it a tent pole of my argument. The other three critics,

perspective about literature as a whole". *Interviews with Northrop Frye*, ed. by Jean Grady (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), p. 479. Some critics have tended to classify Frye as the "last" of the New Critics rather than their vanquisher, see Wang Ning, "Northrop Frye and Cultural Studies", in *Northrop Frye: Eastern and Western Perspectives*, ed. by Jean O'Grady and Wang Ning (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 83.

⁸⁶ Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1967), p. 101.

⁸⁷ According to Quinton, Hulme's "vivid, influential fragments" are "literally religious in only the most marginal way", *The Politics of Imperfection*, p. 11.

⁸⁸ Charles Maurras similarly advocates Catholicism as a purely political concept. See Arthur Versluis, *The New Inquisitions: Heretic-Hunting and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Totalitarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) p. 43. Maurras' influence on Hulme is well attested, yet Maurras' intellectual inheritance is what Henry Mead identifies as "a rationalist and (classically 'French') inheritance running from Descartes through Comte". Henry Mead, *T.E. Hulme and the Ideological Politics of Early Modernism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 111. Hulme's "irrational" perspective must be said to be quite distinct from Maurras, although they share an anti-romantic tendency.

⁸⁹ By this I mean the New Critics I have chosen to study in this thesis. Brooks and Wimsatt were also Catholics, and Eliot's High Anglicanism is, of course, worthy of note.

Blackmur, Richards and Leavis do not advocate, or indeed engage with, religion in any singular capacity, nor recommend realistically or practically the adoption of religious faith as a solution. Nonetheless they do still see a value in religion as part of a historical strategy. All carry a sense of religion's value; although not all are willing to advocate for the propagation of religion in society as a useful tool, Richards, Leavis and Blackmur see in it instead a lost art: religion becomes a demonstrative component of a philosophy of dissociation. By its example in history it testifies to a unified sensibility now lost.

The centrality of religious faith to modernism has been explored by Pericles Lewis, who assigns it a paramount position in definitional terms. Modernism itself is a specific response to the failure and absence of religious faith in modernity:

The modernists troop back into churches, but they no longer expect traditional religious consolation from them [...] they find their own form of religious experience in meditating on the sacramental power that can no longer be contained in the church – or on the social imagination that once conferred power on the church.⁹⁰

Finding only emptiness in old forms, the modernists sought to provide new religious structures that might serve instead:

Yet the modernists did not accept secularization as inevitable or embrace a world emptied of the sacred. They sought instead to understand religious experience anew, in the light of their own experience of modernity and of the theories of their contemporaries. They sought to offer a new understanding of the sacred in their own texts, and in so doing they created a modern form of sacred text, charged with the meaning and power that seemed to them to have evacuated the church buildings.⁹¹

To Lewis, religion offers not only a central aspect of modernism; it serves instead as the primary criteria of definition:

my enquiry also raises questions about why we designated certain works as “modernist”. It seems that only by sublimating religious experience into formal concerns have works qualified for such canonization⁹²

⁹⁰ Pericles Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 4.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 19.

⁹² *Ibid*, p. 18. The primacy of religion as a central aspect of modernism is also suggested by Leon Surette, who points to an observer bias in later critics who have dismissed the possibility: “Although scepticism and

In this we can consider the New Critical “pragmatic” approach to religion, which sees it as a “beautiful” and “necessary” fiction, as operating fully within the modernist tradition as defined by Lewis.

In my separation of the “religious” from the “poetic” strategy, it is important to note that this follows the attitude of the New Critics themselves. They frequently draw attention to the fact that they do not agree with the sentiment that poetry can replace religion. They generally see this attitude as a pernicious legacy of the nineteenth century, characteristic of Art for Art’s Sake and expressionism. Blackmur’s view is representative:

All poetry can do is to dramatise, to express, what has actually happened to religion. This it has done. It has not replaced or in any way taken over the functions of religion; but it has been compelled to replace the operative force of religion as a resource with the discovery, or creation, of religion as an aesthetic experience.⁹³

Similarly, Cleanth Brooks puts amongst his “articles of faith”, “*That literature is not a surrogate for religion.*”⁹⁴ Religion in all cases is ascribed a separate, distinct place on its own terms and cannot be subsumed, although it can be imitated to some extent, or perhaps joined with poetry.⁹⁵ Its effects, and usefulness, are singular and inimitable.⁹⁶

A Note on Method

Some excellent and very thorough studies have explored the cultural background of the Southern Agrarian movement in America.⁹⁷ The origins of the New Criticism in England (and the attendant controversy between Graves/Riding and Richards/Empson) have been charted comprehensively in

relativism are undoubtedly the two definitional dogmas of modern enlightened academic humanism, it is far from obvious that they are the guiding principles of modernism. Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and the Occult* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993), p. 161. See also Timothy Materer, *Modernist Alchemy: Poetry and the Occult* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

⁹³ R.P. Blackmur, “A Burden for Critics”, *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Summer, 1948), pp. 170-185, p. 174.

⁹⁴ Cleanth Brooks, “The Formalist Critics”, *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Winter, 1951), pp. 72-81, p. 72.

⁹⁵ Ransom’s “metaphorical” fusion of poetry and religion, for example. See Chapter 5.

⁹⁶ See also W.K. Winsatt, “Poetry and Christian Thinking” in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (London: Methuen & Co., 1970), pp. 267-279.

⁹⁷ The most venerable being John L. Stewart’s, *The Burden of Time*; see also Mark G. Malvasi, *The Unregenerate South: The Agrarian Thought of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and Donald Davidson* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), Richard Gray, *Writing the South: Ideas of an American Region* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 122-164, Alexander Karanikas, *Tillers of a Myth: Southern Agrarians as Social and Literary Critics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), Paul V. Murphy, *The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), Paul K. Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2001), Thomas Daniel Young, *Waking Their Neighbors Up: The Nashville Agrarians Rediscovered* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982) and Susan V. Donaldson, “Introduction”, *ITMS*, pp. ix-xl.

Donald Childs' recent book.⁹⁸ I have been reliant on such works for background, in addition to the "doorstop" biographies that exist for the individual subjects of my study: each the product of intensive and formidable scholarship.⁹⁹ I intend to stand on the shoulders of such giants, rather than retrace their steps or attempt to better them. My focus will not be on retelling the old, well-established narratives, although it is important of course to tell a story of sorts, or at least have some semblance of a linear narrative, to ensure that my project is readable rather than obtuse. Cultural background and biographical details are offered largely with this in mind; in occasionally sketching some detail of a critic's personal history, my interest is in demonstrating the consistency of their method in spite of the vicissitudes of life, or, more simply, to provide a bit of context.

The reasoning behind the selection of individuals chosen to represent the New Criticism in this study is inherently self-serving. I have chosen them because they represent the foremost examples of the type of practice that I am attempting to prove. A note is worthwhile, however, on why certain exclusions have been made. Cleanth Brooks and W.K. Wimsatt are the New Critics par excellence, going by any entry in a dictionary of literary history. The type of formalism they advocated is generally taken as representative of the group as a whole. This is a partial reason for their exclusion. My intention is to draw out occulted qualities of New Critical practice that have generally been missed by critical overviews or summarising glossaries. William Empson offers an interesting example of how a close reader, working from slightly different premises, might arrive at distinct conclusions whilst still retaining an essentially consistent quality. It is certainly possible to detect in his work a concern for rendering language irreducible to absolute interpretations. It could be argued that the principal aim of his critical work is to make language unpropagandic through stressing its essential nebulousness and ambiguity; this, one might suggest, could be a type of imperfecting doctrine.¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, it is still most profitable to think of him as essentially going his own way with criticism. Robert Penn Warren, simply, must be considered more of a novelist than a critic,

⁹⁸ Donald J. Childs, *The Birth of New Criticism: Conflict and Conciliation in the Early Work of William Empson, I.A. Richards, Laura Riding and Robert Graves* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013).

⁹⁹ Thomas Daniel Young, *Gentleman in a Dustcoat: A Biography of John Crowe Ransom* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University), Thomas A. Underwood, *Allen Tate: Orphan of the South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), Russell Fraser, *A Mingled Yarn: The Life of R.P. Blackmur* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jancovich, 1981), Ian MacKillop, *F.R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism* (London: Allen Lane, 1995) and John Paul Russo, *I.A. Richards: His Life and Work* (London: Routledge, 1989). For Hulme, see Robert Ferguson, *The Short Sharp Life of T.E. Hulme* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), although the scope of this last volume is much less substantial than its equivalents, it is nonetheless the most comprehensive available on the topic.

¹⁰⁰ Paul Fry suggests that Empson implicitly accepts the truth of the dissociation of sensibility: "Far from disagreeing with Eliot's historical diagnosis, Empson could only recover Milton by claiming, later than *Complex Words*, that he was a Gnostic, a cabbalist – and, like Donne, a Renaissance scientist..." Paul H. Fry, *William Empson: Prophet Against Sacrifice* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 121-122.

despite the substantial contributions he made to pedagogy.¹⁰¹ “Pure and Impure Poetry”, however, is a central text of the Southern New Criticism. The absence of T.S. Eliot is perhaps most conspicuous. One reason is that the vast critical enterprise that surrounds his work has left very little unturned; my focus, again, is on attempting to uncover significances that have been neglected. My secondary purpose is to avoid the sense that I am endeavouring to create a linear narrative history or chain of ideas. With Eliot included there is the impression of a clear pipeline of ideas from Hulme, to Eliot, to the New Criticism. By leaving out Eliot the essential distance between the New Critics and Hulme remains clear. I am associating them due to commonalities of practice, rather than as a study of genetic critical lineage.

Other writers have addressed the inherent problems in tracing chains of influence through Modernism; whether in specific cases a direct inspiration is even possible to postulate, or if we are instead dealing with a mutual influence from the same source, or perhaps an arrival at a similar conclusion based on entirely different precursors, is often not easy to tell. The question of Hulme’s influence on Eliot, for example, has been addressed by several critics and most are content to allow a certain vagueness to stand; those who don’t usually get bogged down in minor historical trivialities.¹⁰² In a similar vein, those critics who point towards a chain of influence between Hulme and the New Criticism itself tend to make only the most general of claims.¹⁰³

Several critics have directly addressed the difficulty of establishing a “timeline of modernism”. Lobb argues that direct influences are impossible to establish: “the historian’s problem is therefore to discriminate between small points of particular influence.”¹⁰⁴ Schuchard similarly points to the

¹⁰¹ Several critical works have explored the extent to which Warren’s fiction constitutes a type of mythic reimagining of history. See L. Hugh Moore Jr., *Robert Penn Warren and History: ‘The Big Myth We Live’* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970) and Jonathan S. Cullick, *Making History: The Biographical Narratives of Robert Penn Warren* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).

¹⁰² Matthiessen’s certainty in 1935 that Hulme was of no significant influence on Eliot sets the precedent for many subsequent critics, see *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot*, p. 71. To Asher, Hulme’s legacy consists of little other than “ferrying Maurras across the channel”, *T.S. Eliot and Ideology*, p. 37. Shusterman concludes that Hulme is only a side-branch or dead-end: similarity between him and Eliot is only due to shared influences rather than transmission from one to the other. Richard Shusterman, *T.S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 19.

¹⁰³ Kermode writes “his influence [Hulme] has proved hardy. It remains perceptible in the American ‘New Criticism’” and “one might call Richards a follower of Hulme”, *Romantic Image*, p. 137, p. 132; Krieger points to “Hulme’s enormous influence on the direction modern criticism has taken”. Murray Krieger, *The New Apologists for Poetry* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), p. 35. Lentricchia claims Hulme would “feed the Anglo-American New Criticism” (*After the New Criticism*, p. 114) and Ewa Thompson sees in Hulme’s essay “Romanticism and Classicism”, “much of what later developed into the complexity of a critical movement”, Ewa W. Thompson, *Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism: A Comparative Study* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), p. 39. None provides direct evidence to demonstrate a link.

¹⁰⁴ Edward Lobb, *T.S. Eliot and the Romantic Critical Tradition* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 151.

persistent and problematic “biographical uncertainty.”¹⁰⁵ This point is mirrored by Tearle, who coins the pretentious neologism “parafluence” to describe the difficulties in ascribing particular chains of influence: “the issue of ‘influence’ is often one fraught with dangers for the scholar, and any talk of influence must acknowledge its multifarious nature”.¹⁰⁶ Thaventhiran advocates a less influence-focused critical approach in study of the New Criticism specifically: “historical and circumstantial intersections are less significant in this grouping than certain intellectual and stylistic biases”.¹⁰⁷ Followers of Walter Benjamin have applied Benjamin’s own theory of “constellations” to an outward-expanding firmament of loosely associated Modernist writers; this method favours sensitivity towards parallels and networks of related concepts rather than provable exchanges of ideas.¹⁰⁸ In the light of these precedents, I am content to draw together T.E. Hulme, the Southern New Critics, their English counterparts and R.P. Blackmur without too much concern for proof of whether they are historically linked or influenced each other in any exact way. A study attempting this would, of course, be valid, but I must make it clear that it is not my intention here.

There have been several recent studies that have sought to “reappraise” the New Criticism in some limited extent, to find value in an aspect of their work or “recover” some strategy out of the general toxicity. All carry an implicit anxiety towards the radioactivity of the material. As an example, Childs wonders if the question behind his inquiry might be phrased more accurately as “who deserves blame for the origin of New Criticism” rather than “who deserves credit for it”.¹⁰⁹ To Lentricchia the New Criticism has not left “traces” like other dead ideas, only “scars” instead.¹¹⁰ But more recent criticism has started to move away from the older and dismissive working premises from which any older analysis of the New Critics would have begun. The project carried out by the editors of *Rereading the New Criticism* commendably seeks to address how “abbreviated ways in which they

¹⁰⁵ Ronald Schuchard, *Eliot’s Dark Angel: Intersections of Life and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 54.

¹⁰⁶ Oliver Tearle, *T.E. Hulme and Modernism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 99.

¹⁰⁷ Helen Thaventhiran, *Radical Empiricists: Five Modernist Close Readers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 3. Thaventhiran somewhat lacks the courage of her convictions on this point, however: shortly after she can express doubt as to “how far the work of the American New Critics can usefully be considered alongside the work of their English precursors and contemporaries”, as they “have their own particular contexts of writing and influence”, p. 7.

¹⁰⁸ Spiropoulou offers a summary of method: it is “not so much a full comparison of the two writers, as the drawing of parallels, creating ‘constellations’ between their apparently incongruous lines of thought and vocabularies... so that new insights might emerge in the process”. Angeliki Spiropoulou, *Virginia Woolf, Modernity and History: Constellations with Walter Benjamin* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 3. See also Graeme Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), James McFarland, *Constellation: Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin in the Now-Time of History* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), *Constellations of a Contemporary Romanticism* ed. by Jacques Khalip and Forest Pyle (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016) and, of course, Walter Benjamin “Theses On The Philosophy of History” in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 245-255.

¹⁰⁹ *The Birth of New Criticism*, p. 35.

¹¹⁰ *After the New Criticism*, p. xii.

are usually mentioned contribute to an occlusion of important dimensions of their work” and foreground the critical errors that have characterised the late twentieth century summary of the New Criticism: that they are anti-historical, purely scientific formalists, what one critic calls the “Abrams-Bradbury-Eagleton version” or “conventional seminar-room wisdom of the late twentieth century”.¹¹¹

There is a tendency, however, for this type of recovery project, despite its many positive qualities, to seek out and focus on points of difference. It is even, perhaps, slightly fetishistic. Aspects of the New Criticism are found to be worthy of redemption and made valuable.¹¹² One editor points out how the New Critics have often “been misconstrued as presenting a monolithic school of thought”, which sets the tone for the volume. I seek to go a different way with my analysis, and instead consider the implications of working from a shared, monolithic starting point of high modernism and historical understanding.¹¹³ The nature of that “monolith” has indeed been misidentified; it is not pure formalism, or any other *bête-noire* from Eagleton or Abrams, but rather a doctrine of imperfection, variable in cadence and colour, but at heart always the product of a common impulse to see the world deromanticised and made imperfect once again, then justified in the apparatus and discourse of literature, religion and history itself.

I have divided this thesis into two parts along geographical lines. The first half will focus on the English side of the New Criticism (including Hulme), and the second part will focus on the American side of the movement. The second chapter of this thesis will begin my analysis with T.E. Hulme, and show how his approaches to religion and history are consistently characterised by a desire to

¹¹¹ Robert Archambeau, “Aesthetics as Ethics: One and a Half Theses on the New Criticism”, in *Rereading the New Criticism*, ed. by Miranda B. Hickman and John D. McIntyre (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012), p. 32.

¹¹² A recent issue of *Philosophy and Literature*, for example, carried a symposium on F.R. Leavis. Of eight essays, four focused exclusively on Wittgenstein, and all of the other four mentioned him several times. Even in a dedicated symposium, Leavis seems to be remembered as a little more than a biographical or philosophical footnote to Wittgenstein. *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (April 2016). Similarly, almost all recent critical attention on I.A. Richards has focused on his links to “rhetoric”, largely in American journals such as *Rhetoric Review*, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* and *Rhetorica: A Journal of Rhetoric*.

¹¹³ In this sense I will be invoking a fundamentally monolithic idea of Modernism. This is the most useful to understand the New Critical position, which descends from an essentially High Modernist tradition. More recent critical conceptions of diverse ‘Modernisms’, such as that described by Peter Nicholls, who seeks to position his historical survey in opposition to the “monolithic ideological formation” or what Majorie Perloff’s describes as a “straw-man modernism”, are not of use here simply because they did not exist, for the most part, on the New Critical radar. Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (University of California Press, 1995), p. vii. Pericles Lewis, ten years after Nicholls, is content in his formulation of Modernism to allow it to retain a monolithic quality for the purpose of avoiding vagueness: “My working definition of Modernism will be: the literature that acknowledged and attempted to respond to a crisis of representation beginning in the mid-nineteenth century.” *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*, p. xviii. This is a precedent I am content to follow for the purposes of clarity, and, appropriately, one which I believe would be somewhat familiar to the New Critics themselves in their working practices.

foreground imperfection. Chapter three will focus on I.A. Richards' critical works of the 1920s and 1930s, and demonstrate how his project in this period is to provide a basis for a type of anti-perfectibilist language that can counter the scientific attitude plaguing modernity. I will also consider how the usual dismissals of his work, including those made by other New Critics, typically misrepresent his approach as "scientific" in its own right. Chapter four will turn to F.R. Leavis and explore his criticism through the pivotal event of the "Snow controversy", looking both backwards and forwards from this point to see how his work might be understood in light of the concerns that this affair brought to the forefront. Chapter five consider John Crowe Ransom's philosophical and literary work, in particular the role he established for a "necessary fiction" in society and discourse. Chapter six will focus on Allen Tate, including the social function he envisioned for the literary critic as the major cultural force for the propagation of a doctrine of imperfection. Chapter seven is on R.P. Blackmur and relates recurrent concerns and terminology of his literary criticism, such as "ignorance" to my overarching theme of imperfection. Chapter eight is the conclusion to this thesis, and will suggest some possible implications in other areas for the new definition that I have suggested.

Chapter 2

T.E. Hulme's Doctrine of Imperfection

Introductory: A Critical Consensus?

The history of criticism of Hulme in most of the twentieth century consists of persistent confusion, largely based around a misinterpretation of his writing as unintentionally romantic. This has, more often than not, led to dismissive assessments of Hulme's thought as inconsistent or self-deluding. In this chapter I intend to demonstrate its consistency as a cohesive attempt to establish a critique of modernity through foregrounding the integral imperfection of man and society. Hulme's complete writings are quite evidently a testament to a process of continued experimentation with forms of expression. A remarkable breadth of ideas are tested, abandoned or adapted over time in pursuit of a suitable vocabulary to give voice to the anti-romanticism that is present from the earliest essays and finally finds a mature form in Hulme's final writing just prior to his death. Recent criticism has begun to move away from the typical view of Hulme as romantic. Henry Mead, for instance, makes reference to "confusion in criticism [...] the long-standing argument that he was essentially a romantic, first advanced in Frank Kermode's *Romantic Image*."¹¹⁴ Kermode, however, was not the first to promote this theory. Murray Krieger, one year earlier in *The New Apologists for Poetry*, offers the first example of a common tendency in critiques of Hulme by ascribing to him a romantic sensibility. He sees "the damning inconsistency of a muddled mind" in the disparity between Hulme's advocacy of Bergsonian intuition in "Bergson's Theory of Art" and the attempt at a more grounded perspective in "Romanticism and Classicism"; Krieger concludes that the only defence against this inconsistency would be due to the fact that "Romanticism and Classicism" is actually romantic anyway, despite Hulme's best intentions.¹¹⁵ The romanticism stems from a privileging of artistic intuition, according to Krieger:

It is only the artist, he claims, who can break through the mere static recognition of the world about us which practical life demands; he alone can see through to the dynamic flux which characterizes essential reality. And as artist he makes this vision available to others

¹¹⁴ T.E. Hulme and the Ideological Politics of Early Modernism, p. 62.

¹¹⁵ *The New Apologists for Poetry*, p. 35.

who, without the artist, could never see beyond the stereotyped world of practicality. This conception gives the poet a far higher and more romantic function than Hulme has assigned him in his severe “Romanticism and Classicism”¹¹⁶

In *Romantic Image*, Frank Kermode makes a similar argument for Hulme, describing his intent to “place Hulme and his friends in the full Romantic tradition”.¹¹⁷ Kermode attempts to accomplish this, much like Krieger, by targeting Hulme’s supposed idea of artistic intuition and the special role of the artist: “Hulme’s artist is really the Romantic voyant expressed in terms more agreeable to a man who disliked some kinds of philosophical language”.¹¹⁸ Douglas Day reiterates this view, seeing in “Bergson’s Theory of Art”, much as Krieger had done, a characteristically romantic role prescribed for the artist: “Hulme’s poet is a poet by virtue of his intuition, which allows him to see reality more clearly than non-poets can”.¹¹⁹ Alun Jones, in the first published biography of Hulme, accepts the idea unhesitatingly: “[Hulme was] led back to what amounts to a restatement of the romantic theory of poetry and to a re-affirmation of romantic Platonism.”¹²⁰ The tendency carries on into the twenty-first century; Oliver Tearle readily accepts Kermode’s thesis, pointing to Hulme’s role for the poet: “The true poet is gifted with a knowledge of rhythm, cadence and music which enables him to transcend the mindset of the ‘man of intellect’. Thus he is a romantic, in one sense.”¹²¹

Part of this problem stems from uncertainties of chronology. Day, for instance, describes “Bergson’s Theory of Art” as a later essay than “Romanticism and Classicism”, which is incorrect. Prior to Csengeri’s edition of the *Collected Writings* in 1994 Herbert Read’s *Speculations* served as the pre-eminent edition and its ordering is misrepresentative, muddling essays on Bergson with Hulme’s other writing in an appearance of contemporaneity.¹²² Consequently it gave the impression that Hulme advocated Bergsonism and a contradictory classical stance at the same time. With the benefit of a clearer ordering of timeline, Hulme’s intellectual position becomes easier to define and more consistent: one philosophical position follows after the other, with a clear break in between, representing a development of ideas. The background to Hulme’s involvement in the cultural

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p. 33.

¹¹⁷ *Romantic Image*, p. 137.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p. 130.

¹¹⁹ Douglas Day, “The Background of the New Criticism”, in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Spring, 1966), pp. 429-440.

¹²⁰ Alun Jones, *The Life and Opinions of T.E. Hulme* (London: Gollancz, 1960), p. 46.

¹²¹ *T.E. Hulme and Modernism*, p. 34.

¹²² *Speculations* begins with “Humanism and the Religious Attitude” (1915-1916), a version of one of Hulme’s final pieces, and ends with “Cinders”, his first (1906-1907). The order in between is similarly misrepresentative.

context of English literary modernism has also been explored by several critics, including his involvement with the periodical *New Age*.¹²³

Much as Csengeri has done for clarifying Hulme's chronology, the vindication of Hulme's intellectual consistency can be attributed, in part, to Patricia Rae. Through allying Hulme's thought to Jamesian Pragmatism, Rae provides a unifying element to Hulme's corpus.¹²⁴ Through the consistent practice of James' philosophy Hulme is redeemed from the pre-existing consensus of his logical inconsistency. Although Rae rejects the idea of Hulme's thought being in discrete stages, I would argue that it is still useful to consider them as such to see the different shapes that the underlying attitude takes.¹²⁵ Even presupposing an underlying consistency, the particular manifestations of it across Hulme's thought are still quite distinct.¹²⁶

The break between Hulme's early Bergsonism and his subsequent advocacy of the doctrine of Original Sin bears some similarities to the development of I.A. Richards' critical position slightly later on. Both are thoroughly consistent in their motivations, i.e. to find an escape from what they perceive as a modern fixation with romantic or scientific perfectibility in favour of re-establishing a sense of limitation. Both carry out early experiments to this end (for Hulme, Bergson, and for Richards, pseudo-statements) but finding flaws in these methods, subsequently reform their efforts along a different, more coherent and ultimately more successful line. Whereas Richards always maintains, even much later, the honesty of his intention in the experiment with pseudo-statements (the problem largely being, in his view, the quasi-scientific language causing confusion in the minds

¹²³ See Poetry, *Modernism and an Imperfect World*, pp. 6-8, Martin, *The New Age Under Orage* and Miriam Hansen, "T.E. Hulme, "Mercenary of Modernism, or, Fragments of Avantgarde Sensibility in Pre-World War I Britain", *ELH*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (Summer, 1980), pp. 355-385. Hulme's significance as an interacting element in literary circles and discourse has been pointed to as a paramount instance of the workings of modernism as a practical enterprise: "his work, in fact, may be the first to theorise modernism as a unique social formation founded upon the constant production and consumption of discourse". Edward . P. Comentale and Andrzej Gasiorek, "On the Significance of a Hulmean Modernism", in *T.E. Hulme and the Question of Modernism*, ed. by Edward P. Comentale & Andrzej Gasiorek (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 2.

¹²⁴ See also Matthew Gibson, "Contradictory Images: The Conflicting Influences of Henri Bergson and William James on T.E. Hulme, and the Consequences for Imagism", *The Review of English Studies*, Vol. 62, No. 254 (April 2011), pp. 275-295. It is worth emphasising the point that I use the word "pragmatic" in a fundamentally different context to Rae. By it, I mean a practical strategy, without the implication of the philosophical movement. My aim is not to repeat her work and establish a chain of influence to James but to group Hulme instead, retroactively, with a different movement of (lower case p) "pragmatic" critics who came later.

¹²⁵ *Practical Muse*, p. 46.

¹²⁶ Edward P. Comentale, In *Modernism, Cultural Production, and the British Avant-garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 117, provides the following breakdown of Hulme's different stages of thought:

(1906-7)	An early phenomenology of the body
(1907-8)	The theory of concrete language
(1909-12)	A materialist reading of Bergsonian metaphysics
(1911-14)	The politics of romanticism and classicism
(1914-17)	The religious attitude

of his readers), in Hulme's case, Bergson is simply sidelined rather than outwardly rejected after a certain point. In Hulme's essays, Bergson stops being mentioned after "Bergson's Theory of Art", aside from offhanded mentions on two occasions in dispassionate lists of modern philosophers. The simple narrative of events states that Hulme is dissuaded from Bergson by Maurras and Lasserre of Action française in 1911 and thereafter gradually renounces his allegiance over the period of several months.¹²⁷ Hulme makes specific mention of this:

M. Lasserre then endeavoured to prove to me that Bergsonism was nothing but the last disguise of romanticism. If I thought this was true, I should be compelled to change my views considerably [...] I shall try in a later article to work out the consequences of this (CW 165).

It is perhaps telling that this later article never materialised. Instead Hulme would soon drop Bergson from mention entirely, no doubt indicative of a general failure to work out those consequences. I am inclined to agree with the simple narrative of things: it seems fairly clear that Hulme became aware of irreconcilable problems with Bergson, almost certainly the romantic aspect of his philosophy. However I would argue that there is a consistency in intention across both phases of Hulme's writing that complicates the idea of a clean break: Hulme's interest in Bergson's philosophy stems from its anti-romantic potentialities, specifically the possibility it offered to think and express oneself in a way that is not bound by the conventions of science or materialism. When it eventually fails to live up to this expectation, Hulme abandons it in favour of the self-formulated anti-romantic position that characterises his later conservative writing. This is a view that is somewhat hinted at by Mead, who states that there is no contradiction between Hulme's early (Bergsonian) and later phases: "the two dimensions of Hulme's work, a vitalism and a desire for classical structure are simultaneously present from his earliest work onwards".¹²⁸

This is not entirely correct. I would argue that Bergsonian vitalism and classicism are in fact subsequent rather than simultaneous in Hulme's philosophy; there is certainly a unifying factor across both stages, but it is the anti-romantic or anti-scientific position that gives rise to each specific philosophical expression rather than the philosophies themselves.¹²⁹ Bergson and the vital impulse

¹²⁷ The view that Hulme was a "mere borrower", who "plundered" indiscriminately from French influences, is countered by Csengeri, who charts in detail Hulme's interaction with French antecedents and his novel adaptations of their ideas. Karen Csengeri, "T.E. Hulme's Borrowings from the French", *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Winter, 1982), pp.16-27. Other possible European sources are explored in J. Kamerbeek Jr., "T.E. Hulme and German Philosophy: Dilthey and Scheler", *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Summer, 1969), pp. 193-212.

¹²⁸ T.E. Hulme and the Ideological Politics of Early Modernism, p. 103.

¹²⁹ Mead's overarching argument, that Hulme "might be reconcilable with pluralistic theories of democracy" is also unconvincing. T.E. Hulme and the Ideological Politics of Early Modernism, p. 1. "On Progress and Democracy" demonstrates straightforwardly the erroneousness of this claim.

are the first expression of this intention, which is then abandoned and instead takes the form of Hulme's concrete "Toryism" in later essays.

A similar answer can be given to Levenson's argument that Hulme's classicist period also represents a provisional or transitional phase, covering only the period of 1911-1912. Levenson sees a clear distinction between classicism and the anti-humanism Hulme would later adopt in his final writing ("A Notebook"):

The romantic / classical opposition is simply not identical with the humanist / anti-humanist opposition – not in ordinary use, not in Hulme's use. Once Hulme saw humanism as the root of the problem, he ceased to regard the romantic / classical division as fundamental.¹³⁰

I will argue for a consistency of motivation across these two stages: the "religious attitude" is another development in the sensibility that has been present since the earliest writing, certainly given an increasingly polished definition but representing an answer to the same exigencies as lay behind "Cinders", Hulme's Bergsonism, "A Tory Philosophy", etc. The problem here is perhaps one of terminology. Levenson defines classicism as a historical specificity or an aesthetic attitude. In this sense he is participant in a tradition of historicising misreadings. I argue instead that the classical attitude represents a specific attitude to history (or literature, or art). Although Hulme does indeed move away from the valorisation of a particular "classical" period in history, it is only to substitute it for a different history that he now sees as better for fulfilling his purposes. It is a decision of pure practicality, predicated on an idea of history being put to useful purpose in evincing the doctrine of imperfection. His classical attitude is consistent; it is the specific expression of it that changes. Levenson's argument is perhaps founded on a certain innocence, or an incapacity to countenance the question of bad faith at the centre of Hulme's use of history. It is quite evident that Hulme's motivation to advocate religion from "A Tory Philosophy" onwards is not driven by a genuine spiritual commitment: there was no road to Damascus moment where the revealed truth of Christianity became clear to the atheist author of "Cinders". Original Sin has a social utility and the religion it is attached to is advocated accordingly. It is not, therefore, a substantial reach to conclude that Hulme's various historical interpretations are founded on a similarly cynical sense of which might be most practical for perpetuating his ideology. As Levenson points out, Hulme "abandoned literature after 1912".¹³¹ This is, I contend, because history and religion became the new texts to be put to specific, and useful, interpretation.

¹³⁰ Michael H. Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908-1922* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 98.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, p. 101.

To summarise, the simple narrative of Hulme's earlier intellectual development certainly seems the most correct: Bergsonism is a failed experiment that is put aside upon Hulme's development of self-constructed theories that better convey his anti-romantic stance. These theories are then developed further in his final writing. Across each stage the motivation is consistent. To acquire a full sense of this I intend to examine the three stages of Hulme's writing, which could be thought of as pre-Bergson (early writings), the Bergsonian period and finally post-Bergson (classical / Tory writing and "A Notebook") and demonstrate how, in each stage, the underlying project is to find the best terms of expression for a doctrine that establishes the essential truth and necessity of imperfection.

In this chapter my intention is to examine representative essays from each stage of Hulme's short writing career and demonstrate how an effort at creating a doctrine of imperfection underlies all of them. In so doing, I will show the common strategies that would reappear a generation later in the work of the New Criticism. It is not my intention in this chapter to trace Hulme's genetic-literary heritage, as Rae and other critics have done, whether in terms of those critics (French or otherwise) who influenced Hulme, or the influence that Hulme himself had on Eliot and the New Criticism. Instead, I will point to how a set of principles, in this case the desire to see the world made imperfect, tends to manifest itself critically in a certain set of practices, particularly what I have identified as the religious, poetic and historical strategies. In this Hulme shares a common quality with the later New Critics, in what, I would argue, might be a new definition of a particular type of literary-critical style. Comentale and Gasiorek have defined Hulme by his work's inherent fragmentariness, and in this see him as representative of modernism's underlying inconsistencies:

Hulme's particular brand of modernism offers a unique glimpse into the wider movement's fundamental contradictions [...] If Hulme is in any way representative of modernism, it is only because his work foregrounds (so early in its formation) its inconsistencies and paradoxes¹³²

My intention is not to question this definition, but perhaps instead to offer a new, simultaneous definition. Instead of embracing Hulme's inconsistencies, my experiment is to define his criticism as representative of a consistent set of strategies that is mirrored, although not imitated, in the later work of the New Critics. My intention, most simply, is to show some ways in which it might not be unique.

¹³² T.E. Hulme and the Question of Modernism, p. 6.

Early Writing – “Cinders”

Hulme’s earliest writings, collected as “Cinders”, prefigure many of the themes that would characterise his later work. It is most interesting for its demonstration of the nascent forms of ideas that become much more fully fleshed out in Hulme’s later essays. We can detect a definite space within which Bergsonism will neatly fit, in addition to very early signs of a more ambitious and self-constructed classical sensibility. The essay involves an ambitious attempt to define a new “weltanschauung”, or worldview, characterised by an aesthetic of fragmentation. There is, Hulme writes, no “comprehensive scheme of the cosmos”, only “cinders”, a type of absolute flux that completely resists comprehension or definition (CW 9). Attempts to find philosophical truth constitute only division of chaos into accidental or arbitrary forms which, upon further investigation, collapse into the cindery chaos that they are built upon: “If we look at a collection of cinders from all directions, in the end we are bound to find a shadow that looks regular” (CW 18).

By breaking the world up into cinders, Hulme is carrying out an effort to undermine mechanistic philosophies. His intention is self-evidently anti-scientific, organised against the “pretensions of science” (CW 16). Positing chaos as the default state of the universe serves to emphasise a central unknowability very much against the grain of the scientific rationalism or positivism. Hulme’s view of science is expressed clearly: “The aim of science and of all thought is to reduce the complex and inevitably disconnected world of grit and cinders to a few ideal counters” (CW 11). The usefulness of his theory of a “cinder-heap” reality becomes apparent: “Cinders can never be counters” (CW 10).

The idea of cinders serve an analogous role at this early stage to Bergsonian flux later in Hulme’s career, and Original Sin thereafter. They are a reminder of limitation, and a challenge to the scientific mindset that has forgotten it. It is easy to detect the space into which Bergsonian philosophy would later be integrated: “All is flux” (CW 10). Through examination of Hulme’s intellectual priorities pre-Bergson we can understand better the reasons for his interest in Bergsonian philosophy in subsequent years: Bergson offered a fleshed-out philosophical synthesis of a flux-based weltanschauung for which Hulme himself had already laid a compatible conceptual framework. One idea neatly incorporates the other with little disruption, and at the heart of it is a consistently anti-scientific position.

One theme of Hulme’s essay involves a diminishing of man’s potential or scientific perfectibility. This shows a distinct classical sensibility and sets a clear precedent for the ideas that would develop into his Tory philosophy in the wake of Hulme’s Bergson period. The seeds of it are already present. The cindery nature of reality is extended to people themselves, who are incapable or rising above a

chaotic and disorganised state: “Man is the chaos highly organised, but liable to revert to chaos at any moment” (CW 13). In this there is a sense of a distinctly anti-romantic sensibility. Philosophies which are built upon the idea of man’s perfectibility are undermined by man’s actual state of limitation: “In opposition to Socialism and Utopian schemes comes the insistence on the fact of the unalterability of motives” (CW 16).

Hulme’s description of man’s essential nature as flawed clearly prefigures the space into which Original Sin would arrive in his doctrine, and the purposefulness of its adoption as an anti-romantic strategy. However, at this stage Hulme’s writing is strikingly anti-religious. God is described as “one large counter” and religious doctrine is characterised as a product of a fallacious drive to imply coherence where none exists:

the desire to introduce a unity in the world: (1) The mythologists made it a woman or an elephant; (2) the scientists made fun of the mythologists, but themselves turned the world into the likeness of a mechanical toy (CW 9, 11)

This heavily implies the purely intellectual element of the “religious attitude” Hulme would later advocate; a space for Original Sin is pre-figured in the essay, but it would develop only as a purely practical or efficacious development of a socially useful idea. At this stage, religious ritual is only “a relief from concentrated thinking” and designated no higher role (CW 20).

“Cinders” could be seen to be fundamentally pluralistic, and it has been interpreted as such.¹³³ No system of values or individual value is given priority over any other; religion and science are ascribed an equal claim to falsehood. Any attempt to establish a ground for meaning is a spurious effort: “Symbols are picked out and believed to be realities” (CW 8). The sustained effort of Hulme’s project is simply to drag man down to earth and undermine his pretensions: “The eye is in the mud, the eye *is* mud” (CW 19). This seems to be Hulme’s most natural sensibility: an essential and pure classicism which exists innately prior to the intellectualised doctrines of Bergsonism or Original Sin which would follow. The idea of “mud” at the heart of human nature is echoed later in “Romanticism and Classicism”: “The classical poet [...] remembers always that he is mixed up with earth” (CW 62).

In “Cinders” Hulme’s innate classicism takes the form of negative expression. He is certain what he wants to position himself against and his project is only one of demolition. Andrzej Gasiorek describes Hulme’s work as “a conflict between monism and pluralism”; the pluralism is most apparent in *Cinders*, taking the form of the universalising sensibility that no philosophy is superior to

¹³³ Roger Kimball, “The Importance of T.E. Hulme”, *The New Criterion*, Vol.15, No.6 (1997), pp. 18-23, p. 18.

any other.¹³⁴ But the seeds of the monism that would come later are already present and reflect the development of a positive and self-constructed ideology that would build upon the ground of what Hulme only comports himself against at this early stage. The world of cinders offers a fertile starting point for the cultivation of a new reactionary doctrine.

Hulme on Bergson

Arguably Bergson's significance for Hulme is in his alterity rather than in his specific philosophical positions; he offers to Hulme the first evidence of a possible way out of the scientific mindset.¹³⁵ This is an inspiration for which Hulme acknowledges his gratitude:

The state of my mind before I read Bergson, and while I was still obsessed with the idea that, after all, the truth about the world was that it was nothing but a vast mechanism, can be compared to the state of men imprisoned all their life inside a walled town from which they would fain escape (CW 161)

Although Bergson's philosophy would, of course, later become problematic for Hulme, his importance as the provider of this first step probably cannot be overstated. This perhaps explains Hulme's failure to write the "later article" he promised that would reconcile Lasserre's charge of romanticism with Bergsonism: judging by Hulme's subsequent writing it would have almost certainly taken the form of a complete and blunt renunciation. Silence on the subject perhaps served as a kinder method of moving on from the old master.

The value of Bergson's philosophy is the positing of "intuition" as an alternative faculty of the mind to "intellect". As such it is useful because it is "anti-intellect" and can therefore provide a palliative to the "nightmare of determinism". Hulme places this notion at the centre of Bergson's philosophy because it the most appealing to his nascent anti-romantic sensibilities:

The general idea behind Bergson's work [...] is an endeavour to prove that we seem inevitably to arrive at the mechanistic theory simply because the intellect, in dealing with a certain aspect of reality, distorts it in that direction (CW 170).

This arguably forms the main revelation of artistic insight for Hulme's purposes. Despite certainly seeming to carry out a sort of privileging of the artist, Hulme's view of the sort of insight that artists can have access to is not one that allows much room for revelation of the full Bergsonian-romantic

¹³⁴ Andrzej Gasiorek, *A History of Modernist Literature* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), p. 164.

¹³⁵ Jesse Matz suggests Hulme's intention to "put Bergson on a more conservative footing" by turning evolution into dissociation. "Hulme's Compromise and the New Psychologism", in *T.E. Hulme and the Question of Modernism*, p. 118.

type. If it is indeed romantic, then it is barely so. Taken in isolation certain claims seem to bear out Kermode's accusation of a "romantic fallacy":

the function of the artist is to pierce through here and there, accidentally as it were, the veil placed between us and reality (CW 193)

[Bergson's method] does give you information about a reality which exists outside you (CW 182)

However even at its most romantic this idea of artistic insight is shot through with a sense of its own limitation. The actuality of the reality that the artist can have access to is largely a chaotic state that resists any definition. Hulme writes how "the mind is a flux of interpenetrating elements which cannot be analysed out", something of which "no picture or description can be given" and "although indescribable it is not unknowable" (CW 176-177). The "knowledge" which intuition grants is, in Hulme's interpretation, a simple awareness of flux: essentially the uncertainty behind intellect. In this sense it somewhat foreshadows the classical sensibility that would form later, which would state that art is useful predominantly as a reminder of limitation. Any instance of what we might call a positive definition of this insight is at best half-hearted, whereas the negative is repeated and insistent: the principal form of insight offered by the Bergsonian intuition as Hulme describes it is usually just a doubling back on the fact that intellect offers an incomplete picture of the world.¹³⁶

Hulme and Original Sin

It is in the essays "Romanticism and Classicism" (most likely written in 1911 or 1912) and "A Tory Philosophy" (published between April and May 1912 in the *Commentator*) that Hulme first articulates the idiosyncratic philosophical classicism that would characterise his mature writing. Bergson has by this point been entirely jettisoned and the pluralism of Hulme's earliest essays has given rise to the advocacy of one concrete doctrine above others. The major development between "Romanticism and Classicism" and "A Tory Philosophy" is the introduction of the central concept of original sin in the latter essay.¹³⁷ Although the idea is mentioned in the earlier essay it does not

¹³⁶ Rae describes Hulme's response to Bergson's "infinite" as an attempt to drag it out of the romantic realm through redefinition: "When he characterises the poet's understanding as 'infinite', he means only that he seems to grasp a reality so complex it would take forever to reconstruct it discursively [...] In sum Bergson's poet contact a timely realm, 'infinite' only in the sense of being ineffable." *Practical Muse*, pp. 58-59.

¹³⁷ Christos Hadjiyiannis has shown that the terms "classical" and "romantic" had a political origin in Hulme's response to the Conservative Party's election defeat in 1910; he sees in the 1911 essay "Romanticism and Classicism" a clear conflation of politics and poetics, conservatism and classicism, for this reason. See Christos Hadjiyiannis, "Romanticism versus Classicism in 1910: T.E. Hulme, Edward Storer and *The Commentator*", *Literature & History*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Spring 2013), pp. 25-41. Another possible background for the essay is offered by Suzanne Hobson, who relates the development of the "Angel Club" in the pages of *New Age*, also a

benefit from the same centrality or rhetorical significance. Despite this difference they are nonetheless markedly similar and essentially espouse the same doctrine; the concept of original sin simply furnishes Hulme with a better-adapted tool with which to carry out his purposes.¹³⁸ Both essays are constructed around Hulme's definition of the two competing temperaments. Romanticism is placed within history but simultaneously expanded to mean something more universal:

They had been taught by Rousseau that man was by nature good, that it was only bad laws and customs that had suppressed him. Remove all these and the infinite possibilities of man would have a chance... Here is the root of all romanticism: that man, the individual, is an infinite reservoir of possibilities (CW 61).

In talking of "all romanticism", Hulme demonstrates that he is not merely attacking one particular romantic movement, such as late 19th century French Romanticism, but rather a general romantic tendency.¹³⁹ By the same standard, he offers a general definition of classicism as the "exact opposite": man as an "extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant" (CW 61). Clearly neither is pegged to a specific historical period but rather reflects integral aspects of human nature.

"Romanticism and Classicism" is not a theological tract. Religious faith is not described as an end unto itself, but rather a means of allowing the classical mindset to develop. It is indicative that Hulme writes of original sin as "sane" rather than, say, "true": "the Church has always taken the classical view since the defeat of the Pelagian heresy and the adoption of the sane classical dogma of original sin" (CW 61). The mention of original sin specifically ties the idea of romanticism to the sin of pride; in the Christian tradition, the act of putting one's will before that of God: "You don't believe in a God, so you believe that man is a God". God is useful to the extent that His existence is a buttress against man becoming devoted to his own perfectibility. There is nothing to say that any other idea could not serve a similar function as the hallmark of man's limitation, should it prove better

response to certain aspects of Rousseau, to "Romanticism and Classicism", Suzanne Hobson, "'The Angel Club': Allen Upward and the Divine Calling of Modernist Literature", *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (March 2008), pp. 48-63.

¹³⁸ To Rae, this is characteristic of Hulme's pragmatism: whenever a theory of Hulme's "ceases to be corroborated by evidence, or to be of any practical utility, it must be rapidly dismantled, and another, more satisfactory one erected in its place." Patricia Rae, "The Aesthetics of Comfort: Hulme's Pragmatism and Contemporary Criticism", *English Studies in Canada*, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 48-65, cited in *T.E. Hulme and the Question of Modernism*, p. 11.

¹³⁹ Again, it is worth pointing to Rae's statement on Hulme's generalising terminology, *Practical Muse*, p.12; she also indicates the frequent recurrence of his use of it: "Hulme stipulates his definition of 'romanticism' repeatedly: in 'Romanticism and Classicism', in 'A Tory Philosophy', and in a series of articles contributed to the 1915 *New Age*, published under the title 'A Notebook'", p. 49.

adapted; Hulme even references “De Vries’s mutation theory” as a way of “keep[ing] the classical view with an appearance of scientific backing” (CW 61-62). Such intellectual cosmopolitanism is not typically the hallmark of a true believer.

Hulme’s aesthetic theories are secondary to his social concerns, a pattern that recurs throughout his writings.¹⁴⁰ Although he would later stop writing about literature in any sustained or meaningful way, at this point it is conscripted for the purpose of defining the romantic / classical divide. It is in “Romanticism and Classicism” that Hulme operates most closely to what might be termed a “classical” aesthetic sense by conventional definitions: “I think that there is an increasing proportion of people who simply can’t stand Swinburne.” Hulme defines romantic poetry as verse that “must lead [...] to a beyond of some kind”, promising the reader a species of divine insight. Classical verse, as an anathema, “is always perfectly human and never exaggerated: man is always a man and never a god”. That poetry can provide insights into a divine realm is archetypal of the romantic ideal, underlining the notion that man can ascend to a godly position whilst still part of the material world. Hulme is dismissive, calling this merely a form of misleading vagueness. He is particularly critical of the romantic mindset which expects an obligatory and specious metaphysic imparting some charged infinite at the price of disinheriting any poetry that “confines itself to the finite”. Hulme’s call to poetry is to direct it towards clarity, to throw off the symptomatic vagueness of romanticism in favour of the clear, dry image of classicism: “the light of ordinary day, never the light that never was on land or sea.” In so doing, Hulme seeks to liberate poetry from its position as a propagandist tool of erroneous doctrines of perfectibility. Poetry is not established as a neutral medium divested of religious potentiality, however, but rather reconfigured as something that might benefit from a transcendental rather than immanentist philosophy: “Man is always man and never a god” (CW 65-66).

By the time Hulme came to write “A Tory Philosophy”, mentions of poetry or literature are largely absent. The “discovery” of original sin has made it clear that the most useful arena for founding a school of limitation is through the advocacy of a religious sensibility, rather than a particular type of artistic one. Hulme’s tone has become extraordinarily combative; the romantic / classical duality is recharacterised as a conflict between mortal enemies. The doctrine is expounded in terms that couldn’t be clearer: “It is my aim to explain in this article why I believe in original sin, why I can’t stand romanticism, and why I am a certain kind of Tory” (CW 232). What follows is, as Hulme’s

¹⁴⁰ As as with certain New Critics, Hulme sees aesthetics as the outward manifestation of the fundamental health of a society. Thomas Kishler identifies this tendency: “The art of a given period or stage of civilization is the reflection of the then current, commonly shared conception of man’s relationship to nature.” Thomas C. Kishler, “Original Sin and T.E. Hulme’s Aesthetics”, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Apr., 1976), pp. 99-106, p. 101.

subtitle indicates, a “PROGRAMME”, a manifesto-like statement of intention to reorientate society at a fundamental level. The radical quality is self-evident. However by qualifying such extreme measures as the reiteration of a traditional state (it is romanticism that is the historical aberration and thus the deviation from the norm); Hulme’s “Toryism” is cleverly maintained.¹⁴¹ There can be little doubt about the bellicosity of the essay, however. It is nothing less than a call to action: “We have been beaten, to a certain extent, because our enemies’ theories have conquered us”. The historical problem as Hulme describes it stems from the weaknesses of the conservative faction, who had made themselves susceptible to conquering (such as in the French Revolution): “forces which should have resisted were half-hearted in their resistance” (CW 240). The cause of this is in the fact that the classical mindset is something the modern mind seems to reject. It is less appealing and more difficult than the romantic alternative and consequently most people most of the time are repelled by it: “The modern mind [...] is unable to support with equanimity the idea of an absolutely constant world”. Hulme’s contempt is absolute; in an example of the “modern nervousness and horror at the idea of constancy” he derides Lowes Dickinson’s philosophy of optimism as “childlike simplicity” and “pathetic” (CW 243-244). This being the case, that the majority of people would always reject a return to classicism on a very fundamental level, how could Hulme expect, without popular support, to enact the social upheaval that this essay seems to promise? The answer is quite evidently that Hulme does not need popular support as he very categorically rejects democracy. The essay “On Progress and Democracy” and Hulme’s Preface to Georges Sorel’s *Reflections of Violence* make this abundantly clear. In these essays Hulme applies his theories macrocosmically, expanding the classical sensibility to society as a whole: democracy, as “an essential element in the romantic movement”, is subject to the same problems as an individual’s romantic sensibility (CW 249). Much as an individual cannot accomplish much without themselves being “extraordinarily fixed”, society too is weak unless it holds on to “what checks and restraints have been bequeathed to us from the past”, as such society requires as much maintenance as any one mind: “The state or nation can only be in a healthy condition when it submits itself to a kind of discipline” (CW 220-221).

For an individual the romantic sensibility presents almost like a disease, it takes the form of a demented and constant desire for change or newness: “a NEW art, a NEW religion, even a NEW age”; as Hulme describes it: “I should define a romantic as a person who was in a certain disordered state of mental health in which he can only remain sane by taking repeated doses of this kind of emotion” (CW 237). The disease is experienced by so many individuals in society that society itself has begun to present the same symptoms. This takes the form of democracy, in particular that which

¹⁴¹ The “conservative radical” avoids contradiction by claiming loyalty to a fictionalised set of historical precedents.

commits itself entirely to the doctrine of progress with complete self-certainty: "For the optimistic conception of man leads naturally to the characteristic democratic doctrine of inevitable Progress" (CW 251). Progress on this wide social level is defined as follows: "That the present day is the highest point yet reached, and so that, judging from the past, we may predict that it will increase from now, as it has increased up till now." The ultimate consequence is, of course, collapse. Hulme is certain that "all previous democracies have come to grief" (CW 223). Accordingly the justification is provided for the advocacy of a new system arranged diametrically against the modern, idealistic democracy Hulme rejects.

Hulme's narrative of history is underpinned by a distinct effort to inscribe his particular Toryism as the traditional standard. By rendering democracy into the historical aberration, Hulme's type of conservative is sanctioned in radically opposing it. And by making the democratic majority incapable of adhering to any other doctrine on account of their weakness or prejudice, the minority is justified in the imposition of its particular interpretation of traditional discipline upon the majority. Realistically it is difficult to see this as anything other than proto-fascist. It is into this socio-political worldview that Hulme introduces his idea of Original Sin. He makes clear that it can be put to use as nothing less than the solution to democracy:

We may define Romantics then, as all who do not believe in the Fall of Man. It is this opposition which in reality lies at the root of most of the other divisions in social and political thought (CW 250).

Original sin is advocated purely for its utility. It is almost entirely divorced from any meaningful religious context. Its purpose is to provide an alternative system of thought to the democratic idealism that Hulme rejects. The infinity of the divine serves only as a preventative measure against man inflating himself into divinity: "You don't believe in heaven, so you begin to believe in heaven on earth" (CW 62). Behind Hulme's religiosity at all times there is a type of social agenda, always working to the furtherance of his classical, imperfecting doctrine. The question of how to reconcile most peoples' horror at this doctrine with the necessity of its wide scale implementation is addressed further in "A Notebook", which develops the practical programme of social action prefigured in "A Tory Philosophy" along more explicit lines.

Doing Things with History – "A Notebook"

A noticeable characteristic of Hulme's thought as it develops across his writing career is that of a movement from a largely theoretical standpoint to a decidedly more pragmatic or purposeful stance. Later essays more convincingly carry the quality of manifestos with clear recommendations

and strategies for efforts to bring about change in the world in accordance with ideology. The tone accordingly becomes more combative.¹⁴²

Hulme's final and most mature statement of his philosophy is found in "A Notebook", which dates from the last year of his life.¹⁴³ The prominent themes of earlier essays are still largely present: original sin remains as the central defensive concept in Hulme's attack on romantic progress. He has by this point adopted the terminology of anti-humanism, but this is not a new viewpoint; it reflects the same classicism of "A Tory Philosophy" and contemporaneous essays only refined to a more precise degree. The change is, again, one of terminology and generally reflects Hulme's move away from aesthetics into religion and history, requiring a better adapted frame of reference. The language of classicism has in turn given way to a different means of expression, much as the language of Bergsonism gave way to classicism; the sensibility behind it, however, remains unchanged and consistent in motive. Hulme's classicism was directed at art, the "religious attitude" is an identical sensibility directed instead at history.

The idea of a duality in human nature is revisited in "A Notebook" and stands at the centre of the essay: the duality constitutes what Hulme defines as the "religious attitude" and the "humanist attitude". There is no major difference between these two terms and the romantic / classical divide of earlier essays aside from the language used. Hulme defines the humanist attitude as a lack of absolute values; in particular the absence of Original Sin: "the belief that life is the source and measure of all values, and that man is fundamentally good" (CW 444). This is caused by the lack of an absolute as a frame of reference such as might be provided by a concept of the divine: "Biology is not theology, nor can God be defined in terms of 'life' or 'progress'" (CW 425). Hulme's definition is not a particularly new development. In the Preface to Sorel's *Reflections on Violence*, Hulme defines Romanticism as that which "confuses both human and divine things by not clearly separating them [...] by introducing into them the Perfection that properly belongs only to the non-human" (CW 250n). Standing in opposition to humanism is the religious attitude, in which "He [man] is endowed with Original Sin". This is again a very familiar refrain: "man is essentially bad, he can only accomplish anything of value by discipline" (CW 444). In defining these distinctions Hulme makes apparent the extent of the problem to be overcome if the humanist attitude is to be banished. The "principle of continuity" (an equivalent concept to "idealism" or "progress")

¹⁴² It is in this period that Hulme, in his "War Notes", stages a sustained argument with Bertrand Russell, who maintained a position of idealistic pacifism quite at odds with Hulme's own militarism. Ferguson recounts that Russell would later remember Hulme as an "evil man who could have created nothing but evil" and who would have eventually "wound up an Oswald Mosley type". Cited in *The Short Sharp Life of T.E. Hulme*, p. 242.

¹⁴³ In most editions of the twentieth century this essay is published in an abridged form as "Humanism and the Religious Attitude".

has attained the status of a category. We now absorb it unconsciously from an environment so completely soaked in it; so that we regard it [...] as an inevitable constituent of reality itself. When any fact seems to contradict this principle, we are inclined to deny that the fact really exists (CW 423).

Against this wilful and totalising ignorance the religious attitude is offered as solution. For it to succeed against such odds, a new way of thinking must be adopted. To Hulme it is entirely possible: “a real attitude, perfectly possible for us today [...] a kind of conversion. It radically alters our physical perception, almost, so that the world takes on an entirely different aspect” (CW 456).

The most important development of Hulme’s doctrine at this point is the introduction of what I will term a clear “historicising strategy” for the perpetuation of his ideas in society. This is the only significant difference between the “religious attitude” and the earlier “classical” mindset, but the difference is an important and central one. “A Notebook” argues for the practical application of an approach to religion and history to counteract the condition affecting modern man. To cultivate the religious attitude it is necessary to engage in an imaginary reconfiguration of history predicated on a presumption of dissociation. “A Notebook” represents the first instance of this practice being expressed or recommended as concrete methodology, but there are certainly indications earlier in Hulme’s writing that he is experimenting with different versions of history to see which can be put to the most useful purpose. In fact it is there from the beginning: the first line of the preface of his first essay carries a call for a new type of history: “The history of philosophers we know, but who will write the history of philosophical amateurs and readers?” (CW 7)

Later, in “On Progress and Democracy” Hulme co-opts the cyclical interpretation of history from Flinders Petrie’s *Revolutions of Civilisation* to serve the practical purpose of undermining the idea of constant social progress. In his final essay that type of historiography is explicitly rejected: “I do not in the least wish to imply any mechanical view of history as inevitable alternation” (CW 448). Instead, by the time of writing “A Notebook”, Hulme’s willingness to experiment with history has stabilised into one programmatic method. To undermine idealism Hulme states that it is necessary to undermine the worldview on which that idealism is founded; the effort becomes to remove its historical sanction by imputing a new historiography. In so doing the framework and posterity upon which those ideologies are constructed is fundamentally destabilised: “I think that history is necessary in order to emancipate the individual from the influence of certain *pseudo-categories*”.

Hulme's combative variety of classicism attempts to retroactively strangle humanism in the crib, cutting the enemy's doctrine off at its historical roots. History has become the final proving ground for the conflict initially flagged up in Hulme's earlier essays:

We are all of us under the influence of a number of abstract ideas, of which we are as a matter-of-fact unconscious. We do not see them, but we see other things *through* them... it is first of all necessary to rob certain ideas of their status of categories. This is a difficult operation ... The rare type of historical intelligence which investigates their origins can help us considerably (CW 439).

As an eventual result, through this project of historical revision, we can "vaccinate ourselves" against erroneous assumptions about history or human nature (CW 440). The means to best "give body" to the abstract religious attitude that stands in opposition to humanism in history is to actively fabricate a history of conflict. In so doing it becomes an easier and more convincing story to tell. Hulme expresses this intention in extraordinarily blunt terms:

The importance of this difference between the two conceptions of the nature of man becomes much more evident when it is given a historical setting. When this somewhat abstract antithesis is seen to be at the root of the difference between two historical periods, it begins to seem much more solid; in this way one gives it body (CW 444).

The Middle Ages is offered as this emblematic historical example, an era in which the universal truth of Original Sin was (supposedly) unequivocally accepted, and set up in contrast to the "renaissance", which brought about the humanist attitude. Although Hulme undermines humanism for its erroneous claim to validity, the classical attitude he advocates is clearly described in terms that give it no greater claim to inherent historical validity or absolute value. The worldview Hulme valorises is not described as one that is true, necessarily, but rather is simply felt to be true: "the doctrines which are thought of not as doctrines, but as FACTS" (CW 446). Here we can gain a clear sense of the pragmatism at the heart of Hulme's project; he acknowledges the relativism of doctrines competing amongst each other, but demands a necessary investment in the absolute truth of one above others.

Hulme's project is developed in "A Notebook" to its most extreme form. He is convinced, it seems, of some possibility of its success. It is here therefore, of all of Hulme's writing, that it would be most easy to imagine him participating most fully in what Kermode diagnosed as his chronic "romantic fallacy". Hulme almost seems aware of this potential, perhaps on account of his earlier missteps with Bergsonism. The essay is heavy with caveats that make clear that it would be impossible to revivify the past in any literal sense:

I do not in the least imagine that humanism is breaking up merely to make place for a new medievalism. The only thing the new period will have in common with medievalism will be the subordination of man to certain absolute values (CW 449).

Similarly, any teleological standards are projected so far into the future as to reflect only an absurdity: "For in a couple thousand years the confused human mind works itself out clearly into all the separate attitudes it is possible for it to assume" (CW 440). The past is not to be understood as a literal golden age to be re-established. There can be no romantic renewal.¹⁴⁴ Its purpose is to create, in the present, a constructed precedent against which romantic thinking can be undermined. It is essential only to believe in it, regardless of the literal truth of the matter. A lesson is taught about the relativism of that which would otherwise seem absolute. By making humanism a historical category its claim to inherent absolute value disappears. Consequently, the past serves as a text with which to educate modern man about his own limitation and necessary humility. This is the great project Hulme wishes to carry out: "Exactly the same type existed in the Middle Ages as now. This constancy of man thus provides the greatest hope of the possibility of a radical transformation of society" (CW 449).

I have endeavoured to prove that Hulme's "religious attitude" takes the form of an attitude towards history. It represents the culmination of Hulme's consistent attempt, throughout the entirety of his writing, to establish an anti-romantic position.¹⁴⁵ "A Notebook" has behind it the same intentionality as the rest of Hulme's corpus, but the specific means of its expression, in pragmatic historiography, is new. Certain critics have addressed this aspect of Hulme's work, but almost all have missed Hulme's occulted purposefulness in reconfiguring history as a means to an end. Kermode calls Hulme the first Englishman to develop a theory analogous to the dissociation of sensibility, but errs in presuming genuineness of intention or literal belief. He writes: "Whenever Hulme generalises about historical periods he goes wrong".¹⁴⁶ As I have shown, it is quite evident that it is by design, rather than merely being an accident of historical interpretation. The misreading is deliberate. This is a subtlety that C.D. Blanton picks up on:

In Hulme's usage, medievalism entails no affirmative relation to the social, theological, or political structures of the Middle Ages. Instead, it conjures up a set of simple but totalising

¹⁴⁴ Schuchard considers Hulme to possess a "recurring optimistic belief", despite his fundamentally pessimistic view of human nature. This is based on the view that Hulme envisioned a "full neoclassical revival". Ronald Schuchard "Eliot and Hulme in 1916: Towards a Reevaluation of Eliot's Critical and Spiritual Development", *PMLA*, Vol. 88, No. 5 (Oct., 1973), pp. 1083-1094, p. 1090.

¹⁴⁵ The final paragraph of "A Notebook" states Hulme's intention to turn next to literature. A project that would, of course, be forestalled by Hulme's death in March 1916.

¹⁴⁶ *Romantic Image*, p. 125.

historical differences, largely devoid of particular content precisely because they stand in less for the past than for the future.¹⁴⁷

To Hulme the particular value of medievalism is certainly its alterity to the present. To describe it as a figure for possible realisation in the future however is to fail to understand its intended purpose of undermining the hubris of the modern attitude and those people who would romantically envision a changeable future.

In Hulme's work it is possible to detect, almost uncannily, the strategies of an imperfecting agenda that would appear later in the New Criticism. Whether there is a direct influence will likely remain unprovable. What is worthy of note, however, are the commonalities of practice. The perpetuation of a doctrine of imperfection is founded on the instrumentalisation of certain key strategies, and these practices are all evident in Hulme's work: the religio-secular "religious" strategy is found in original sin; a "historical" strategy in his valorisation of a dissociated vision of the past; and a "poetic" strategy, perhaps the most subtle, in his advocacy of abstract art and the role of a poet as a provider of unromantic insights into a fundamentally chaotic intuitive state.

¹⁴⁷ C.D. Blanton, "The Politics of Epochality: Antinomies of Original Sin", in *T.E. Hulme and the Question of Modernism*, p. 192.

Chapter 3

I.A. Richards: Knowledge against Science

Introductory

I.A. Richards' literary criticism demonstrates a general concern for the rise of new and scientific modes of thinking in modernity, and the consequences that has upon the emotional wellbeing of individuals and the cultural integrity of society as a whole. In this he identifies primarily the disruption to belief-based "support" systems, such as religion, that had occurred in the relatively recent past, and the simultaneous impact of the cultural cohesion of individuals and society as a whole. For Richards, language offered the only realistic and useful tool to challenge the scientific presuppositions underpinning modernity and encourage a type of cultural health by preventing minds from becoming "thin, brittle and patchy" in the modern age: "As the other vehicles of tradition, the family and the community, for example, are dissolved, we are forced more and more to rely on language" (PC 320-321). Poetry serves as a bellwether, of sorts, so intricately attached to the emotional life of the individual that it can not only indicate the degree to which they have drifted from the ideal state of emotional and cultural well-being, but also indicating to a large extent this very sensibility: "A feeble capacity to understand poetry impl[ies] a corresponding inability to apprehend and make use of the values of ordinary life." The purposeful drive of Richards' criticism is to "consider [...] what influences are available as remedies" and to suggest as a palliative those remedies as he discovers them (PC 319-320). Richards identifies language, and through it, poetry, as the principal factor that can serve to arrest cultural deracination, in this his approach bears some similarities to that of Leavis. Unlike Leavis, however, Richards' vision of the past lacks a fully fleshed-out theory of organic unity.¹⁴⁸ Russo notes that the "organic community" for Richards was a "nostalgic paradigm" and that he "showed no interest in reviving it except in one aspect, its cultivated arts of language".¹⁴⁹ This is perhaps a product of Richards' realism, or fatalism, as his

¹⁴⁸ The connections and mutual influence between Richards and Leavis is explored in details by Needham, see John Needham, *The Completest Mode: I.A. Richards and the Continuity of English Literary Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1982), pp. 158-190.

¹⁴⁹ John Paul Russo, *I.A. Richards: His Life and Work* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 538. It is worth indicating, of course, that no New Critic in this study realistically sees any possible of historical "revival".

books certainly testify to a willingness to countenance the existence of functional “organic” societies in the past (in *Mencius on the Mind*, for example). Although he never uses or acknowledges the term, I would argue that Richards can be placed squarely in the tradition of critics whose historical vision is founded on a version of a dissociation of sensibility. It is the revival of the organic past in modernity, perhaps, that is for Richards impossible rather than the fact of its having existed at all. In this, again, he is not alone among the New Critics.

An early sense of “dissociation” is apparent in *Principles of Literary Criticism*, although seemingly more as an intuition or feeling than a comprehensive theory. Richards observes that “recent generations suffer more from nervous strain than some at least of their predecessors”. From this starting point he ventures a cause:

An explanation not sufficiently noticed, perhaps is the break-down of traditional accounts of the universe, and the strain imposed by the vain attempt to orient the mind by belief of the scientific kind alone.

Here is apparent a clear sense of a “break”: occurring first in the mind, and thereafter in society. Richards imagines a historical period from before this break, in which the mind was unified. In this type of society, Richards imagines, the immersion in the culture is absolute, and the sensibility unified, to the extent that, in a society dominated by the “Catholic account of the world”, the mere thought of “scepticism” would be impossible: “The complete sceptic, of course, is a new phenomenon, dissenters in the past having commonly disbelieved only because they held a different belief of the same kind.” There can be no cultural alienation in such a society because the state of existing outside the totalised culture cannot even be conceived, let alone realised.

The use of a “unified” past to draw attention to an anti-scientific and anti-modern way of living is returned to in Richards’ later work, as is his more general project to disrupt positivist assumptions about human nature. It is along these lines, in *Principles of Literary Criticism*, that Richards can recommend “The central experience of Tragedy and its chief value [as] an attitude indispensable for a fully developed life.” The lesson of tragedy, limitation, is contrasted favourably with the sort of “knowledge” offered by “hard-headed positivists” and “Revelation doctrines”. By the latter Richards means the type of insight promised by romantic art.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Routledge, 2002), pp.263-265.

The Southern New Critics generally tend to disregard Richards' early criticism as naive and ill-formed, usually because it is not perceived to fit their particular purposes for literature and criticism.¹⁵¹ Ransom dismisses *The Meaning of Meaning* by stating that it "does not justify its pretentiousness" and *Principles of Literary Criticism* is evidence only of Richards' status as a "scientist who has got into the wrong science" (WB 146, 148). Tate includes Richards' early writings within what he terms the "demireligion of positivism", dealing in the "very limited frame of reference supplied by a doctrine of correlation"¹⁵² (EFD 100). Both Ransom and Tate seem satisfied to dismiss Richards' early attempts at a psychological-scientific approach to the poetic as failing, not just on an aesthetic plane, but in terms of science as well.¹⁵³ Richards himself seems to agree to a mild extent with criticism of his earliest books, conceding in a 1974 letter to a biographer that he has "often regretted" the definition of poetry in *Principles of Literary Criticism*, however he makes clear in the same letter that he stands by the poetic theory advocated in *Science and Poetry*.¹⁵⁴ (IAR SL 195) In the 1970 preface to *Science and Poetry* (reissued as *Poetries and Sciences*), Richards defends this text and in so doing gives it a pre-eminent status among his early work: "what seemed to me its best and most clearly stated points were, I found, understood in ways which turned them into indefensible nonsense. That was, I feel, what the opponents – some of them eminent – wanted them to be."¹⁵⁵ (PS 7)

For the American New Critics, Richards becomes more valuable from 1934 with the publication of *Coleridge on Imagination*. This text marks the point at which Richards is perceived to have to finally put away his psychological-scientific pretensions and conceded to raising poetry to the higher

¹⁵¹ North provides an overview of how the American New Critics adapted the central ideas of Richards' practical criticism into their own methods: "The New Critics happily took up many of Richards's practical innovations and made them into core components of literary study in the United States, and thence elsewhere, they did so in a way that split them off from their theoretical foundations in an incipiently materialist aesthetics". Joseph North, "What's 'New Critical' about 'Close Reading'?: I.A. Richards and His New Critical Reception", *New Literary History*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Winter 2013), pp.141-157, p. 148.

¹⁵² A similar type of sentiment is expressed by Eliseo Vivas, "Four Notes on I.A. Richards' Aesthetic Theory", *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (Jul., 1935) pp. 354-367.

¹⁵³ Ransom and Tate point out that the terminology of science has been appropriated, along with the impression of a tested analysis, but that the methodological rigour of science is lacking. They argue that Richards utterly fails to follow through with any of the essential data such a scientific approach would require to back up a conjecture: as Ransom puts it, "he makes no effort to show how a poem can perform this ordering", and for Tate, "the vagueness of the language" is problematic and there is "no experimental basis" (WB 154, EFD 98). Although Richards regularly weathered the attacks of the New Criticism in the 1930s, he has more recently avoided their critical fate, as Cullen points out: "Unlike Leavis, or the sundry helpless 'orthodox' critics who now fall regularly under the Eagletonian axe, Richards is a figure who has largely escaped hostile attention". Barry Cullen, "I.A. Richards and the Problem of Method", in *The British Critical Tradition: A Re-evaluation*, ed. by Gary Day (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), p. 122.

¹⁵⁴ See also I.A. Richards, "The Composing Mind", in I.A. Richards, *Richards on Rhetoric: I.A. Richards Selected Essays 1929-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 137-139.

¹⁵⁵ Richards' justification for the title change to *Poetries and Sciences* is that "plurals also discourage quests for premature ultimates and for equally premature solutions". (PS 10) The removal of the singulars allows less of a sense of the two concepts being oppositional or somehow in conflict.

echelon it deserves: “his doubts of the truth of the poetic assertions disappear, and poetry becomes for him nearly as strong as science.” This new attitude, according to Ransom, “voids much of the criticism which I have made of him” (WB 163-164). Tate reads 1936’s *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* as an “implicit repudiation of the leading doctrine of *The Principles of Literary Criticism*” (EFD 101). Cleanth Brooks is slightly more guarded: he eschews fully acknowledging Richards as a “returned prodigal”, seeing him instead as a “pioneer who started out from a different set of assumptions”.¹⁵⁶ It is not a stretch to say that Richards’ supposed *kehre* in 1934 makes him more palatable to the New Critics because it represents the point at which, to them, he has become decidedly and clearly anti-scientific. For Tate, Richards’ life is even useful as drama representative of the struggle of the modern intellect to cast off its shackles: having rejected positivism, Richards turns to what Tate calls “learned ignorance” and in so doing becomes more agreeable and useful:

Richards’ books may be seen together as a parable, as a mythical and dramatic projection, of the failure of the modern mind to understand poetry on the assumptions underlying the demireligion of positivism (EFD 104).

This sentiment provides an interesting insight: perhaps it is the novelty of Richards’ method in the early texts that the American New Critics reject, his “individual talent” operating without a “tradition”. By *Coleridge and Imagination* Richards has ceased to coin neologisms and has instead fallen back on the time-sanctioned terminology of Coleridgean imagination, although the essential emphasis of his thought is, for the most part, unchanged. In later works Richards is more than willing to emphasise ideas and terms that expressly signify his rejection of the reductive psychological sense that so many read into his earliest work. In 1936’s *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, for example, Richards claims the mind is “no mere signalling system”; *Mencius on the Mind* makes reference to a type of thought “whose structure and content are not suited to available formulations”; and *Beyond* describes how a poet’s thought process is “somehow done for him”.¹⁵⁷ (MM 8) By emphasising mystery Richards avoids the stereotype.

I would argue that the idea of Richards’ undergoing a “conversion” and putting away his scientific instruments is a false impression based on a misreading of *Science and Poetry* and *Practical Criticism*.¹⁵⁸ Through a close reading of these texts I believe it is possible to identify a consistent perspective that carried over into the comparatively later work of *Coleridge on Imagination*

¹⁵⁶ Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1970), p. 266.

¹⁵⁷ I.A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 131, I.A. Richards, *Beyond* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), p. 145.

¹⁵⁸ Although the New Critics’ censures of *The Meaning of Meaning* and, to a lesser extent, *Principles of Literary Criticism* are largely correct, as Richards himself seems to acknowledge.

onwards, including a tacit rejection of positivism or science, and with that an advocacy of poetic language as something entirely separate: a form, in fact, of learned ignorance. In so doing we can justify Richards' own belief that *Science and Poetry* is a worthwhile text and that its dismissal along with his other, more naive, early texts is an oversight.¹⁵⁹ The American New Critics' contempt for *Science and Poetry* is a product of an instinctive distaste for any perceived appropriation of the apparatus and terminology of scientific enquiry and this reactionary attitude (a form, perhaps, of wilful ignorance) blinds them to the very qualities in the text that not only have value, but also implicitly support their own later views of the usefulness of poetic language.

Richards' early career is characterised by a willingness to experiment with a variety of different terms to attempt a description of the role he foresees for language and poetry: "pseudo-statements", "impulses" and "sincerity" are all examples of this effort.¹⁶⁰ In the course of his critical work, Richards repeatedly decides that the majority of these terms fail to capture a completely accurate sense of the point he is trying to make, or are simply prone to being misinterpreted. They are successively jettisoned in favour of newer means of expression. The motivating force behind all of them, regardless of their actual success at communicating the idea, is the consistent attempt to ascribe to poetic language a distinctly non-scientific character. Poetry, in particular, is emphasised as useful due to its unique property among the "myths" that man has access to in modernity, inasmuch as it mediates its uplift value with an in-built awareness of the impossibility of complete self-actualisation. In *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Richards positions metaphor as the "omnipresent principle of language".¹⁶¹ It is illustrative, therefore, that he not only makes metaphor the basis of cognition, but also founds it quite distinctly on incompleteness and disparity:

Once we begin "to examine attentively" interactions which do not work through resemblances between tenor and vehicle, but depend upon other relations between them

¹⁵⁹ I am referring specifically to *The Foundations of Aesthetics* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1922) and *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of Language Upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1923). Even in these works, however, it is possible to detect the seeds of the concern for incompleteness that would follow more pronouncedly later in Richards' career. Sibley points to the line of development from these earlier books: "The concept of speculative instruments grows from an implicit underlying epistemology in *The Foundation of Aesthetics* (1922) and the other early books by Richards, through explicit use as a term in *Coleridge on Imagination*, to a thoroughly developed epistemological recommendation in *Speculative Instruments*." Sibley clarifies the element of uncertainty inherent to the concept: "For Richards, a speculative instrument is not a static or even a stable thing because of the fluidity engendered and kept alive by its openness." Francis M. Sibley, "How to Read I.A. Richards", *The American Scholar*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Spring, 1973), pp. 318-328, p. 321.

¹⁶⁰ Berthoff ties Richards' literary efforts to James' philosophical pragmatism: *Practical Criticism* represented a "shift from a sort of faculty psychology to a version of pragmatism [which was] Richards's attempt to adapt the ideas he'd gathered from William James's *Principles of Psychology*, to reintroduce them as *principles of literary criticism*." Ann E. Berthoff, "I.A. Richards and the Audit of Meaning", *New Literary History*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Autumn, 1982), pp. 63-79, p. 66.

¹⁶¹ *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, p. 92.

including *disparities*, some of our most prevalent, over-simple, ruling assumptions about metaphors as comparisons are soon exposed¹⁶²

Norman Hotopf links Richards' theory of metaphor to his other critical innovations, inasmuch as they are all, effectively, serving a similar function:

It is evident that he is using "metaphor" here for the same purposes as he used "fictions" for in [sic] *Principles of Literary Criticism*, "pseudo-statements" in *Science and Poetry*, and "myths" in *Coleridge On Imagination*. Just as he made more important the myths of poetry, religion, and metaphysics by stating that all apprehension is myth, so now he makes the metaphors of poetry, religion, and metaphysics vital issues, because all thinking and language is said to be metaphorical, both of which he fortifies by references to Bradley's belief in the unavoidability of fictions.¹⁶³

I would add to this only that the precise nature of the linking factor across these works is imperfection. Each development in theory represents a new way of bringing a fundamental incompleteness, and therefore limitation, to the forefront of critical discourse.

In this chapter my focus will be, primarily, on four of Richards' texts: *Poetry and Science*, *Practical Criticism*, *Mencius on the Mind* and *Coleridge on Imagination*. These, I would argue, constitute Richards' major works.¹⁶⁴ Across each of these texts I will chart Richards' efforts to underline an inherent unknowable quality that underpins all language. In this he demonstrates a concern for showing the essentially limited nature of expression as a direct counter to the scientific and perfectibilist thinking that is otherwise characteristic of modernity. A central part of this strategy

¹⁶² Ibid, pp.107-108. Bilsky explores Richards' use of metaphor thoroughly in Manuel Bilsky, "I.A. Richards' Theory of Metaphor", *Modern Philology*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Nov., 1952), pp. 130-137.

¹⁶³ W.H.N. Hotopf, *Language, Thought and Comprehension: A Case Study of the Writings of I.A. Richards* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 105.

¹⁶⁴ After the activity of what Thaventhiran calls Richards' "experimental decade (1929-38)", his critical output consists largely of collected volumes of essays without any substantial overarching theme and material specifically concerned with linguistics or Basic English. Thaventhiran theorises that the experimental decade came to an end because of "external events" due to which, "even practical criticism was forced to 'grow up' and to 'leave home'". *Radical Empiricists*, p. 62. For a summary of Richards' involvement with Basic English, see Rodney Koenek, *Empires of the Mind: I.A. Richards and Basic English in China, 1929-1979* (Stanford University Press, 2004). Baldick points to the inconsistency, or even hypocrisy, in Richards' turn to Basic, "a project which ultimately threatened the subtlety of the language upon whose fate depended (as Richards himself had pointed out) the entire cultural heritage." *The Social Mission of English Literary Criticism*, p. 164. Russo gives a good account of Leavis' comprehensive dismissal of Basic and the project associated with it, see *I.A. Richards: His Life and Work*, pp. 538-539. Richards also turned to creative writing himself later in life. Predictably, to Foster, this is another sign of a growing romanticism: "this romanticised positivist has in his sixties begun to give us, for the first time in his life, plays and poems – proof of a new access in himself of Imagination, or of Imagination renewed." *The New Romantics*, p. 63. Although some of Richards' late-career volumes are intriguing, they incline largely to the technical. The three-part sequence on Job in *Beyond*, however, is among his finest writing. I.A. Richards, *Beyond* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jancovich, 1974), pp. 41-86.

involves the creation of a historical vision with something akin to the dissociation of sensibility at its core. In this fashion Richards can create valid alternative “myths” for human experience that can stand opposed to scientific modernity, such as the pre-modern “Magical View” or Mencian China.¹⁶⁵ In this sense he demonstrates a concern for the usefulness of history as a means of conveying the particular lesson of imperfection.

Through this analysis I intend to offer a counter to the recurrent view that Richards possessed a fundamentally romantic view of poetry. Ross Winterowd is indicative of this perspective: in his analysis, Richards, “throughout his career, clung tenaciously to the Romantic faith in the inner vision.”¹⁶⁶ Hope Hodgkins, similarly, points to Richards’ “belief in poetry’s salvific potential”.¹⁶⁷ Foster, also, relates Richards to his overarching view of the New Critics as romantic.¹⁶⁸ Instead, Richards’ interpretation of poetry offered what we might think of as an unromantic image: its one revelation is the impossibility of revelation. For this exact reason it becomes useful as a counter to the type of perfectibilist doctrine against which he arranged his critique.

Certain critics have noticed Richards’ attempts to establish uncertainty as a fundamental quality of language and see in it a foreshadowing of later post-structural theory. To Stuart Brown, Richards’ work “anticipates the much-proclaimed contemporary understanding that texts do not have a single, determinate meaning.”¹⁶⁹ More than one critic has pointed to an apparent discontinuity in Richards’ position that serves to subvert his proto-Theory credibility: although he removes from language its claim to determinate or absolute meaning, he still gestures towards a time when this was not so. Although this has been largely seen as a paradox or logical inconsistency, it is in fact perfectly coherent in both the logic of the dissociation of sensibility and as a doctrine of imperfection. Louis Mackey finds the disparity between these two seemingly contradictory positions unsettling: on one hand, “Richards’ account of meaning and interpretation seems to entail deconstructivist doctrines of dissemination and undecidability”, yet on the other hand, “somewhat disturbingly, however, at least from a deconstructivist point of view, Richards’ last words suggest that there was an original order

¹⁶⁵ An objection to Richards’ mythic view, and a resolutely pro-science counter-perspective, is offered by one critic of Richards from the 1930s: “Richards fails to prove, however, that these mythologies, which in the past had little, if any, correspondence with science, and, indeed, often flatly contravened its teachings, are the only ones that can give us aim and order. He also fails to demonstrate that scientific knowledge is not only powerless to impose order but that it is inimical to it.” Charles I. Glicksberg, “I.A. Richards and the Science of Criticism”, *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (Oct. – Dec., 1938), pp. 520-533, p. 528.

¹⁶⁶ W. Ross Winterowd, “I.A. Richards, Literary Theory and Romantic Composition”, *Rhetoric Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Autumn 1992), pp. 59-78, p. 60.

¹⁶⁷ Hope Howell Hodgkins, “Rhetoric versus Poetic: High Modernist Literature and the Cult of Belief”, *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Spring 1998), pp. 201-225, p. 218.

¹⁶⁸ See *The New Romantics*, pp. 47-63.

¹⁶⁹ Stuart C. Brown, “I.A. Richards’ New Rhetoric: Multiplicity, Instrument and Metaphor”, *Rhetoric Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 218-231, p. 219.

from which we have fallen and that our present state of misunderstanding and broken communication is a product of this lapse.”¹⁷⁰ This complexity is also picked up by William V. Spanos:

Richards’ discourse, too, despite its avowed departure from Arnold’s substitution of poetry for the Christian religion as agency of human salvation, is an Apollonian discourse. It is fundamentally motivated, that is, by his anxiety in the face of the “promiscuous” dissemination of knowledge occasioned by an era of uncontrolled expansion, if not by a fall from a prior Golden Age.¹⁷¹

It would be misrepresentative to assume that Richards seeks salvation in the revelatory sense through poetry, or that his historical imagination is founded on any type of reclamatory project. Instead, he carries out the classicising act of gesturing beyond the scientific present to a past founded on essentially different presuppositions, in order to undermine the claim of any status quo to absolute integrity and entrench in its place a sense of necessary imperfection.

Science and Poetry: The Magical View of History

Despite its frequently obfuscating use of quasi-psychological terminology, the analysis of poetry in *Science and Poetry* belies an old-fashioned, even Arnoldian sense of the social value of poetry: within the jargon of “the moral ordering of the impulses” it is even possible to detect a reimagining of Aristotelian catharsis (PS 40). It is certainly not a particularly methodological approach, as Harding notices: “‘the impulse’ will not serve in practice as a unit of measurement”.¹⁷² Ostensibly Richards’ valuation of the role poetry can play in life seems extraordinarily idealistic, even romantic.¹⁷³ He depicts poetic experiences as “the fullest, keenest, most active and completest kind of life”, in which composition is an almost mystical process whereby “an inconceivably intricate concourse of impulses brings the words together” (PS 38, 33). Yet Richards does not stretch to a completely

¹⁷⁰ Louis Mackey, “Theory and Practice in the Rhetoric of I.A. Richards”, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Spring 1997), pp. 51-68, p. 61. The “last words” to which Mackey refers are as follows: “Words are not a medium in which to copy life. Their true work is to restore life itself to order.” *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, p. 134.

¹⁷¹ William V. Spanos, “The Apollonian Investment of Modern Humanist Education: The Examples of Matthew Arnold, Irving Babbitt, and I.A. Richards”, *Cultural Critique*, No. 1 (Autumn, 1985), pp. 7-72, p. 52. Spanos’ identification of “Apollonian” discourse is to “show that the history of modern humanistic education has been characterised by a recurrent effort to recuperate a logocentric pedagogy in the face of historical ruptures.” William V. Spanos, “The Apollonian Investment of Modern Humanist Education: The Examples of Matthew Arnold, Irving Babbitt, and I.A. Richards (Part Two)”, *Cultural Critique*, No. 2 (Winter 1985-1986), pp. 105-134, p. 105.

¹⁷² D.W. Harding, “I.A. Richards”, in *A Selection from Scrutiny, Vol. I*, ed. by F.R. Leavis (Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 282.

¹⁷³ Cohn links Richards to Shelley in their shared concern for the protection of poetry from science: “Shelley and Richards are similarly engaged in the support of poetry against the attacks of an increasingly hostile world of science and utility.” Jan Cohn, “The Theory of Poetic Value in I.A. Richards ‘Principles of Literary Criticism’ and Shelley’s ‘A Defence of Poetry’”, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, Vol. 21/22 (1972/1973), pp. 95-111, p. 111.

romantic sensibility by raising poetry to the level of inexplicability or revelation. He is interested in poetry primarily, in this text, for its usefulness in opposition to science. His is a pragmatic theory of poetry. This usefulness is the key reason why poetry is “important” (PS 21). To this end he introduces the concept of the “pseudo-statement”: “a form of words whose scientific truth or falsity is irrelevant to the purpose in hand”. A pseudo-statement is different, therefore, from a “statement” which can be called true or not based on its “correspondence, in a highly technical sense, with the fact to which it points” (PS 60). A poem, as a “pseudo-statement”, is oppositional to a scientific fact by virtue of being “indescribable” (PS 49). This reiterates that there are things outside of clear “statements” that can be verified and that there exist, by definition, non-scientific ways of thinking. In this sense Richards is expanding his idea of the two types of language (“emotive” and “referential”), explored in *Principles of Literary Criticism*, into the wider realm of belief.¹⁷⁴ The effort to carry out this procedure is described in terms that reflect its exigency:

these sciences progressively invade every province of our thought. They meet nothing with equal authority, or that can resist them, which does not take its power from the same source in verifiable happenings.

Scientific statements cannot to be challenged on their own terms; Richards emphasises the futility of this effort: “challenge from myths of other ranks is suicidal” (PS 78). The pseudo-statement is useful, therefore, because it does not exist on the terms of scientific language. It does not seek to confront, only to gesture towards a different method of communication, without challenge to established norms. In a 1935 letter to Eliot, Richards emphasises the ambiguous, even Empsonian, quality of pseudo-statements, which are described as being in possession of “inexhaustible meanings”, in contrast to statements which have “ideally one ascertainable meaning”. This sense of being unknowable and irreducible, to Richards, serves as the major advantage of the pseudo-statement, usefully underlining the failure of the logical mind to verify or apprehend. This is a feature which Richards draws Eliot’s attention to: “we don’t know (in any similar way) how to find out what Pseudo-Statements offer to us” (IA SL 95-96).

The 1970 preface in the reissue of *Science and Poetry* expresses Richards’ continued frustration at the wilful misinterpretation of his chosen terminology; his detractors “clung [...] devoutly to their muddle”, conflating pseudo-statements with false statements (PS 7). In this sense, his term is arbitrarily repurposed to reinforce the binary perception of meaningful and meaningless, with “pseudo” signifying the latter quality. It is, as Richards’ frustration indicates, a persistent and

¹⁷⁴ It is worth noting that, as one critic points out in reference to Richards, “‘intellectual’, ‘scientific’ and ‘referential’ are synonymous for him”. Manuel Bilsky, “I.A. Richards on Belief”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Sep. 1951), pp. 105-115, p. 108.

timeless mindset that would think in this way, proving immune to Richards' repeated attempts at correction. The title of his book by this deprecatory logic is interpreted in the sense of meaning (science) and non-meaning (poetry). By 1970 Richards acknowledges that "they were, I should have realised, simply confirming my account" (PS 7). Richards later acknowledges the sense of a "derogatory smack" in the term and seems to regret using it rather than a term such as "myth" (which would come into use by the time of *Coleridge on Imagination*) (IA SL 96).

Hotoph points out that the "frequently pejorative connotation" that was read into the term lead to "many who were unable to use Richards' contextual guidance, to think he was saying something derogatory about statement in poetry"¹⁷⁵. The American New Critics certainly followed this tendency: for Wimsatt and Beardsley, the pseudo-statement is "a patronising term by which he [Richards] indicated the attractive nullity of poems."¹⁷⁶ Ransom seems to participate in the same misinterpretation of the term, regretting that the pseudo-statement only served as a vehicle for Richards to "offer his apologies for the untruthfulness of poetry" (WB 164).

A pseudo-statement is not an attempt to apply science to language, despite seeming so, but rather an attempt to inoculate language against science. It has, Richards indicates, become important to define this clearly non-scientific language type because of the cultural shift that has enabled scientific types of expression to become dominant and unchallenged in society. Richards is concerned that, without a clearly defined non-scientific form of language, all language will eventually be annexed into one homogenous and reductive form of technical talk. To Richards this is historically a unique facet of modernity and therefore an entirely new problem for him to attempt to solve, hence the necessity for his new definition of a type of language. Behind this logic is a view of history reminiscent of the dissociation of sensibility; the implicit presumption that positivism has caused a type of "break" in historical terms:

Countless pseudo-statements about God, about the universe, about human nature, the relations of mind to mind, about the soul, its rank and destiny – pseudo statements which are pivotal points in the organization of the mind, vital to its well-being, have suddenly become, for sincere, honest and informed minds, impossible to believe as for centuries they have been believed (PS 61).

This historical decline of belief is given the term the "Neutralization of Nature" and is supposed to have occurred in the preceding 70 years, It involves the decline of the "Magical View" of the world,

¹⁷⁵ *Language, Thought and Comprehension*, p. 52.

¹⁷⁶ W.K. Wimsatt & Monroe Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), p. 35.

in particular the demise of belief in “spirits and powers which control events, and which can be evoked and, to some extent, controlled themselves by human practices”, and the subsequent “transference [...] of the world to the scientific” (PS 50-51). Richards, in *Poetry and Science*, avoids utopian nostalgia for the past, or the sense of it being inherently superior, but instead sees the general phenomenon of invested belief as having been primarily functional in a practical sense: collective belief in pseudo-statements on a wide scale served to hold a society together. No particular era is given as an example of this, it is only offered as a comparison to the modern situation, which, in contrast, falls utterly short of providing a comparable system in which people can invest their belief and consequently find the emotional stability necessary for the creation of poetry. A historical break is implied, a point where these types of pseudo-statements ceased to function and could no longer be taken for granted: a transition point, presumably, into modernity. At this point “modes of believing are changed irrevocably” and cannot be relied upon to offer a firm ground for imagination or creativity. The responsible factor is, of course, the rise of science, which is “not of a kind upon which an equally fine organization of the mind can be based”. Richards is proposing the use of his poetic pseudo-statements like a quarantine measure, to enact a separate space for language that isn’t liable to the infection of positivism; his operation is “to cut our pseudo-statements free from that kind of belief which is appropriate to verified statements.” There is a steep decline in the quality and usefulness of these pseudo-statements from those hinted at in history, around which whole societies could derive their meaning and function: “so released they will be changed, of course, but they can still be the main instruments by which we order our attitudes to one another and to the world” (PS 61).

From the beginning, Richards’ modern pseudo-statements seem hamstrung by their own limitation and pallid in the light of grand ancestral equivalents. He describes the principal feature of the “Magical View” of the world, essentially the “unqualified acceptance” of pseudo-statements, as a historical phenomenon, and points towards the positive ability of this worldview to enable “the impulses and attitudes with which we respond to it [the pseudo-statement itself] to gain a notable stability and vigour”. To attempt this in the contemporary world, “with the extension of science and the neutralization of nature”, however, would be both “difficult as well as dangerous”, as there is no meaningful underlying myth-structure to support this type of effort. The consequences of the fall of the “Magical” world are described in stark terms: “when the world-picture ceases to assist there is a collapse” (PS 62-63). The fallout is not limited just to religion, poetry or myth in general; it is also devastating for the emotional part of the psyche. Richards terms this the “neutrality of nature”, and in his usage it carries the acute sense of neutering. When the “shadowy supports” which prop up peoples’ beliefs are removed, “they are no longer able to respond” and consequently “over whole

tracts of natural emotional response we are today like a bed of dahlias whose sticks have been removed". The consequence is a type-specimen panorama of Modernist anguish (in a footnote Richards acknowledges the debt to Eliot): "A sense of desolation, of uncertainty, of futility, of the groundlessness of aspirations, of the vanity of endeavour, and a thirst for a life-giving water which seems suddenly to have failed." Man's principal and automatic adaptation to this new modern situation is a reversion to the default pre-Magical state: degeneration to "their biological justification", self-indulgence in the most atavistic sense, "made once again sufficient to themselves" (PS 63-64). This constitutes the easiest method of palliating the emotional derealisation that results from modernity and arises both from an unconsidered state of ignorance and a world-weary resignation:

the only impulses which seem strong enough to continue unflagging are commonly so crude that, to more finely developed individuals, they hardly seem worth having. Such people cannot live by warmth, fighting, drink and sex alone. Those who are least affected by the change are those who are emotionally least removed from the animals [...] Even a considerable poet may attempt to find relief by a reversion to primitive mentality.

This is the nature of the disease that Richards has diagnosed: a product, essentially, of a world that is free from belief. In *Poetry and Science* Richards participates in a kind of fatalism. He knows that "science" is not a historical anomaly, or an ideology that has arisen to tyrannise man until its eventual overthrow. Rather it is an unfiltered view of the unsympathetic reality of a universe that is insufficient for man to derive any structure for his emotional nature. Modernity is characterised as the opening of the awareness of this fact and Richards' sense of it seems to acknowledge its inevitability:

We are beginning to know too much about the bond which unites the mind to its object in knowledge for that old dream of a perfect knowledge which would guarantee perfect life to retain its sanction (PS 64-65).

In the past the highest aspiration of knowledge (whether as metaphysics, theology, or anything else) existed at a level of consciousness below this realisation, so the pursuit of knowledge, as an imaginative act or pseudo-statement, could still serve as a source of emotional cohesion for the individual:

What was thought to be pure knowledge we see now to have been shot through with hope and desire, with fear and wonder; and these intrusive elements indeed gave it all its power to support our lives (PS 65-66).

Modern knowledge, such as it is, cannot support anyone, aside perhaps for “a few scientists caught young and brought up in a laboratory” (PS 63). Belief, therefore, must be founded on something other than knowledge, and this requires an implicit rejection of the standard, unimaginative perception of the world, i.e. “scientific” knowledge or truth:

It is not what the universe it made of, but how it works, the law it follows, which makes verifiable knowledge of it incapable of spurring on our emotional responses, and further, the nature of knowledge itself makes it inadequate.

Belief therefore must be by definition exclusionary. To avoid emotional ruin we can benefit from involving ourselves in the form of conditioned ignorance for which Richards uses the term belief. The possibility of whether this is genuinely achievable in any wide-scale sense is doubtful, and the significance of the pseudo-statement in the modern age is to arrest this deterioration to as large a degree as possible: “we still hunger after a basis in belief”, despite it being “more difficult to maintain” (PS 65-66). Richards concludes *Science and Poetry* with a sentiment that encapsulates the theme of the text. Poetry offers a form of salvation, if we are willing to accept it: “it is capable of saving us, or since some have found a scandal in this word, of preserving us or rescuing us from confusion and frustration.” It is the potential of poetry, most simply put, to grant a paradigm for belief in something other than science that is its paramount value: “The poetic function is the source, and the tradition of poetry is the guardian, of the supra-scientific myths” (PS 78).

The necessary fictions of poetry can serve as a means of resistance to scientific ideology, and a means to benefit mildly from the positive qualities of belief without the constriction of literalness that we are subject to when using verifiable statements. In this, Richards prescribes a type of turn towards selective ignorance, of a sort, and advocates a variety of magical or imaginative thinking: the “supra-scientific myths”. As much as there is a potential for further degeneration, as when Richards tells us that “this effect of the neutralization of nature is perhaps only in its beginning”, there is also an optimistic note that the pseudo-statements of poetry might prove worthy of maintaining the invested belief of the artistically-minded: “Love poetry seems able to out-play psychoanalysis” (PS 62, 64). Nonetheless, Richards is cynical about the attempts of modern poets to define a self-supporting imaginative space in which to mimic the benefits of the “Magical View”: De La Mare’s “dream-world of the child”, for example,; Yeats’ “black velvet curtains and visions of the Hermeticist”; or Lawrence’s “mentality of the Bushman”. These are only “tendencies among the defeated”, flawed strategies that represent a failure of doctrine, and the problem lies with their idiosyncrasy. They are “insufficiently concerned with normal experience” as useful beliefs are those

for which “the attitudes they support are already existent”.¹⁷⁷ (PS 70-73) In this sense, Richards’ text seems overwhelmingly fatalistic; he does not prescribe any cure for the disease and only disparages the attempts of individuals to put into practice the “poetic” sensibility that he seems to prescribe. It is in later works that he moves towards offering more than the diagnostician’s glance.¹⁷⁸

Practical Criticism

Practical Criticism, in particular the chapter on belief, is evidence of, according to Richards, “the same view, I think, exactly that I tried to maintain in *Science and Poetry* but I hope clearer and not as easily misunderstood”.¹⁷⁹ (IA SL 47) The primary development (other than the complete and comprehensive dismissal of the term “pseudo-statement”) is the introduction of the concept of “sincerity”. Like belief, sincerity is a product of the emotive aspect of one’s character; but where belief is directed outwards towards a thing in the external world, sincerity is directed inwards. Accordingly, to nurture sincerity is described as a process of self-actualisation. This seems a romantic concept by definition, but Richards clarifies that its attainment is actually impossible. In striving towards a sincerity that we can never achieve a sense of fundamental limitation is underlined, and the mind is pushed away from the scientific worldview of complete, or romantic, attainability. Richards incentive for writing *Practical Criticism* remains a reaction against science, in particular what he views as the pernicious and widespread habit of “attaching emotional belief only to intellectually certified ideas” (PC 278). He perceives that this has created a problem of belief where one did not exist before:

most readers, and nearly all good readers, are very little disturbed by even a direct opposition between their own beliefs and the beliefs of the poet. Lucretius and Virgil, Euripides and Aeschylus [...] are equally accessible, given the necessary scholarship, to a Roman Catholic, to a Buddhist and to a confirmed sceptic (PC 271).

The verifiable truth-value of a text has become an issue where it previously was not, as poetry has become literalised and related to the wider scientific world and political or ideological factors. A

¹⁷⁷ In this Richards demonstrates a great deal of similarity to Tate’s simple formula for poetic value (Richards predates Tate by a decade and a half): “there must be a direct and effective correlation between the previously established truth of the poet’s ideas and the value of the poetry” (EFD 308)

¹⁷⁸ Hunt asserts absolutely, however, that “Richards is best seen as a pioneer and diagnostician and not – ironically – a practitioner”. John Dixon Hunt, “I.A. Richards and the Advancement of Learning”, *Critical Survey*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Summer 1965), pp. 84-88, p. 88. I would, of course, argue for Richards’ approach being far more practical and pragmatic than Hunt suggests.

¹⁷⁹ The interpretation of *Practical Criticism* constituting the same type of “scientific” project as *Poetry and Science* has carried down into later scholarship. To Hugh Bredin, “The intellectual framework for Richards’ thinking is clear: a materialist theory of mind, a stimulus-response psychology, a utilitarian ethic, a positivist theory of language. He is the British empiricist *par excellence*.” Hugh Bredin, “I.A. Richards and the Philosophy of Practical Criticism”, *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (April 1986), pp. 26-37, p. 30.

poem is therefore assessed in the context of one's personal beliefs and valued accordingly; examples from Richards' students include one who feels a poem "sums up my creed as a socialist", and another to whom a poem is simply "too religious" (PC 27, 46). The easy and idyllic interchange of Buddhists reading Virgil or Catholics reading Aeschylus has become a thing of the past. This phenomenon has been rendered more common through "the increased prestige of science". The consequence of committing one's beliefs entirely to the intellect is a complete detachment of the emotive sensibility: "For those whom it conquers, it means 'Good-bye to poetry'" (PC 278). Of course, the rot does not stop there; this phenomenon is "fatal not only to poetry, but to all our finer, more spiritual responses" (PC 279n). In contrast to *Science and Poetry*, in *Practical Criticism* Richards makes more of an attempt to provide a solution to this problem, and it takes the form of his concept of sincerity, defined primarily as "obedience to that tendency which 'seeks' a more perfect order in the mind" (PC 288). Sincerity is explicitly not the same thing as simplicity, which is only "an echo of Rousseau's romantic fiction, the 'Natural Man'". It is the product instead of effort and will, of building-up rather than stripping-down, as "many emotions which look simple and natural are nothing of the kind, they result from cultivated self-control". The aspects of the ambition towards sincerity that Richards most emphasises are its difficulty and its dependence on environment; Richards seems to make a concerted effort to highlight the unromantic qualities of the concept:

it is not a quality that we can take for granted in ourselves as our inalienable birthright. It fluctuates with our state of health, with the quality of our recent companions, with our responsibility and our nearness to the object, with a score of conditions that are not easy to take account of.

Sincerity is the aspiration of the will towards a perfect mind, a state of freedom from impurity wherein all impulses are perfectly organised. Such a mind is, however, "nowhere attainable", and is therefore useful only "as an ideal standard by which to measure degrees of relative insincerity" (PC 281-283). The aspiration towards sincerity, therefore, can never be fulfilled. To Richards, however, this is the key aspect of its usefulness. We comport ourselves towards full sincerity, implicitly acknowledging the impossibility of the act, and in so doing become aware of our limitation. A "technique or ritual" to better heighten one's sincerity is sketched out, and its emphasis seems fully to undermine any sense of self-actualisation. The points Richards proposes for contemplation are as follows:

- i. Man's loneliness (the isolation of the human situation).
- ii. The facts of birth, and of death, in their inexplicable oddity.
- iii. The inconceivable immensity of the universe.

- iv. Man's place in the perspective of time.
- v. The enormity of his ignorance

Ignorance, inconceivability and inexplicability are the points of emphasis, serving in a meditative sense to draw the mind towards a standard that is unachievable and emphasising the nature of that gesture. Similarly, "religious exercises" and "practices of divination and magic" are mentioned as potentially useful for carrying out the same purpose, participant, as they are in an ordering tradition that has the sanction of history (PC 290-291). In an essay on Dostoyevsky from the same period Richards writes of man, that "many of his best traits would never have developed without religion."¹⁸⁰ To Richards the value of religious and ritual practices is solely in their use in organising the mind; in this sense his advocacy of religion or magic is purely practical: "its only justification is its success in meeting our needs" (PC 280). There is no inherent superior quality ascribed to the rituals of an organised religion, for example. This makes sense in the context of Richards' comment that "to 'pretend to believe' what we 'don't really believe' would certainly be insincerity"; the use of a religious practice to a non-believer would be bad faith, a charge Richards levels against Confucius in his attitude towards ancestor-worship (PC 280). It is only if one genuinely believes and can make that necessary investment of faith that the rituals heighten, rather than diminish, one's sincerity. Nonetheless Richards hints at ideas that are long-established in religious tradition: he talks of the "irremediable default" in human nature, the product of "man's innate constitution and [...] the accidents to which he is exposed"; something roughly analogous, perhaps, to original sin. The result of the innately-flawed state Richards describes is "*a tendency towards increased order*" (PC 285). The supreme order of a perfect mind is unattainable, as Richards has made clear, but sincerity nonetheless comes from an aspiration towards it: "Sincerity [...] is obedience to that tendency which 'seeks' a more perfect order within the mind" (PC 288). The use of inverted commas for "'seeks'" offers an interesting emphasis, perhaps underlining the lack of a literal possibility.

The idea of sincerity as self-completion, and the religious overtones attached to this, is, as Russo indicates, a magnet to accusations of it being an example of the "jargon of authenticity". A reading of Richards' theory of sincerity in *Practical Criticism*, however, makes clear that for Richards the act of self-completion is impossible; there is no achievable wholeness. Russo astutely acknowledges this factor: "his emphasis falls on the causes preventing self-completion and is always critical". As such, the "tendency towards increased order" that Richards refers to "clearly impl[ies] a direction, a way, and a matter of degree, not a finished perfection".¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ I.A. Richards, *Complementaries: Uncollected Essays* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1976), p. 152.

¹⁸¹ I.A. Richards: *His Life and Work*, p. 354.

Mencius on the Mind

Richards uses ancient China to provide an example of a society participant in a “Magical View”, making up for the absence of such evidence in *Science and Poetry* and *Practical Criticism*. The product of Richards’ years at Peking University and his interest in Confucianism, *Mencius on the Mind* is an idiosyncratic study of the philosopher of the Warring States period and the intellectual world within which his thought operated.¹⁸² The motive behind the book, as Richards later explained, was to explore the reasons for the “sheer incomprehensibility” his Chinese students would express when presented with certain Western cultural ideas in the form of the texts of the Western literary canon. *Mencius on the Mind* subsequently formed an attempt by Richards to demonstrate “how Chinese and Western cultures could be so mutually incommunicable” by exploring a part of the history of Chinese philosophical thought and, implicitly, the cultural heritage it provided.¹⁸³

Richards is particularly drawn to the fundamental stability that China has benefitted from through most of its history, and the mindset that this either created or was created by. The world of Mencius in the 4th Century BC is depicted as a unified and intricate interrelation of society, individual and tradition, all components of which function organically and apparently without conflict. This is a “magical framework”, within which the philosopher lives. Belief is so totally invested that the distinction between individual and universe essentially disintegrates:

the magical participation between him and his universe is so close that his nature and the nature of things in general may be thought of with one thought without opposition or distinction (MM 76).

The world of Mencius is so far removed from scientific thinking that it does not, according to Richards, even possess a theory of knowledge: Richards draws attention to “the absence of a theory of cognition in his [Mencius’] psychology”. Consequently what occurs is “the absence, in Mencius

¹⁸² To Winterowd, Richards’ *Mencius* is “assuredly one of the most idiosyncratic books ever to have established itself in the canon of the humanities”, “I.A. Richards, Literary Theory and Romantic Composition”, p. 67. Sample responds to this claim by pointing out that *Mencius on the Mind* is not only quite clearly *not* established in the canon of the humanities, but also is quite representative: it “is not so idiosyncratic when compared to Richards’ other writings”. Joseph C. Sample, “Mencius on the Mind: Experiments in Multiple Definition by I.A. Richards and John Constable (Review)”, *Rhetoric Review*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2004), pp. 94-98, p. 94. With this latter point I would, of course, concur. To Watson, *Mencius* is Richards’ “best book”, although a reason is not given. George Watson, “The Amiable Heretic: I.A. Richards 1893-1979”, *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 104, No. 2 (Spring, 1996), pp. 248-262, p. 250. Xie sees the book as “an important precursor of hermeneutical, poststructuralist, and pragmatist ways of thinking” in its concern for multiple definition. Ming Xie, “Trying to be on Both Sides of the Mirror at Once: I.A. Richards, Multiple Definition, and Comparative Method”, *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (2007), pp. 279-297, p. 280.

¹⁸³ I.A. Richards, *Poetries: Their Media and Ends* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), pp. 167-169.

and his fellows, of a *theoretical interest*" (MM 82-83). This creates a society free from any inquiring interest into whys. Any discussion is not intellectual; the issue, for instance, of paying respect to age is addressed only in terms of the practical: how such a respect is determined. There is no interest in the theoretical, such as providing justification for the act or addressing the reasons for doing so. This difference, according to Richards, defines the divide between Chinese and Western thinking, in particular "from that strain in Western thinking which has led to the modern world" (MM 56). It is, at the most fundamental level, a product of the differences in the capacity to invest belief. This is because it is only with belief that the harmonious universe he writes of can exist; if the belief were to fail, then a "strain" (or "break") such as the West experienced would initiate a comparable trauma. Richards hints at the inherent resistance Chinese society has to the psychological crisis involved in the same tide of modernisation which wreaked havoc in the West: Richards recalls in 1950 "the Chinese showing Mao what the sons of Han could again be", although this was before the full effects of the Cultural Revolution could be experienced by the population at large.¹⁸⁴ Richards observes that the innate character of the Chinese is "traditionally more moral, more responsible and law-abiding [...] more dependable, and far less given to casual violence than most Western peoples."¹⁸⁵ This is a product, by Richards' estimation, of the society to which they are the inheritors, in particular that of Mencius and the tradition of Confucianism. Using the example of paying respect to age, Richards points towards the link between the philosophical concept of knowledge (or its absence) and the unchanging nature of society that follows:

The fixity, in unquestioned security, of a system of social observances, such as the paying of respect to age, gave them a terminus to their thinking. What they are doing is not so much inquiring into the nature of man as giving an account of it which will conduce to the maintenance of these fixed, unquestionable observances.

By definition therefore Mencius' philosophical thought can only ever be inductive; it serves only to explain or justify pre-existing rituals or social practices. It is, as Richards describes, "designed to give intellectual support to a system whose basis is social" (MM 56).

Richards' interest, of course, stems from his apparent discovery of a well-functioning society that operates without science. In particular he is drawn to the "schema of conduct" that seems innate in each individual member of that society as a result of their absolute integration into it. Despite the spatial and chronological distance, Richards perceives that there are benefits to the Modern West that can be derived from observation of this society. The "schema of conduct" of Mencian China

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 180.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 168.

serves to do psychologically what only “the administration of drugs or the use of exercises” accomplishes in the Modern West: the maintenance of a social order. The failure of “purely scientific psychology” to serve a greater social role than drugging and constraining leads to the question of whether Chinese society, and its orientation around collective myths, offers a better solution for ordering a society. Richards is relatively direct about the precedent this could provide: “we should be forced probably to supplement scientific psychology with a fictional account of human nature in the interest of a finely ordered society and of reasonably un wasteful living.” Accordingly,

There may thus be another advantage in studying, if only as a set of fictions, the scheme of conceptions which has given both a fine and a very widely diffused civilization to the Chinese people (MM 64).

This advantage is related to knowledge, as China shows us that although “the pursuit of knowledge [...] may seem a natural activity of the mind”, it is rather a “highly artificial and specialised function requiring a rather violent dissociation from other interests”. Mencius’ worldview, as one “not under the sway of a similar theoretic interest” demonstrates what Richards calls the “chief lesson” of his inquiry, that “the scientific endeavour [...] does itself constitute an immense differentiation between minds” (MM 84).

Richards’ use of Chinese philosophy is of course vulnerable to an accusation of being a product of characteristic Western orientalism, whereby his analysis would function as a means of adapting aspects of a foreign culture for self-serving bourgeois purposes. Edward Said specifically references *Mencius on the Mind* in *Orientalism*, determining that it is participant in the tradition of liberal humanism which “retards the process of enlarged and enlarging meaning through which true understanding can be attained”. If Richards is to be condemned on this account, it is worth noting that it would be a result of factors beyond his control: his background and the inevitable outlook of the culture to which he belonged.¹⁸⁶ Despite this, Said notes that Richards claims a “genuine type of pluralism” and Rodney Koeneke characterises him as “an opponent of imperialism with just as much certainty as a Said or a Bhabha”.¹⁸⁷

It is not in the particular interest of my analysis to reconcile Richards’ position with modern critical theory or cast a value judgment as to his rightness or wrongness in the course of the history of

¹⁸⁶ Some specifics of Richards’ misinterpretations of Chinese philosophy are referred to by Yih-jiun, perhaps most prominently: “One of Richards’ more obvious distortions is his use of the Western categories of mind (intellect), will, and human nature in trying to understand Mencius”. Peter Wong Yih-jiun, “Mencius on the Mind: Experiments in Multiple Definition (Review)”, *China Review International*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 333-343, p. 341.

¹⁸⁷ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 254; *Empires of the Mind*, p. 15.

cultural dialogue. It would be foolish to make a claim for Richards being anything other than a dilettante in Chinese culture. Instead it is because of the fact that his vision of the East is to a large extent a product of his philosophical pre-expectations and cultural interests that we can gain a useful sense of his view of his native Western society and its particular relation to modernity. *Mencius on the Mind* appropriates classical Chinese culture to make a point that belief-based society is conceivable and has existed in the past. The “magical framework” of Mencius is a worldview that is perhaps inconceivable to the West: Richards states that it has not existed in “any remembered universe, except Adam’s, that has been imagined in *our* tradition” (MM 76). But as he makes apparent, by virtue of its existence it makes us aware that there is at the very least the possibility of an alternative within human nature to the purely intellectual or scientific state of mind that has become ascendant in the West. In this sense it serves to undermine the absoluteness that characterises positivistic thought, and challenges its insistence on the non-negotiable primacy of its own dogma.

Coleridge on Imagination

Coleridge on Imagination makes reference to the familiar themes of Richards’ work, such as the decline of belief, the rise of science and the use of language to provide a solution. In this book, however, Richards offers more of a theoretical framework with which to carry out this purpose. As such it represents a development and continuation of the ideas that have characterised his vision of the role of language since *Science and Poetry*.¹⁸⁸ It is primarily a social problem that Richards is addressing, and poetic language is the tool with which he seeks to address it.¹⁸⁹

Richards provides definitions of two doctrines which historically were used to explain the creation of poetry and the intercourse of the mind with nature. They are familiar concepts from literary history:

1. The mind of the poet at moments, penetrating “the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude”, gains an insight into reality, reads Nature as a symbol of something behind or within Nature not ordinarily perceived

¹⁸⁸ Leavis lambasted Richards’ efforts in *Coleridge on Imagination* for the perceived heresy of “filtering Coleridgean ideas through a utilitarian strainer” and as a result bestows the damnatory brand of “Benthamism”. Cited in *I.A. Richards: His Life and Work*, p. 537. Tate has a more guarded objection to the fact that Richards would even attempt to see poetry as a problem to be solved, rather than “in its full import [...] preserved” (EFD 105).

¹⁸⁹ Craig considers *Coleridge on Imagination* in light of contemporaneous psychological developments, particularly the “conception of the mind as an active, self-forming, self-realising system”. Cairns Craig, “T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards and Empiricism’s Art of Memory”, *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, No. 1 (Jan-March, 1998), pp. 111-135, p. 123.

2. The mind of the poet creates a nature into which his own feelings, his aspirations and apprehensions are projected (CI 145)

Richards' analysis actively seeks to reconcile the projective and the realist doctrines by proving that they are only aspects of a larger and more general phenomenon of *Imagination*; their seeming conflict is the result of "systematic linguistic illusions" (CI 147). Coleridge serves as Richards' precedent; his theory of Primary and Secondary Imagination grants him an "integral vision". The history of syntactical confusion between the two doctrines has obscured the fact that "the meanings of real and projected derive from the imaginative fact of mind". By this logic, Nature is already a projection of man's sensibility prior to the imagination projecting into it (CI 164-166). Consequently nothing is "more real" than anything else as everything is a product of imagination. This version of reality is useful to Richards because it nullifies the claim of any worldview to be superior to any other.¹⁹⁰ Everything is simply imaginative and therefore possesses the same degree of "realness"; all theories and beliefs claim equal precedence.¹⁹¹ Science is a "mythology" as much as anything else because it is a product of human creativity – the poet and the physicist obtain knowledge in comparable fashion: "for what is there, of which we can think or speak, which is not a hypostatized abstraction?" (CI 183) Richards cites Coleridge's perception of this fact:

The material universe, saith a Greek philosopher, is but one vast complex mythus (i.e. symbolical representation); and mythology the apex and complement of all genuine philosophy (CI 167).

This defines Richards' purpose; he wishes to make of the world a myth, or at the very least clarify the mythic nature of all perceptions of the world. In this type of world the most advantageous doctrines would be, therefore, those which are most prescient of this fact. In this sense the poet, or poetry more generally, is given a special destiny. This also explains why Richards has by this point developed more sympathy for the "greater mythologies" of history than he has demonstrated in previous texts, they can now possess a claim for essential realness and seem more necessary than ever to the spiritual health of man:

¹⁹⁰ According to Mackey, Richards' recognition of this fact grants him some common ground with deconstruction: "If the world is a fabric of meanings, there may be no important difference. This is where the deconstructivist and the Richardsian critic are in the same boat". "Theory and Practice in the Rhetoric of I.A. Richards", p. 65.

¹⁹¹ B. J. Leggett interprets Richards' idea of myth, as expressed in *Coleridge on Imagination*, to be a substantial influence on Stevens' *Supreme Fiction*: "Although Richards prefers the term *myth* to *fiction*, there is little difference between the formulation of his conception and Stevens". B.J. Leggett, "Why It Must Be Abstract: Stevens, Coleridge, and I.A. Richards", *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Winter, 1983), pp. 489-515, p. 505.

The saner and greater mythologies are not fancies; they are the utterance of the whole soul of man and, as such, inexhaustible to meditation. They are no amusement or diversion to be sought as a relaxation and an escape from the hard realities of life. They are these hard realities in projection, their symbolic recognition, co-ordination and acceptance. Through such mythologies our will is collected, our powers unified, our growth controlled (CI 171).

However, as a product of the decline of belief in these particular mythologies in the aftermath of the dissociation, they cannot be revived and are no longer of any practical use: "There can be no question of a return to any mythologic structures prevailing before the seventeenth century" (CI 225). This presents a problem because Richards makes clear that to be devoid of myth is to be devoid of essential humanness:

Without his mythologies man is only a cruel animal without a soul – for a soul is a central part of his governing mythology – he is a congeries of possibilities without order and without aim.

The myth-free man is primitive, or simply insane, as is the man whose mythology is entirely self-created and uninvolved in the "greater mythologies". The existence of the latter type of person can, to a mild extent, encompass the poet who seeks to create his own myths.¹⁹² Another manifestation of this type might be found in the more serious example of the "primitive man" whose self-supporting imagination brings about "disastrous consequences"; Richard foresees "whole nations again in the control of such madmen" and makes the portentous observation that "if these myths usually destroy their creators, it is not until they have destroyed much else" (CI 172).

This conveys the nature of the dilemma that confronts Richards – a myth-less world is one which does not support man in any suitable cultural sense, and one which also leaves a vacuum open for destructive ideologies to germinate in the absence of anything grander or more coherent. At the same time, the great mythologies of the past that have served in this role are beyond reach and cannot be resurrected. It is also "too vast a matter to be handled by that other system of myths (those of science and history)." The hope that Richards points to is that, although the traditional schemas by which man has ordered himself have lost their power, "he has not lost the power to make new ones" - although this power may lie dormant. Richards' solution takes the form of language, or poetry more specifically, and it is his creation of the "entirely mythical" world enables poetry to ascend to the dominant position:

¹⁹² See Richards' treatment of Yeats, Lawrence and De La Mare in *Science and Poetry* (p.73)

For while any part of the world-picture is regarded as not of mythopoeic origin, poetry – earlier recognised as mythopoeic – could not but be given a second place. If philosophic contemplation, or religious experience, or science gave us Reality, then poetry gave us something of less consequence, at best some sort of shadow. If we grant that all is myth, poetry as the myth-making which most brings the “whole soul” of man into activity [...] becomes the necessary channel for the reconstitution of order (CI 226-228).

Leavis calls this notion an “extreme of romantic inflation”¹⁹³ and Foster sees a vision of man elevated romantically to the state of being “free and creative in his interminable quest to realise the spender, and perhaps the tragedy of his own nature”.¹⁹⁴ Richards’ intentions for poetry are ambitious, certainly, but it is worth noting that the particular qualification of the type of poetry Richards is prescribing is its self-conscious “mythicness” and the fact that it carries with it the sense of restraint that is anathema to the romantic. Although he talks of the “mistaken conception of its [poetry’s] limitations”, the actual idea that poetry can provide a complete actualisation is not realisable: Richards reminds us that “the mind has never been in order” and to think that it is possible to achieve this is folly: “there is no vanished perfection of balance to be restored” (CI 228-229). Poetry is useful, like the old “greater mythologies”, specifically because it creates an aspiration without a possibility of consummation. It gives us “new powers over our minds” and the capacity of constituting a new order based upon, not poets, but the “poetic function” (CI 232, 227). Behind it all remains the idea that “with the best poetry there is nowhere to arrive, no final solution”; the best poetry is useful only because it provides “the norms of value”, a structuring function that can order the mind through language and, in stark contrast with science, protect the psyche from delusions of its own infinite capacities (CI 213-214). It remains, for Richards, purposeful in the sense that it can “preserve us from mistaking our notions either for things or for ourselves.” The fact that Richards calls poetry “the completest mode of utterance” is indicative of its implied limitation – “completest” is after all very different to “complete” (CI 163). Poetry is the most honest and the most useful among the myths, but it is not transcendent, and certainly not complete.

¹⁹³ Cited in *I.A. Richards: His Life and Work*, p. 537.

¹⁹⁴ *The New Romantics*, p. 98.

Chapter 4

F.R. Leavis and the *Two Cultures*

Introductory

The legacy of F.R. Leavis can be thought of as, at best, contentious. Leavis was fondly remembered on a recent BBC radio programme as “half man, half dog-whistle”, yet also cited by then-Education Secretary Michael Gove as representative of all that is good in a traditional and British literary curriculum: “the Great Tradition of our literature – Dryden, Pope, Swift, Byron, Keats, Shelley, Austen, Dickens and Hardy – should be at the heart of school life.”¹⁹⁵ Somewhere between these two disconnected sentiments is reflected, perhaps, the reality of Leavis the critic. Although he was certainly not the elitist, establishment figure portrayed by his “culture-war” enemies on the Left, it would nonetheless, I think, be fair to categorise him as a retrograde and belligerent enemy of all that was mainstream in modernity.¹⁹⁶ Literature, to Leavis, served as a means of projecting essentially reactionary cultural values out into the world. Close reading was a project designed to carry out this work, yet his approach was based on fundamentally different premises to those proposed by I.A. Richards.¹⁹⁷ The early work of *The Great Tradition* and similar books carried the seeds of what would later develop into a comprehensive cultural critique, initially a subtle acknowledgement of the

¹⁹⁵ “Public Enemy, FR Leavis, Tate Britain, Death”, *Night Waves*, BBC Radio 3, 13 May 2013. Michael Gove, “All Pupils Will Learn Our Island Story” (5 October 2010), <http://conservative-speeches.sayit.mysociety.org/speech/601441>.

¹⁹⁶ Even from a very cursory, biographical overview, we can instantly see paradoxes in the stereotype: the *elitist* was always an outsider at Cambridge, the *traditionalist* was responsible for some of the first waves of critical discourse in the new schools of Modernism, and the *institutionalist* to had a significant role in founding (with Denys Thompson) the discipline of cultural studies. Similarly, Leavis avoided the type of strict formalism that is characteristic of the stereotypical New Critical position, and with which he is often charged (W.K. Wimsatt offering, perhaps, the only actual archetype). Chris Joyce goes as far as to ascribe to Leavis a philosophical presentiment: he had “thought his way through many of the theoretical issues that have been presented in recent decades as if newly discovered.” Joyce points to the philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer as an example. Chris Joyce, “Rethinking Leavis”, *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (April 2016), pp. 137-156, p. 139.

¹⁹⁷ Leavis’ critique was one which emphasised an essentially human response to literature, for this reason he rejected the impersonal type of criticism practiced by Eliot and Richards. See *The Common Pursuit* (London: Penguin, 1969), pp. 134-135 for Leavis’ objection to Richards’ method, what he calls “Richards’ essential Neo-Benthamite ambition”. This view is mirrored in one of D.W. Harding’s contribution to *Scrutiny*, “I.A. Richards”, in *A Selection from Scrutiny*, pp. 278-288. An account of Leavis’ response to Richards’ “desertion” to Basic English can be found in Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism*, pp. 164-168.

occurrence of a dissociation of sensibility, but later an aggressive sustained attack on “technologico-Benthamism” in wider society. The infamous incident with C.P. Snow stands between and at the centre of this development. Underneath it all is a view of history, and the particular relationship of literature to it.

“Technologico-Benthamism” was a relatively late term in Leavis’ lexicon, but the ideas behind it can be traced back decades, apparent in his writings on Marxism in the 1930s, for example.¹⁹⁸ Even from very early days, the ideas that had germinated in Leavis’ work on poetry and the novel were not exclusively focused on the text at hand and often had ramifications in society and culture.¹⁹⁹ According to Day, Leavis’ *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture*, in 1930, “contained, in embryonic form, Scrutiny’s governing theme”, specifically the destructive effects of industrialism on society and culture.²⁰⁰ Other early publications mirrored this concern. Stefan Collini points to Leavis’ “dissident, even Dissenting” qualities and that the type of cultural critique he participated in reflected a radical departure from the status quo:

¹⁹⁸ In particular three essays from 1933’s *For Continuity* (Cambridge: Minority Press, 1933), “Marxism and Cultural Continuity”, “Restatements for Critics” and “Under Which King Bezonian”, reprinted in VC. Day concludes that the essays of this time define Leavis’ relationship with Marxism more generally: “To focus on Leavis’ relation to Marxism is to accept, and to some extent reproduce, his reading of the cultural configuration of forces in the early 1930s.” Gary Day, *Re-reading Leavis: ‘Culture’ and Literary Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 119. Baldick sees the essays of *For Continuity* “bear[ing] witness to the importance of Marxism as a ‘whetstone’ for Leavis”. *The Social Mission of English Literary Criticism*, p. 169. Q.D. Leavis characterises the conflict with Marxists as a disagreement over the essentials of human nature: “Professor Harold Laski, the Marxist historian, then the dominating spirit of the London School of Economics, and chairman of the British Labour Party, was furious, I was told, if he saw a student of his reading my book. My offence was to have challenged the automatic optimism on which the attitudes of the fashionable left-wing intellectuals were based.” Q.D. Leavis, “A Glance Backward, 1965”, in *Collected Essays Vol. I: The Englishness of the English Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 16. As an interesting Leavisian afterlife: the influence of Leavis’ cultural studies on the “New Left” of the 1950s and 60s is explored by F. Foks, who points to the existence of “left-Leavisism”, “The Sociological Imagination of the British New Left: ‘Culture’ and the ‘Managerial Society’, C.1956-1962”, *Modern Intellectual History*, 1-20, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S147924431600038X>, p. 2. See also L. Hardy, “F.R. Leavis, E.P. Thompson and the New Left”, *Socialist History Journal*, 30 (2007), pp. 1-30 and Alexander Hutton, “Literature, Criticism, and Politics in the Early New Left 1956-1962”, *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2016), pp. 51-75.

¹⁹⁹ The turn, in Leavis’ career, from focus on poetry to the novel is explored by Greenwood, who sees in Leavis’ later work on fiction an ambition “to assimilate the novel as much as possible to poetry”. Edward Greenwood, “Leavis, Tolstoy, Lawrence and ‘Ultimate Questions’”, *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (April 2016), pp. 157-170, p. 157. I do not consider there to be a significant shift of focus in Leavis’ career, aside from the development of “technologico-Benthamism” into a distinct and theoretically consistent critique of culture.

²⁰⁰ Day also points to *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* in 1930 signifying a new way of thinking on Leavis’ part, rather than participating in the older Arnoldian tradition: it was “not merely an isolated grumbling against the garishness of the modern world”; Day indicates that the wider context of the book needs to be considered, including the publication of Freud’s *Civilisation and its Discontents* in English the same year. Gary Day, “Leavis and Post-Structuralism”, in *F.R. Leavis: Essays and Documents*, ed. by Ian MacKillop and Richard Storer (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 182.

the reordering of English literary history had an insurgent and oppositional character precisely because these critics believed that the dominant tendencies of contemporary culture represented a betrayal of an earlier England.²⁰¹

It is in this ambition to operate outside the historical mainstream that allows Leavis to share with Eliot and the New Critics a concern for the “dissociation of sensibility”. Waugh states that the dissociation was, for Leavis, “the crux on which he would rest his re-evaluation of the English literary canon, and the ground on which to build his grand moral vision of cultural rejuvenation”.²⁰² As with other New Critics, the precision of historical dating was less important than the mere fact that a break had occurred, with all that this entailed for modernity. Leavis’ distinction, perhaps, is thinking of the dissociation more broadly in terms of culture rather than art or literature alone. Despite this, his early canon-forming works on English literary history ostensibly seem to contain a prejudice shaped by a purely literary version of dissociation. In *New Bearings in English Poetry*, the poetry of the nineteenth century “was characteristically preoccupied with the creation of a dream-world [...] the preoccupation was characteristic.”²⁰³ This historical view is mirrored in 1936’s *Revaluation*, where Leavis makes reference to “the divorce between thought and feeling, intelligence and sensibility, that is characteristic of the nineteenth century”. In *Revaluation*, the literary value of a poet is directly linked, by Leavis, to their capacity to resist the dissociation, as with Wordsworth, who “represents – and it is his strength – a continuous development out of the eighteenth century”.²⁰⁴ Similarly, Leavis charts an alternative line of descent outside the main stream of literary history, “the line of wit”, which runs “from Ben Jonson (and Donne) through Carew and Marvell to Pope”.²⁰⁵ Nonetheless, the “embryonic” anti-civilisational aspects are gestational in these works. The appearance in 1933 of *Culture and Environment* (co-authored with Denys Thompson) reflected the cultural expansion of Leavis’ project. The total effect of these volumes is, as Williams has described it, the creation of “a myth, a significant construction [...] persuasively communicated.”²⁰⁶ In the creation of this myth, Leavis was aided by the academic work of his wife, Q.D. Leavis, Denys

²⁰¹ Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 370-371. See also Stefan Collini, “Where Did It All Go Wrong? Cultural Critics and ‘Modernity’ in Inter-War Britain”, in *The Strange Survival of Liberal England: Political Leaders, Moral Values and the Receptions of Economic Debate*, pp. 247-274.

²⁰² Patricia Waugh, “Legacies: From Literary Criticism to Literary Theory”, in *T.S. Eliot in Context*, ed. by Jason Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 383.

²⁰³ F.R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1967), p. 17.

²⁰⁴ F.R. Leavis, *Revaluation* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), p. 8.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p. 29.

²⁰⁶ Raymond Williams, *Culture & Society: 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 256. Williams ties Leavis’ attempts at creating a cultured elite or “clerisy” into the tradition of Arnold, and through him, Coleridge. See pp. 252-264.

Thompson, and the writers associated with *Scrutiny* more generally.²⁰⁷ David Hopkins provides a summary of the overall effect of this sustained collaboration:

In the writings of Leavis and some of the other contributors to *Scrutiny*, Eliot's "dissociation of sensibility" was fused with the findings of certain contemporary historians to create a powerful totalising Myth of the Fall that attempted to account for the moment in which the old "organic" order took its fatal wrong turning towards the alienated dehumanization of modern mass civilization.²⁰⁸

Leavis' promulgation of the idea of a break required a learned clerisy to perpetuate it. This represented the major secondary project of Leavis' criticism and mirrors the similar projects undertaken by Tate and, to a lesser extent, Blackmur - although it must be said that Leavis' efforts in this arena were certainly far greater than both. Again, the emergence of this project is apparent from early days. Baldick sees in *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture*, "the defence of threatened minority values" and characterises Leavis' sustained project as being preoccupied "with this enlarged vanguard's cohesion, its effectiveness as a social force, and its degree of influence on those who have power."²⁰⁹ Both Williams and Baldick cite the same extract from 1933's *For Continuity* as

²⁰⁷ The Leavisite brand of the dissociation might best be thought of as a collaborative project, at least in the 1930s. Hilliard charts the shift in Leavis' precise dating of the "dissociation" over his career: in the early 1930s "Leavis believed that the eighteenth century still 'enjoyed the advantages of a homogenous – a real – culture'", but following recurrent arguments over the idea in the pages of *Scrutiny* "it became more common to date the change from the seventeenth century itself." Christopher Hilliard, *English as Vocation: The Scrutiny Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 52. Hilliard puts L.C. Knights, a regular contributor to *Scrutiny*, as a major force in this development, particularly by virtue of his essay "Bacon and the Seventeenth Century Dissociation of Sensibility". See L.C. Knights, in *Scrutiny*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Summer 1943), pp. 268-285, reprinted in L.C. Knights, *Explorations* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1946), pp. 92-111. Leavis draws attention to the study of Knights' historical work specifically in his "sketch for an English school", on account of its "interesting and illuminating relations to the changing social and cultural background" of the seventeenth century. Eliot, similarly, is placed in the curriculum as a means of insight into the "death of the spirit" occurring in the age. F.R. Leavis, *Education & The University* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1943), p. 56. James Smith points to Leavisite history being a combined project of both Leavises: "the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which for both authors represented an ideal balance where literature could be integrated with every level of culture without toppling into the complete absence of standards which came with the rise of industrialisation and mass culture in the nineteenth century." J.A. Smith, "Scrutiny's Eighteenth Century", *Essays in Criticism*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (2014), pp. 318-430, p. 319. This historical sentiment is quite apparent in Q.D. Leavis' critical writing, although more impressionistic than theoretical, at least compared to her husband: "It is painful to compare the staple of eighteenth-century popular fiction and that exhibited by twentieth-century writers." Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1939), p. 257. See also Q.D. Leavis, "Henry James and the Disabilities of the American Novelist in the Nineteenth Century", in *Collected Essays Vol. II: The American Novel and Reflections of the European Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 108-125.

²⁰⁸ David Hopkins, "Dr Leavis's Seventeenth Century", *Essays in Criticism*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (2014), pp. 293-317, p. 305. Hopkins points to the centrality of R.H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* as an influence on the historical views of L.C. Knights, Denys Thompson and other members of the *Scrutiny* group.

²⁰⁹ *The Social Mission of English Criticism*, p. 165.

evidence of the consistency of Leavis' project; it is worth emphasising its significance for what would follow in Leavis' work (in comparison I have truncated the extract slightly):

In any period it is upon a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends [...]. The minority capable not only of appreciating Dante, Shakespeare, Donne, Baudelaire, Hardy (to take major instances) but of recognising their later successors constitute the consciousness of the race (or of a branch of it) at a given time. [...] Upon this minority depends our power of profiting by the finest human experience of the past; they keep alive the subtlest and most perishable parts of tradition.²¹⁰

At the forefront of the responsibilities of this group is the maintenance of awareness of a true tradition, one predicated on the assumption of a dissociation having taken place. The radical anti-mainstream position of such a group, therefore, is justified in their perceived maintenance of that true cultural tradition, something that modernity, with its co-opting of language for mass civilisational purposes, has subverted. The organs of cultural outreach for such a group, whether in university classrooms or publications, such as *Scrutiny*, were put to use by Leavis and his allies as a means of carrying the lesson as far as possible.²¹¹ In this, such organs were positioned diametrically against those of mass civilisation, which, in Leavis' view, propagandised constantly for technologico-Benthamism.²¹²

In the formulation of the dissociation of sensibility characteristic of Leavis and his allies, industrialisation is credited with destroying the organic unity between individuals and their environments; the disruption to artistic expression that resulted from this is a secondary factor. This is reflected in Leavis' own approach: more so than any other New Critic, Leavis' cultural concerns are primary, in the sense of both chronology and importance, and the concern for literature developed

²¹⁰ *For Continuity*, pp. 14-15.

²¹¹ Alloway has explored in detail the technical and financial specifics of publishing *Scrutiny* and other periodicals and books by the Leavises and Leavisites, see Ross Alloway, "Selling the Great Tradition: Resistance and Conformity in the Publishing Practices of F.R. Leavis", *Book History*, Vol. 6 (2003), pp. 227-250. For a more general sense of the financial and practical particularities of publishing in the period, see Joyce Piell Wexler, *Who Paid For Modernism? Art, Money, and the Fiction of Conrad, Joyce and Lawrence* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1997)

²¹² The rogue's gallery of Leavis' cultural enemies generally extends to, among others, "those British council surveys, the valuations of which are propagated and enforced by the virtual unanimity of the British Council (financed by the tax payer), the BBC (an enormously wealthy, influential and powerful public corporation), the weeklies and the Sunday papers – and into this system the universities are being more and more drawn." F.R. Leavis, "Rejoinder", in *A Selection from Scrutiny, Vol. II*, ed. by F.R. Leavis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 315. To Carey, Leavis is representative of European intellectuals of the time in his hostility to newspapers and other mass media. See *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, pp. 7-8.

as a secondary cause.²¹³ For this reason he might be seen as a reversal of Tate and Blackmur, whose early narrow concern for literature expanded outwards at a later point into socio-cultural writing. In Ellis' recollections, Leavis' opposition to what he saw as the "Benthamite mode of life" in fact coloured his standards of literary value, as he "became more concerned to celebrate those people who had fought against those tendencies in the past".²¹⁴ Laura Carter positions Leavis among thinkers who drew from a "folk" tradition to justify their anti-modern critique, rather than a specific literary heritage: they "had used the organic community to enact a radical break from the industrial present."²¹⁵ In Leavis' historical vision, the culture of Old England was one of an "organic community", now disrupted in modern times on account of a "vast and terrifying disintegration" caused by "Progress".²¹⁶ The industrial revolution is the major event of destabilisation.²¹⁷ Consequently, renewal, of the wide scale social or political variety, seems, for Leavis, impractical or impossible, as "even if agriculture were revived, that would not bring back the organic community", yet there is a hope that literature can prove useful in limiting the deleterious effects of industrialisation.²¹⁸ For Leavis, language in general is debased by advertising, propaganda and other products of modern industrial society, but literature can serve to resist these forces: "it is to literature alone, where its [language's] subtlest and finest use is preserved, that we can look with any hope of keeping in touch with our spiritual tradition".²¹⁹ To keep this tradition vital, Leavis undertakes to establish his version of history, predicated on the theory of dissociation, as a literary norm in the type of elite he seeks to create.²²⁰ To accomplish this Leavis harkens back to the dissociation of sensibility, and foregrounds it in the curriculum he envisions for university students in *Education & the University*:

For the aim is certainly not that a "lesson" should be drawn from the Seventeenth Century. The aim is to produce a mind that will approach the problems of modern civilization with an understanding of their origins, a maturity of outlook, and, not a nostalgic addiction to the

²¹³ Bilan considers Leavis' view of the inseparableness of culture and language to be his primary distinction from Eliot and Arnold, see R.P. Bilan, *The Literary Criticism of F.R. Leavis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 27-28.

²¹⁴ David Ellis, *Memoirs of a Leavisite: The Decline and Fall of Cambridge English* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), p. 88.

²¹⁵ Laura Carter, "Rethinking Folk Culture in Twentieth Century Britain", *Twentieth Century British History* (August 2017), hwx038, <https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwx038>, p. 15.

²¹⁶ F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1950), pp. 87-88.

²¹⁷ Hilliard indicates the centrality of Leavis, along with Raymond Williams, David Holbrook and E.P. Thompson, in the "revaluation of the 'industrial revolution' as a 'catastrophe'." *English as a Vocation*, p. 55.

²¹⁸ *Culture and Environment*, p. 96.

²¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 82. The first half of *Culture and Environment* is devoted to cataloguing the pernicious misuses of language in modernity, see pp. 11-77.

²²⁰ To Williams, Leavis' particular version of the "myth" is not only "more powerful than most of its competitors", but also, as a consequence, more dangerous. *Culture and Society*, p. 256.

past, but a sense of human possibilities, difficult of achievement, that traditional cultures bear witness to and that it would be disastrous, in a breach of continuity, to lose sight of for good.²²¹

The object is the cultivation of a sensibility comported around an opposition to modernity and its values. By initiating the student into an awareness of historical dissociation the right type of attitude is encouraged: an attitude that has at its fore an awareness of imperfection and limitation:

The education proposed is necessarily full of incompleteness and imperfections. It is a training in carrying on and going forward in spite of, and in recognition of, incompleteness and imperfections – the only way in which the required kind of thinking (without which the specialist is frustrate) *can* be carried on.²²²

Leavis's idea of university education having a necessary focus on incompleteness derives from his anti-perfectibilist critique of modernity. It is a useful method of undermining in academic nascency the type of utopian thinking that could cause problems later. Elsewhere he makes similar reference to:

that conscious and intelligent incompleteness which carries with it the principle of growth; not the canny amassing of inert material for the examination-room, but the organization that represents a measure of real understanding, and seeks of its very nature to extend and complete itself.²²³

Simpson sees in this type of strategy a "celebration of vitalist imperfection".²²⁴ What is most apparent is that Leavis is putting the past to use. Gervais reflects that history, for Leavis, "is not a collection of data but a moral force; it is therefore only morally that it can be apprehended for what it is." Accordingly, "the past that matters most for us is the past we need to invent".²²⁵ In light of this, Leavis' stated ambition in works like *The Great Tradition*, "to form a more useful idea of

²²¹ *Education & the University*, p. 56.

²²² *Ibid*, p.59. To Cranfield, Leavis is anticipating the postmodern concern for "provisionality" with his reference to necessary incompleteness; the extent of Cranfield's misreading is apparent in the fact that he sees Leavis' view of imperfection as essentially *negative*: "the price to be paid is that it engenders a feeling of fragility and uncertainty in student and educator alike." Steven Cranfield, *F.R. Leavis: The Creative University* (New York: Springer, 2016), p. 48. Ian Mackillop interprets Leavis' intention quite oppositely (and much more convincingly) as imperfect by *design*: "the course was devised in order to initiate students into the experience. This Leavis, was saying, is a real mode of study." *F.R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism*, p. 238.

²²³ F.R. Leavis, "Introduction", in John Stuart Mill, *Mill on Bentham and Coleridge* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959), p. 4.

²²⁴ David Simpson, *The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of Literature: A Report on Half-Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 74.

²²⁵ David Gervais, *Literary Englands: Versions of 'Englishness' in Modern Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 143.

tradition”, seems quite clearly strategic and pragmatic.²²⁶ Leavis shares this tendency with the New Critics more generally: his approach to the past is a practical one, and the values that he sees in the past that would be of benefit to the present are in the lesson of man’s limitation. With this sensibility placed at the forefront of critical awareness, a counter can be created against the technologico-Benthamite tendencies of modernity, one that foregrounds uncertainty, doubt and limitation. It is in this spirit that Leavis characterised his own position as that of an “anti-philosopher” for the purposes of resisting formal definition of method.²²⁷

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. Firstly, I intend to demonstrate that Leavis’ view of what constitutes literary value stems from an imperfecting instinct. In particular I intend to examine how the priority he assigned to Blake and other writers is primarily defined by either the useful lesson of their failure or a perception of their inherent awareness of the imperfection of man or society. Behind this lies a vision of history characterised by a useful lesson of dissociation. To best demonstrate the movement of Leavis’ thought I will begin with an analysis of his feud with C.P. Snow, the origins and subtleties of which are extremely illustrative, and, from there, trace the lines of thought both back to his earlier essays and forward to his later essays, including those collected in the posthumous volumes, *The Critic as Anti-Philosopher* and *Valuation in Criticism*.²²⁸ In the book *Nor Shall My Sword*, which contains his anti-Snow material, Leavis consciously positions those lectures between a discussion of romantic poetry and a consideration of the role of the university in society. This is most certainly not an arbitrary ordering. I seek to explore the reasoning and contrast between these separate materials, and how Leavis thought they might be used to illuminate each other. Secondly I will explore Leavis’ great “secondary” project, the ongoing effort to define the terms for a cultured elite (what Chris Baldick calls his “‘expansionist’ ambitions” for English Literature) and its role as a vehicle for the priorities of literary value and historical understanding that he sought to establish, predicated on an essentially anti-modern and anti-romantic sensibility.²²⁹

²²⁶ F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Penguin, 1967), p. 11.

²²⁷ See *Thought, Words and Creativity: Art and Thought in Lawrence* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1976), p. 34. According to MacKillop, Leavis’ anti-philosophy was an “unwillingness to define criteria of literary judgement explicitly”. *F.R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism*, p. 406. The implications of the term are broken down in Chris Joyce, “The Idea of ‘Anti-Philosophy’ in the Work of F.R. Leavis”, *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2009), pp. 24-44.

²²⁸ The Snow debate represents an important consolidation of Leavis’ theory of the *enemy*, and it is from this point that he begins to talk of the “technologico-Benthamite” in a universalising sense to describe the socio-cultural worldview he opposed. Richard Storer defines this term to mean “an age in which the benefits of technological and economic progress were over-valued and the dominant way of thinking about human well-being was in material and statistical terms.” Richard Storer, *F.R. Leavis* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 52.

²²⁹ *The Social Mission of English Literary Criticism*, p. 225.

Two Cultures and William Blake: The Urizenic Snow

To at least one of its participants the Leavis-Snow affair represented more than a simple clash of personalities: to Leavis his conflict with Snow is the continuation of a wider cultural conflict in modernity between the totalising forces of progress, with their reductive tendency towards specialisation, and the contrasting culture of literary value.²³⁰ Guy Ortolano describes the difference between Snow and Leavis as one of “technocratic liberalism” against “radical liberalism”.²³¹ The perception of Snow as technocrat, with all that entails, certainly motivated the hostility of Leavis: in his epochal worldview their respective roles are emblematic of all that is good or bad in culture, and all that might be liberating or oppressive in man’s future.

C.P. Snow, known as Sir Charles, or later, Lord Snow, was an establishment figure with the brief of a public intellectual, permitted, he felt, by virtue of his experience as both a man-of-letters and a scientist to express his opinions freely on any topic: “By training I was a scientist; by vocation I was a writer” (TC 1). The critical consensus seems to be that he was never much more than a literary dilettante; his novels, although popular in their time, have largely failed to retain print runs much past their author’s death. Snow’s scientific background was in physics and during the war he acquired his status through advancement in the civil service, for which he received a knighthood in 1957. This seemingly harmless establishment figure, nonetheless, had in his character all the makings of nemesis. According to Collini:

In retrospect, one can only feel that a malevolent deity setting out to design a single figure in whom the largest number of Leavis’s deepest antipathies would find themselves embodied could not have done better than to create Charles Percy Snow.²³² (TC xxxii)

By 1959, Snow’s simultaneous “expertise” in the literary and scientific worlds generated his subject for the 1959 Rede lecture at Cambridge, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, which reflected his attempt to address the problems he had identified in this bipartite relationship. Snow’s lecture makes clear his belief that a divergence had occurred between two cultures that were once united: the culture of the scientists and that of the literary intellectuals. The motivation for this is anecdotal: the observation that in his separate social lives as a scientist and a writer, he frequently

²³⁰ Trilling’s well-regarded “moderating” response to the Snow-Leavis affair also attempts to situate it in a historical tradition, comparing the disagreement between the two to that between Thomas Huxley and Matthew Arnold in the 1880s. Lionel Trilling, “Science, Literature and Culture: A Comment on the Leavis-Snow Controversy”, *Commentary* (June 1962), pp. 461-477.

²³¹ Guy Ortolano, *The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), ch. 1-2.

²³² See Collini’s introduction to *The Two Cultures* for an excellent summary of the whole affair, also Mackillop *F.R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism*, pp. 314-325.

“felt I was moving among two groups” (TC 2). Consequently, he reaches the conclusion that “the intellectual life of the whole of western society is increasingly being split into two polar groups” (TC 3). The mutual hostility generated by the existence of these two groups represents a major stalling point for the type of social and industrial progress that Snow feels is essential.

From the offset, Snow cultivates the self-conscious air of an impartial diagnostician. Despite this, the lecture is overwhelmingly antagonistic towards traditional literary culture as he saw it: its intellectuals are “luddites” who stand in the way of progress and Snow is contemptuous of their position in society. Snow informs his audience that this fact is attributable to the inherent oppositional tendency of the respective poles; if one extreme adopts a particular perspective, then the other extreme accordingly adapts itself to the contrary position. Literary intellectuals are therefore backward-looking because their counterpoint is forward-looking: “if the scientists have the future in their bones, then the traditional culture responds by wishing the future did not exist” (TC 11). At this point, the most pronounced and egregious flaw in the development of Snow’s argument starts to become clear: he has constructed a colossal straw man against which to argue. This hypothetical luddite of his lecture is one who decides “as a personal choice, to reject industrialisation”, then proceeds to “impose the same choice on others who are not free to choose” bringing about the eventual situation where people have to “go without much food, see most of your children die in infancy [...] [and] accept twenty years off your life”.

To counter the perceived intentions of literary intellectuals to return civilisation to the dark ages, Snow unequivocally and unhesitatingly endorses the rush forward of industrialisation, which offers the “only hope of the poor”. Snow praises the inexorable progress of industry in the nineteenth century and the resultant improvements in the general quality of life. Writers, such as Dickens, who wrote of the unpleasant effect of the industrial revolution on the urban poor, suffered from a lack of “imaginative sympathy”, seeing only the “hideous back-streets, the smoking chimneys” and ignoring the positive consequences of industrial progress, “the prospects of life that were opening out” (TC 25-26). This progress, Snow makes clear, is all-important, as much in the present day as it was in the nineteenth century. The lecture has a tone of urgency that becomes more pronounced as it develops; eventually drawing to a close with the simple warning that “we have very little time” (TC 51). Snow makes plain that industrial progress must be the foremost concern for the future, and that the holdovers of traditional literary culture must be cut off like gangrene from a healthy limb, as we are presently “standing uneasily with one foot in a dead or dying world and the other in a world that at all costs we must see born” (TC 40). Snow rejects any excuse for standing in the way of his vision of progress: its hour has come round at last. Anything other than active participation in this march

towards the future is roundly unacceptable, to the extent that “the worst crime is innocence”. Snow’s enthusiasm possesses a universalising intentionality: his ultimate end is the spread of industrial modernity over all of the world’s nations. The obligation of the western world is to supply capital and build the educational facilities necessary to provide “ten thousand to twenty thousand engineers” per developing country, with the ultimate aim that they all might be brought up to the same level of prosperity. With this eventual state of affairs in mind, Snow’s belief that “closing the gap between our cultures is a necessity”, is obviously not founded on an idea of reconciliation with the other one of the two cultures, but rather the total supplanting of one side by the other.²³³ (TC 46-47)

Snow’s lecture was politely applauded and warmly received in intellectual circles. If its provocative tone, which now seems quite evident, was detected by any who read it, then no comment was immediately offered. Leavis addressed the content of Snow’s lecture in a 1962 lecture of his own at Downing College, “Two Cultures? The Significance of Lord Snow”. The response to this lecture, after its eventual publication, is well-documented. The victimised “Poor Charles”, became a national cause celebre and Leavis was largely vilified for the hostility of his remarks, at least in the short term.²³⁴

The reason for Leavis’ objection to the idea of two cultures is quite self-evident in his work. In *For Continuity* three decades earlier he had signalled the ominous quality of the term “highbrow” as a method of differentiating culture.²³⁵ In the last years of Leavis’ life he found cause to publish a

²³³ Whelan points out the ideological one-sidedness of Snow’s lecture, in which, having listed a selection of twentieth century writers who “paved the way for fascist dictators”, Snow makes some conspicuous omissions: “As a loyal man of the left, Snow neglected to cite George Bernard Shaw and (his especial hero) H.G. Wells whose support for Soviet communism helped to bring Stalin’s purges nearer”. Robert Whelan, “Introduction: Any Culture at All Would be Nice”, in Frank Furedi, and others, *From Two Cultures to No Culture: C.P. Snow’s ‘Two Cultures’ Lecture Fifty Years On* (London: Civitas, 2009), p. 2.

²³⁴ In 1965 Sir Edward Boyle, delivering the introduction to the first F.R. Leavis Lecture at Cambridge, provided an indication of the long-standing antipathy by qualifying that his involvement was non-partisan: “my presence here should not be interpreted as part of the Opposition campaign against the new Ministry of Technology” (Snow was appointed parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Technology in the House of Lords in 1964). Whether this comment was intended to prompt a laugh from the audience or not is unclear, but either way it demonstrates the perception of battle-lines drawn between Snow and Leavis in the popular mindset. W.W. Robson, *English as a University Subject* (Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 1.

²³⁵ *For Continuity*, p. 38. Baldick and Carey both draw attention to the significance of this term for Leavis’ later position, see *The Social Mission of English Criticism*, p. 163 and *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, p. 10. Interestingly, in the 1930s Snow was also foreshadowing the convictions that would lead to his eventual conflict with Leavis. Stefan Collini has noted that Snow’s debate with Leavis is pre-figured by his relationship to H.G. Wells, in particular in a review of the latter’s *Experiment in Autobiography* from 1934: Snow sympathises with Wells’ “urge for a planned world” and the fact that he is “the least nostalgic of great writers”, as well as demonstrating his irritation at the literary society which proved dismissive of Wells. As Collini describes it, “this early review already contains the seeds of his later attack on ‘literary intellectuals’ and ‘natural luddites’” (TC xxiii). The seeds of Leavis’ attack on Snow are also found in his attitude towards Wells at around the same time. In a 1932 review of *The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind*, in the first issue of *Scrutiny*, Leavis describes Wells as “a case, a type, a portent” in words that anticipate his famous dismissal in “Two Cultures?”

retrospective volume that addressed the *Two Cultures* affair and came as close to offering a reasonable justification for it as one might imagine: there is no attempt to backtrack or apologise. Leavis instead provides a socio-cultural context for the existence of C.P. Snow and his ideology, and explains his aversion to that, thus to a great extent nullifying the ad hominem nuances that were so widely read into his original response. This makes clear that the insults that many found so offensive in 1962, importantly, are neither personal nor vindictive. They are instead dismissive. Their purpose is to allow Leavis to remove any notion that he might consider Snow to be worthy, on his own merits, of taking the time to write about him. It is instead that which Snow is symptomatic of that Leavis considers important to address. In short, this is the scientific worldview and its belief in its own unlimited capacities. It is “Snow’s assurance” and “pervasive tone” that Leavis objects to; Snow’s establishment status and authority as a scientist and novelist grant his statements a tone of authority that Leavis seeks to dismantle (NSMS 41). Snow’s impression of history, in particular the industrial revolution, is “portentously ignorant”. Leavis emphasises his use of the word “portentously”: Snow is both a portent and a symbol of the age; unlike a Voltaire or an Erasmus, he is “characterised not by insight and spiritual energy”, but rather by “blindness, unconsciousness and automatism”. To Leavis, then, Snow represents all of the negative characteristics of industrial modernity made manifest. Snow manages this despite being “intellectually as undistinguished as it is possible to be” (NSMS 41-45).

Leavis’ response, in *Nor Shall My Sword*, to the Snow controversy extends across both the introductory materials and the first chapter. Yet the introduction of this volume begins, almost in media res, with a thought about Blake:

No one will suppose me to have forgotten how Blake’s stanza continues: he declares that *his sword shall not sleep in his hand*

Till we have built Jerusalem

The reasoning for this topic prefiguring the *Two Cultures* essay quickly becomes apparent. Leavis begins to talk about the value of failure as a literary topic. Blake’s Jerusalem, to the poet, is an unrealisable ideal, yet one to which Blake returns repeatedly. There is a yearning incompleteness in the line “Till we have built Jerusalem”. By working with an ongoing sense of his own limitation Blake

The Significance of Lord Snow”. Wells is portentous, much as Snow would later be, for believing that “the efficiency of the machinery becomes the ultimate value”. F.R. Leavis, “Babbitt Buys the World”, *Scrutiny*, 1 (1932), pp. 80-82. In the same issue, Leavis attacks the American critic Max Eastman for his Wellsian inclination to believe in the panacea offered by technological progress: “In short, he lives still in the age of H.G. Wells”. F.R. Leavis, “The Literary Mind”, *Scrutiny*, 1 (1932), p. 30. The scorn was deep-seated: in 1967 Leavis would still be disdainfully using phrases such as “neo-Wellsian euphoria” to describe a type of enthusiastic cultural ignorance (ELOT 59).

manages to invest the concept of his Jerusalem with a meaningful purpose, despite it not being a certainty: the fact that it is “a posited goal – or telos [...] that Blake constantly fails to make anything but posited”, only invests it with poetic-mythological value. Leavis points towards “Blake’s awareness of his failure”, particularly in his “explorations to arrive at a convincingly created suggestion of what would succeed the reversal of the Fall”, and in tying Blake specifically to the Fall of Man underlines the connection between his work and the usefulness of the Christian idea of a fixed, imperfect humanity. To Leavis, this is Blake’s particular value, and is what makes him a demonstrative precedent and comparison to C.P. Snow and the dogma of scientific modernity that the latter represents. Leavis cites Lawrence’s description of Blake as “one of those ghastly obscene knowers”, and in so demonstrates, through Lawrence, the continuation of a Blakean, anti-romantic chronology into the Modern or Modernist era:

the Laurentian ejaculation points to [...] a mark of the importance to us of the Blakean genius in face of the present human world.²³⁶

This sense of the continuity of ideas provides a foundation for a living, plausible alternative to what Snow’s vision of the world would entail for humanity. Blake is a paragon because of his insistent sense of what we might think of as “creative externality”: the assumption that his creativity did not belong to himself. In this way, Blake fulfils, for Leavis, the same role as Yeats for Blackmur, or Dante for Tate.²³⁷ Blake’s focus is the “self-dedication to a reality that we have to discover, knowing that discovery will at best be qualified by misapprehension and certainly incomplete.” Blake is therefore the unromantic romantic; his is a philosophy of limitation and uncertainty, rather than the typical romantic outlook of unchecked possibility and poetic overindulgence. This makes Blake a useful companion-piece to Leavis’ modern anti-scientific argument, which he compares specifically to romantic excess:

The Blakean sense of human responsibility is as much the antithesis of the defiant Byronic hubris as it is of the hubris of technologic-positivist enlightenment (NSMS 11-12)

Blake remains grounded and unromantic because, unlike his contemporaries, he retains a conventional religious orthodoxy: he is not the “great heresiarch” and “his doctrines fall within the general tradition of Christianity”. Pride and artistic hubris are avoided because he believed all his

²³⁶ For “ghastly, obscene knowers”, see D.H. Lawrence, “Edgar Allen Poe”, in *D.H. Lawrence: Selected Literary Criticism* (New York: Viking Press, 1966), p. 337.

²³⁷ In relation to the centrality of Dante in the estimation of Eliot and his (New Critical) followers (such as Tate), Leavis differentiated himself by sticking closer to home; according to MacKillop, who cites a letter to Ian Robinson: “Leavis always made a point of acknowledging the supremacy of Chaucer, partly to distance himself from Eliot’s alliance with Dante: ‘I can’t for the life of me why Dante should be exalted above Chaucer; the civilisation that produced Chaucer is the one I much prefer’.” *F.R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism*, p. 410.

intellectual efforts were really “the work of a higher power operating all his artistic creation through him.” To Blake, stark romantic individuality and human responsibility are distinct opposites, the latter requiring the externalising mediation of conventional or unconventional religious belief. Leavis uses Blake’s mythology to make a claim for the existence of a modern Urizen: “For Urizen [...]the important thing is that life shall be known, its possibilities determined” (NSMS 13-14). Urizen represents the scientific confidence in the absolute possibility of knowing: reason and law, which together aspire to measuring the universe. In Leavis’ terminology this is the technologico-Benthamite. To Blake, and therefore to Leavis, the creative and living impulse comes in the reaction against this force: “Wonder is the welcoming apprehension of the new, the anti-Urizenic recognition of the divined possibility.”

This creativity is defined by its irreducibility to any sort of measuring schema, whether Urizenic or technologico-Benthamite; in this aspect it transcends the centuries. The forces that seek to oppress it are as active in Blake’s time as in Leavis’: “[it] can’t be exhaustively reduced to the determined, whatever some biologists may still hope” (NSMS 15). Despite the idiosyncrasy of his personal beliefs, Christian tradition offered the means for Blake to carry out his rejection of positivism. To Leavis, this orthodox focus is “inevitable”, much like the necessity of the theme of the Fall for Blake as the metaphor that underlines most pronouncedly the importance of the teleological focus on the unachievable. This is the telos of creative effort: Blake’s Jerusalem or Eternal Man, the eternally unknowable yet the eternally strived-towards. Leavis summarises, “How could there *but* be failure?” Yet the effort is all. It is this constant sense of failure that serves to challenge the absolutism of the scientific or romantic mindset that, to Leavis, represents everything that is toxic in modernity.

Leavis defines Blake as a “profound psychologist”. This is due to Blake’s self-constructed criteria for the “poet”, in particular the maxims that “Truth only exists in minutely ordered particulars” and “To generalise is to be an idiot”. In seeing people as individuals, rather than in general, abstract terms, Blake’s psychological ability becomes more pronounced than that of E.M. Forster who, in Lawrence’s words (as quoted by Leavis), sees “people, people and nothing but people ad nauseam.” Life, in a meaningful perspective, only exists in the terms of individuality and the attendant disparities it brings, “the interacting energies, the disharmonies, the conflicts and the transmutations [...] of humanity as it is.” This “profound psychology” of Blake is an anti-scientific one. The implication is that reliance on statistics, population and mass survey for one’s assumptions about humanity inevitably lead to a fallacious understanding of human nature. Blake’s individuating perspective, for all its value, inevitably undermines the romantic gesture of defining or realising his attempted vision of the “Eternal Man” in the restored, absolute condition: “How can Man be brought before us unless

as a man?" (NSMS 16-17) To Leavis this verges on being "arrestingly paradoxical" and sets Blake up for inevitable and inexorable failure: "The Eternal Man and Jerusalem can't even by Blake be imagined; there can be no presentation of them in terms of 'minute particulars'." Yet it is in the comportment towards the unknowable that Blake's poetic value is most explicit, as Los, "creativity in the fallen human condition". He is committed to knowing where knowing is impossible, and it is the self-sense of limitation that results that provides a divine sense of humility in addition to a poetic one. Leavis traces this through to Lawrence as well: "Lawrence might have said of his own works what Blake said of his paintings and designs: 'though I call them mine, I know they are not mine.'" Through Blake and Lawrence, Leavis defines an anti-romantic tradition that has the potential to provide an alternative to the worldview of which Snow is a symptom. Leavis points out that the reason for his antipathy to this is not merely anti-scientific:

this anti-industrial conviction is incidental to my great reason for insisting on Blake. To associate his name with my theme and attitude is to emphasise that I have a positive theme, and that it and my attitude are truly positive[...] I am not a satiric polemicist who takes a cruel and wanton pleasure in attacking "poor Charles" (NSMS 19-20).

Leavis seems to be making the point that "anti-industrialism" is a misrepresentative term. By virtue of it being an anti it carries the connotation of negativity. Why should "industrialism" carry the positive aspect of a default term, and the negative position be ascribed to its opposite; perhaps it would be more appropriate to refer to industrialism as "anti-nature" or "anti-human responsibility"? Moreover, Leavis is stating that "industrialism" is a small part of the system he is describing, a consequence of it, not a key cause. Science is not what causes man's problems; rather, it is the thing that causes science that is the primordial problem. Primarily he is sketching out the duality between two opposite realities: one of which is a human-focused mindset that exists prior to anything that follows. It is from this that one can derive a respect for individual diversity and a rejection of totalising systems, just as "industrialism" follows from the mindset that rejects human responsibility. Although the anti-industrial aspects of Leavis' argument might seem ostensibly negative, they are overshadowed by the essential positivity of the creative, human tradition that he is importing from Blake and Lawrence: the unselfishness that comes from "a living reality that is not his selfhood". To Leavis this is a fundamentally religious attitude. As Paul Dean writes,

Leavis associates the religious with the transcending of ego and the impersonal objectivity of inquiry, which he counts among the marks of great art. This is why Lawrence is for Leavis a religious writer, in a wholly good sense [...] Lawrence, bearing witness against Cartesian dualism, is in the line from Dickens, who protests against the world of Mill and Bentham, and

of Blake, who protests against the world of Locke and Newton – all that Leavis would label, following Aldous Huxley, “Scientism”. The affirmation of the artist’s creative responsibility in the face of scientism is essentially religious.²³⁸

Religion is, like literature, a defence against modernity.²³⁹ It serves to arrest and prevent the individual mind from removing itself from the world and forgetting its essential limited humanness. According to Leavis, a positive consequence of the failure of romantic individuality is social co-dependency. This is principally what Leavis (channelling Blake) refers to when he talks about human responsibility in a “positive” sense. To dispose of self-sufficiency and self-obsession is to instinctively realise the value of other people and the necessity of meaningful collaboration. To do so one must not see the scientific “people” but see instead the “interacting energies” of persons (NSMS 18-20). This social exigency offers, to Leavis, a realistic counter to the dehumanising progress of positivism, and reaches its highest manifestation in his vision of the university. The university is “the answer to a present extremely urgent need of civilization” - specifically it offers “a way to save cultural continuity, that continuous collaborative renewal which keeps the ‘heritage’ of perception, judgment, responsibility and spiritual awareness alive”. The university is therefore “humanity’s chance of escaping the disasters from which scientists, technologists and economists, as such and alone, cannot save us.” (NSMS 27)

The body of Leavis’ argument, and inevitably, the entire book, is consciously directed towards the educated minorities of the university environment. He acknowledges that “it would be pointless of course to think of adducing Blake for the persuasion of politicians”, but this does not necessarily make the whole exercise futile as “creative change is not initiated by majorities” (NSMS 34). The prescription for the future, then, is to see to the “forming, reinforcing and multiplying” of society’s “vital – it’s generative – centres” (NSMS 36). The study of English Literature is at the heart of this; Leavis envisions it as the central discipline of the humanities.

We must wonder, if the university presents the sole area where cultural continuity might be kept alive, what Leavis forecasts for the rest of society? It is, in his forecast, a future where unchecked technological progress both “menaces civilization itself” whilst ensuring a “higher standard of living”. Progress brings about a “disorder” that cannot be cured “even by the elimination of venereal disease

²³⁸ Paul Dean, “Leavis on Tragedy”, *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (April 2016), pp. 189-205, pp. 198-199.

²³⁹ Leavis’ view of the value of religion is ambiguous. It *can* serve as a bulwark against the romantic veneration of self, but this role might well be served by something more optimal. Bell relates Leavis to the modern truism of the “replacement of religion with art or the aesthetic”, concluding that Leavis “demurs at the slogan but delivers much of the meaning”. Michael Bell, “Creativity and Pedagogy in Leavis”, *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (April 2016), pp. 171-188, p. 186.

and every inhibition" (NSMS 37). The eventual consequence, Leavis implies, is the destabilisation of human identity to the extent that the definition of human becomes blurred with that of machine, the latter even possessing ascendancy as it comes to define us more than we define it. To Leavis, this is an inevitable end-point of positivism and its desire to subjugate and automate as much of nature as possible:

that the kind of resolute statistico-egalitarian reductivism [...] in education will triumph, the progress towards that goal being, by the enlightened, acclaimed as all in keeping with man's accelerating conquest of nature.

It is the subtlety of technological progress that Leavis finds most unsettling, its capacity to overwhelm and destroy what is human without even making people aware it is happening. This fact is effectively hidden by making people progressively more subdued and satisfied. He calls this "the most frightening thing about our civilization", the "non-recognition [that] derives from the insidious way in which, depending as we do on mysterious mechanisms [...] we are inevitably unable to separate the human use of mechanisms from being used by them" (NSMS 34-35). It is in this context we can understand what Leavis means when he talks about the "pregnant directness calculated to make an impact" in the quotation "If men were exterminated [...] the production of machines would stop" (NSMS 23). Leavis is telling us that technological advancement, the inexorable rush forward of science through machine production, seems so natural that it has become intrinsically shocking to think that man came before the machine or the computer. In essence, it has become difficult to conceive that machines need people, rather than the usual accepted day-to-day truth of modern life that people need machines. Leavis cites the extreme example of a correspondent who brought to his notice "the unquestionable fact that homo sapiens is obsolete" (NSMS 33).

Leavis is not afraid to tie this theory into the contemporary political environment, and talks about the growing threat of "becoming European".²⁴⁰ The particular problem with this seems to be that it would place a higher order of anti-cultural, pro-industrial structures on top of those which already exist; the mechanisms that stand in the way of "getting the essential human problem attended to" will "become more formidable" and as such lessen the already minimal potential for any form of cultural renewal (NSMS 36). The anti-industrial tendency that Leavis recommends is one which focuses on a form of cultural miniaturisation, digging out and identifying the unique parts of society's traditional culture. The larger and more centralised a society becomes, and the more layers that are piled on top of this essential base-layer, the harder it is to reach back to a smaller culture's

²⁴⁰ See "Further Considerations" in *Thought, Words and Creativity* for Leavis' thoughts on joining the EEC, pp. 149-150.

roots. Obsolete demarcations such as a county, a town or a village, and their attendant cultures, can come to seem largely ridiculous in comparison to the pan-cultural reach of globalisation and the instant delivery of entertainment from any of the many organs of global media. Although the doomsday scenario predicted in Leavis' essay seems extreme, especially when we remember that this book is largely a response to a well-meaning public lecture given by the avuncular C.P. Snow, it is important to recall that Leavis isn't directly talking about Snow or the *Two Cultures*, but rather what they are symptomatic of, and what this larger force will inevitably lead to. His intention seems consistently to do what he can to arrest this development, primarily to introduce a Blakean/Laurentian idea of creativity founded on externality, inevitable failure and human limitation to educated pockets of literary study.

Leavis' Later Work on the Romantics

Towards the end of his life, Leavis became increasingly focused on his idea of establishing a space in which an educated, literary public who could keep alive the living tradition that he felt was at threat. In his last volumes of essays, published posthumously, Leavis becomes increasingly insistent that the "vital urgency of this human need is more intense than ever before" and that "the urgency is extreme; disaster that threatens to be final is imminent" (CAP 176, 185). Leavis is blunt and direct in pointing out what he sees as the major problem that threatens society. He talks about politicians as a symptom of the time more than a problem on their own terms. The fact that "the triumph of democratic egalitarianism is disastrous for humanity" is something that Leavis is confident any intelligent politician with "brains" (in his example the liberal Jeremy Thorpe) would recognise, although he knows they wouldn't say it (CAP 171). Democratic politics reflects the dominant mode of the times as it has to by its nature. By acting in the spirit of the sentiment "politics is the art of the possible", the politician is propagandising the romantic ideology of the perfectibility of society and partaking in the reductive logic of scientific / industrial modernity. To Leavis, the democratic politician's fixation with quantity of votes is analogous to a factory foreman's concern for maximum production: "A politician's dominant aim must be to win elections, and in our civilisation the quantitative concept has conquered". Culture and tradition, aspects of society related to quality, suffer as a consequence in this quantitative schema because they are not evaluated as possessing any tangible worth. With this logic, Leavis can make the claim that "the pursuit of the 'democratic' ideal has led to a disastrous loss of standards" (CAP 183-184).

Leavis sees the literary elite as the last holdout of the values of traditional culture, even "religious leaders more and more betray, speaking out of their modern enlightenment". He turns again to Lawrence, who "didn't act on his own conclusion: 'There is nothing to be done'", and from this

example urges that “the life is in us too, and makes it impossible for us to wait inertly for the overt disaster – which is now imminent” (CAP 185). Leavis’ language has by this point become as epochal as that of Snow in 1962. Leavis’ exhortations bear out his conviction to not go quietly into the good night; the gnawing impossibility of what he is prescribing for social renewal suggests a fatalism that he is overtly and determinately resisting. Bearing this in mind, he consciously seeks to counter accusations that could be levelled at the absurdity of his position, that of Leavis the “one-man reformer” single-handedly holding back the tide of industrialism.²⁴¹ He makes clear that “there has been no question of any attempt, or desire, on my part to prove that a present-day university could be “reformed” in accordance with any conception of mine” (CAP 182). Instead, his ambition is to encourage an idea of continuity and renewal: “The important thing is that the seed shall be sown, allowed to strike deep and root itself strongly, so that the idea is robustly alive – living and potent as an influence.” The university is essential for this: the “living seed is extinguished” without the “essential university-function to protect and foster its growth” (CAP 184). Once again Leavis writes off most of society as being beyond help, but seeks to arrest this degradation in the vital centres of culture. His means of carrying this out is by validating the unquantifiable aspects of life to provide a stark contrast to the reductive logic of quantity that dominates the rest of society, such as in science, politics and business.

Leavis’ use of Blake to make this argument was a consistent project of his final years. An essay, “Justifying One’s Valuation of Blake”, which appears in this posthumous volume, reasserts Blake’s “major value” and “peculiar importance for our time.” Leavis begins with a question about the teaching of Blake to undergraduates: “what kind of approach should one make it one’s aim to develop in working with students in a university English school?” His answer to that question does not seem immediately helpful in any practical educational sense; he writes “It is one’s responsibility to warn the student against being hopeful of light and profit to be got from the Blake authorities and the Blake literature”. It doesn’t seem that Leavis is telling the reader that his is the definitive interpretation of Blake and that therefore reading anything else is a waste of time. Rather, he is emphasising the value of Blake for his particular purpose of fostering a creative and resolutely anti-modern position. Further, Leavis writes that the student “should be told unequivocally that none of the elaborated prophetic works is a successful work of art” (CAP 1-2). Blake’s failure, his lack of knowledge, his essential limitation, these are the lessons from Blake that Leavis seeks to teach. There is nothing positive to be said for “the kind of Blake research of which Miss Kathleen Raine is the recognised high-priestess in our time”. Leavis rejects the idea that romantic insight should be the

²⁴¹ In *The Living Principle*, Leavis mockingly asserts that “another refugee in a never-never land of the past is F.R. Leavis” and points out how “F.R. Leavis (for instance) thinks that the world can be saved by literary criticism” (LP 29, 50).

ultimate end of reading Blake's poetry - he dismisses this idea as if it were that of a deluded cult: "The notion that by a devout study of Blake's symbolism a key can be found that will open to us a supreme esoteric wisdom is absurd" (CAP 18). At the same time, however, Leavis dismisses the idea of Blake that Eliot expresses in *The Sacred Wood*, summarised in Eliot's statement:

What his genius required, and what it sadly lacked, was a framework of accepted and traditional ideas which would have prevented him from indulgence in a philosophy of his own (CAP 7)

Leavis revaluation of Blake is founded entirely on the fact that the poet did indeed rely on external structures. This is why he offers an anti-romantic lesson. Accordingly Leavis rejects Eliot's idea that Blake did not possess such a framework and sees Eliot's accusation as a product of his lack of cultural inclusiveness, citing "plenty of evidence that a traditional popular culture [...] affect[ed] his [Blake's] poetic use of the English language" in addition to a "starting point" in Shakespeare from which Blake created his poetic foundation.²⁴² Leavis' accusation against Eliot is that he has an "inadequate conception of the 'traditional'" which "enfeebles his thought both as a critic and a poet" (CAP 11). Leavis sees Eliot's "ironical" approach to Blake as symptomatic predominately of his own prejudices.²⁴³ In this we can perceive the main divergence point between Leavis and most of the New Critics; in the latter group, the impetus is towards an Eliotish conformity to traditional structures, but Leavis' tendency is to emphasise the individual, human creativity that Blake represents. This does not undermine Leavis' rejection of romantic excess and its consequences for modern society; instead it demonstrates his emphasis on human responsibility to overcome it, rather than unyielding conformity to arbitrarily-defined "sensibilities" in literary history (although Leavis certainly participates in that habit when it suits him). Blake's "humanism" expresses itself in the belief that it is only by being individuals, conscious of our own flaws and limitations, that we might become responsible in a "humanistic" sense:

Blake's thought expressed in his insistence that Man, concretely "there" only in the individual human being and governed by his knowledge that he doesn't belong to himself, is responsible for determining what his responsibility is (CAP 19).

²⁴² In this we can see a demonstration of Leavis' "cultural" approach in contrast to the narrower, purely "literary" focus of Eliot and the New Criticism more generally. Evidence of Leavis' concern for alternative routes of cultural influence are mentioned by Roy Holland, who provides the example of Leavis' "two Northern lines" of influence behind Shakespeare, one of which being traditional English folklore. Roy Holland, *F.R. Leavis: The Gnome of Cambridge* (Alloa: Diadem Books, 2011), p. 22.

²⁴³ Elsewhere Leavis sees Eliot as guilty of "a most gravely disabling ignorance" in his romantic vision of pre-industrial England (LP 195). The complexities of Leavis and Eliot's struggle over Lawrence's "literary remains" is explored in Brian Crick and Michael DiSanto, "D.H. Lawrence, 'An opportunity and a test': The Leavis-Eliot Controversy Revisited", *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (June 2009), pp. 130-146.

There is an almost existential tone to Leavis' description of Blake's philosophy, but one mediated by its recognition of the importance of bonding individual limitation to creative inspiration. It is in this sense that man can be "working creatively though unpossessed of any vision of an ultimate goal", because "possessing an achieved knowledge of ultimate solutions and ultimate goals is not for poets and artists" (CAP 22). Here Leavis repeats, almost verbatim, the sentiments he expressed in the essay on Blake published ten years before:

the ambition to possess an achieved knowledge of ultimate solutions and ultimate goals is neither for poet and artists nor for those who tackle the human problem at the level I here propose for my own attempts (CAP 25).

In the later essay, however, "those who tackle the human problem" are instead defined as:

those among us who, figured by Los, know that their business is to get the conscious and full human responsibility that the crisis of the human world calls for awakened and vindicated (CAP 22).

In the intervening decade between these two statements the importance of Blake to defining a strategy that might arrest society's decline has become seemingly more pronounced. In a 1969 essay Leavis concludes that "the Romantic era's great permanent contribution" is "a new sense of human responsibility". Yet this is a very cautious approach – Shelley, for example, is frequently dismissed as "a naive idealist" and Leavis' use of the word "Shelleyan" is as a synonym for "self-ignorant" in a later essay on Wordsworth.²⁴⁴ (ELOT 106, CAP 31) Leavis sees a degree of value in Wordsworth and Coleridge and recommends their being taught, but like the teaching of Blake, this comes with heavy caveats. Successive essays on Wordsworth and Coleridge both begin in a similar fashion, with short commending statements:

That Wordsworth is a great poet seems to me certain.

That Coleridge was a rarely gifted mind is a commonplace (CAP 24, 41).

After this initial magnanimity, however, Leavis' tone becomes more guarded. Coleridge should only be approached "by way of reservation and caveat"; he was "brilliantly gifted" but his "currency as an academic classic is something of a scandal" (CAP 52). Coleridge's philosophy is venerated due to a "transcendental aura" (much like the Blake "cult") which disguises the fact that his criticism is only "awed vagueness" and "confused response" (CAP 42). Coleridge, for Leavis, is an important figure in

²⁴⁴ This essay, "Wordsworth: The Creative Conditions", Leavis regarded as "one of the best things I've done". Cited in *F.R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism*, p. 405.

the history of criticism, due largely to his role as a conduit for German philosophical ideas into English, and although he managed to embody the “creative imagination” that Leavis values (instead of only “imagination”) his critical ineptness ensured that he failed to “make the Romantic tradition, of which he was an acclaimed founding father, aware of the difference” (CAP 46). Leavis is substantially more favourable towards Wordsworth, whose rustic ideals and individualism allowed him to escape from what Leavis terms “positive culture”; he characterises his “greatness” as both creative individuality and a position of anti-positivism. These are explicitly tied to Blake’s example: “The word ‘creative’ as Wordsworth keeps bringing it conveys a Blakean insistence – the Blakean protest or testimony, against the universes of Newton or Locke.” (VC 301)

If we imagine Leavis’ evaluative spectrum of the Romantic poets as having Blake at one extreme and Shelley at the other, then Wordsworth is much closer to the Blake end: he is described as “notably un-Shelleyan” and Leavis characterises his poetic approach as concerned with ultimate failure and a rejection of typical romantic ideals (CAP 26). In *The Ruined Cottage*, “the wanderer” represents the figure that Wordsworth aspires to attain through an act of imaginative realisation; yet the poem suggests a continuous sense of it being beyond reach: “So little can the actual Wordsworth achieve such assured tranquillity that he is tormented by a compulsion that makes him expose himself to the contemplating he can hardly endure.” The poem attains a balance between romantic creativity and a sense of human limitation, the “easy cheerfulness” of the wanderer contrasts with its “utter attainableness” (CAP 35). For Leavis this force is “equipoise”, a “poignant livingness [that] unsays any promise of finality, or permanence” (CAP 38). Wordsworth’s poetic values at this point are tied specifically to his political experiences, in particular his perceptions of the French Revolution in which, as a young man, he had been so psychically invested; consequently, “his own innocent assumptions and his exalted faith were brutally questioned by actualities; the Revolution, in the accepted phrase, devoured its children” (CAP 37). Leavis sees this sequence of events as a definitive cause of Wordsworth’s cynicism towards overarching romantic sentiment in both politics and poetry: “in his reaction against the idea of revolution he fostered his equipoise”. This is reflected in *The Ruined Cottage*, in which “no simple formulation, no easily summarisable doctrine, can be adequate to the human state – which is what the poem explicitly says.” Wordsworth’s poetry reflects his worldview, and Leavis sees here an early prefiguring of the poet’s eventual turn towards conservatism: “the equipoise settles into security”, as such, “there is nothing insincere or censurable [...] in his development into the Tory Anglican” (CAP 39-40). It is difficult not to imagine that Leavis doesn’t see a useful paradigm in Wordsworth; particularly his first-hand exposure to the failure of romantic rhetoric and subsequent turn away from it and his capacity to simultaneously retain his fundamentally poetic imaginative creativity.

Marxism and technologico-Benthamism

In his strategies for teaching (effectively recommendations on how to present Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge to a classroom), Leavis makes clear the importance of emphasis on imaginative creativity and human responsibility. Unrestrained romantic excess should be guarded against and poetry that provides an anti-romantic sensibility is encouraged. This is a recurring theme of his later years and reflects the centrality he ascribed to the rejection of technologico-Benthamism in both cultural and literary fields. This is also reflected in the various “discursive” philosophers Leavis would idiosyncratically find value in and recommend to students, such as Michael Polanyi, R.G. Collingwood and Marjorie Grene. Michael Polanyi, in particular, is used by Leavis to provide an independent support for a Blakean worldview over the “fallaciousness of positivism”.²⁴⁵ Although Leavis does not acknowledge it, Polanyi’s theories are essentially those of Heidegger with very little added (at least the parts that are put to use by Leavis): statements such as “an exact mathematical theory means nothing unless we recognise an inexact non-mathematical knowledge on which it bears” and “our understanding of living beings involves at all times a measure of indwelling” are essentially formulas for Dasein and the pre-reflexivity defined in *Being and Time*.²⁴⁶ Leavis seems to be including this scientific digression simply to justify the idea of the Blakean unknowable to those who wouldn’t be satisfied with literature alone, in particular the philosopher who “assured me that a computer can write a poem”.²⁴⁷ (NSMS 21-24) Polanyi and the others are of use because they can be co-opted to

²⁴⁵ Polanyi’s interaction with and use by the “enemy”, the ideological left, is explored in Tim Rogan, “Karl Polanyi at the Margins of English Socialism, 1934-1947”, *Modern Intellectual History*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2013), pp. 317-346. For Polanyi’s response to the Snow-Leavis affair, see Mary Jo Nye, *Michael Polanyi and his Generation: Origins of the Social Construction of Science* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011), pp. 291-293.

²⁴⁶ The link between Heidegger and Leavis himself is explored in a comprehensive chapter by Bell, who writes “the nearest philosophical model for Leavis’ conception of language is provided by Martin Heidegger [...] Heidegger combines a view of language strikingly similar to Leavis’ with a major philosophical intelligence.” Michael Bell, *F.R. Leavis* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 36. Contrastingly, Hilliard’s book has no mention of Heidegger, and dismisses the philosophical significance of Leavis for philosophy more generally, referring to his “doubts that the encounter between Leavisians and Wittgenstein’s philosophy (and the work of Michael Polanyi and Marjorie Grene) [...] has been as anywhere near as significant in this sphere as were Scrutiny’s contributions elsewhere.” *English as a Vocation*, p.16. Another recent critic has described how “Leavis willy-nilly found himself doing philosophy”. Ian Robinson, “Leavisian Thinking”, *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (April 2016), pp. 127-135, p. 135. Leavis’ own words on the topic seem fairly decisive: “I think of myself as an anti-philosopher, which is what a literary critic ought to be” (*Thought, Words and Creativity*, p.34).

²⁴⁷ Elsewhere Leavis states quite decisively: “It is a principle that means death: this is the age when a computer can write a poem” (LP 43). Interestingly, there seems to be a foreshadowing here of Dreyfus’ application of Heideggerian philosophy to AI: Dreyfus laboured to prove that a computer couldn’t, in fact, write a poem or equivalent activity and used the philosophy of Polanyi in his theory. See Hubert L. Dreyfus, *What Computers Still Can’t Do: A Critique of Artificial Reason* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), especially p. 32 and p. 252. If this is not foreshadowing then it is synchronicity of sorts, as both Leavis’ and Dreyfus’ books were first published in 1972. It is similarly possible to perceive a parallel with Leavis in Dreyfus’ more general views on technological society: “The real danger, then, is not the destruction of nature or culture nor a self-indulgent consumerism, but a new totalising style of practices that would restrict our openness to people and things by driving out all

support Leavis' concept of the "Third Realm", a "collaborative space between discourses" which emphasises an essential unknowable element to discourse.²⁴⁸ Sauerberg points out that this idea is central to Leavis' advocacy of "intuitive" readings in criticism through his vision of historical process:

Leavis' particular intuition determining his literary preferences becomes, on closer inspection, a general intuition derived from a set of tacit assumptions about an evolutionary culture with a long history, discontinued or overshadowed in periods by revolutionary upsurges. It is a culture which is at heart conservative and rationalistic. Conservative because it preserves values proven by time and hence not subject to questioning. Rationalistic since these values are the result not of metaphysical speculations but of a trial-and-error procedure conducted through the generations.²⁴⁹

Although it manifests in numerous forms, Leavis' principal concern is always a rejection of utopian or perfectibilist thinking, whether it be that of romantic poets, C.P. Snow, H.G. Wells or the Marxists. Ideas such as "intuition" and "non-mathematical knowledge" serve the same purpose of presenting an unknowable quality to culture or literature that might otherwise be easily co-opted into an ends-oriented agenda. In the 1930s, Leavis published articles addressing the ideology of Marxism, of which the most prominent was *Under Which King, Bezonian?* (a response to George Santayana and others, who had asked for a definition of *Scrutiny's* philosophy). The rejection of Marxism here apparent in the mid-1930s mirrors the response to Snow decades later; the speculative societies proposed by both are similar inasmuch as they are consequences of technologico-Benthamite thinking. It is perhaps a unique accomplishment of Leavis that he rejected capitalism and communism for exactly the same reason.²⁵⁰ He makes reference to "the process of civilization that produced, among other things, the Marxian dogma" (VC 44). This process of civilisation is the one initiated by the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, which served to destabilise "the delicate organic growth that human culture is". That which is lost is "an art of living, involving codes, developed in ages of continuous experience, of relations between man and man, and man and environment in seasonal rhythm" (VC 40). It is only because of the void that resulted from such a loss that ideologies of this type can take hold.

other styles of practice that enable us to be receptive to reality." Hubert L. Dreyfus and Charles Spinosa, "Further Reflections on Heidegger, Technology, and the Everyday", in *Philosophical Romanticism*, ed. by Nikolas Kompridis (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 268.

²⁴⁸ See *F.R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism*, p. 392. The links between Leavis' idea of a "third realm" and his concept of tradition is explored in Ian Robinson, "Leavisian Thinking", pp. 127-136. To Harrison, Leavis is aligned with Wittgenstein in his third realm's concern for "language as living". Bernard Harrison, "Leavis and Wittgenstein", *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (April 2016), pp. 206-225, p. 209.

²⁴⁹ Lars Ole Sauerberg, *Versions of the Past – Visions of the Future: The Canonical in the Criticism of T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis, Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom* (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 66.

²⁵⁰ Although in this he was representative, to an extent, of a not-uncommon New Critical conviction.

In frequently describing communism and capitalism in the same terms, tracing a combined origin and even failing to differentiate them in the course of an argument, Leavis is mocking the two extremes who would define themselves by their mutual difference. Gary Day goes as far as to say that Leavis was in some ways more “revolutionary” than the Marxists themselves:

Marxism, like capitalism, addressed itself only to economic matters not cultural ones and hence there was a profound continuity between the two systems. Leavis, by contrast, wanted to undermine capitalism by promoting a cultural sensibility whose values were opposed to it.²⁵¹

The Marxist dogma, at Leavis defines it, “is to aim, whether wittingly or not, at completing the work of capitalism and its products, the cheap car, the wireless and the cinema” (VC 44). The Marxist is particularly worthy of ridicule, it seems, for although he participates in the same industrial reductivism as the capitalist, he does so with a carefully constructed veneer of self-delusion about what the future holds; as Leavis phrases it, “the future has been forecast in California” (VC 42). Most of the disdain Leavis feels for Marxism is due to his perception of it as a form of intellectual cowardice, just as he is contemptuous of any who “see salvation in a formula or in any simple creed”, in particular “the attraction of Marxism is its simplicity: it absolves from the duty of wrestling with complexities” (VC 38, VC 33). Co-opting a famous statement of Lenin’s, Leavis refers to Marxism as “the alcohol of the intellectual, warming and exalting, obliterating difficulties, and incapacitating for elementary discriminations” (VC 51). Its terminology is fuzzy and non-specific; its imprecision means that orthodoxy can constantly shift to different emphases, hence the rise and fall of various central factions in Russia, such as the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks and others, “pure” Marxism, Leninism, Trotskyism, Stalinism, etc. As Leavis puts it, “one never knows what definitions, the Marxist, when challenged, will produce from under the blanket”. Nonetheless, there is an appearance of thoroughness, an “algebraic rigour” in Marxian dialectic that is, however, entirely “illusory”. Leavis describes Leon Trotsky variously as “dangerously intelligent”, “unusually intelligent” and “cultivated”, principally because he seemed the most capable of realising the truth that culture cannot be created and must be continuous and fundamentally traditional: “Trotsky knows that behind the word ‘culture’ there is something that cannot be explained by the ‘methods of production’ and that it would be disastrous to destroy as bourgeois.” This is an “un-Marxian truth” and its elucidation is one of Leavis’ principal *modus operandi*. Trotsky’s realisation of this truth, and the subsequent nuance it imparted to his ideas, was responsible, Leavis implies, for his being left behind by the political machinery: it “perhaps has something to do with his misfortune”

²⁵¹ *Re-reading Leavis*, p. 111.

(VC 39-43). Marxism thrives on ignorance, a “Marxian blanket” of imprecision, and “the simplifying dialectic itself works like a machine” (VC 51). There would be no room for Trotsky’s subtlety and inclusiveness in this political environment. Yet even the relatively nuanced cultural outlook Trotsky described, if applied, would ultimately be a failure; Trotsky sought to liberate culture and render it autonomous, “independent of any economic, technical or social system”. What would be left is a “rootless culture” in possession of no attachments to any living tradition and incapable of the type of “cultural regeneration” that the Russians had, at that time, made assurances was happening behind the Iron Curtain (VC 42).

Despite this, it would not be entirely fair to label Leavis a virulent anti-communist. He often seems quite sympathetic to the humanitarian agendas of certain party members and their attempts to arrest the cultural degeneration brought about by industrialism. He even concedes “some form of economic communism to be inevitable and desirable” (VC 50). Rather he pities the simultaneous innocence and ignorance that would recommend the subduing of culture to “methods of production” as a solution; it demonstrates only “the naivest faith in the capacity of the human spirit for self-direction” (VC 35). Communism is shaped by modernity and therefore also the breach in tradition that resulted from earlier centuries. The idea of “bourgeois” culture is one that only makes sense by virtue of “the Marxist dogma and the Marxist dialectic”, the “illusory” alternative to a system that it is actually carrying out the work of. The idea of “class war” in socialist rhetoric is similarly illusory, as “class of the kind that can justify talk about ‘class culture’ has long been extinct”. There can’t be said to be a “working class” of any meaningful quality as that class has been destroyed already through the severance of its traditional culture by industrialism. If anything, communism seeks to widen the breach between the modern worker and his ancestral culture. It is in this context that Leavis can say that “the values of the working class [...] are inevitably those induced by the modern environment”, as a consequence of a divorce between life and occupation that industrialism has brought about (VC 43-44). Those who work on farms no longer have a farmer’s culture, for example. Instead, modern work is “the antithesis of living” and culture, such as it is, has been supplanted by “leisure”, for which one “saves up living for after work hours”. Into this cultural void the Marxist system instead injects a cultish worship of industrial process, “enthusiasm for Five Year Plans, the sense of a noble cause, or romantic worship of mechanical efficiency”, to replace the invested involvement in working, living culture that was taken for granted before. Leavis predicts the eventual universality of the leisure class, its “special moral disadvantage” and anticipates a time when “we are all leisured”. The consequences for culture would be fatal, as Leavis makes clear in a damning indictment: “a class without social function tends to produce decadent poetry” (VC 41).

To Leavis, cultural degradation is an inevitable product of both communism and capitalism. As we have seen, Leavis' principal issue with either is in their essential lack of difference, and the lack of self-awareness on the part of their advocates. The title of the essay, "Under Which King, Bezonian?" (an allusion to *Henry IV, Part Two*, in which Pistol demands a statement of loyalty) implies the divisiveness of ideology and assumption of belonging to respective "camps" and flying their colours. Greenwood sees one of Leavis' great strengths to be his advocacy of a contrasting, non-ideological "third way": "it can reasonably be claimed that what Leavis provided was a way of grappling with moral problems without commitment to discredited substantive ideologies."²⁵² Bell, however, writes that Leavis' idea of Marxism, that against which *Scrutiny* positioned itself, was in fact a "vulgar Marxism", intrinsically linked to the Communist Party: "Since then the essential impact of a sophisticated Marxism has increasingly moved into the mainstream of all cultural disciplines including literary criticism."²⁵³ The Marxism that Leavis finds fault with is, like scientific industrialism, an ideology of perfectibility, and it is this specific quality which earned his scorn across the decades. He does not seem to acknowledge any conciliatory aspect to its integration into the mainstream academic disciplines over the years. He is instead consistent in his central belief that any ideology fails to offer a strategy to reverse cultural decline, despite claims by both sides; in the Communist East, "mechanical efficiency should be a religion for Russia" and "the West can imagine a 'technocratic' or 'planned economy' America". Neither takes any account of culture or individual humanity and "the finer human values have [...] been left behind for good in capitalist Progress" (VC 51-52).

After the 1930s Leavis' style changes somewhat, as Ian MacKillop summarises: he was "becoming more cautious of big statements about modern malaises" and "had begun to think apocalyptic statements were indulgent".²⁵⁴ The focus of his cultural critique largely does not shift, however, and he addresses Snow as a symptom of a wider problem, much as he had approached Marxism and H.G. Wells in the same way in the 1930s and much as he had always approached the utopian optimism of the technologico-Benthamite outlook. The impetus to address Snow in particular was largely, I would argue, a simple desire to counter the excesses of praise that Snow had been receiving for *The Two Cultures* in the popular media, and balance out the debate to some extent by offering a contrary opinion. Leavis' resolution to move away from the "big statements" of his 1930s essays lasted successfully for decades. Yet as a result of the alarmingly misguided views of C.P. Snow, the congratulatory audience his lecture received and the influence it allowed him to wield (as one critic

²⁵² Edward Greenwood, *F.R. Leavis* (London: Longman, 1978), p. 26.

²⁵³ Bell, *F.R. Leavis*, p. 21.

²⁵⁴ *F.R. Leavis, A Life in Criticism*, p. 204.

describes it, “Snow walked the corridors of international power”), Leavis abandoned his conviction and once again waded once again into a debate of apocalyptic statements.²⁵⁵

The Snow-Leavis debate set the tone for the rest of Leavis’ career. Technologico-Benthamism and the means of addressing it made up (directly or indirectly) the principal theme of most of the volumes published after the event. This was obviously not a new theme for Leavis, it merely became more pronounced and obvious and the “vital centre” of the university, envisioned as a palliative for cultural decline, became a primary focus. The 1967 volume, *English Literature in our Time and the University*, is the apex of this tendency, reflecting Leavis’ desire to change the modern definition of a university from a “mere collocation of specialist departments”. It also carries a hallmark of this stage of Leavis’ career, inasmuch as it is very politically engaged, unlike his earlier work (post the 1930s “anti-Marxist” phase). For example, Leavis denigrates the modern concept of the university as proposed by politicians:

neither the College of Technology exalted (to Mr Harold Wilson’s satisfaction) into a degree-conferring university, nor the Open University [...] is a university in what it is my business to insist on as the important sense (ELOT 2-3).

This “important sense” is of course the capability to carry forward creative continuity; indications of the modern university’s failure to complete this vital process are found in the rise of “wanton destructiveness” and a “still spreading drug habit” (presumably amongst students). To Leavis, America represents the worst-case scenario of technologico-Benthamism; America is not a cause of declining standards unto itself, but rather a demonstrative example of a more deeply affected system, dangerous to England because “superior advancedness is portentously influential”.²⁵⁶ (ELOT 24-25) The “disease” is “inherent in industrial civilization” – America is only the most affected as it is the most industrial (ELOT 34). In talking about the university English department, Leavis is bearing in mind the whole apocalyptic future of humanity. Leavis’ prediction is a superficially similar vision to that which Snow forecast. Yet for Leavis it is a dystopian future, where for Snow it was a utopia: a global, fundamentally technological system, where difference within is discouraged, where “in neither country will it be allowed to prejudice at all seriously our technological advance”, and for which America sets the precedent: “It is an American ethos that prescribes these cosmopolitan cures

²⁵⁵ Anthony Arthur, *Literary Feuds: A Century of Celebrated Quarrels, From Mark Twain to Tom Wolfe* (London: Macmillan, 2002). Snow himself coined this phrase.

²⁵⁶ Abravanel explores in details how “Leavis relies on the example of America, and upon transatlantic comparison, as a method in his cultural analyses”. See Genevieve Abravanel, “English by Example: F.R. Leavis and the Americanisation of Modern England”, *Modernism/modernity*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (November 2008), pp. 685-701, p. 686.

for our provinciality, and the idea that being provincial is what we suffer from is American" (ELOT 181-182).

Democracy, particularly American democracy, once again becomes apparent as a principal organ of technogico-Benthamism to undermine society; it reflects the desire of populism and "leisure" against culture: "the masses respond to what they 'want', or recognise as irresistible" (ELOT 34). The type of university Leavis is suggesting is an antithesis to this model, as democracy ensures that "anything in the nature of an intellectual elite is to be jealously guarded against" (ELOT 182). The university would not be concerned with quantitative standards, and therefore would be irreconcilable to modern society. To Leavis, this is its great strength; it is a community that "transcends the present" and represents a decisive rejection of the scientific urge towards complete accountability and knowledge: "To talk of 'completeness', then, would be to use a term that implied an irrelevant ethos and a misleading emphasis and inflexion" (ELOT 8). The university, as here described reflects the high-point of Leavis' cultural programme. It is a "spiritual community", which means that it is not ends-oriented or materialistic but rather that it values "other-than-quantitative standards" (ELOT 30). In this we can see a summation of the Leavisite worldview. Technogico-Benthamism represents nothing so much as a concern with quantity and the drive towards complete, ends-driven tabulation.

Leavis applies the same value system to his critique of literature. He rejects "Marxist 'interpretation' and the symbol industry" because it is also ends-oriented, focused on appropriating a text to make a certain political or social point. He rejects the accusation that he is carrying out a similar, purposive agenda, dismissing a correspondent who "reduces my criticism and my advocacies to a preoccupation with the 'civilising' benefits to be derived from the study of great authors" (ELOT 29n). To Leavis, Snow and Wells and the industrial futurism they represent, Edmund Wilson and the Marxist critics of culture and literature represent equal ideological threats, united in their status as enemies to his vision of literature as irreducible and culture as entrenched. They share the common desire to found a new culture. To Leavis this is folly: one essay in *Nor Shall My Sword* is starkly titled *There is Only One Culture*. Snow's "portentous ignorance" is his fatal misunderstanding of history, and his failure to recognise that a new culture cannot be created ex nihilo. This is why, despite the fact that "practical Marxism in Russia does appear to have released an impressive volume of energy in cultural directions", it will never be more than a "mere function of the economic conditions, of the machinery of civilization". (VC 34-35) A rootless culture produces only futility, regardless of the impetus behind it; in the West, the separation of the (leisure) culture from the working culture and

the reduction of the worker to repetitive “automatisms”, results in the incapability to carry out a cultural expression greater than “the passive and the crude” (NSMS 87).

Leavis’ Doctrine of Imperfection

Leavis’ concern is primarily a human one, and it is in this sense we can understand his insistence that “I don’t believe in any ‘literary values’ and you won’t find me talking about them.” It is because “the judgments the literary critic is concerned with are judgments about life”. It is the moderating capacity of cultural value that Leavis finds important, as something that might temper the unthinking rush towards the future of industrial society. Leavis’ valorisation of literature and philosophy emphasises the unknowable this is the commonality at the heart of his literary prescriptions. Critiques of particular textual difficulties in Leavis’ criticism need to be understood in the grander scheme of the literary work he is carrying out, an attempt, almost certainly doomed, to arrest further cultural decline. In this sense, it is difficult to agree with Williams warning of “pseudo-aristocratic authoritarianism” as at heart Leavis seems to be fully aware of the impossibility of presenting any alternative to Technologico-Benthamism on a social level; the university, with its capacity for nuance, and study of thinkers like Blake and Lawrence, with their un-romantic sense of the value of unknowability, are a useful, if only mildly effective, decelerant to this process, and Leavis’ language reflects his awareness of the ultimate triumph of technologico-Benthamism; words such as “inevitable”, “accelerating” and, in particular, “portentous” reoccur whenever it is mentioned.²⁵⁷ Despite this, literature, culture and their respective schools of criticism are useful as illuminating links to the past. In a sense the critical effort is characterised by a sort of failure from the beginning:

We didn’t recall this organic kind of relation of work to life in any nostalgic spirit, as something to be restored, or to take a melancholy pleasure in lamenting it; but by way of emphasising that it was *gone*, with the organic community it belonged to, not to be restored in any foreseeable future. We were calling attention to an essential change in human conditions that is entailed by the accelerating technological revolution, and to the nature of the attendant human problem (NSMS 85).

This is as close to a full statement of purpose as can be found in Leavis’ critical work. The message is that if we can be made aware of what has already been lost, then we might be more hesitant about committing to a future which can only entail a greater extent of diminishment. To Leavis, man is

²⁵⁷ *Culture & Society*, p. 263.

fixed in his one cultural heritage – new alternatives cannot be created. If it is destroyed then we lose the only chance we ever have to possess one.

Yet for Leavis tradition is not the static inheritance of the past: it is a changing, living force. This idea is explored in *The Living Principle*, the last major book Leavis published in his lifetime. In it we can see the major facets of his work come together in a radically new theory. Leavis states, “I mean by tradition something living”. He positions his view of creativity diametrically against self-supporting, romantic concepts, foregrounding the necessary reliance on tradition: the creative spirit must draw from “something other than itself” (LP 67-68). To accomplish this requires a new, reflexive understanding of language, one which is founded on a presumption of absolute incompleteness. This is the “third realm” to which he refers, and it is a “living principle”:

the intuited “living principle” – the principle implicit in the interplay between the living language and the creativity of individual genius. [...] A product of collaborative creativity, it makes continued and advancing collaborative thought possible – and it will hardly be forgotten that such collaboration entails, vitally and essentially, disagreements. Finality is unattainable (LP 49).

Leavis offers the third realm as a solution to a historical problem: the dissociation of sensibility specifically.²⁵⁸ “Cartesian dualism”, in his assessment, has brought about a reductive philosophical conception of the mind: it is a dangerous “ghost” which can “disable a notably vigorous intelligence”.²⁵⁹ The solution is found in Leavis’ project for the humanities: “To the business of exorcism the distinctive discipline of thought that should characterise ‘English’ may be said to be addressed” (LP 35). Leavis reiterates the point to ensure his meaning is clear: “I have in mind, of course, the importance, and that is, the nature, of the discipline of thought that should be associated with ‘English’, the university study” (LP 44). In this the philosophical presupposition that “Cartesian dualism is unassailable, having been established for good” (Leavis points to Stanislaw Andreski as a specific proponent) might be challenged from a new angle; English Literature can

²⁵⁸ Specifics are, in fact, given. They do not differ greatly from those of Leavis’ 1930s publications: he points to “the great change manifested in the English language between Shakespeare and Dryden, which inevitably involves some reference to the decisive start of modern civilisation in the seventeenth century” (LP 53). What is new is the impending sense of the finalisation of the dissociation. America, in particular, has already been lost: “It is not credible that America could save itself; the *ahnung*, the memory, the faith, and the ‘living intuitive faculty’ that must be appealed to in the initiation of the new kind of sustained creative effort can’t be appealed to there.” There is some small hope for Britain, it seems, although “America has long been menacing our future” (LP 50).

²⁵⁹ Parallels with Tate’s historical theory of a “Cartesian Split” are self-evident. See EFD 412.

accomplish nothing less than the “potent emergence from the Cartesian dualism”.²⁶⁰ (LP 44) This is because those versed in both “English” and the “tradition” are conversant in the language of uncertainty and incompleteness, and can therefore challenge the philosophical status quo:

There must be practised thinking that brings in consciously, with pertinacious and delicate resource, the un-Cartesian reality underlying language and implicit in it; what is inexpressible in terms of logic and clarity, the unstatable, must not be excluded from thought.

Leavis reiterates the central strength of this approach to language: the conscious awareness of the existence of “the basic unstatable” (LP 43-44). Leavis’ theory again summons to mind Heidegger, in particular being-in-the-world: the idea that philosophical distinctions of mind such as subject / object are not representative of the actual pre-reflexive state of mind, which is in actuality irreducible to traditional epistemology:

In Descartes we find the most extreme tendency towards such an ontology of the “world”, with, indeed, a counter-orientation towards the *res cogitans* – which does not coincide with Dasein either ontically or ontologically.²⁶¹

It is for this reason that the twentieth century has brought about “the essential vindication of Blake”, the forerunner of Leavis’ creative attitude, who saw in the post-Cartesian language of perfectibility “an oppression he labelled Newton and Locke” (LP 53). Philosophy has caught up with what poetry knew centuries before. In this we see Leavis’ sense of value for Blake’s presence in any curriculum of literary study.

The construction of a doctrine of limitation has been Leavis’ lifelong project. In this final work it takes on a minimalistic philosophical purity. This is Leavis’ unromantic image: the knowledge that all knowledge is ultimately uncertain. Underneath all discourse there exists a necessary and fundamental incompleteness. This is the lesson of the past, the lesson of Blake and those who lived before modernity dissociated the human mind and, with it, human culture. Through the living

²⁶⁰ Polanyi is put forward, once again, as a philosophical defence: “Polanyi as an epistemologist insists that what for philosophers is ‘mind’ is ‘there’ only in individual minds” (LP 39).

²⁶¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 95. Hubert Dreyfus provides an overview of Heidegger’s position on this point: “Since Descartes, philosophers have been stuck with the epistemological problem of explaining how the ideas in our mind can be true of the external world. Heidegger shows that this subject/object epistemology presupposes a background of everyday practices into which we are socialised but that do not represent our minds.” He continues, “The traditional view of practice, from Descartes on at least, is representational. [...] Heidegger’s attempt to break out of the tradition is focused in his attempt to get beyond the subject / object distinction in all domains.” Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), p. 3, p. 49. See footnote 53, above, for mention of Dreyfus’ and Heidegger’s overlap with Leavis’ thought elsewhere.

principle, which exists wherever “an educated public” is a “living presence”, this one transformative insight alone might be passed forwards from the deep past into the uncertain future (LP 69). This living principle, or living tradition, serves no other purpose aside from that, for it is in this one small, yet critical, fragment of insight that civilisation might, to some extent, retain its humanity.

Wisdom we may call a higher plausibility, profoundly judicious and responsible. For in this realm of thought there is nothing certain or provable, and no finality (LP 69).

Chapter 5

John Crowe Ransom's Necessary Fictions

Introductory

John Crowe Ransom's critical work is dominated by a search for and an attempt to define the "necessary fictions" for human discourse. As one might imagine, this effort is predicated on a belief that such fictions are, in fact, necessary. For this to be the case, two essentials must be accepted. Firstly, that a "dissociation of sensibility" has occurred and rendered modernity bereft of a suitable grounding for value; and secondly, that the thing modern society has lost is a sense of human limitation. This chapter will prove that these points are the operating principle behind Ransom's criticism, and that the use of myths, or necessary fictions, is Ransom's means of re-establishing the idea of limitation in discourse and thereby addressing, to some extent, the historical break that has rendered modernity fragmentary.

In exploring Ransom's essays on thinkers such as Kant, Wallace Stevens and George Santayana, I will show that his critical engagement with contemporaries and philosophical forebears is always characterised in the terms of his philosophy of imperfection. Ransom's critique finds value in these thinkers based entirely on their proximity to the fixed assumptions of his own philosophical outlook.

Miller Williams writes of the irony behind the "terrible wisdom" that attends the work of John Crowe Ransom: "the abiding realization that every human statement contains its own contradiction and that every human act contains the seeds of its own defeat."²⁶² If we might make one point about the entirety of Ransom's critical work, it is that he consistently affirms both the inherent truth and the essentially positive character of this truth. It would be a mistake to assume a negative connotation to this attitude. In fact, for Ransom, it is a gospel to proselytise. The South is superior to the North because it carries an awareness of its own defeatedness. It is the rise of science, characterised as the "Northern" forces of "Progress", favouring abstraction and a utopian idea of man's potential that has undermined the age-old truths of human imperfection. In "Poets Without Laurels", Ransom describes a historical break in terms akin to Eliot's:

²⁶² *The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom*, p. 29.

The religious impulse used to join to itself and dominate and hold together nearly all the fields of human experience; politics, science, art, and even industry, and by all means moral conduct. But Puritanism came in the form of the Protestant Reformation and separated religion from all its partners (WB 64).

The importance of this historical process to Ransom is reflected in an essay by Robert Penn Warren, who describes his friend's belief that myth offered the solution to the dissociative tendencies of modernity.²⁶³ Ransom's innovation was to move the mythicising effort from the past upwards into man's present attitude to religion.²⁶⁴ Myth was no longer something only to be done to make the past more useful. It was also possible to mythicise the "abstracts" of modern religion into something more historical and more useful.

Certain critics have seen Ransom's intellectual position as consistently dualistic.²⁶⁵ They argue that his work can be seen as an effort to balance the scales of the two halves of man's nature, where the one half is tangible and scientific and the other chaotic and imprecise. In modernity, according to this interpretation, the quantitative, or "occidental" side has grossly outweighed the qualitative or "oriental" half; to recover a proper balance, weight must be added to the latter. In this we might understand Ransom's efforts to encourage an "irrational" discourse and worldview. To classify Ransom as dualist is, however, rather too simplistic. This problem seems to stem in part from the conflation of Ransom's poetry, which often deals with "divided man living between polarities [...] acknowledging man's dualism", and the position he takes in his critical work, which is quite separate.²⁶⁶ Warren is more cautious when he identifies Ransom's poetic concern for the "haunting dualism in man's nature".²⁶⁷ To see poetry as a statement of a philosophical position seems to

²⁶³ See Robert Penn Warren, "John Crowe Ransom: A Study in Irony", in *John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography*, ed. by Thomas Daniel Young (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), p. 207, pp. 24-40.

²⁶⁴ In this he shares distinct common ground with Hulme's "religio-secular" strategy.

²⁶⁵ See *Burden of Time*, pp. 257-270, Wesley Morris, *Toward a New Historicism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 105-121. According to fellow agrarian Andrew Lytle, Ransom's was a "dualism so eminently descriptive of his point of view", Andrew Lytle "Notes on a Traditional Sensibility", *The Sewanee Review*, Vol.56, No.3 (Summer, 1948), pp. 370-373, p. 372; Allen Tate recalls Ransom training him and others in "Kantian aesthetics and a philosophical dualism, tinged with Christian theology, but ultimately derived from the Nicomachian ethics" (EFD 580).

²⁶⁶ James H. Justus, "A Note on John Crowe Ransom and Robert Penn Warren", *American Literature*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Nov. 1969), pp. 425-430, p. 427. For an account of the "dualistic" features of Ransom's poetry see Vivienne Koch, "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom", in *John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography*, pp. 115-142, Robert Penn Warren, "John Crowe Ransom: A Study in Irony"; Louis D. Rubin, "The Wary Fugitive John Crowe Ransom", *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 82, No. 4 (Fall, 1974), pp. 583-618 – in the latter, "Ransom's poetry and the philosophy that underlie it are built upon a dualism", pp.598-599. See also *Burden of Time*, p. 258-259.

²⁶⁷ Robert Penn Warren, "Notes on the Poetry of John Crowe Ransom at his Eightieth Birthday", *The Kenyon Review*, Vol.30, No.3 (1968), pp. 319-349, p. 322.

require a disengagement with the principles of a poet for whom impersonality was an active practice.

In fact, Dualism-as-philosophy is exactly the type of simplifying narrative imposition that Ransom himself rails against. It is one of the reasons that he raises objections to the neo-Thomism of the catholic revival (as advocated by Jacques Maritain, Allen Tate and others).²⁶⁸ Dualism, along with other absolutist philosophies, leads us away from the true picture of the world because it pretends to knowledge by offering a totalising theoretic structure. Cleanth Brooks summarises this attitude of Ransom's:

we must not let the marvellous and wonderful entity [the "World's Body"] be reduced to a diagram. If we are deluded into thinking that by such reductive analysis we can possess it and use it as we please, we shall end up by destroying our own humanity.²⁶⁹

Ann Mikkelsen sees in Ransom a similar irreducibility, an almost postmodern habit of transgressing philosophical boundaries and categories, particularly the binaries of dualism: Ransom's theory of poetry is based on "a realm of multiplicity and possibility beyond any consumerist or utilitarian purposes"; this is all-encompassing and takes the form of "inherent interfusion of subject and object, male and female, environment and text, science and art".²⁷⁰

It is in this seeming conflict that we can gather a sense of Ransom's view of poetry's function. He does not actively advocate dualism so much as he engages with it. In his criticism is an attempt to break down dual categories: Brooks acknowledges that "the difficulty with Ransom's account of poetry lies in its basic dualism", yet can see in Ransom's work "a dualism that Ransom argues must be finally overcome if the poem is not to be reduced to nonsense."²⁷¹ Ransom's criticism actively challenges the dualistic idea of poetry and strives to overcome it, yet whether this effort is successful, or if the categories he seeks to banish only enforce their hold is a question for debate. Even if poetry did consist only of two elements, rendering them into philosophically coherent or distinct elements is impossible. John L. Stewart writes of Ransom's desire for a "pluralistic cosmology" that merges the dual qualities of sensibility and reason, but points out that, even if the world can be reduced to a binary, then it is not the equivalent of a philosophical system: "fragments

²⁶⁸ See John Crowe Ransom, "The Inorganic Muses", *Kenyon Review*, Vol.5, No. 2 (Spring 1943), pp. 278-300.

²⁶⁹ Cleanth Brooks, "John Crowe Ransom: As I Remember Him", *The American Scholar*, Vol.58, No.2 (Spring 1989), pp. 211-233, pp. 224-225.

²⁷⁰ Ann Mikkelsen, "Roger Prim, Gentleman: Gender, Pragmatism, and the Strange Career of John Crowe Ransom", *College Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Fall 2009), pp. 46-74, p. 66; p. 49.

²⁷¹ Ibid

of the two ideals are mixed in unpredictable ways that preclude realization of either one".²⁷² This is mirrored by Fekete, to whom "Ransom's prose is concerned with developing the appropriate epistemology and ontology for a pluralistic cosmology."²⁷³ Most critically, Ransom's battle against his own dualistic starting point represents a constant desire to introduce elements of the imperfect into poetry. To this end, his definition of poetry would eventually become one which allowed only multiplicity: "Art seems to permit us to predict only some order of unpredictability" (NC 293).

In this light we can understand his attempts to make poetry "ontologically distinct". Poetry must be rendered into an irreducible context that any totalising philosophical approach, including the dualistic, cannot be related to. A dualistic sense of poetry's capacity to possess structure and texture condemns it to being a vessel of a certain type of knowledge. To make it ontological is an attempt to escape the trap of dualism and any other rational or totalising system. It must be liberated and in the relating of poetry to religion, particularly in the reduction of metaphor to inexplicable "miraculism", we can see one of Ransom's strategies to escape narrow or positivistic definitions. Ransom's concern for the introduction of "irrelevances" to poetry serves a similar function, disrupting critical attempts to find order: irrelevances are "the importation of a little foreign or extraneous content into what should be determinate" (NC 314). This ensures that the poem contains "indeterminacy of this positive or valuable sort" (NC 316). In this fashion the poem might be better made to resemble reality, "the realm of the natural objects or situations themselves" which, to Ransom is itself "many-valued" (NC 293).

I have used dualism as an example to convey the extent to which Ransom rejects any type of positive theoretical structure for knowledge. Ransom's critical effort is always towards plurality; the dualistic is unsatisfactory because it is binary and can, resultantly, be charged with a false claim to absolute meaning. Rendering meaning across an illimitable field of pluralities is the only way to encapsulate the full inexplicability of reality and the World's Body which is poetry's special function. William Handy summarises this unique quality of literature which Ransom used to subvert philosophy:

It is in close examination and interpretation of a literary work that its special contribution is to be found – its way of symbolising some aspect of human experience that defies formulation in any of the logical disciplines.²⁷⁴

Poetry and religion, for Ransom, shared a function. His efforts to define poetry as irrational are mirrored in the religious approach of *God Without Thunder*, which seeks to turn religion into a non-

²⁷² *Burden of Time*, p.261

²⁷³ *The Critical Twilight*, p. 50.

²⁷⁴ *Kant and the Southern New Critics*, p. 9.

logical discourse. There seems a strange paradox here; Ransom on more than one occasion calls for a more “grounded”, “reasonable” or simply “secular” religion:

Our institutional religion - or religions [...] are in an uncomfortable and indeed desperate position [...] I think our ruling religious dogmas can be substantively grounded (NC 207)

there is no hope of understanding religion unless it can receive a modern and therefore secular description”.²⁷⁵

And yet the solution he offers is that “it seems necessary that we should believe in ghosts” (GWT 248). The ghost is, by Ransom’s definition, “an unhistorical, mythical, or miraculous object”. Ransom’s strange, “unorthodox” (to say the least) prescription is, however, completely secular. It is rather like Hulme’s “religious attitude”, within which original sin was only a useful tool. To Ransom the ghosts and angels of religion are similarly useful fictions.

In *God Without Thunder* Ransom’s intention is twofold: firstly, by placing science on the same absurd level as “demonology” (GWT 248), the dignity of the former is undermined; its claims to absoluteness seem as tenuous as the Devil or the God of the Old Testament. Secondly, in advocating belief in the irrational Ransom seeks to turn society actively towards unknowledge and a sense of its own limitation. Therefore the “thunderous” god of the Old Testament is superior to the modern, protestant-ised equivalent because He is absurd. For us to invest belief in Him must therefore require a sense of our own absurdity. There is nothing that could serve better as anathema to the utopian idea of man’s elevated station, assuming it could be believed.²⁷⁶

John Crowe Ransom’s critical work offers, perhaps more so than any other New Critic, an example of a pragmatic mind at work. The imperfecting agenda, attended usually with subtlety in his contemporaries, is displayed brazenly in Ransom’s work, particularly in *God Without Thunder*.²⁷⁷ A letter to Tate seems to suggest his sense of a learned “clerisy” who know better than the uneducated and literal believers: “Actually – for you and me and the elite whom I know – art is the true religion and no other is needed” (JCR SL 168).²⁷⁸ Ransom’s objective is always clear-cut. The

²⁷⁵ John Crowe Ransom, “Descartes’s Angels”, in *The Sewanee Review*, Vol.54, No.1 (Jan-Mar 1946), pp. 153-156, p. 156.

²⁷⁶ Ransom seems, at times, to deliberately emphasise the absurd in his formulations; In *The New Criticism*, Ransom refers to “the absurdity of expecting a science to yield more precise knowledge than accorded with the nature of its content” (NC 206)

²⁷⁷ Quinlan speculates “the very haste with which *God Without Thunder* was finally written served to make it a more straightforward and honest book than a longer and more considered reflection might have advised”. Kieran Quinlan, *John Crowe Ransom’s Secular Faith* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), p.46

²⁷⁸ In at least one stage of his life, Ransom seems to have genuinely attempted to participate in formal religion (although this did not last). See Quinlan, *Secular Faith*, p. 60, Young, *Gentleman in a Dustcoat*, pp. 271-272.

position he takes in his published work is consistently secular and his approach to religion is always concerned with its utility. This view is subject to some development over the years of Ransom's writing, but not a great deal. To Ransom, religion is obviously and completely fictitious, a "supersensible" far removed from the "sensible" and concrete reality of the world of objects. But in this it might be useful for a rear-guard defence against other fictions that are not recognised as such; religion, itself long debased of any truth value, can operate as an exposé of the entire supersensible realm. Poetry, also known as a type of illusion, can similarly turn its qualities back on to the reader and poetise the world itself through the association.

The Third Moment

Ransom's contribution to *I'll Take My Stand*, "Unreconstructed but Unregenerate" begins with a regret that "it is out of fashion in these days to look backward rather than forward" (ITMS 1). This regret, and the attempt to bring about the reversal of such a condition, characterise the central component of Ransom's criticism during each of its permutations. The year of publication of *I'll Take My Stand*, for which Ransom contributed the preface and this first essay, also saw *God Without Thunder*, the extraordinary "unorthodox defence of orthodoxy" in which Ransom sought to affirm an old-fashioned interpretation of God and the place of religion in the world. At around the same time Ransom worked on an economic treatise called "Land!" which concerned itself with the advocacy of agrarianism for solving the problems of capitalism and the great depression.²⁷⁹ These three works constitute Ransom's first substantial appearance in the public sphere, and, taken together, make his concerns seem primarily social and economic; if it had not been for the prior publication of two volumes of poetry it would not have been evident that his was in fact a literary background, or that literature was even a preeminent concern.

A simple narrative of events might state that Ransom is only a product of his environment at this point, largely concerned with defensive political strategies to preserve or reawaken the vision of the Old South, only later turning to literature after efforts in the socio-cultural sphere had failed. This narrative aligns with Eagleton's account of the Southern Agrarian movement, for which literature was the lacklustre secondary effort of feudal aristocrats who had failed to affect social policy on

²⁷⁹ *Land!* was unpublished in Ransom's lifetime, but a truncated version did see daylight as an article in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* in 1932: "Land! An Answer to the Unemployment Problem", *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, July 1932, pp. 216-224. By 1932 Ransom laments "My poor book is nearly a total loss – I don't like it. It would have been a passable book published a year ago... Within these next ten days I will have kicked it into the incinerator" (JCR SL 210). Eventually it was published in its entirety in 2017: John Crowe Ransom, *Land! The Case for an Agrarian Economy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017).

their own terms.²⁸⁰ A more careful account, however, would position Ransom's socio-economic writing as the product of an interstitial period or anomaly, if a particularly productive one, that was preceded and followed by periods of intensive concern for artistic or literary projects. To ascribe to art a position of primacy, however, would be entirely fallacious. The motivating factor behind both Ransom's artistic and social/economic work is the drive to make man's horizon imperfect and in so doing to counter the specious attitudes of the scientific worldview.

Ransom's letters to Allen Tate in 1926 and 1927 provide an account of his development of an "ars aesthetica" (JCR SL 163), a manuscript, later burned, titled "The Third Moment". Ransom's essay, according to the account of it in his letters, describes the usefulness of aesthetic experience for attempting to recapture a pre-scientific mindset. Human experience is divided into three separate "moments". The first moment is reminiscent of a Bergsonian "flux" state: "pure of all intellectual content, unreflective, concrete, and singular; there are no distinctions and the subject is identical with the whole" (JCR SL 155). Following this, the second moment is a process of forgetting or moving away from the first pure moment: "the beginning of science ... its means are abstraction". Consequently, "experience becomes history, conceptualized knowledge" (JCR SL 155). The third moment is a process of looking backwards towards the first and seeking reclamation, along with the questioning of abstract knowledge: "we become aware of the deficiency of the record" (JCR SL 155). Art is one of several methods by which we might reach back to the first moment, to Ransom the most valuable of five (the others being, in ascending order: dreams, fancy, religion and morals). There seems, in this record of individual history of experience, a microcosm of Ransom's view of the modern world itself, it is easy to conceive of modernity distanced from its history by science, yet ever striving to "look backward", as Ransom encourages in *I'll Take My Stand*. Much as Hulme's interpretation of Bergson was qualified by his sense of the impossibility of actually attaining a pre-reflexive state, Ransom makes clear that any type of romantic achievement of a pure pre-abstract state is impossible:

We are trying to reconstitute an experience which we once had, only to handle and mutilate. Only, we cannot quite reconstitute them. Association is too strong for us; the habit of cognition too strong. The images comes out much mixed and adulterated with concepts.

At best, the experience of the third moment can offer "some healing power" but to try and use aesthetics (the third moment) to completely bypass scientific or abstract thinking (the second

²⁸⁰ *Literary Theory*, p.40. See also John J. Langdale III, *Superfluous Southerners: Cultural Conservatism and the South, 1920-1990* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2012), pp.47-48

moment) and recapture pre-cognitive purity (the first moment) is described by Ransom as “wildly romantic”. Art is thought of, at best, as a palliative, not a cure.

Further evidence of Ransom’s initial concern for aesthetics can be found in the 1929 essay “Classical and Romantic”, in which Ransom marshals art to stand as a defence against scientific attitudes. His position accommodates the romantic, along with the classical, both as “two inevitable forms of the revulsion against science” (SE 36). Although the mild rehabilitation of the romantic would be an anathema to Hulme’s sense of it, Ransom’s own sense of the value of classical art is characterised in quite Hulmean terms, based largely on its pragmatic potential to render the world complex rather than only as “simple-featured and manageable entities which our formulas would represent them as being”. It is when we are “compelled by a tragic experience” that the realisation of a world of stubborn contingencies comes about; romantic art, although it “goes rather deeper” than the classical equivalent, nonetheless is only a “rare and simple attitude” that cannot be turned to practical purpose: it is “vain and aimless for practical purposes” (SE 41-42, 44). On the other hand, classical art can be made useful: “Classical art in the criticism of science by science’s own standards, witnessing to its failure or success in attaining the purposes at which it aims” (SE 42). This must be enacted against a world in which the “genius loci under the circumstances refuses rather flatly to make the spirit of tragedy into its adoption”. Ransom here, of course, is referring to science, the guiding spirit of the age, which displays the hubris of believing it can dominate nature. The advantage of agrarianism, as Ransom points out on several occasions, is that it carries with it a sense of tragedy and futility that runs counter to city-based utopianism. The world of the farmer is one full of stubborn, contingent realities, unlike the world of the progressive.²⁸¹ The latter deludes himself with a sense of his own potential: “it is our public policy to advertise all positive achievements and to prattle very innocently about man’s immanent and even actual control over nature” (SE 40). What is needed as a corrective is a stark reminder of the tragedy that lies under all human endeavour, something that classical art can offer, depicting, as it does, a picture of man’s struggle against forces beyond his immediate control:

²⁸¹ See “The South – Old or New?": “Nature wears out man before man can war out nature; only a city-man, a laboratory man, a man cloistered from the normal contacts with the soil, will deny that”. John Crowe Ransom, “The South – Old or New?”, *The Sewanee Review*, Vol.36, No.2 (Apr., 1928), pp. 139-147, p. 141. Also, according to Malvasi: “Agrarians, unlike modern scientists, philosophers and theologians, knew that man occupied a lowly place in the universe”, *The Unregenerate South*, p. 44. Ransom makes a comparable claim for primitive cultures: “we are able to gloze certain facts very obvious to more primitive societies which have never lost contact with earth and the elements or to older societies who have tasted many defeats” (JCR SL 40). The idea is returned to in GWT: “Savages are in direct and sustained contact with a nature over which they know they have a very limited power... In their myths they often express a tragic sense which represents the highest philosophical enlightenment” (GWT 87). Who, if anyone, might be flattered by this connection is unclear.

The moral of tragedy is not the failure of the specific program, perhaps, so much as it is the failure of programs generally, on the realistic principle that calculation can never allow for the infinite contingency with which the objective world is invested. Sooner or later we shall have to make an adaptation to the world which is submissive and religious (SE 41).

“Classical and Romantic” is unusual at this stage in Ransom’s career, dealing as it does with artistic themes (despite art only serving as a potential method of attack on science). Its central theme of the world as a type of concrete complexity that cannot be reduced to simplistic ideology is developed in *The World’s Body* (1938), a volume which signals Ransom’s retreat from the socio-cultural focus that seemed the dominant concern in 1930 back into the artistic and literary concerns which had been at the forefront in the earlier period that produced “The Third Moment” and “Classical and Romantic”.²⁸² The motivating concerns, and to a large extent the methodology, of both periods, display a substantial degree of commonality, since Ransom is always motivated by a desire to discover the best strategy to defend against science and abstraction.

Ransom considers his idea of religion to be one founded primarily on reason; he contrasts this with his view of Allen Tate’s, which he characterises (like Richards) as “stak[ing] everything on the chance of recovering some cosmological values out of the debris” (JCR SL 161). Tate is inclined towards literal religious belief, and his position is founded on a real and sustained effort towards faith. Ransom’s idea of religion, contrarily, is a remarkable example of a self-conscious position of bad faith. He foreshadows the principal theme of *God Without Thunder* in a letter to Tate of 1927:

We must, as critics, not only define the fictions of science for what they are, but also the fictions of philosophy... So are religious systems. Their formulas must be questioned... The State, the Soul, God, the World, the Cosmos (with a capital) – these are types of the scientific fiction put together by reasons and quite exceeding the sense: Supersensibles (JCR SL 162).

Religion is just as fictitious as the grandiose claims of science, they are identical in their distance from the firm, concrete reality that Ransom prefers. At this stage (1927) Ransom favours the aesthetic “third moment” as his most potent weapon in the arsenal to challenge science. By 1930, however, the manuscript of “The Third Moment” had been literally consigned to the flames, and religion had taken up the mantle as the best method to bring about an anti-scientific mindset.

²⁸² Jay T. Collier calls 1937 the year of “a decisive break” – Introduction to *Land!*, p. xxv.

God Without Thunder

Rather than reversing its status as fiction and valorising religion as something worthy of literal investment and belief (what we might call the “Tate method”), Ransom approaches it as a type of useful fiction exactly because it is a fiction and can serve as a demonstration of this fact. To carry this out Ransom attempts to dismiss the parts of the Christian religion that undermine his sense of its purposefulness. Most egregious is the New Testament and its depiction of Christ as ascended man. Such a conceit as this undermines the potential of religion to serve as a defence against the utopian or perfecting tendencies of science: man as God is the problem. Ransom’s account of it in a letter to Tate is stark in its sense of Christianity as a useful myth: “The N.T. has been a failure & a backset as a religious myth; not its own fault, as I think, but nevertheless failure, it’s hurt us” (JCR SL 181). It might seem paradoxical or even disingenuous that, in the same letter, Ransom can claim that “religion is fundamental and prior to intelligent (or human) conduct on any plane” yet still retain the right to pick and choose the parts that might prove most useful and discard those that don’t suit the agenda (JCR SL 180). Religion to Ransom is the name for an attitude, rather than a specific type of manifest belief. As we might expect, this attitude is the anti-scientific attitude: “Religion is the only effective defense against Progress & our very vicious economic system; against empire and against socialism, or any other political foolishness” (JCR SL 180). If a specific religion fails on the terms that Ransom has laid out for its definition of value, as a bulwark against progress and science, then it fails as a religion entirely:

Little by little the God of the Jew has been whittled down in the Spirit of Science, or the Spirit of Love, or the Spirit of Rotary, and now religion is not religion at all, but a purely secular experience, like Y.M.C.A. and boy scouts. Humanism in religion means pretending that Man is God (JCR SL 181).

The condition of religion must be its capacity to induce humility. There is certainly a peculiar (catholic-seeming) religiosity about this sentiment, despite its unorthodoxy. Much like Hulme, Ransom is only interested in religion for the something like the doctrine of original sin, the unique ability to bring society back to its fixed constancy and undermine scientific presuppositions. A Hulme-style technique of putting religion to work for social ends is everywhere evident in *God Without Thunder*. In effect, it could be seen as the perfecting of Hulme’s method, or at least the most honest version of it. In this regard it holds a unique position in the annals of the New Criticism as the most self-aware, or perhaps least duplicitous statement of principles: it is blatant about the

idea of necessary fictions and reflects, among others, Tate's thoughts on mythic thinking in "Remarks on the Southern Religion", taken perhaps to a logical extreme.²⁸³

It is difficult to imagine who exactly *God Without Thunder* aims to satisfy. This might, to an extent, explain its obscurity. Science and religion are both described in terms that emphasise their fictionality, and the respective disciples of both camps would presumably be offended by their conflation in these terms (or any terms). There is something of Machiavelli about it: one can imagine it serving well as a guidebook for cynical rulers on how to create compliant subjects by fostering in bad faith a "religious attitude" of humility and anti-utopianism. The operating agenda of the book is certainly based on the intention of creating a better society; it is for culture what *Land!* is for economics, Ransom's solution to a perceived problem in modernity. In terms of tone, Ransom's advocacy of religion is generally similar to an economic treatise: "the progress which moderns need now to make..." (GWT 77) In this sense it testifies to an extraordinarily divested view of religious faith as solely the most useful myth among many. Science is the least of these myths because it is the most self-deluding in not thinking it is a myth:

There is simply no meaning in a science which has no supernatural meaning. There are supernatural assumptions which science has to make right from the beginning, and as long as it undertakes to be science (GWT 72).

Science is, nonetheless, supernatural. It is no better than religion or any other mythic structure. Breaking down its presuppositions far enough will result in axioms which are true only because they are taken to be so: "one cannot account for the facts except by appealing to something that is not fact" (GWT 75). The scientist, in effect, carries out the act of appealing to a deity (the unnameable) as frequently as the theist. Religion is superior because it is predicated on a sense of the impossibility of its own realisation. At all times, assuming it is the correct type of religion, it emphasises to its practitioners the tragic vision of the world, where science lies about its own fictitiousness and offers illusions of utopia:

To the metaphysical entities of this sort the religionist gives supernatural names: God, his hosts and ministering angels, Satan, demons and the like. The names mean to be undemonstrable. And this is one reason why they are superior to the quasi-scientific names through which scientists grow metaphysical without knowing it. Gods are better than

²⁸³ This sentiment is shared to an extent by John L. Stewart, to whom GWT "holds the central position in Ransom's prose writings [...] The ideas of the prose of the next three decades are simply extensions, with but a few modifications, of the arguments here set forth" and "moreover the book will serve as a guide in reading the works of Tate and Warren", *Burden of Time*, pp. 268-269.

principles, because you know that with Gods you are dealing with entities not phenomenal, while it is possible for you to invoke and use Principles, thinking that you have merely picked them up somewhere in the natural world [...] Metaphysics names the supernatural entities in terms that look physical or natural and tend to conceal their character; but religion names them in terms that declare their supernaturalism. Metaphysics sticks close by physics, where a confusion between them is the most likely, while religion is openly mythical (GWT 75-76).

Religion is not only a useful attitude, as the traditions and institutions of organised religion can also offer a useful systematisation. There is enough in religion to constitute a comprehensive universe for the believer. As such there is no possibility for a “religious attitude” outside of conventional religion to offer much benefit, since “a myth must be institutionalized [...] There is hardly any such thing as a strictly private religion” (GWT 90). This, combined with the requisite amount of “quasi-historical concreteness” has the total effect of ensuring a sense of humility of the part of the believer (GWT 87). To render the world mythic is to once again render it imperfect. Religion abandons this useful function when it moves into abstraction, “peeling off its wrappings of concrete detail”.²⁸⁴ (GWT 88) Ransom here echoes the concerns of his earlier aesthetic writing. It is evident that religion serves as a type of elevated poetry; in fact Ransom goes as far as to make religion a predicate for the production of great art: “religion must inform poetry, or at any rate great poetry”.²⁸⁵ (JCR SL 205) Great poetry here means the classical or unromantic type; religion is useful as it sets a precedent for the existence of an impenetrable ceiling to man’s ambition. The possibility for any romantic type of revelation is entirely undermined. The best that can be accomplished is to name the unknowable in terms that underline the impossibility of knowledge: an unromantic image.

The New Criticism: An Ontological Critic and the World’s Body

Following the publication of *God Without Thunder* and the abandonment of *Land!*, Ransom’s critical focus returned to literature. It would remain here for the rest of his writing career.²⁸⁶ 1938 and 1941

²⁸⁴ Ransom’s primitivism is again evident: “Primitives never make this error. Their Gods are tangible” (GWT 88). Ransom seems quite rueful that “we could not care for totemism”, primarily due to the fact that “we are now living in cities”. As a consequence, “we could not, therefore, probably, if we were perfect creatures of our age, accept with relish as the appropriate symbol of omnipotence a mere Rain-God, or a God of vegetation” (GWT 89).

²⁸⁵ It is quite strange to see Ransom, the advocate of religion as social utility, admonishing Tate, the true believer, for “going over to Richard’s view that any private myth will serve the poet, if only he can sustain it”. Ransom instead is convinced that “behind the major poet is not only a bit of myth but *the myth*” (JCR SL 205).

²⁸⁶ 1945, in particular, saw the publication of “Art and the Human Economy”, in which Ransom formally renounced the Agrarian project, stating clearly, “We cannot actually go back”. John Crowe Ransom, “Art and the Human Economy”, *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Autumn 1945), pp. 683-688, p. 685. Donald Davidson’s response was outrage, as a letter to Tate makes clear: “I can only say, what devil has got into John Ransom?” Davidson ascribes the change in attitude to Ransom’s absence from the South: “Ransom of the North talks differently, if not oppositely from Ransom of the South...” (LC 344-345). An essay by Geoffrey Hill,

produced the influential volumes of criticism, *The World's Body* and *The New Criticism*, respectively. Ransom's primary interest at this stage is in what he terms "ontological" approach to poetry: the unique recourse of poetic language to reflect a non-scientific world: "I suggest that the differentia of poetry as discourse is an ontological one. It treats an order of experience, a grade of objectivity, which cannot be treated in scientific discourse."²⁸⁷ (NC 281) His concerns in this essay ("Wanted: An Ontological Critic") demonstrate a direct link back to his earlier aesthetic efforts:

Poetry intends to recover the denser and more refractory original world which we know loosely through our perceptions and memories. By this supposition it is a kind of knowledge which is radically or ontologically distinct (NC 281)

Clear links can be made Ransom's earlier abortive project, "The Third Moment". Here poetry serves as a type of third moment, cutting back through the second ("scientific discourse") to recover the first (the "original world"). As with the earlier project, the possibility for any actual recapturing of the primordial state is directly countered. It is the act or effort of reaching back that is significant and constitutes the ontological, or artistic, effort.

To escape the tendencies towards abstraction inherent in scientific language, the world to be represented by the poet should be one constituted of dry, hard objects, diametrically opposed to romantic abstractions, such as the "shoddy resonances like those of the romantic Wordsworth" (NC 333). In reflecting the difficulty of the world, poetry has a capacity to reflect it honestly: "Ontologically, it is a case of bringing into experience both a denser and a more contingent world, and commanding a discourse in more dimensions" (NC 330). The ontological sense is bound inextricably to tradition, to the extent that, if a poet is not traditional, there can be little or no promise for his own verse. The influence of "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is obvious in Ransom's theory. So essential is the maintenance of linear tradition that even a translation from one language to another is sufficient to break the ontological potential of a poem; the translation of a line of Dante into English is enough to bring about its "ontological annihilation [...] it has lost one of its worlds" (NC 329). Ransom is barely optimistic about the potential of modern poets to carry ontology forward in their work. Even if they are participant in tradition, they are still not active: "the moderns might be called the products of a poetic tradition; but they are only its end-products, or their status is even post-traditional: they are only the heirs of a tradition" (NC 334). Modern poetry,

inspired by Davidson's comment, uses this strife as a conceptual starting point, see Geoffrey Hill, "What Devil Has Got Into John Ransom?", *Grand Street*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Summer, 1983), pp. 81-103.

²⁸⁷ Eliseo Vivas, a fellow New Critic, lightly derides the pretentiousness of Ransom's terminology: "Before I saw the inadequacies of naturalism I could not have seen that art contains an ontological element. But I do not use this awesome term as Pappy Ransom did." Eliseo Vivas, *Two Roads to Ignorance: A Quasi Biography* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), p.269

then, is in a transition between a living and a dead ontology. There is some cause for hope, as the living tradition can still be picked up and put to use, with the right attitude. One more generation passing, presumably, would sever it for good. Ransom makes some suggestion as to a possible means of reawakening the active ontological sense:

The dense and brilliant yet obscure world of the modern poets may reflect a certain initial ontological sense. Their most actual world, as they sense it, resists mastery, is more mysterious and intelligible, perhaps is more evil than good (NC 335).

Modern poetry has potential, but it lacks, or has forgotten, the key elements necessary for ontological insight. Ransom here suggests one approach by which a poet might be move more towards ontological insight: by appreciating more fully the complexity of the world, its irreducibility and “resistance to mastery”. Ransom makes apparent that there are two other necessary criteria for poets to requalify as ontological. Firstly, Ransom establishes the criteria for the “startling exception” of a “perfect poetic phrase” to appear: “The occasion of so sudden a flight may be simple nostalgia, looking backward” (NC 336). Once again, the language of the opening lines of “Reconstructed but Unregenerate” is summoned to mind. In “looking backward” towards history the poet resists the present and humbles himself through the submission to the valorised past and its traditions. Secondly: “It [modern poetry] does not give quite the necessary impression of spent energies. And in that sense it is not quite thorough” (NC 336). “Spent energies” here might be substituted with tragedy, or limitation, or humility, or even original sin as an indicator of the grand fixity underpinning Man and the society he participates in. Or it might have a more local meaning. In either case Ransom draws the poetic away from the energetic, in favour of a cultivated aesthetic of restraint. An energy that is spent is not one that never existed; rather it is one that has existed but now signals only its own depletion. In this sense the depleted state of the present draws us back to thinking about the energetic past and suffers in the comparison.

So, to sum up, the poetic sensibility, to be truly ontological, must be at once aware of irreducible, concrete complexity, looking back towards history, and focused on its own limitation and the limitation of the world. Only in fulfilling these criteria might poetry once again become ontological. Ransom’s definition of an “ontological critic”, then, is one who can recognise and value exactly these criteria in poetry. Unfortunately, as Ransom laments, “I have failed to find a new critic with an

ontological account of poetry” (NC 281). Such is the extent of Ransom’s concern for limitation: that even putting into practice the methodology of limitation is foiled by too limited a field.²⁸⁸

Ransom’s other “ontological” essay is “Poetry: A Note in Ontology”, first published in the *American Review* in 1934 and included in *The World’s Body* in 1938. It is most significant for its definition of “platonic” and “metaphysical” poetry, the second and third of three types of poetic. These three types mirror the ur-example of “The Third Moment”: the first in the new categorisation is “physical poetry”, reflecting a purist attempt to recapture “things in their thingness”. The Imagists are Ransom’s example of this type. To Ransom their effort to reach a sort of primordial truth of things is “sufficiently heroic” but ultimately “it was impossible that they should make of poetry so simple an exercise in doctrine as they seemed to think it was” (SE 75). The second type is “Platonic poetry”, Ransom’s new term for that well-established and recognisable *bête noire*: the romantic or scientific. Platonism here does not really refer systematically to anything to do with Plato.²⁸⁹ Instead it signifies the combined attitude of perfectibility and abstraction. Ransom brings these two evils into alignment: “the love of truth” and “zeal for human improvement” are unified in Platonism: “the forces are one force” (SE 81). The consequence for the true believer is a sense that “nature is rational and that by the force of reasoning we shall possess it” (SE 81). In this sense, the Platonic view is ultimately the “predatory”.

There is hope however, that “the Platonists may be cured of Platonism”. One palliative is, most simply, “the failure of the ideas to work”; the other is “education in the fine arts”, presumably training in the sensibility of tragedy which, otherwise, would eventually be provided by enough life experience (SE 83). By either method, failure and limitation is prescribed as the ameliorating factor to address the scientific or romantic tendency.

²⁸⁸ “Wanted: An Ontological Critic” is the fourth essay in *The New Criticism*, and begins with the regret that the “important new critics... sense this fact [the difference between poetry and prose] but do not offer a decisive version of what the differentia is” (NC 279). The poets examined earlier in the book and here referenced are T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards, William Empson and Yvor Winters. The list is speculatively expanded by Ransom in a letter to Tate in 1941: “[Delmore Schwartz said] it was a pity I couldn’t find an ‘ontological critic’; wished I might have made Tate or Blackmur or Brooks into one” (JCR SL 275).

²⁸⁹ Ransom’s definition of Platonism refers to an impulse rather than a philosophical system: “Platonism [...] is not the property of the historical person. Platonism, in the sense I mean, is the name of the impulse that is native to us all, frequent, tending to take a too complete possession of our minds” (JCR SL 81). This sense of the word seems indebted to Nietzsche, for whom Platonism led to the “pernicious manifestation” of positivism, following this he concluded that “the scientific account of the universe is as fictitious as any other”, Sanford Schwartz, *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot and Early Twentieth Century Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 39. See also Catherine Zuckert, “Nietzsche’s Rereading of Plato”, *Political Theory*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (May, 1985), pp. 213-238. For a further account of the Modernist idea of “Platonism”, see Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and the Occult* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993).

The third stage is called the “metaphysical”. Rather than ostensibly signifying only an attempt at reaching back past the second into the first (as per “The Third Moment”), instead here it serves as a synthesis. The “metaphysical” is a union of the first (image-based) and second (idea-based) stages into an aesthetic whole. In a letter to Tate Ransom addresses what he means by the “metaphysical”: he arrives at the definition of it being “supernatural, mythical”; from this he concludes “I am back at my God-without-Thunder thesis” (JCR SL 214). This much is clear in the essay, as myth is foregrounded as a cornerstone of the “metaphysical” poetic; Ransom recognises its value as instrumental rather than transcendent:

The metaphysical poets, perhaps like their spiritual fathers the medieval schoolmen, were under no illusions about this. They recognized myth, as they recognized the conceits, as a device of expression; its sanctity as the consequence of its public or social importance (SE 92).

Ransom is keen to conflate poetry and religion because they can be engineered to share a common social function and consequently might be used for the same purpose. Poetry is made religious by turning the device of metaphor into something predicated on religious function: “We may consult the dictionary, and discover that there is miraculism or supernaturalism in a metaphorical assertion if we are ready to mean what we say, or believe what we hear” (SE 91). This “miraculism” is not itself metaphorical, it is literally meant as an equivalent to the religious sense of the term: “The miraculism which provides the humblest conceit is the same miraculism which supplies to religions their substantive content” (SE 91). Simultaneously, religion is made into a product of poetry: “the myths are conceits, born of metaphors. Religions are periodically produced by poets” (SE 91).

Although there seems to be an aspect of circularity or chicken-and-egg about this, it is not the case that the two are simply feeding one another. Instead they are effectively one and the same, united by Ransom’s pragmatic concern for the function they might serve in society. As such, it cannot be said that Ransom is carrying out the “Art for Art’s Sake” ambition to replace religion with poetry. His is an effort to conjoin, not supplant.

According to Ransom, the activity of art is successful only through humility. If the role of art is to reach back to the primordial stage of pure things (Dinglichkeit), then it succeeds or fails based on this capability:

The way to obtain the true Dinglichkeit of a formal dinner or a landscape or a beloved person is to approach the object as such, and in humility; then it unfolds a nature which we

are unprepared for if we have put our trust in the simple idea which attempted to represent it (SE 82)

To make religion poetic and to make poetry religious has the effect of bringing to the fore the limiting aspects of both. Either is prevented from ascending to romantic heights by being grounded and tied to the other. The terms of their grounding are that they are both fictions. Poetry fictionalises religion, protecting it from the inflated claims of the devout, and religion elevates poetry by affirming its ritualistic or ceremonial significance. In addition, through “miraculism” poetry can perhaps be marshalled as a defence against the type of “bad faith” issue that characterised Ransom’s work since 1930’s *God Without Thunder*. This is one of its integral and peculiar ontological features. A statement might be obviously fictional, but through attempting to believe it literally one undergoes a process of liberation. Obviously a complete investment in the potential of poetry to convey essential “truths” would be untenably romantic, but through a religious act of faith by which we attempt, in good faith, to believe the statement that is being made we are participant in the work of art. Ransom phrases the terms of this question elsewhere:

how it is we obtain poetic satisfaction from poetry making religious or philosophical statements which modern science has invalidated and which as a matter of fact we no longer believe (NC 33)

The answer is to be found in the difference between good poetry and bad poetry: “good poets are not like the merely romantic ones, repeating what they would like to believe but cannot any longer believe” (NC 43). This difference is of a religious character, it is one of faith. A good poet can compel belief, whereas a bad poet cannot. The criterion is in miraculism which is, as Stewart describes “if the poet means what he says and compels the reader to believe what he has read”.²⁹⁰ This bears some similarity to how transubstantiation can literally be the transformation of host into living body for the believer as long as they have faith in the act. This is not the same thing as revelation, but it is, Ransom indicates, enough to be aesthetically satisfying, and by comporting ourselves, through faith, to a belief in fiction that is unrealisable we are constantly reminded of the limitation inherent in belief and the world. The religious character of “metaphysical” poetry, and its capacity to convey this type of faith-gesture, is the reason why it is superior to the poetry of any other era; the seventeenth century “had the courage of its metaphors”, by which it is meant that they actually believed in them. The nineteenth century, on the other hand, “lacked this courage and was half-heartedly metaphorical” its poetry is devoid of the charge of the miracle” (SE 89).

²⁹⁰ *Burden of Time*, p.313

By a similar standard, religious belief, when not poetic, is insipid and useless. The value of either only arises in its fusion with the other. In light of this we can understand Ransom's criticism of Eliot, that "he believes in believing the religious dogmas, not the affirmations of poetry" (NC 207-208). As a poet, Eliot really should know better.²⁹¹ Religion without metaphor is as devoid of purpose as poetry without miraculism. An unquestioning true believer, as Ransom perceives Eliot to be, cannot participate fully in the poetic as there is no reach for them to make in the act of metaphorical miraculism. They are already on the other side of the gulf. Ransom makes clear a miraculous transportation of this kind is impossible, even ridiculous. But this is part of its value. By believing in a religious or poetic assertion, even briefly, our attention turns back on ourselves with embarrassment: an individual, having uttered a prayer, "quickly perceives its absurdity" (GWT 100). Similarly, having allowed ourselves to be transported by a poetic metaphor our self-awareness undermines us long before any sort of romantic type "revelation" can come about. All we are left with is an idea of our own tragic limitation. For Ransom, this is the point: "its purpose [prayer] is opposite to that usually ascribed to it: it reconciles him to his impending defeat" (GWT 101).

Perhaps the most indicative evidence of Ransom's utilitarian view of religion is in his ecumenicism. The final lines of *God Without Thunder* are a demand for precepts:

With whatever religious institution a modern man may be connected, let him try and turn it back towards orthodoxy.

Let him insist on a virile and concrete God, and accept no principle as a substitute.

Let him restore to God the thunder.

Let him resist the usurpation of the Godhead by the soft modern version of Christ, and try to keep the Christ for what he professed to be: the demigod who came to do honour to the God.

Despite the particular references to Christ, the "whatever" opens up a claim to validity for any religion as long as it is orthodox and thunderous enough. Similarly, "Forms and Citizens" carries an assertion that "religion is an institution existing for the sake of its ritual rather than, as I have heard, for the sake of its doctrines" (WB 43). Quinlan concludes that Ransom is approaching a "Jungian eclecticism".²⁹²

²⁹¹ In "The Concrete Universal II" Ransom refers to how "a certain practical kind of religiosity [...] is capable of getting between the soul and its reception of poetry and literature. This is when the soul is a timid soul and prefers the security of dogma to the dreadful facts of life" (SE 303).

²⁹² *John Crowe Ransom's Secular Faith*, p. 63.

Case Studies: Ransom's Critical Method

With almost no exception, Ransom's essays of poetic criticism are also essays on religion. As we have seen, his view of poetry is that it is, through the transubstantiating miraculism of metaphor, effectively the same as religion. It is, therefore, inevitable that his critiques of poetic style tend to be inquiries into religious sensibilities. The poets that seem most to interest him most are those who are convergent on, but have not completely arrived at, his own aesthetic theory: those for whom religion and poetry are most allied, and those to whom an idea of some type of "necessary fiction" occurs.

In "Yeats and his Symbols", Ransom explores Yeats' attempt at a solution to the problem of society's irreligion and consequent lack of a constitutive base for the creation of poetry. Yeats constructs an idiosyncratic personal myth from which to poetise: he "tinkered with a system for private use".²⁹³ Ransom sees some value in the attempt, but it is less than ideal. Such individual myth-structures can be useful in keeping an occulted religion secure underground during times of persecution: "unofficial poetry kept religion alive if not flourishing during the collapse of the establishment". Yeats is also commended for the fact that "his poetry breathes a tragic sense". For the most part however his type of poetry suffers due to the emptiness of symbols and should not be regarded too highly. Yeats' symbols are only "unofficial", poor imitations:

They cannot expect to be entertained as the result of a discipline that has already instructed the public in them as in the images of a dogmatic system; nor can one of them simply imply a whole historical system of images that is intellectually coherent. They are inferior in force to the properly symbolic images.²⁹⁴

Participation in a system sanctioned by tradition is the only means sufficient for poetry. The size of the system required is beyond the scope of any individual, or even any age, to create. The only hope is to participate in the systems already existing; it is this which charges symbols with their evocative meaning: "the symbol needs its public genealogy".²⁹⁵ The extent to which Ransom synonymises religion and poetry is absolute. The recurrent concern of Ransom's criticism is to enshrine religion and poetry together in a doctrine that emphasises limitation. The most adroit strategy to accomplish this end was to bind them together along those lines. By the latter part of his writing career he had become more straightforward in his advocacy of this:

²⁹³ John Crowe Ransom, "Yeats and His Symbols", *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Summer, 1939), pp. 309-322, p. 311.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 316.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 313.

both the genius of poetry and the genius of the religious establishment work against the same difficulty, which is the registration of what is inexpressible or metaphysical (SE 320)

There are many uses for a theology which enforces humility (SE 330)

In particular, Ransom's readings of Kant begin to evidence, if not development in thought (Ransom's views are strikingly consistent), then a development in the parts to which he assigns priority. Throughout his career Ransom frequently acknowledges the influence he has taken from Kant: "I am obliged to think of Kant as my own mentor" (SE 286). Kant's philosophy is used as evidence for Ransom's arguments in *God Without Thunder*, and is later marshalled in a similar context to support Ransom's poetic ideas. Ransom's version of Kant might appear somewhat different to the conventional perception of Kant's proto-romanticism.²⁹⁶ Kant becomes, in Ransom's interpretation, an unromantic thinker who emphasised the flaws and limitations in human nature. To Ransom, the "doctrine" underpinning Kant's critical philosophy is "that there are limits to human understanding" (GWT 128). On top of this doctrinal assumption Kant builds his idea of "necessary fictions":

Kant humanized, regularized, and classified – and in that sense justified – the fictions [...] Kant classified the fictions under categories, which are simply the leading type of fictions that the universal mind imposes upon the barren facts (GWT 215-216).

To Ransom, Kant's experience of the sublime carries with it a tragic element.²⁹⁷ The sublime is the contemplation of a supersensible, something beyond understanding. The consequence of the gulf between ambition and attainability leads to us becoming "distressed because our faculties do not partake equally of it" (GWT 273). As a result, "the feeling attending this experience is not a pleasant one" (GWT 274). It inclines us against any hope of a systematic knowledge" (274).

Ransom reiterates much of the Kantian material of *God Without Thunder* years later, in "An Address to Kenneth Burke" (1939) and "The Planetary Poet" (1964), the latter an essay on Wallace Stevens which was Ransom's last published work. A phrase that seems to possess particular resonance is "supersensible destination", which appears in *God Without Thunder* (GWT 274). In "An Address",

²⁹⁶ For a rebuttal of both Kant's romanticism and his influence on romanticism see Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987): "Kant and Schiller... do not see it [art] as a means for acquiring metaphysical knowledge", p. 333n. Also Beiser, "Romanticism and Idealism", in *The Relevance of Romanticism: Essays on German Romantic Philosophy*, ed. by Dalia Nassar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 30-44: "Kant never permits the artist to have insight", pp. 40-41, and "The romantics were never fervent admirers of Kant's *Kritik der Urteils kraft*, and they never went poring over the text to find inspiration", p. 41. For an account of the differing opinions over Kant's influence on British Romanticism see Tim Milnes, *The Truth About Romanticism: Pragmatism and Idealism in Keats, Shelley, Coleridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

²⁹⁷ See R.P. Blackmur's "Between the *Numen* and the *Moha*" for a similar view of the "sublime" in perfectibilist terms (LH 289-309).

Ransom repeats the phrase: “the mind must have a supersensible destination” and shortly afterwards elevates it: it becomes “supersensible destiny”.²⁹⁸ In the earlier instance, in *God Without Thunder*, the term indicates “the mind’s destiny to strip off its senses and live wholly in the barren and simple world of the quantities”. In the later essay, destiny leads to density, specifically “a chaotic qualitative density”. If “destiny” implies more purposefulness or directionality than “destination”, the chance of reaching terminus is nonetheless the same in both cases. Destination and destiny both point only towards an implied realm that the mind cannot reach. Ransom refers to this higher sensory realm, “we strain ever so painfully to receive it... But it eludes us.”²⁹⁹

In both essays Ransom finds value in the futile gesture. The earlier essay offers the caveat that, by their insurmountable distance, supersensibles can be converted into “ghosts” and “satisfy this strangely assorted yet integral mind with a fiction” (GWT 274). A ghost imitates the form of the supersensible it represents, but stands as a reminder of the impossibility of incarnating that represented figure. It is, in some way, a reassuring presence despite its fiction. It is in light of this that Ransom can confidently assert “Religions on the cosmic side are perfectly familiar with this crisis.”³⁰⁰ By the time he comes to write “An Address”, Ransom’s solace comes from “humor”, which is the turning-back of the enquiring mind onto itself with awareness of its own ridiculousness. In this it offers some degree of ontological insight, that ontology specifically taking the form of an awareness of the impossibility of realisation. Laughter results when we reach towards the supersensible realm: “we laugh when we are invited to determine a human action by mechanical principles...” Accordingly, “humour is neither poetic nor anti-poetic but pre-poetic”; the type of humour here referred to is that which comes from recognising the absurdity of man’s ambitions.³⁰¹

Ransom is, in many ways, moving beyond Kant with his formulations. His characteristically “New Critical” amendment is to add the point of limit at the end of Kant’s philosophy, where otherwise it stretches into the higher realm of the romantic “pure idea”. To Ransom’s ontology, the “pure idea” is only the fact that there can be no “pure idea”: this is the unromantic image. In this he differs from his mentor to an extent, although Ransom always emphasises the aspects of Kant’s philosophy that are uncharacteristically restrained: “I came upon Kant the Transcendentalist, who did not dare to make images of the Unknown God” (WB 376).

²⁹⁸ John Crowe Ransom, “An Address to Kenneth Burke”, *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Spring, 1942), pp. 219-237, p. 232.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 233.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 233.

³⁰¹ *Ibid*, p.236.

In later life Ransom displayed a profound interest in the philosophy and poetry of Wallace Stevens.³⁰² Ransom began to see in Wallace Stevens “a major poet whose magnificence has been dawning only gradually on us”.³⁰³ On more than one occasion Ransom relates Stevens to Kant directly: “Stevens was a very good Kantian, though there is no evidence that he had ever read Kant seriously”; or again, “Kant, I think, would have accepted it [Steven’s poem “The Motive for Metaphor] as a stylized but competent variation upon his own view”.³⁰⁴ And in a letter to Stevens, having recently read *Notes towards a Supreme Fiction*, Ransom comments “I’m absolutely for the philosophical position you occupy” (JCR SL 316). Taking Ransom’s statements together, and assuming honesty, we can imagine a circularity or triumvirate of sorts. Kant is Ransom’s mentor; Ransom’s philosophy is the same as Stevens’; Stevens is a Kantian. In Ransom’s view there is an integral link that binds this circle together.³⁰⁵

In “Poets Without Laurels”, Ransom had politely dismissed Stevens’ poetry as “pure”, meaning “you cannot get a moral out of it”; it has “no moral, political, religious, or sociological values” (WB 59). Art for art’s sake, in short. By “The Planetary Poet” Ransom sees in Stevens something of a kindred spirit and philosophical ally.³⁰⁶ “The Planetary Poet” is Ransom’s address to Stevens’ “antipathy to the churches and priests”.³⁰⁷ Ransom reads Stevens through the lens of Kant and regrets Stevens cultivation of “an aesthetic faith, not a theological faith”, especially when “aesthetic foundations are collapsing beneath their [Yeats, Eliot and Stevens’] feet”.³⁰⁸ He points towards “God-images” in

³⁰² Ransom’s engagement with Stevens is substantial, but they never met. “The Planetary Poet” recalls the story of their near-meeting: “Teaching at Bread Loaf in Vermont during the summer of 1942, I engaged to make a stopover after the session at Cambridge. So I wrote to Stevens proposing to return at Gambier by train via Hartford and New York, provided I might get off my train at Hartford and call on him for the sake of some conversation. His reply was instant. I cannot now come upon his letter, but I have kept it in memory; I can stipulate that it was typed on office stationery, and read almost exactly in these words:

No Ransom, I cannot allow you to get off your train at Hartford and come to me here for a little conversation. But if you will tell me the day and hour when your train arrives at Hartford, I will be there to board it, and we will go to New York and have a big conversation.

That was as genial as it was peremptory, perfect for his character, and perfect for my intentions.

Unfortunately, before the appointed day could arrive, I received a telegram requiring me to hurry home by the speediest route, and make no stops by the way.” John Crowe Ransom, “The Planetary Poet”, *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Winter, 1964), pp. 233-264, pp. 234-235.

³⁰³ “The Planetary Poet”, p. 233.

³⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 235 and SE 299

³⁰⁵ According to Quinlan it is simply that “Ransom superimposes his own version of Kantianism on Stevens”, p.98. Young’s biography suggests the mild beginning of senility at this point in Ransom’s life. *Gentleman in a Dustcoat*, p. 455.

³⁰⁶ Marion Montgomery theorises “earlier in his career he had seemed rather indifferent to a companionable poet – that is, a poet who holds very much the same position... it was only late in life that Ransom recognised his philosophical relation to Stevens.” Marion Montgomery, *John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate: At Odds About the Ends of History and the Mystery of Nature* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2003), p. 87.

³⁰⁷ “The Planetary Poet”, pp. 253.

³⁰⁸ Ibid, pp. 258-259.

Stevens' poetry, "supernatural providences" that might be taken for comfort.³⁰⁹ This is characterised in the terminology of Kantian naturalism: nature is beautiful when it is "purposive" when "one of its many configurations seems orderly, as if intended".³¹⁰ The poet's cultivation of fictions can serve, as nature, to create some transporting sensation. It might even imitate the naturalistic beauty Kant describes. Ransom hints at the possible usefulness of poetic fiction to emphasise and create value:

In stupid fact the rock which the man encountered was barren. But into the icon which the poet made of the rock he introduced the leaves, and they made all the difference.³¹¹

Despite this potential, Stevens' aesthetic sensibility is undermined by its separation from the religious. His fictions will remain empty of symbolic value. Ransom is rueful of Stevens' failure to unify the two factors which, to his philosophy, are one and the same to begin with. This he acknowledges ten years earlier, in "The Concrete Universal I", when talking of Stevens: "the poets can erect their handsome fictions, and I seem to find an always diminishing distance between these and the transcendental structures of religion" (SE 285). Ransom describes how Stevens' poetry could be seen as "a set of Notes Toward the Definition of a Secular Culture, and would therefore stand in some opposition to T.S. Eliot's Notes Towards the Definition of a Culture as Based on Religion" (SE 284). Such a project can only be carried out in individualistic terms and, removed from the religious sensibility, it can only ever be foolishly romantic. Ransom's critique of Stevens' "supreme fiction" is expressed in these terms.

Stevens' project of assembling a "supreme fiction" out of the material of poetry bears a likeness to the type of project that could have been carried out by Ransom himself, or even Hulme. This might, to an extent, explain Ransom's simultaneous fascination with the project and bitter sense of its flaws. It might well have served as useful myth, if there wasn't a fatal romantic defect underpinning it.³¹² Joseph Carroll describes how Stevens sought to "assimilate the diction and imagery of Christianity to a humanistic aestheticism"; yet the scope of Stevens' project in creating a Supreme Fiction is ever defined in strongly romantic terms. Unlike Ransom or Hulme, Stevens lacks the upper

³⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 260.

³¹⁰ Ibid, p. 255.

³¹¹ Ibid, p. 263.

³¹² Stevens seems to recognise something of this difference, when writing of Ransom, he describes "what John Crowe Ransom does is to make a legend of reality", adding the clarification "I don't in the least mean anything romantic." Wallace Stevens, "John Crowe Ransom: Tennessean" *The Sewanee Review*, Vol.56, No.3 (Summer 1948), pp. 367-369, p. 367.

limit to human ambition, he seeks to transcend the self or make the self transcendent. He even names his project a “new romanticism”.³¹³

Santayana, Stevens’ mentor at Harvard and addressee of “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” forms a fourth member of the hypothetical circle, related by Ransom to both Kant and Stevens. Conkin posits Santayana as an early influence on Ransom to counter the influence of John Dewey’s Pragmatism: “John Crowe Ransom was much more under the influence of Santayana than Dewey.”³¹⁴ Bates describes how Santayana bridged the schools of idealism and pragmatism by suggesting that “poetry must step forward to provide us with a new mythology.”³¹⁵ Although Ransom sees value in his project, Santayana, like Stevens, is unfortunately undermined by the romantic tendency.³¹⁶ In “Art and Mr Santayana” Ransom regrets that “both the scientific essences and the Santayana ones are obtained by abstraction” (WB 319). Ransom sees Santayana’s philosophy as underscored with Platonism; he is however working with “a more honest ghost than the Platonic idea”. Ransom describes Santayana’s distinction between the realms of essence and matter. The former is “quaint” and “like a child’s collection of coloured blocks”. Ransom summarises Platonic idealism as “whenever one comes upon a new quality one takes a picture of it and puts it into a drawer”. A redeeming quality is to be found in Santayana’s description of the contrasting realm of matter, however:

the forms of matter [...] are frightful things for an animal to have to deal with, because their adjectives are unpredictable, and evil more often than good; and they are sadly or comically

³¹³ Joseph Carroll, *Wallace Stevens’ Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), p.4; p.6. See also, B.J. Leggett, *Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory: Conceiving the Supreme Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011). For Edward Ragg “secular idealism” is the specific factor that sets Stevens apart from the Ransom and the New Criticism: “The distance between Stevens and the New Critics marks, therefore, the ingenuity of the poet’s rehabilitation of a modernised ‘Romantic’ aesthetic.” Edward Ragg, *Wallace Stevens and the Aesthetics of Abstraction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 108-109.

³¹⁴ Conkin, *When All the Gods Trembled*, p. 154. Jarvis has argued for Ransom’s debt to F.H. Bradley “this Bradleyian strain... informs two fundamental aspects of his theory: scepticism of the claim of science to offer full and adequate knowledge of the phenomenal world, and, secondly, his insistence that poetry offers such knowledge”. F.P. Jarvis, “F.H. Bradley’s Appearance and Reality and the Critical Theory of John Crowe Ransom”, in *John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays*, p. 207. Quinlan offers a counter: “Bradley’s absolute, in which all separation is overcome and all distinctions vanish, was an idea that was quite alien to Ransom’s sensibility.” *John Crowe Ransom’s Secular Faith*, p.10. For Ransom’s own comments on Dewey, see “The Inorganic Muses”, p. 282.

³¹⁵ Milton J. Bates, “Stevens and the Supreme Fiction”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens*, ed. by John N. Serio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 49.

³¹⁶ For a similar and contemporaneous account of Santayana’s “addict[ion] to Platonism”, see Philip Blair Rice, “George Santayana: The Philosopher as Poet”, *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Autumn, 1940), pp. 460-475, p. 460; Around the same time, Joseph E. Baker sees in Ransom’s praise of Santayana’s philosophy an attempt to integrate him into the “New Reactionaries” under the mantra “Historical ignorance is aesthetic bliss”, Joseph E. Baker, “The Philosopher and the New Critic”, *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Apr-Jun, 1942), pp. 167-171, pp. 168-169.

unsuitable for a scientists, because they cannot be held to strict accountability like the nouns in dictionaries but are possessed of an obscene and malignant fertility [...] Mr Santayana's account of this realm is a great literary achievement, and should be recommended equally to soft-hearted sentimentalists and hard-headed positivists (WB 315-316).

Santayana shows a sensitivity for the chaotic nature of contingent things that Ransom appreciates. Unfortunately, his inclination is not towards the realm of matter, despite his compelling description of it, but instead towards the Platonic higher realm: "He has only essences" (WB 317). The consequences for art are fatal, the realm of essences is "a realm too thin to pretend to support belief" (WB 318). By the end of the essay Ransom can comprehensively conclude: "Mr Santayana is more Platonic and unworldly than ever" (WB 326n). Santayana has favoured the perfect over the imperfect. Despite his good qualities, to Ransom this is an unforgivable err in judgment.³¹⁷

We might return to Ransom's definition of the ideal "ontological" poetry: aware of irreducible, concrete complexity, looking back towards history, and focused on its own limitation and the limitation of the world. He considered his primary work as a critic to foreground those desirable aspects. Yet they carry with them a sense of their own impossibility. As one critic has pointed out, Ransom's "Wanted: An Ontological Critic", the final essay of *The New Criticism*, seems to end the New Criticism before it has even started.³¹⁸ It gestures beyond itself in the moment of its inception. In calling for a new type of poetry and a new type of criticism that is, perhaps, impossible, Ransom is both undermining the temporal credibility of the New Criticism and making a higher gesture towards an unromantic image. It is not a new type of critic that is urgently needed. It is instead a new type of attitude that is capable of comporting itself towards the impossible. An ontological critic, perhaps, is as much a necessary fiction as any other "ghost" we might witness in *God Without Thunder*.

³¹⁷ G.K. Chesterton similarly criticises Santayana for his failure to find value in the "imperfect", despite praising his perceptiveness: in his reading of Browning, Santayana had "discovered what was the real root virtue of Browning's poetry [imperfection]; and... having discovered that root virtue, he thinks it a vice." G.K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning* (London: Macmillan, 1903), p. 183.

³¹⁸ Firchow writes, "Ransom's last chapter, however, calls for the coming of an 'ontological' critic who will supersede the lower-case new critics whom he has been considering hitherto. Paradoxically Ransom ends the New Criticism at the very moment he begins it." Peter Edgerly Firchow, *Reluctant Modernists: Aldous Huxley and Some Contemporaries* (Munster: Lit Verlag, 2002), p. 257.

Chapter 6

Allen Tate and the Function of Criticism

Introductory

This chapter will attempt to draw out two primary aspects of Allen Tate's literary criticism. Firstly, the extent to which the evaluative approach to literature, history and culture that characterises his work can be seen as a doctrine of limitation for the purposes of countering the contrary attitude (romanticism, scientific thinking or perfectibility) in modernity. Secondly, whether Tate's vision for a literary class of men of letters in society largely comes about as an active social programme for the propagation of that exact doctrine.

Tate's prose tends to be quite clear-cut. The points of literature that he finds valuable and the agenda that he is pursuing are both expressed simply and recurrently over the course of his career. One of the more striking qualities of his *Essays of Four Decades* (a collection of all his major writing) is the remarkable consistency of the project he is undertaking across those forty years. Ransom's intentions tend to be more occulted, with the extreme exception of *God Without Thunder*, and couched in the language of philosophy (especially his lifelong engagement with Kantianism). It is also more the case that Ransom's work can be divided into clear stages where certain differing attitudes are cultivated, and different prescriptions made. Tate's attitude does not tend to deviate a great deal from the earliest to the last of his work.

Perhaps the major event of Tate's life is his 1950 conversion to Catholicism, yet even before *I'll Take My Stand*, in 1929, he can express to Donald Davidson his conviction that "I am heading more and more towards Catholicism" (LC 223). His contribution to that volume in the following year clearly demonstrates a sense of the value of a Catholic sensibility.³¹⁹ It is not, I think, particularly valid to think of Tate's work in terms of pre and post-conversion periods. Although his correspondence with

³¹⁹ Tate's conversion is mentioned, laconically, in his correspondence with Cleanth Brooks. "Second, I've done what I should have done, and I don't know why I didn't do, years ago: I have joined the Catholic Church." Brooks' response is illustrative of Tate's long-standing sentiments: "Some one told me a few weeks ago that you had entered the Church. Your *general* sympathies have long been on record in your writings and I have, of course, been familiar with it." Cleanth Brooks and Allen Tate: *Collected Letters, 1933-1976*, ed. by Alphonse Vinh (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988), pp. 172-173.

Jacques Maritain in the years after converting do demonstrate a conviction to establish a catholic-focused humanist society, this is not anything strikingly new when compared with his previous attempts at similar projects (such as the Southern Agrarian movement). The attitude throughout is consistent, as this chapter will explore.

In his concern for the social utility that might be derived from the study of literature, and the importance of a cultivated class of literati, Tate's literary work has parallels with that of F.R. Leavis, perhaps more so than any other New Critic. Although Leavis certainly does not share Tate's substantial engagement with Christianity, the reclassification of literature as a quasi-religious standard of cultural value is common to both, in addition to the epochal sense of the impending cultural crisis that both see as imminent.³²⁰ This crisis is alluded to by Tate in several essays and he traces its source to the individual mind. In the preface to his volume *Reason in Madness*, which includes several of his more famous essays, Tate writes of their universal quality:

I believe that all the essays are on one theme: a deep illness of the modern mind [...] At any rate the mind is the dark centre from which one may see coming the darkness gathered outside (RM ix)

The first page of the first essay in the volume, "The Present Function of Criticism" can say decisively that "this state of mind is positivism". The problem found in the mind extends outwards into society and is reflected in the types of knowledge that modern society prioritises:

The point of view here, then, is that historicism, scientism, psychologism, biologism, in general the confident use of the scientific vocabularies in the spiritual realm, has created or at any rate is the expression of a spiritual disorder (RM 3)

The mind of the modern individual has forgotten its limitation and has given over instead to what Tate sees as a romantic mentality of unlimited potential. On this point he is quite clear:

Reason – in the sense of moderate unbelief in difficult truths about human nature – and belief in the perfectibility of man-in-the-gross, were the great liberal dogmas which underlay much of our present trouble (EFD 24).

Positivism, along with its attendant disciplines, is the outward symptom of this internal condition. In a late essay Tate goes as far as to demonise science as the "Black Arts" due to its Faustian

³²⁰ In "Johnson on the Metaphysical Poets" Tate credits Leavis with the insight that Johnson lived in a "positive culture" which was conducive to criticism. (EFD 491) This seems a tacit acknowledgement of Leavis' allied status as an advocate of a dissociation of sensibility in history.

occultation of man's spiritual and limited nature.³²¹ By the later part of his career Tate uses explicitly religious terminology: "Another name for the Utopian demon is Gnosticism, or the belief in the omnipotence of reason in the political order".³²² This leads Tate to conclude that if one were to attempt to formulate a palliative for the cultural problems affecting society as a whole, one would need to address it as "a spiritual disorder", at the source in the mind that produces those problems (EFD 198). This would be akin to treating the disease directly, rather than just the symptoms. It is unsurprising that Tate can say in the next paragraph of "The Present Function of Criticism": the point of view of this essay, then, is influenced by the late, neglected T.E. Hulme (and not in this essay alone).³²³ Like Hulme, Tate sees art, especially poetry, as the magic bullet which can directly target the sick mind.³²⁴ It is for this reason that he can earnestly claim for literature a role of supreme importance in the modern world for countering "the totalitarian society that is coming in the next few years" (RM 4). The critic, as the advocate of literature, is elevated to a position of paramount importance, as he is the one capable of distinguishing the type of anti-romantic or anti-perfectibilist poetry that can be most usefully put to work. For without the critic, society's consumption of literature would be indiscriminate, and, as Tate makes clear, poets such as Hart Crane or Emerson can do more harm than good – they are in effect, by their romantic veneration of the self, part of the problem. Following Tate we turn instead to Dante, Eliot, or perhaps Yeats, and the lessons we receive are edifying and constructive. The critic simultaneously offers knowledge of the "dissociation of sensibility" in the spirit of Eliot.³²⁵ The state of the modern world as fallen and incomplete is

³²¹ Allen Tate, "Several Thousand Books", *The Sewanee Review* Vol. 75, No. 3 (Summer, 1967), pp. 377-384, p. 382.

³²² Allen Tate, "Christ and the Unicorn", *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (Apr. – Jun., 1955), pp. 175-181, p. 178. Gnosticism, "the belief in the perfectibility of man" has a counterpart demon in "Manicheism", the belief in the perfectibility of the State necessary on account of man being a "vicious imbecile", p.178. For Tate communism is the exemplar of the latter system. In "Mere Literature and the Lost Traveller", an essay from the year of his death, Tate can point to "Hippies as the latest expression of Gnostic libertinism", as well as regretting the moon landing as the product of "a disillusioned romantic imagination" favouring empty scientific marvels over "salvation". Allen Tate, "Mere Literature and the Lost Traveller", *Poetry*, Vol. 135, No. 2 [Nov., 1979], pp.93-102, p. 97, p. 101. The appeal of the moon as somewhere we might want to go because it "presumably cannot support human life" is reminiscent of Tate's critique of Poe's desire for self-extinction (see footnote 35, below).

³²³ Elsewhere Tate makes reference to "the late T.E. Hulme, prophet of his generation", Allen Tate, "Poetry and the Absolute", *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Jan 1927), pp. 41-52, p. 49. Critics who have detected influence or affinity between Hulme and Tate include R.K. Meiners, *The Last Alternatives: A Study of the Works of Allen Tate* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1963), p. 39, and Lillian Feder, "Allen Tate's Use of Classical Literature", *The Centennial Review of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 4, No.1 (Winter 1960), pp. 89-114.

³²⁴ Tate on other occasions pathologises romanticism-as-disease, such as Hart Crane's "exacerbation of the nerve-ends, along with an incapacity to live within the limitations of the human condition" (EFD 327)

³²⁵ Eliot's early influence on Tate is evidenced in his letters to Davidson: in 1922, Tate, having read *The Sacred Wood*, was praising "the demi-god T.S. Eliot" as "the most learned man writing now" (LC 36), and in 1923, Donald Davidson warned Tate that he was "distinctly limiting your possibilities by the Eliotish manner which you have to a certain extent adopted". (LC 70) Underwood narrates how Tate found in *The Sacred Wood* a support for his interest in the tradition of the Old South. *Orphan of the South*, p. 136.

predicated on a presumption that there can be imagined a world in which man is unified with his environment, such as, typically, the middle ages. The dissociation of sensibility, therefore, is a phenomenon that bears greatly on the present.³²⁶ The absence of an all-encompassing myth or religion in modernity severs the poet, and man more generally, from the higher structures that provide value to poetry, or life. Edwin Arlington Robinson, for example, “has no epos, myth or code to tell him what the terminal points of human conduct are, in this age”; just as deracinated modern man is lost without a meaningful culture or religious faith.³²⁷ Tate’s early attraction to the Agrarian ideal, and later to Catholicism, stems from his belief that they might provide some degree of myth to compensate.

Tate’s work demonstrates his conviction that it is only in communities of enlightened readers that the “plutocratic” influence that overwhelms the rest of society might be meaningfully resisted. The quality that is particular to these communities is their specific sense of the value of religion and myth to modernity; specifically the use they can have in conveying a sense of man’s inherent limitation. Poetry – specifically the classical or Hulmean type - is the primary means by which these factors are brought to bear on society.

This point constitutes a central crux of Mark Malvasi’s volume on the Southern Agrarians: he argues that Ransom and Tate’s philosophies can be separated primarily because Tate recognises the necessity of external structures (such as religion or myth) for an individual to function culturally or socially, whereas Ransom sees the mind as self-sustaining and independent: “not bound by tradition or devoted to any social order [...] faithful only to art”.³²⁸ Malvasi seems, perhaps, to make too much of Ransom’s rejection of Agrarianism. As we have seen, the rejection of agrarianism did not reflect a major shift in attitude, but only represented a changing of tools to carry out the same work. If Tate and Ransom stand opposed as advocates, respectively, of myth and mind, it is only another indicator of the ambivalent middle-ground that these critics inhabit that simultaneously points towards the desirable superiority of definite structures yet knows the impossibility of their realisation. Ransom inclines towards the independent mind of the poet or critic as a standard of judgement, and Tate

³²⁶ Towards the end of his career, in “The Unilateral Imagination; Or, I, too, Dislike It”, Tate internalises the dissociation of sensibility as a habit of mind rather than a “doctrine of historical determinism”. (EFD 461) He attributes his modification of Eliot’s theory to William Lynch, whose *Christ and Apollo* also shares some commonalities with Tate’s famous late essays on the “Angelic” and “Symbolic” imaginations nearly a decade earlier. See William Lynch, *Christ and Apollo: The Dimensions of the Literary Imagination* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1960). John V. Glass III overstates things when he claims that Tate “discovers the means by which he overcomes the modern dissociation of sensibility”, this consigns Tate to a pure romanticism he would have absolutely rejected. John V. Glass III, *Allen Tate: The Modern Mind and the Discovery of Enduring Love* (Washington, D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 2016), p. 34.

³²⁷ Allen Tate, “Edwin Arlington Robinson”, in *The Poetry Reviews of Allen Tate, 1924-1944* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1983), p. 167.

³²⁸ *The Unregenerate South*, p. 77.

inclines in a contrary direction towards a comprehensive myth for society, yet both are drawn back together, as if by elastic, and meet in a cultivated middle of a conscious futility – a limiting doctrine would not allow any other. Their shared doctrine is imperfection and it undermines both extremes as potentialities of actual cultural redemption.³²⁹

Malvasi's differentiation between Ransom and Tate owes a debt to an essay by Lewis P. Simpson a decade earlier, "The Southern Republic of Letters and I'll Take My Stand", which follows an intellectual history into which Ransom, Tate and the Southern Agrarians more generally are integrated. Simpson, himself what one might think of as a "second generation" agrarian, participates in a historicising act clearly in the spirit of a "dissociation of sensibility", and describes the context of the production of *I'll Take My Stand* in light of it. The background to the creation of Agrarian's foundational text is traced to the middle ages, beginning from a watershed moment defined as the "exodus of the clerks", whereby literary men declare their independence to form the "republic of letters", a process in which the secular is differentiated from the spiritual and a "third realm" – this republic – is established alongside the two pre-existing realms, Church and State. The pre-separation society is the organically united medieval world, and the separation becomes increasingly established in the renaissance and enlightenment, reaching its highest point in romanticism, involving a gradual abandonment of myth, ritual, tradition and religion in favour of the pure veneration of the self. The separation of faculties affects all aspects of society, in particular is its view of its own past: "mind" becomes the motivating force of historical process, rather than society itself: "history is a grand, wilful process – conducted by rational, secular mind – of transferring all that the human consciousness comprehends as existence into itself."³³⁰ The consequence is the aggrandisement of the self – the Emersonian "oversoul" at its most excessive – as the centrality around which society is organised in the modern age.³³¹ This is the context into which Simpson sees

³²⁹ Richard Gray goes into some detail about the individual differences between Ransom and Tate's specific versions of agrarianism, see *A Web of Words: The Great Dialogue of Southern Literature* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), pp. 107-108.

³³⁰ Lewis P. Simpson, "The Southern Republic of Letters and *I'll Take My Stand*", in *A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years*, ed. by William C. Harvard and Walter Sullivan (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), p. 72.

³³¹ Simpson explores several interesting implications for his theory of history, some of which, perhaps, indicate a shared reactionary character with the Southern Agrarians. Slavery in the South, for instance, was a product of "secularization" as the totalising religious zeal of colonisation subsided in favour of a corporate interest in tobacco farming. Simpson goes as far as to say that any society comported romantically around "mind" – rather than consisting of minds subservient to society – is in fact a "slave society". Accordingly, "it is no historical accident that one of the greatest of the Enlightenment philosophes, Thomas Jefferson, was a Virginia slavemaster." *A Band of Prophets*, pp. 74-75. The Declaration of Independence itself is also characterised as the triumphant statement of "mind's assumption of dominance over society by means of its embodiment in the sovereign soul", p.75.

the Agrarian movement arising. Their project is nothing less than the reunification of the entire lost sensibility:

The southerners would, let us say, encourage mind to reverse its status, to become as it once had been: the consciousness of the webbed order of myth and tradition, always submissive to ritual manners and customs [...] the consciousness of a society of men existing under the complete sovereignty of God (or gods).

The attempt to carry out this grand reversal is “programmatically”, Simpson cites a manifesto-like correspondence from Tate to Donald Davidson which advocates the use of tactics “associated with progressivism” to carry out the a “reaction against progressivism”.³³² It is a “paradoxical and aggressive” movement as its agenda is a type of self-annihilation: by reversing mind and society as models of existence, should such a thing be possible, it would effectively nullify its own authority. The project in its entirety can be broken down into two aspects: firstly, the attempt to reunify mind and society through the example of the transformed South, recovering myth and tradition and making culture organic and spiritual once more; secondly, the underlying, semi-occulted acknowledgement of the impossibility of this effort. To Simpson this dual motion is indicative of the project’s failure, “it is finally a symbol of what it basically stands against: the transference of existence into mind”.³³³

It is on this point that Simpson slightly misinterprets the spirit of the effort undertaken by Tate (if not the entirety of the contributors to *I’ll Take My Stand*). The impossible nature of the task is an aspect integral to its meaning. It is what saves the historicising tendency from being only romantic nostalgia. Tate gestures to the past, not because he wishes it to be a possibility for resurrection, but as a means of drawing attention away from the absoluteness of the romanticised modern self. The project cannot be said to be a failure, therefore, if it fails to accomplish what it never set out to do. Were Tate to believe in the actual potential of a community of letters to reinvigorate society then it would be doomed to the fate of all such romantic movements. What useful change might such a group be capable of then, under such limitations? Only to serve as a reminder of man’s tragic nature. One critic writes of Tate’s poetry, that it “is not romanticized or sentimentalized, but, through the Homeric associations it evokes, suggests tragic experience in the past and presence”.³³⁴ Literature in general, and the communities which propagate it, serve a similar purpose. Their existence points beyond the present to the limiting lesson of the past and poetry. To see either as anything else is nostalgia or romantic folly.

³³² *A Band of Prophets*, pp. 67-69.

³³³ *Ibid*, p. 88.

³³⁴ “Allen Tate’s Use of Classical Literature”, p. 114.

This misinterpretation seems to be carried down into Malvasi, who describes Tate's "stunning attempt" to "reverse the course of western history".³³⁵ Yet Malvasi perceptively describes Tate's impressionistic use of history as a type of lesson rather than a literal truth or possibility for revolutionary re-establishment:

traditionalists had no desire to recover or restore the past [...] rather, [they] created something new, and though they drew on the past, they adapted it to their own moral problems and spiritual needs and thus assimilated past and present into an organic whole³³⁶

This hits on the central value of Tate's view of history: its use as a means of engendering a type of sensibility or awareness. Its function is anti-romantic and it serves as an imperfecting strategy, thereby standing against modernity.³³⁷ This explains why Tate can often play fast-and-loose with the historical record – it is not important because of its literal truth-value, but instead for its utility.³³⁸ He is able, nonetheless, to differentiate himself from the nostalgic romantic poet, who co-opts a "fictitious past" as a means of asserting his will: "This special property of escape is the Golden Age, used in a special fashion. The romantic poet attributes it to a historical reality."³³⁹ (EFD 184-185) Tate knows his history is not real, only that it is useful to act as if it was. According to one critic, Tate channels the spirit of "that progressivist, nationalist archenemy of the New Criticism Van Wyck Brooks" in his search for a usable past.³⁴⁰ Yet it is important to remember the integral limits that Tate has built into his exegesis of the literature of the past. In the essay "Modern Poets and the Convention", Tate addresses the task of the "traditional poet" and poses a repeated question:

Where shall the modern poet, for whom Eliot spoke when he said novelty is preferable to repetition, learn anything that he can use?

For the traditional poet [...] his question is always: Where can I find something that I can use?

³³⁵ *The Unregenerate South*, p. 89.

³³⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 105-108.

³³⁷ A review of *Decline of the West* demonstrates Tate's broad support of Spengler's use of history to reject scientific modernity. Allen Tate, "Fundamentalism", *Nation* 122 (12 May 1926), pp. 532-534. Although much later he considers it a "historical melodrama". "Christ and the Unicorn", p. 180.

³³⁸ Malvasi writes "Tate himself took liberties with the past when it suited him: he was never especially interested in historical accuracy." *The Unregenerate South*, p. 107.

³³⁹ Tate adds that science creates the additional, utopian capacity to conceive a "pure Golden Age of the future". (EFD 185)

³⁴⁰ *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry*, p. 90.

Where in Shakespeare or in some other giant of the past, can he find something useful?
Something that he can carry on?³⁴¹

The answer that Tate provides demonstrates is that the past cannot be grasped directly, nor can it be rendered truly useful in any practical way. It can be reached for, but the distance is always insurmountable. In that act of reaching, however, and experiencing failure, the lesson is taught of limitation:

We cannot penetrate the mind of another age deeply enough to repeat its experience: it is the task of poetry then to comprehend its awareness of the past in the experience of the present.³⁴²

The past is usable, then, but only in the extraordinarily narrow sense of its capacity to make us aware of how unusable it is. The lesson that might be derived from this one simple function is, for Tate, however, one that surpasses all others in importance and, dare I say it, usefulness for correcting the ills of modern society.

When reading Tate's work it is necessary to bear in mind his constant amalgamation of religion, history, poetry and culture as inextricably linked facets that characterise the relationship between individual and society. This is a thoroughly "New Critical" habit. An essay of Tate's on poetry is also an essay about history, as well as about religion. They are unified as aspects that a fragmented modern mind cannot meaningfully engage with, and all hearken back to the one overarching problem: the incapacity of the mind to embrace unifying structures that exist outside of itself:

whether the failure of the modern mind to understand, to think itself into the great myths, is a failure of the religious attitude or a failure of the imagination; or whether the two failures are not the same. They probably are.³⁴³

Religion, over the course of Tate's career, moved more into the ascendant position as the primary arena for the battle for men's souls, but this movement was a subtle one. I reiterate that I would not think it correct to point to a major attitude shift at any point, only a steady gradation towards faith over time. As Doreski has noted, this drift can be attributed to an increasing sense of religion's superiority as a way of emphasising the unknown quality:

³⁴¹ Allen Tate, "Modern Poets and Conventions", in *The Forlorn Demon: Didactic and Critical Essays* (Chicago: Regnery, 1953), pp. 166-168. For reasons unclear, this essay seems the only major piece from any of Tate's earlier critical volumes not reprinted in *Essays of Four Decades*.

³⁴² *Ibid*, p. 170.

³⁴³ Allen Tate, "Babette Deutsch", in *The Poetry Reviews of Allen Tate, 1924-1944* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1983), pp. 117-118.

Tate never recanted his belief that poetry offered a unique form of knowledge, but it is possible that the glimpse of the mysteries offered by Catholicism made the writing of poetry appear to be a comparatively limited approach to the unknown.³⁴⁴

Tate never fuses religion and poetry in the technical way that Ransom attempts, but they are essentially linked in his work. They are united in functionality as methods of varying efficiency for the projection of man's sense of self outside of himself. Much like Ransom, the tools that Tate takes up in his criticism fade in and out of favour depending entirely on their perceived usefulness as doctrines of limitation.

The Usefulness of Poetry

History and poetry share a similar function for Tate's project. They are both methods for emphasising the imperfect. The effect of the formalism of his close reading technique, like that of other New Critics, serves the function of protecting the text from the level of personal, or romantic, readings. In an early essay, "Tension in Poetry", Tate identifies the tension between disparate elements to be the determining feature of poetry. The poem itself is in equilibrium, "the full organised body of all the extension and intension that we can find in it" (EFD 64). The whole, as such, is "unknowable" in any true sense because of its foundation on the uncertainties of these unsteady constituent parts; the whole "poetic effect" is just as much unknowable as Ransom's supernatural entities in *God Without Thunder*. The limit of the knowledge that we might gain from the poetic work is its "distinct quality as the ultimate effect of the whole" and accordingly "that whole is the "result" of a configuration of meaning which it is the duty of the critic to examine and evaluate" (EFD 56). The overarching "sense" of the poem is beyond quantification; the critic must focus instead on parts of the formal components of the text. Romantic completeness of any variety, by this standard, becomes impossible.

Tate writes that it is important that "in metaphysical poetry the logical order is explicit". As such, "it must be coherent; the imagery by which it is sensuously embodied must have at least the appearance of logical determinism..." Here we can see necessity of a system for the creation of great art, however, the completeness of such a system is undermined by the next part of Tate's statement:

³⁴⁴ William Doeski, *The Years of Our Friendship: Robert Lowell and Allen Tate* (Jackson: University Press of Missouri, 1990), p. 178.

... perhaps the appearance only, because the varieties of ambiguity and contradiction possible between the logical surface are endless, as Mr Empson has demonstrated in his elucidation of Marvell's "The Garden" (EFD 61).

It is important, Tate realises, for the work of art to be directed towards a system, but the actuality of such a system is impossible due, specifically, to the play of ambiguity, irony and the textual tensions that Tate describes. In this way the poem can be made to actively resist any attempts to force a totalising meaning upon it. In making criticism the active search for points of uncertainty, Tate turns the poem's formal components into a bulwark. The poetry that can be most readily adapted to this end is, therefore, the most rewarding and useful.

Irony, paradox and ambiguity all point towards the impossibility of achieving an absolute text; the attempt, however, is where greatness lies: this is the essence of the "tragic poet", striving yet, inexorably, in the process of failing to realise his aims. In this light we can understand better Tate's essay "Is Literary Criticism Possible?" The obvious answer to the title question would be no: we cannot arrive at a complete understanding of a text, particularly even if the artist themselves cannot accomplish just such an absoluteness in their own work. In fact, the idea that absolute literary criticism is even truly possible is a fundamentally romantic misapprehension, as Tate explains:

The assumption that we are capable of just evaluation ... is one of the subtler, if crude, abuses of democratic doctrine, as follows: all men ought to exercise independent judgment, and all men being equal, all are equally capable of it, even in literature and the arts (EFD 36).

As a result, "an absolutely independent judgment (if such a thing were possible) would be an absolutely ignorant judgment", or "critical idolatry", serving only to force "parts discretely attended" into an artificial "localization" (EFD 36, 42). Tate is avowedly apart from what he sees as the reductive systemisation of criticism, such as I. A. Richards' psychological approach.³⁴⁵ To apply a scientific method to poetry is to misunderstand its fundamental qualities: "a work of the imagination differs from a work of the logical intellect in some radical sense that seems to lie beyond our comprehension" (EFD 42). For this reason, literary criticism is "perpetually impossible" (EFD 44). The key job of the critic, Tate makes clear, is instead to resist absolute judgements and preserve the poem in its irreducible quality.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁵ A view which, as I argue, does something of an injustice to Richards. For Tate, Richards is a "parable" of "man without his mythologies" - see "Literature and Knowledge", EFD 97-105 and "Three Types of Poetry" (EFD 190-196)

³⁴⁶ According to one critic, Tate's own early poetry reflected a desire for extreme discontinuity alone, without recourse to anything greater: "He seemed content, as his poetry shows, to emphasise the discontinuity and

Unlike more systematic New Critics such as Brooks or Wimsatt, Tate has very few essays that exemplify what we might call intensive close reading. Of all the New Critics, he would presumably, therefore, be the least susceptible to a charge of “asocial formalism”. In Tate’s work, discussion of literature almost universally leads to a discussion of culture, or religion, or history. Some variation of a dissociation of sensibility is referenced (although almost never with that phrase) in most essays, and Tate’s poetic critique is, I would argue, based around it.³⁴⁷ Simpson describes it as, for Tate, “a dominant, controlling, and irredeemable fact of modern culture”.³⁴⁸ Modern poetry is a testament to the disintegration of man’s sensibilities and the absence of faith. The examples of poetry that Tate chooses to analyse are either evidence for a dissociated modern mindset, a testament to an age of unified sensibility or an instance of an outlier who resisted the decline to some limited extent through a poetic strategy.

If we might summarise Tate’s application of Eliot’s theory to poetry, it would be that what is lacking in the modern age and preventing great art is not necessarily the mythic system itself, but rather the belief in such a system, with which the poet must be vitally possessed, and of which religion must surely be a principal element. Tate’s comment on Yeats, that “he only wanted what all men want, a world larger than himself to live in; for the modern world as he saw it was in human terms too small for the human spirit, though quantitatively large if looked at with the scientist”, indicates the flaws in the modern worldview, and seems ostensibly to be nostalgic for a past that constituted a distinct system within which the poet might participate. The sentence, however, is more of a wishful imperative. Yeats “wanted” for a world, just as much as Tate does, but there is no clear statement that it has existed or ever will exist. The “want”, Yeats’ “intensified desire”, is enough, and serves to direct the poet towards a system in a manner that can allow the production of great poetry. In Yeats’ case, this was “the famous ‘system’... the Great Wheel with its gyres and cones”, but this serves as only a singular, idiosyncratic example of a process that could exist on a far wider scale:

May we say that Yeats’ *A Vision*, however private and almost childishly eclectic it may seem, has somewhat the same relation to the central tradition as the far more rigid structure of *The Divine Comedy* has to the Christian myth?

complexity of existence and consciousness [...] without apparent meaning other than the mirroring of life’s difficult ironies”, Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr., *Three Catholic Writers of the American South: Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, Walker Percy* (Jackson: University of Missouri Press, 1985), p. 8.

³⁴⁷ I can find only one example of the term appearing verbatim in Tate’s work, in the late essay “The Unilateral Imagination: Or, I, too, Dislike It” (EFD 459-461), see footnote 8, above.

³⁴⁸ Lewis P. Simpson, *The Brazen Face of History: Studies in the Literary Consciousness in America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), p. 171.

The value of religion for poetry is its potential for providing a myth-structure. To Tate, the Catholicism of the middle ages served this function optimally, but it is not the absolute truth of Catholicism that is of specific significance, rather the system it provides: “myths differ in range and intensity, but not I take it as high and low; for they are in the end what poets can make of them” (EFD 302-305). Tate’s religion, then, is not a romantic absolutism, but rather an acceptance of the usefulness of all-embracing systems in sharpening man’s creative ability. We cannot achieve perfection, or indeed redemption, directly, but we can, by comporting ourselves towards these ends, realise the rewards of the attempt alone. The effort is all, in life as much as poetry. Richard Foster is partially aware of Tate’s position, and states dismissively, “Tate has many times proclaimed the need for absolutes, knowing at the same time that he himself hadn’t any”; this seems to be the point, one cannot “have” absolutes, their necessity is because they are ever out of reach, yet must ever be strived towards.³⁴⁹ Foster argues that “Tate has pictured the ideal criticism in a chaotic time as the expression of a “whole” and traditionally formed mind intellectually detached from the present.”³⁵⁰ Tate’s poetic criticism in fact does quite the opposite, and resists “wholeness”; in an essay on Dante, Tate writes that “no writer has held in mind at one time the whole of *The Divine Comedy*: not even Dante, perhaps least of all Dante himself” (EFD 424). If Dante cannot register a poetic wholeness, then clearly there is no hope for Tate or any other modern. Wholeness is always undermined by the dependence on external structures. According to Tate it is impossible to create a myth ex nihilo, this is a romantic fallacy. A writer is doomed to failure by so doing, even the *Paradiso* is a “vision [...] imagined, it is imaged; its essence is not possessed” (EFD 436). Tate finds his friend Hart Crane’s great mistake to be thinking that he could create a myth. Crane’s fatal degeneration is at least partly a consequence of his incapability to “achieve, in his own life, the full human condition” (EFD 327). Tate’s diagnosis is concise: “the disorder is original and fundamental... it was the historic problem of romanticism” (EFD 310). The poet cannot create his own place in the world – this is the essence of romantic misapprehension – but rather must immerse himself in structures to reverse the decay of individual consciousness: “disunity of the intellect is responsible for Crane’s unphilosophical belief that the poet, unaided and isolated from the people, can create a myth” (EFD 317). The poet’s relation to the world is essentially skewed, and he asks of it more than it can give: “he asks of nature, perfection – requiring only of himself, intensity” (EFD 319). For this reason Crane is the example par excellence of the dissociation of sensibility:

Far from “refuting” Eliot, his [Crane’s] whole career is a vindication of Eliot’s major premise – that the integrity of the individual consciousness has broken down... Instead of the effort to

³⁴⁹ *The New Romantics*, p. 127.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 122.

define himself in the midst of almost overwhelming complications – a situation that might have produced a tragic poet – he falls back upon the intensity of consciousness, rather than the clarity, for his centre of vision. And that is romanticism (EFD 321).

The romantic poet seeks to consummate the absolute in his poetry, to quantify and breach it; Hart Crane is Tate's emblem of this desire.³⁵¹

In an essay on Poe, Tate refers to this tendency as the "Angelic Imagination" and Poe represents another example of the corrupting romantic habit of excess: "When neither intellect nor will is bound to the human scale, their projection becomes godlike, and man becomes an angel" (EFD 411)³⁵² Poe is a transitional figure, according to Tate. He suffers as a result of the "Cartesian split" a variation of the dissociation of sensibility where reason is separated from feeling as a result of the Enlightenment rationalism of which Descartes is exemplary: man has become "an angel inhabiting a machine and directing it by means of the pineal gland" (EFD 412). Poe's transitional state means that he suffers from the disintegrated personality, but communicates still in the language of "unity and order".³⁵³ (EFD 408)

Dante is the exemplar of the opposing type of poetry, founded upon the unrealisable and the limited: "the final insight must elude us". Dante seeks to describe the empyrean in the *Paradiso*. Because the originator of this vision is a mere man, the poet, "it [poetic insight] carries the bottom along with it, however high it may climb". Dante's poem is, therefore, possessed of a tragic nature: "its every gain beyond the simple realism of experience imposes so great a strain upon any actuality of form as to set the ultimate limit of the gain as a defeat" (EFD 446). Dante cannot achieve his final vision as "direct experience", and the knowledge that is gained is that of the tragic poet: "what

³⁵¹ According to Hammer, Tate's definitive proclamations on Crane set the tone for a generation, and providing a defence against that consensus constituted "the tasks of Crane scholarship during the tenure of the New Criticism". *Janus-Faced Modernism*, pp. 34-35.

³⁵² In his reading of Tate, Blackmur defines this phenomenon in terms of dissociation: "For Tate in his later essays, the curse of dissociated thought and unrelated meditation, has been given the name of Angelic thought or imagination", R.P. Blackmur, "San Giovanni in Venere: Allen Tate as Man of Letters", *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (Autumn 1959), pp. 614-631, p. 630.

³⁵³ In "The Angelic Imagination", Tate cites the proposition of Poe's *Eureka*, "In the original unity of the first thing lies the secondary cause of all things, with the germ of their inevitable annihilation". A biographical essay 17 years later recounts how these words had haunted Tate since his encountering them in childhood (ME 116-117). They offer an interesting thought exercise – might this statement not be interpreted as a sort of doctrine of limitation? All things carrying the seed of their destruction sounds a great deal like original sin. Yet Tate is clear in both essays that the very absoluteness of the proclamation renders it grotesquely individualistic: in the later essay, "The cosmos will shrink back into spatial nothingness, taking man along with it; and hence man, having returned to the original nothing, which is God, will *be* God" (ME 117); and in "The Angelic Imagination": "there is lurid sublimity in the spectacle of his taking God along with him into a grave which is not smaller than the universe" (EFD 420). Poe's statement becomes indicative of the highest solipsism, demonstrating an incapability to even envision the universe without the self.

Dante achieved is an actual insight into the great dilemma”, the limitation of man’s vision (EFD 436). The impossibility of a “final vision” was a foregone conclusion, however, and it is the movement of the poem and the poet towards an impossible absolute that is critical. There is a fundamentally religious quality to constant striving and never reaching. This is the “movement” Tate finds in the poem to be valuable: “the poem is an action; it is an action to the end”. The purity of the beatific vision is “uncertain of realization”, and man’s continually moving state means that he is “removed from the Unmoved Mover”. Tate qualifies Dante’s position: “everything that moves, says Dante the Thomist in his letter to Can Grande, has some imperfection in it”; this is what it is to be human, to be moving and to be imperfect: “if Dante’s will is turning like a wheel, he is neither damned nor saved; he is morally active in the universal human predicament”. The “great dilemma” of the tragic poet precludes any form of truly individualised redemption or betterment. However, desire and will “like a wheel moving equally” can be moved, Tate indicates, “by a force outside it”. This seemingly indicates the potential for an external redemption, yet

the wheel is Dante’s last symbol of the great failure. Since it must be moved, it is not yet at one, not yet in unity, with the divine will: it obeys it, as those other wheels, the sun and stars, moved by love, obey (EFD 437-439).

Dante’s poem, like all great classical poetry, does not assert the “anagogical conversion of symbol”, but rather is “constantly moving, rendered moment by moment as *action*”. The striving towards God, this movement, emblemises the vital gesture of both classical poetry and great poetry. The romantic poet, however, seeks to assert stasis by arriving at an immediate revelation: Tate writes of Crane,

In “Cape Hatteras”, the airplane and Walt Whitman are analogous “bridges” to some transcendental truth. Because the idea is variously metaphor, symbol and analogy, it tends to make the poem static.

There is no movement, only an idea taken up and abandoned “when the poetic image of the moment is exhausted”; the consequence of such individualism is “poetic sentimentality... undisciplined by the structure of events or ideas of which it is ostensibly a part” (EFD 315). The romantic, in seeking to exert an individual vision or worldview is, in effect, trying to cut off the rest of the world and society, much as if Dante’s poet had tried to force the wheel to a halt: he would have failed, and compromised himself in the process.

Against Dante’s “Symbolic Imagination” stands Poe, who is similarly constrained by carrying his human limitation with him, yet Poe’s Angelic imagination expects more, unlike Dante who always

knows the futility of man's efforts yet strives regardless. Both of Tate's twin essays on the "Symbolic" and the "Angelic" imagination mirror the language of carrying the bottom up with you. The difference, principally, is always one of expectation:

The reach of our imaginative enlargement is perhaps no longer than the ladder of analogy, at the top of which we may see all, if we still wish to see anything, that we have brought up with us from the bottom, where lies the sensible world. If we take nothing with us to the top but our emptied, angelic intellects, we shall see nothing when we get there. Poe as God sits silent in darkness. Here the movement of tragedy is reversed: there is no action. Man as angel becomes a demon (EFD 422)

The romantic poet must always isolate himself. This is the consequence of the absolute veneration of self: "He must, in short, be *alone*" (ME 121). It is at the highest levels of romantic excess that he is most alone. The angelic and the demonic are one-and-the-same as expressions of the self projected outwards yet forgetting its origin in the imperfect world. It is in this light that Tate can pay a high compliment to Eliot, in a memorial of his death, that he recognised that "poetry begins with the common reality, and ends with it".³⁵⁴

The Dissociation of Sensibility

Tate's essays on literary history allow us to imagine quite easily a linear yardstick of value: at the one extreme there is Dante, the representative of the completely immersed culture of externalised personality. Lower down the spectrum is Emily Dickinson, lower still is the "minor mythology" of Yeats. On the other half of the yardstick one finds the fully romantic poets who try to create their own cult of self: Hart Crane is there, John Donne, and, at the extreme end, counter-balancing Dante, is Emerson, whose Oversoul is the modern apotheosis of romantic self-mythologising.³⁵⁵ The cultures to which these poets belong, to Tate, largely dictate and limit their respective potentials.

A series of Tate's essays of literary criticism explicate a consistent interpretation of the history of literature in English. The "Cartesian split" he refers to in his essay on Poe, "The Angelic Imagination" is one of several "dissociative" moments in history. Another is found in the "modernism" of John

³⁵⁴ Allen Tate, "Postscript by the Guest Editor", *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (Winter, 1966), pp.383-387, p. 384.

³⁵⁵ Emerson's influence is so polluting that he left after him a "post-Emersonian world" in which man can only be "innately perfect". (EFD 287) Tate cites Robert Penn Warren's view that "After Emerson had done his work [...] any tragic possibilities in that culture were dissipated" (EFD 284-285). However in the later essay, "The Unilateral Imagination; Or, I, too, Dislike it", Tate regrets that "I fell into the trap thirty-five years ago when I said that after Emerson had done his work, the tragic vision was henceforth impossible in America". (EFD 461) He considers by this point that the poetry of Eliot and Ransom has shown that such a thing could still be possible. See footnote 8, above.

Donne provides evidence of the root of the modern consciousness in his age: abstract ideas and mythology are distinct, as they would not have been in Dante's age. What is lacking is the "ultimate, symbolic character of a myth". Donne's historical consciousness has no greater relation to his world or his surroundings. From this it is only "one small step" to the excesses of romantic self-aggrandisement – a step that Donne himself does not take, "but doubtless would take were he alive today" (EFD 245). Donne's poetry suffers because the "background" of its composition consists only of disconnected fragments rather than anything grander. Tate cites Eliot's description of Donne: "'his learning' says Mr Eliot 'is just information suffused with emotion [...] rather a humorous shuffling of the pieces'" (EFD 242). This view of modern "learning" as only fetishised fragments is what Tate identifies more generally as the "historical method" – the abstracting of small pieces out of the whole to which they used to integrally belong. In a slightly later essay, Tate returns to Eliot to provide a metaphor for the shallow intellectualism of the modern mind, referring to "A Game of Chess" from *The Waste Land*:

The woman in Mr Eliot's poem is, I believe, the symbol of man at the present time. He is surrounded by the grandeurs of the past, but he does not participate in them; they do not sustain him. To complete the allegory, the man represents a kind of truth that I have described in very general terms as the historical method: he offers us the exercise of intellect to no purpose, a game that we cannot relate to our conduct, an instrument of power over both past and present which we can neither control nor properly use (EFD 555).

It is in our relation to history that we are in the spirit of Donne's modernity. An escape might only come when "it will again be possible for men to give themselves up to a self-contained, objective system of truths" (EFD 246). Although Tate seems cynical about the possibility of this outcome actually being realised, his timeline of history is not formulated as a linear decline. There was a "still powerful strain of medieval thought at the end of the sixteenth century" and possibly later. Tate's historical vision is not an absolute medievalism. The medieval worldview is the most valuable because it serves, when compared to other cultures, most optimally as a limiting influence on any romantic habits of individuals operating within it. Other cultures and historical periods can function with a modest degree of success in a similar fashion, although they never reach such a high watermark. The value of any culture for the creation of poetry is exactly proportional to the potential it has to draw the individual outside of themselves. This can be expressed in a markedly simple formula, perhaps the most clearly expressed summation of Tate's doctrine: "there must be a direct and effective correlation between the previously established truth of the poet's ideas and the value of the poetry" (EFD 308). The standard of value is only the extent to which the poet's ideas

have come before them; this is the criteria of good poetry. The more that exists before the poet, therefore, the less that comes from the poet. This is a concise criterion of anti-romanticism. Although it has the effect of restraining the artist to substantial success only in a rich culture that can offer just such thoroughness, the standard of what that culture might actually look like or constitute is largely unimportant.³⁵⁶ As we have seen with Ransom, Tate demonstrates a remarkable relativity when assessing culture, history or religion – all that really matters is the usefulness of each as a limiting doctrine. Religious faith of any type can be useful, as Tate establishes in a letter to Donald Davidson: “it is better to be an idolater than to worship nothing” (EFD 370).

The application of a method consistent with Tate’s simple formula – that the amount of pre-existing truth correlates to the value of poetry - can be seen in his approach to Emily Dickinson’s work. The puritan New England tradition of which she was a part can offer the type of “complete” culture necessary for a useful degree of immersion. It could not be said to equal the medieval world in this regard, but even as a pale imitation it still can serve as a milder prerequisite for the production of great, unromantic art.

Although Dickinson, like Donne, strives for “personal revelation”, she is not precluded from writing great poetry as her poetic effort is still a demonstration of a living connection to a vital culture. Poetry, according to Tate, “must have a tradition to probe”, and in Dickinson’s case a traditional culture is readily available to be put to use. The value is not in the specific tenets of the New England culture, or the Puritan faith; it is instead only in the fact that it is comprehensive and substantial enough to permeate the greater part of a whole society and characterise most parts of a peoples’ involvement with it. Its usefulness is the product of its capacity to exist before the individual mind. The individual is therefore freed from the self-destructive inclination to create, and need only participate:

A culture cannot be consciously created. It is an available source of ideas that are imbedded in a complete and homogenous society [...] The world order is assimilated, in Miss Dickinson, as medievalism was in Shakespeare, to the poetic vision; it is brought down from abstraction to personal sensibility (EFD 293-294)

Puritanism had, in New England, preserved an enclave within which art might be created. Dickinson serves as the ideal vessel for the expression of this type of pre-existing culture. Hers was a “deep

³⁵⁶ Tate relates this to his own attempts to write poetry, ascribing it to a “modern impotence”: “No poem that I have tried to write has come out at the end according to plan [...] I only know that there are certain effects in the poetry of the past that I cannot reproduce; nor do I see them successfully reproduced in other modern verse” (FD 165-166)

mind writing from a deep culture”, yet Tate lists the limiting qualities of her character that made the culture take root absolutely with no challenge from ego: “her very ignorance, her lack of formal training [...] She cannot reason at all, she can only see” (EFD 289). There is no tendency towards personal abstraction and so she is like Shakespeare, according to Tate, inasmuch as she is “without opinions”, and her poetry is “at the opposite end of intellectualism” (EFD 295). Without the inclination to self-conscious individualism, “she is able to grasp the myth directly” (EFD 289).

The Responsibility of the Critic

Tate’s consideration of Dickinson’s culture leads him to mourn its passing: “Puritanism, as a unified version of the world, is dead” (EFD 297). It is like the middle ages, a “buried city” which might be gestured at instructively from the present to entrench modern man’s humility, but capable of no further creation of its own. The connection between the present and the past informs the type of criticism that Tate seeks to carry out. These pasts should not be treated as if they are absolutely beyond reach. It is only the scholars of “historical method” who deal with history as a dead artefact; the faculty of the “historical imagination” allows instead a process that is “reciprocal and simultaneous”, dealing with living history that can be brought to bear on the present.³⁵⁷ Those who are participant in a mechanical theory of history are carrying out a “Great Refusal”. It is the myth that is real, and it is those that recognise this fact that are truly scholars and might have a positive effect on society:

I use the word myth not to indicate a fantasy, but a reality – this myth (EFD 588)

By myth I mean a dramatic projection of heroic action, or of the tragic failure of heroic action, upon the reality of the common life of a society, so that the myth *is* reality (ME 151)

Without a living and mythic history, a totalitarian drive to utopia is inevitable.³⁵⁸ The ultimate end is “to extinguish our moral natures in a group mind” (EFD 144). It is in light of this that Tate can make for the cultivation of literary awareness the highest claims:

³⁵⁷ The similarity to Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, in which literature “has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” and “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” is self-evident, T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), p. 41.

³⁵⁸ An early biographer of Tate, Radcliffe Squires, ascribes to Dante’s influence the realisation that myth can be more real than history: “Tate would be able to employ Dante, as he had Vergil to widen his vision-which is a way of saying that he learned myth and great art would work where the simple historical sense had to fail because history itself was failing”, Radcliffe Squires, *Allen Tate: A Literary Biography* (New York: Pegasus, 1971), p. 119. Louise Cowan takes this further: “it has been Dante who provided the modern era with its governing myth [...] Only Tate, it seems to me, has been able to ‘get at’ Dante” Louise Cowan, “Allen Tate and the Garment of Dante”, *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 80, No. 2 (Spring 1972), pp. 377-382, pp. 378-379. See also

It is more than an obligation; we must do it if we would keep on living (EFD 152).

By these arts one means the arts without which men can live, but without which they cannot live well, or live as men (EFD 4)

The obligation is on a sympathetic and learned community to foreground these living arts. They can offer the last bulwark against the “great liberal dogmas” that plague modernity. For the most part men of letters have become cultish like “parvenu Gods and their votaries”, interested in “distraction and novelty” and predisposed to “Gnostic arrogance” as readily as “Augustinian humility” (EFD 7). Yet they retain a “small but critical service” in the capacity to discriminate man’s “supra-temporal destiny” (a term borrowed from Maritain); by this Tate means the differentiation between language that reflects the reality and complexity of the human condition, and that which is dehumanising and mechanistic (EFD 15-16). This is nothing short of the difference between a bright future and a dark one. Francesca Aran sees in this Tate’s principal desire to retain “a transcendent reference to God” and it is indisputable that Tate envisions a religious quality to the man of letters’ remaining linguistic function.³⁵⁹ Lombardy, similarly, sees Tate’s approach to language as a defence against the “tyranny of literalism”, as there are aspects of human imagination that “reveal themselves [...] only through non-literal modes of cognition.”³⁶⁰ Deprived of this function of irreducibility both the mind and society in general are grossly diminished.

When Tate claims that “progressive education is rapidly making us a nation of illiterates” (EFD 159), his is not a mild point about declining educational standards. He sees instead a fight for the very soul of man.³⁶¹ According to Tate, the “general doctrine” of modernity is supported by an “elusive mystique” – the constant driving-forward of progress and inquiry in the pursuit of perfectibility. Tate asks “How might it be withheld?” (EFD 21) His answer is through the propagation of a contrary doctrine that focuses instead on imperfection. Poetry is the tool by which this doctrine might be

Feder, “Allen Tate’s Use of Classical Literature” for the influence of classical tragedy: “we built Troy not only literally but figuratively or poetically out of our need for a heroic destiny and a meaningful way of life. After all, Troy even to the Romans was essentially a myth, and it can, Tate seems to say, serve us as it served them. It is the myth of our own past”, p. 98.

³⁵⁹ Francesca Aran Murphy, *Christ the Form of Beauty: A Study in Literature and Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p. 43.

³⁶⁰ Anthony Lombardy, “Allen Tate and the Metaphysics of Metaphor”, *The Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 37, No. 2, (Spring 2005), pp. 62-80, p. 80.

³⁶¹ It is along these lines that Tate defends his role in the decision to award Ezra Pound the Bollingen Prize, despite his reservations: “the specific task of the man of letters is to attend to the health of society not at large but through literature”. EFD 512. It was, per his justification, for the greater good. For Geoffrey Hill there is an equivalency between Tate and Pound: “Tate’s blindness to the fact that his ‘South’ is scarred by slavery equates, for Hill, with Pound’s blindness regarding fascism and anti-Semitism.” Steven Matthews, “Geoffrey Hill’s Complex Affinities with American Agrarian Poetry”, *Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol. 44, Issue 4, (December 2015), pp. 321-340, p. 338.

spread, and for this reason it is under sustained assault: “We have seen in our time a powerful attempt to purify ourselves of the knowledge of evil in man. Poetry is one of the sources of that knowledge” (EFD 29). The reading of poetry, qualified with the New Critical tools of ambiguity, paradox and irony, cultivates in the reader a sense of its own irreducibility. It provides, therefore, a type of insight into the true nature of man that is not available elsewhere in the corrupted society:

Literary criticism, like the Kingdom of God on earth, is perpetually necessary, and in the very nature of its middle position between imagination and philosophy, perpetually impossible [...] It is of the nature of man and of criticism to occupy the intolerable position (EFD 44).

These two quotes, from separate essays written within a year of each other, demonstrate the extent to which Tate is willing to impute to poetry a near-religious function. Both apply the language of religion to poetry specifically along the lines of limitation. The special function of poetry in society, and by association the critic who advocates for it, is nothing short of epochal. The critic’s responsibility is to foreground and preserve a quality of poetry which might otherwise be neglected or lost, specifically that quasi-religious quality of emphasising man’s limitation:

The function of criticism should have been, in our time, as in all times, to maintain and to demonstrate the special, unique, and complete knowledge which the great forms of literature afford us (EFD 202).

This is not revelatory insight of the romantic kind. As we have seen elsewhere, the valuable insight of poetry is its lesson of classical limitation and imperfection, the lesson, most simply, of humility:

our belief in the inferiority of our own age to the past [...] this belief is the fundamental groundwork of all poetry at all times. It is the instinctive counterattack of the intelligence against the dogma of future perfection for persons and societies. It is in this sense, perhaps, that poetry is most profoundly the criticism of life (EFD 260).

Poetry serves as the last bastion of this classical vision of the world. Arrayed against it is Richards, the “good positivist”, and “method” in general (EFD 204). To Tate the fall of poetry signifies the fall of the last meaningful aspect of the old world that could stand against a dark future. The expansion of “social sciences and their influence in education” leads to nothing less than the waking nightmare of “the coming of the slave society” (EFD 200). The mission of Tate’s criticism is to resist at all costs the arrival of that impending situation. Its imminence turns the present into a point of crisis. The “Present Function of Criticism”, the title of one essay, is to address the “the totalitarian society that is coming in the next few years” (EFD 198).

As Jancovich has pointed out, a great deal of the content of Tate's essays consist of discussions of "different forms of social organization", particularly with reference to the relationship between writers and the wider society.³⁶² Similarly, when writing on history, Tate often imagines the role of the writer in a given society as a means of opening up a wider discussion of the cultural or artistic qualities of the time period he wishes to explore. This figure is often a bellweather – the relative health or sickness of a culture can be gauged by the status of writers or artists within it. In "The Profession of Letters in the South" Tate describes the medieval artist as a fully-immersed component of a totalised culture: "under feudalism the artists was a member of an organic society" (EFD 519). The rise of a "more inimical plutocratic society" over the relatively benign aristocracy brought about a new culture, leading eventually to "Marxism, the child of plutocracy." The artist becomes only one part in "a mere system of money references through which neither artist nor plutocrat can perform as an entire person" (EFD 527-529). Tate's dissociation of sensibility is first and foremost a dissociation of man from soil. To remove a man from his connection to earth is to remove him from culture and the limiting lessons that it provides. This applies in both the literal sense of an individual tilling the earth to farm, and the wider cultural connection between societies and specific geographical locations. As such, "all great cultures have been rooted in peasantries."³⁶³ (EFD 525) A man with no connection to the soil is without history, "locked in the present" and represents the ideal subject for modern industrial capitalism because he can offer no defence against utopia (EFD 539). Without the lessons of the soil or the inherited wisdom of ancestors man is not regional, only "provincial". Accordingly, "our utopian politics is provincial" and is predicated on a world in which "we have forgotten the nature of man" (EFD 540). This is the necessary precursor to the slave-society, the "pseudo-mystical and pseudo-democratic utopia on the Wellsian plan" (EFD 200). Such a world is constituted of provinces, with no regions, populated entirely with deracinated individuals who might easily be enlisted in service of any utopian project.

It is along these lines that Tate offers an extraordinary criticism of the potential of the Old South to offer any sort of bulwark against the degenerating tendencies of modernity. In what amounts to an unconventional attack on chattel slavery, not on moral grounds, but rather on grounds of practicality, Tate regrets the boundary that the slave creates between his master and the soil: "The

³⁶² *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism*, p. 48.

³⁶³ Tate's Swiftian parody, "The Problem of the Unemployed: A Modest Proposal" frequently disparages "the peasant ideas of life" and celebrates the fact that "the archaic peasant family is disappearing" in favour of a "perfectly machine-like and impersonal corporation that runs so well itself that it requires no social system for its successful operation", Allen Tate, "The Problem of the Unemployed: A Modest Proposal", in *The Southern Agrarians and the New Deal: Essays After I'll Take My Stand*, pp. 280-281. Although Tate's essays in general shy away from the high medievalism of an actual advocacy of feudal peasantry, the protection of parody to advocate against a straw-man perhaps provide an insight in to the contrary.

peasant is the soil. The Negro slave was a barrier between the ruling class and the soil.” The figure of the slave is only a sum on a balance-sheet, and there is no useful culture attendant upon him. The slave should not, presumably, be blamed for his fundamentally economic role in the South, but the ultimate consequence of his integral role in that society is to make the society itself economically focused. Without a living connection to the soil, such as might have been sanctioned by a history of do-it-yourself agrarianism, the planter class could create nothing greater than a superficial culture of their own: “The white man got nothing from the Negro, no profound image of himself in terms of the soil” (EFD 525). This failure might be bonded to Tate’s critique in “Religion and the Old South”, that the South lacked a proper religion: it was “a feudal society without a feudal religion” (EFD 568). Their religion instead was the poor-fit Protestantism of the North, “hardly a religion at all but rather a disguised secular ambition” (EFD 570). Its specific flaw is in its utopianism, a quality uncharacteristic of the South and quite counter-productive “it is a bad religion, for that very reason; it can only predict success” (EFD 561). The South would never have been defeated in the Civil War “had she possessed a sufficient faith in her own kind of God” (EFD 575).

Soil and God are not ends unto themselves. They are purposeful as strategies to pull modern, romantic man out of himself. Tate’s Agrarian project and his efforts in later decades to establish a Catholic society of letters share a unity of purpose in their equal roles as means of propagating a doctrine of limitation. It is also the reason why Tate finds the Humanist movement of Babbitt, More and Foerster to be unsatisfactory as it is only “morality for morality’s sake”.³⁶⁴ (ME 189) To have any meaning, “the background of an objective religion, a universal scheme of reference, is necessary”.³⁶⁵ (ME 190) Once again the value of religion is specifically tied to “its successful representation of the problem of evil” – evil here meaning the unangelic aspect of human nature, which drags him inexorably towards the imperfect.³⁶⁶

Looking back on the Agrarian project a decade and a half later, Tate can summarise in a letter to Davidson that “we never got much further than Nostalgia because no historic faith came into consideration.” This might be tied to a sentiment Tate makes in the same letter about how “John [Ransom] rejects religion and takes poetry” (LC 370). Tate’s universalising sensibility dictates that poetry cannot be taken as an independent measure of value – this is akin to the project of Babbitt’s Humanists and can be related perhaps to a sentiment in that essay:

³⁶⁴ Eliot, who had converted to Anglicanism two years previously, praised the essay as “a brilliant article”. Cited in *Orphan of the South*, p. 155.

³⁶⁵ In this regard, Tate can say that he agrees with the fundamental principles of Ransom’s *God Without Thunder*. Allen Tate, “Reflections of the Death of John Crowe Ransom”, *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 82, No. 4 (Fall 1974), pp. 545-551, p. 548.

³⁶⁶ See also Tate’s 1929 letter to Davidson, LC 222-224

You cannot have literature without the prior, specific and self-sufficient sense of something else. Without this you expect too much of literature; you expect of it a religion and a philosophy [...] You destroy literature without constructing a religion (ME 194).

The agrarian project did not foreground religion enough, for Tate. Without it as a mythic basis any other attempts to revitalise culture or literature fall apart. Of the twelve essays included in *I'll Take My Stand*, Tate's is the only one to demonstrably emphasise the importance of religion to the type of society that their group envisioned.

Tate's conversion in 1950 evidences the expansion of his critical position, which saw value in the type of art that acknowledges and participates in a higher myth and excoriated those writers who thought to create their own, to an attempt at a personal faith.³⁶⁷ Peter A. Huff has related in great detail Tate's involvement with the neo-Thomist "catholic revival" movement in the mid part of the twentieth century, as well as the central role of Jacques Maritain as an influence in Tate's religious faith. Until Vatican II, which did away with the mythic material that, for thinkers such as Tate, constituted the greater part of its value, the catholic revival seemed to offer a "highly imaginative world of myth, meaning, and ritual, based upon the classical vision of Catholicism's cultural mission" that could, for Tate, offer the basis for a complete and coherent worldview.³⁶⁸ Something which the South – ultimately – could not on its own offer. We might see Tate's Catholic efforts, therefore, as a new dimension for the motivating impulse behind the earlier agrarian effort which by this point had

³⁶⁷ The question of whether this faith was genuine, strived for, or merely a type of cultural *realpolitik* is uncertain. On one hand Tate can confidently assert "I am an atheist [...] but a religious one" in a letter of 1929, whilst actively advocating for something very close to Catholicism as the potential saviour of the old feudal South. Cited in Thomas Underwood, *Allen Tate: Orphan of the South*, p. 157. The issue of bad faith, as such, is not out of the question. Ralph C. Wood writes, "It would be churlish to suggest that Allen Tate converted to Roman Catholicism as a convenient way of justifying the absolutist kind of traditionalism that he had long held". Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), p. 66. Wood points out, referring to letter to Andrew Lytle, that "I have found only one exception to Tate's instrumental regard for Christianity" (p.66n). An analysis of Tate's letters does point towards genuineness, for the most part. For example, a letter of 1960 from Tate to his close friend and godparent, the theologian Jacques Maritain, in response to the death of Maritain's wife Raissa, can express "If Raissa must linger in Purgatory at all, her time there will be brief". Allen Tate, and others, *Exiles and Fugitives: The Letters of Jacques and Raissa Maritain, Allen Tate and Caroline Gordon*, ed. by John M. Dunaway (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), p. 74. This seems to point towards an earnest and total acceptance of even the most retrograde aspects of Catholic doctrine. Or perhaps Tate is only obliging the faith of his friend.

³⁶⁸ Peter A. Huff, *Allen Tate and the Catholic Revival: Trace of the Fugitive Gods* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 23. Thomas F. Haddock sees Tate's conversion, and that of his wife Caroline Gordon, as "belated" and an escapist "response to the failure of Agrarian politics", *Fears and Fascinations: Representing Catholicism in the American South* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 115. For an overview of the movement see Arnold Sparr, *To Promote, Defend and Redeem: The Catholic Literary Revival and the Cultural Transformation of American Catholicism 1920-1960* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1990), pp. 167-168 for reference to New Criticism. See also Una M. Cadegan, *All Good Books are Catholic Books: Print, Culture, Censorship and Modernity in Twentieth Century American* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013) and Murphy, *Rebuke of History*, p. 128.

entirely ceased to be a practical political effort or retain the mythic potentialities it was once imagined to possess. Simpson suggests that Tate retroactively saw Agrarianism as a “confusion of profane and sacred history”.³⁶⁹ In the neo-Thomism of the Catholic Revival Tate found allies who broadly shared his concerns for modernity, although largely without the subtleties of his New Critical doctrine.³⁷⁰

Two letters of 1952, one to Jacques Maritain and one to Robert Fitzgerald, provide an insight into the type of spiritual community that Tate wished to see established. Most significant is the absence of any desire for practical political action:

I have long opposed, publically and privately, the overt action of American men of letters in immediate political issues; and I see no reason to change my mind now that I am a Catholic.³⁷¹

Our aim should be the advancement of humanistic culture within the Church herself for the greater glory of God. For the glory of God will be advanced by the deepest culture of the social order of which the Members of the Mystical Body are capable. As such a program develops, its influence would inevitably extend beyond the Catholic community. But this extrinsic result cannot be achieved as a conscious aim. A great Catholic culture as an end in itself – that should be, as I see it, the aim, simple and ambitious, of an association of Catholic men of letters. The chief end must be pursued through the practice of letters, not through propaganda.³⁷²

We are reminded of Tate’s belief that poetry cannot save men. There is no salvation to be had. Accordingly no society of men can point towards redemption or it would be guilty of misrepresentation. Its purpose is to draw attention to limitation, as is summarised excellently by Robert S. Dupree, for whom Tate’s effort possesses an “Augustinian” character:

The man of letters, according to Tate, must recognize his limitation. He cannot resolve the split between self and society any more than he can revive the dead past. What he can do is

³⁶⁹ *The Brazen Face of History*, p. 178.

³⁷⁰ Huff makes reference to “New Criticism’s apparent similarities to Catholic thought” (*Allen Tate and the Catholic Revival* p.82), although he sees Tate’s involvement with Catholicism as the stimulus for something entirely new: “using literary theory as a foundation for cultural critique”, p. 89. I would argue, of course, that this is something that Tate was attempting far earlier than his conversion; Catholicism serves as a perfecting of method.

³⁷¹ *Exiles and Fugitives*, p. 42.

³⁷² *Ibid*, pp. 102-103.

convince men who have forgotten the eternal order that something is missing from their lives.³⁷³

By 1955 Tate's early "programmatic" tendency had all but faded. The final piece included in *Essays of Four Decades* strikes a note of measured serenity: "I do not think that men can achieve salvation by painting pictures or writing poetry, or by cleaving to an historical or social tradition" (EFD 624). What remains is still a powerful sense of the value of limitation.³⁷⁴ Yet the effort to force the doctrine of imperfection outwards on to society, whether as agrarianism or another socio-cultural policy, has faded to only a self-aware humility. Tate's focus has turned inwards: "Whatever certainties one may cherish as a man – religious, or moral, or merely philosophical – it is almost certain that as a literary critic one knows virtually nothing" (EFD 626). In knowing nothing the man of letters both knows and can show through example the instrumental doctrine. This is the difference between "communication", described by Tate as the inhuman and modern "techniques of mass control", and "communion", a means of expressing knowledge that is not knowledge, the pure and irreducible sense that points beyond the limits of communication to an implicit wholeness always out of reach – either in the unreachable yet superior past, through faith towards an unknowable God, or in the yearning of the classical spirit in poetry. It is because it is unreachable that it is meaningful, and the obligation of the man of letters, therefore, can only be to gesture. The special quality of Tate's own doctrine of limitation is that it is not enough only to limit. One must strive and push against that limit, and it is faith that accomplishes this. Through this process great art is created. It is in this sense that we can detect the unique fusion of the religious and poetic sensibilities in his criticism. "The end of social man is communion in time through love, which is beyond time" (EFD 16).

³⁷³ Robert S. Dupree, *Allen Tate and Augustinian Imagination: A Study of the Poetry* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), p. 155.

³⁷⁴ Tate's final essay, from the year of his death, "Mere Literature and the Lost Traveller", amongst its hand-wringing over hippies and the moon-landing, looks back and summarises a life as such: "I have had from first consciousness a daily awareness of human imperfection and failure, the former, in myself, always about to dash me into the latter", p. 95. See footnote 4, above.

Chapter 7

R.P. Blackmur: the Value of Ignorance

Introductory

In most overviews of the New Criticism, R.P. Blackmur tends to receive a cautionary note pointing to his singular idiosyncrasy; unlike the others, so it often goes, Blackmur's unwillingness to make definite prescriptions for the text or participate in narrow formalism grants him a certain separateness.³⁷⁵ James Bloom provides an example of this attitude:

His scruple against severing verbal detail from writers' aspirations and readers' expectations, along with a fastidious resistance to the blandishments of dogma and philosophical idealism that coloured much of his contemporaries work, distinguished Blackmur from his more orthodox, often more formalist, contemporaries: John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, Tate and Winters.³⁷⁶

This is the reason given for Blackmur's absence from Krieger's survey of the New Criticism, *New Apologists for Poetry*, as according to Krieger, he does not fall under the umbrella of "theoretical criticism".³⁷⁷ Edward Said, one of Blackmur's students, could identify him as being "the least influential, the least doctrinal, the least serviceable [...] of the New Critics." He therefore concludes that Blackmur is "quite unconnected with the comparatively modest, even tight world of New

³⁷⁵ Paul Bove, characteristically hostile to the New Criticism, attempts to puzzle out why Ransom insisted on integrating Blackmur under a shared category: "What motivates Ransom's attempt to incorporate Blackmur into a movement which he fits badly, if at all? [...] Was his personal friendship for Blackmur the root of his generosity? Or is the namer of New Criticism alert to Blackmur's subversive project, to his heretical intention, and aware that by incorporating the heresy into the orthodoxy he can more effectively disarm or co-opt the 'guerrilla tactics' he first identified?", "R.P. Blackmur and the Job of the Critic: Turning from the New Criticism", p. 363. Blackmur's own engagement with the idea of a "New Criticism" is inconsistent: in "A Burden for Critics" he refers to "how facile, a thing it has been" (LH 206). Six years later, in "The Numen and the Moha", reference is made to "all that is sound in the dogmas which are supposed to be asserted in the so-called New Criticism" (LH 301). Ransom's view of Blackmur is universally laudatory, see for instance *The New Criticism*, pp. vii-viii.

³⁷⁶ James D. Bloom, *The Stock of Available Reality: R.P. Blackmur and John Berryman* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1984), p. 23.

³⁷⁷ *New Apologists for Poetry*, p. 9.

Critical ideology.”³⁷⁸ Foster takes this to an extreme, and sees in Blackmur the mystical obscurity of an uninhibited poet-visionary or mystic:

Rhythmic incantation, allegorical indirection, the mystical rhetoric of pun and paradox – these are the sorts of techniques creating in his criticism its distinctive aura of priestly and prophetic power.³⁷⁹

Such “prophetic” flourishes are more symptomatic of Blackmur’s idiosyncrasies and occasional fuzziness of vocabulary than a philosophical position. The general reason for this type of dismissal lies in Blackmur’s alleged and infamous obscurity. One of the very few recent critics of Blackmur’s work, Helen Thaventhiran, summarises his habits of “circumlocution” in a withering tone:

Whether through vacuous verbosity or through enigmatic compression, Blackmur’s style suffers from a lack of clarity as to its object – and, since criticism is above all a matter of being “about”, this tends towards a potential dead-end for critical prose.³⁸⁰

Blackmur’s criticism might well lack clarity, if the reader is seeking theory or clear-cut pronouncements on literary value. I would argue that this is by design.³⁸¹ In this chapter my focus will be on demonstrating that Blackmur’s work is self-consciously motivated by the desire to establish the terms of valuable ignorance and failure. It is from this that the obscurity or difficulty stems. He is constructing a doctrine of limitation, and reading his work with this in mind allows it to be better understood. If Blackmur is leading us down a dead-end, it is for the purposes of showing us how all roads eventually might lead to one. With this in mind, Blackmur can be recategorised as a critic operating consistently in a characteristically New Critical style. In fact, by following the terms that I have established to define the New Criticism, Blackmur becomes one of its most self-aware practitioners, rather than an outsider linked in only as a best-fit convenience.

Blackmur shares with other New Critics the concern for strategies by which the individual might be drawn out of himself and made unromantic. One of which might be found in the “protective

³⁷⁸ Edward W. Said, “The Horizon of R.P. Blackmur”, in *Reflection on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 251-253.

³⁷⁹ *The New Romantics*, p. 98.

³⁸⁰ *Radical Empiricists*, p. 166.

³⁸¹ Kenneth Burke sees in Blackmur’s critical work a dogmatic imperviousness to ideology: “Blackmur was temperamentally immune not just to doctrinaire Marxism but even to any critical frame that would shift the attention from the analysis of the work in itself to a stress upon environmental or genetic factors”, “Notes on a Hypothetical Blackmur Anthology”, in *The Legacy of R.P. Blackmur: Essays Memoirs, Texts*, ed. by Edward T. Cone, and others (New York: Ecco Press, 1987), p. 7. Hyman, however, claims Blackmur “makes little overt use of either of the two main founts of insight in contemporary criticism, psychoanalysis and Marxism, although there is a good deal of buried influence.” Stanley Edgar Hyman, “R.P. Blackmur and the Expense of Criticism”, *Poetry*, Vol. 71, No. 5 (Feb., 1948), pp. 259-270, p. 268. The latter claim is not substantiated.

strengths of the past”, religion and myth (LH 20). Quite brazenly, he favours what he describes as “ignorance”, a cultivated state of self-aware humility that can be made to oppose the dangerous perfectibility underpinning modern society.³⁸² More ignorance is needed in modernity as a defensive strategy, and it is in language that this type of defence can be mounted. As one critic summarises, “he saw the West, and notably America, as newly illiterate, that is, not ignorant but devoted to ‘fragmented and specialized knowledge’”.³⁸³ In 1954 Blackmur, in “Towards a Modus Vivendi”, addresses directly what he sees as the widespread problem of a “new illiteracy”. This essay is perhaps his major attempt at addressing the “social” problems in modernity directly.³⁸⁴ He sees the type of illiteracy in modernity as uniquely pernicious, not simply good old-fashioned ignorance, but rather the illiteracy of those who know how to read: “deformities of knowledge, not with natural monsters but with maimed spirit” (LH 6). The true illiterate knows he is ignorant, and therefore carries always a degree of humility or awareness of his implicit limitation. The new illiterate is different, however, and more dangerous, because he is convinced of his unlimited abilities: he “makes the mistake of thinking the intellect is self-created” (LH 24-25). The implications of this are felt in politics and seem an inherent flaw in modern democracy: Senator McCarthy can exploit the supposedly highly-literate American people because “the majority of his readers have not the skill or familiarity to distinguish the relation of his words to fact or purpose” (LH 6). The consequences for society are a “moral suicide” (LH 5). Blackmur’s solution mirrors those proposed, in their own styles, by Tate and Leavis: he concludes that “we – all countries - need a larger truly literate class” (LH 7). Academia and universities are the domain in which this class must establish itself, to confront “the special problem of the humanities in our generation”. The quality of the literate elite is to point towards fundamental disorder and undermine totalising power structures founded on perfectibilist doctrines. The individual mind is founded in disorder and society is, in effect, the product of an impulse to order. The balance between the two is upset when individuals are too easily ordered:

The true business of literature, as of all intellect, critical or creative, is to remind the powers that be, simple and corrupt as they are, of the turbulence they have to control. There is a disorder vital to the individual which is fatal to society (LH 41).

³⁸² In this Blackmur perhaps channels Socrates, “I know only that I know nothing”.

³⁸³ Michael Wood, “R.P. Blackmur”, in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Vol. VII: Modernism and the New Criticism*, p. 245. Blackmur at times seems more measured, however: “We are as bad off as Socrates complaining about the specialisation of knowledge at Athens in his time; by which I do not mean to be frivolous but only to suggest that the availability of knowledge depends deeply on the attitude we take towards it.” R.P. Blackmur, *Anni Mirabiles 1921-1925: Reason in the Madness of Letters: Four Lectures Presented Under the Auspices of the Gertrude Clarke Whittall Poetry and Literature Fund* (Washington: The Library of Congress, 1956), p. 55.

³⁸⁴ Fraser sees in the broadening of Blackmur’s scope away from its narrow focus the evidence of how “he grew bored with words [...] and this shows in the thinning texture of his prose.” Russell Fraser, “R.P. Blackmur at Princeton”, *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 89, No. 4 (Fall 1981), pp. 540-559, p. 541.

The individual mind must resist control by recognising its own uncertainty. Humility and ignorance are means to accomplish this. Without imperfection the members of a society can only be enlisted in the grand, perfecting tendency of society founded on order:

It is precisely because of the fundamental imperfection of any given intellect – whether individual, national, or cultural – that the steadily attended conception of a Modus Vivendi is necessary (LH 4).

The scientist or politician typically sees the world as large: an equation waiting to be solved by illimitable human reason. The problem in the modern era is the product of a technical-social mindset, promulgated by “an education that has become both universal and largely technical” (PI 8-9). The loss of faith in favour of “pure sensual knowledge” undermines the subtle products of integrated worldviews, such as morality: science cannot be moral, nor can it be didactic: the “malicious critiques” of the modern age “dissolve our sense of the texture of moral experience” (PI 15). Blackmur is fundamentally pessimistic about the possibility for escape from modern industrialism. He tells us that “there is no panacea for any society, no end to the ruin and damnation of man” and relates this to the efforts of the Agrarians to renew the Old South:

The agrarian fraction of society cannot withdraw from the urban society of which it is an integral part as well as the prop [...] Worse – and especially worse for the Southern sectionalists – a centralized society, of which the concentrations of irresponsible power is the idiosyncrasy, cannot fail to control with a surprising irresponsibility the agrarian system upon which it is superimposed, and upon which it depends.³⁸⁵

Returning to an agrarian culture, therefore, is impossible on account of the vertiginous industrial superstructure interposed on top of it: it would be an effort comparable to trying to pull the foundation out from under a building. What might be accomplished instead is the cultivation of a sensibility in the small elites of society: literature can be put to use as the spearhead of a limiting doctrine that, even if it might not offer salvation, may still offer some benefit. With this project the diminishment of literature might be, in some small way, countered. Jones gives a good sense of Blackmur’s attitude:

³⁸⁵ R.P. Blackmur, *Outsider at the Heart of Things: Essays by R.P. Blackmur* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), p. 91.

Literature ought to teach us to be humble. Instead we institutionalize it, canonize the great authors, erect dogmatic critical systems, and generally take ourselves out of a feeling relation with it. We deprive it of the awful power that makes it useful.³⁸⁶

Said makes a similar point, foregrounding Blackmur's consistent intention to introduce uncertainty where otherwise there would be systematised confidence, what he refers to as Blackmur's "negative dialectic":

Wherever Blackmur finds a reification, a hard definition, a system, a strident tone, an overly busy label, a conception forced into overwork, a scheme running on by itself, there he methodically introduces the "uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor".³⁸⁷

This chapter will explore Blackmur's criticism to indicate how his consistent project might be defined as an attempt to point towards the unknowable in terms that underline its unknowableness, specifically for the purposes of countering the claims to absolute knowledge made by scientific or romantic discourse in modernity: to one critic, his use of "language as a vehicle for the unsayable".³⁸⁸ We might think of his ambition as the reinsertion of mystery into life and discourse.³⁸⁹ The second part of the chapter will focus on how his readings of Henry Adams, more so than any other writer, served as a means to carry out that doctrine.

Literature as Limitation

The major shift in the character of Blackmur's criticism over the course of his career is a movement from the study of poetry to the study of fiction.³⁹⁰ The most direct statement of Blackmur's early and

³⁸⁶ James T. Jones, *Wayward Skeptic: The Theories of R.P. Blackmur* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p. 22.

³⁸⁷ *Reflections on Exile*, p. 263, p. 252.

³⁸⁸ W.S. Merwin, "Affable Irregular: Recollections of R.P. Blackmur", *Grand Street*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Winter 1982), pp. 151-164, p. 164.

³⁸⁹ Blackmur's station as the most "mysterious" of the New Critics is referred to by a few critics: To Boyers, "he was not, like Empson, impatient with mystery, irritated by the inexplicable." Robert Boyers, *R.P. Blackmur: Poet-Critic: Toward a View of Poetic Objects* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980), p. 5. Foster states "mystery is his reality", *The New Romantics*, p. 104. Walsh refers to Blackmur's "positive awareness of the overbrimming mystery inheriting in all things". Timothy Walsh, *The Dark Matter of Words: Absence, Unknowing and Emptiness in Literature* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), p. 65. Blackmur's poem, "Witness of Light", begins "See all we see | weakness and strength | without feud without faith | mirror the mystery | light in the light". R.P. Blackmur, *Poems of R.P. Blackmur* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 33.

³⁹⁰ Blackmur relates the advantage of fiction as representative art: "It is in the novel, more than in any settled form of art, that our thoughts and tendencies – the dogmas by which we catch momentum day to day – come into their only true concert, the concert of conflicts". R.P. Blackmur, "The Possessed", in *Eleven Essays in the European Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), p. 166.

more formal methodology is found in "A Critic's Job of Work", from 1935, in which he describes his literary criticism or "technical approach" as operating:

primarily through the technique, in the widest sense of that word, of the examples handled; technique on the plane of words and even of linguistics in Mr Richards' sense, but also technique on the plane of intellectual and emotional patterns... There is a technique of securing and arranging and representing a fundamental view of life.

The main advantage of the technical approach, according to Blackmur, is in its ability to "treat of nothing in literature except in its capacity of reduction to literary fact". Blackmur advocates a technical approach as the only way to derive some degree of comprehension after taking into account the limitations of literary understanding. It is only by focusing on the technical aspects of a poem that we might say anything about it at all. These serve as the only features therefore for the critic to meaningfully engage with. The total eludes analysis, so the formal elements are the necessary subjects of study. Blackmur even begins to sound like Wittgenstein in his focus on "that which we cannot say":

it is only the facts about a poem, a play, a novel, that can be reduced to tractable form, talked about, and examined; the rest is the product of facts, from the technical point of view, and not a product but the thing itself from its own point of view. The rest, whatever it is, can only be known, not talked about (LAG 396-397).

As Fraser summarises, "the early writing is hard, only rarely is it precious, and it is never subjective."³⁹¹ Jones refers to "two Blackmurs" and the "perceived discrepancy between the early and late careers", yet concludes that, aside from a diminishment of extreme attention to formal detail in the secondary phase, "Blackmur's method remains the same", despite the changing of focus to fiction.³⁹² This point is essentially correct. Blackmur's attention turns to fiction as a new emphasis for expounding the lesson of failure and limitation that he had previously sought in verse. He is also more willing to apply this process of thought outwards to wider social or cultural concerns. To Foster, however, there is a more detectable movement over the course of Blackmur's work. He sees, as he has in Ransom and Tate, a development towards romanticism over time. It might be possible to see an element of this in the early part of Blackmur's career, provided one only looked superficially. In "A Critic's Job of Work", from 1935, Blackmur implies that, to an extent, the poet

³⁹¹ Russell Fraser, "R.P. Blackmur: The Politics of A New Critic", in *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 87, No. 4 (Fall 1979), pp. 557-572, p. 558.

³⁹² *Wayward Skeptic*, pp.6-7. According to Jones, the primary reason for Blackmur's shift to fiction was "sheer exhaustion", what might be thought of as "a kind of failure", p. 7.

can break through obscurity and gain a sense of the “actual”. It is “intuition” that serves this function. Blackmur talks of a “pre-conscious”, and describes the means by which it might be accessed:

by intuition we mean adventure in the preconscious; and there is no need or suspicion of certainty or meaning; there is the living, expanding; prescient substance without the tags and handles of conscious form. Art is the looking-glass of the preconscious (LAG 398).

There is no romantic insight to be had. The looking-glass into the mind provided by art allows us to see only a chaotic state. This underlies all logical systems and subverts attempts at order. Even then, preconscious insight cannot be expressed randomly or abstractly, however, the poet must instead acquire “habits of meter, pattern, phrase, cadence, rhyme, aptitude for trope and image” and aim “to get the whole thing back on a concrete or actual basis” (LAG 109). The grounding effect of form resists the romantic flight of pure self. An unrestrained or romantic flight of pure imagery is not possible; rather, the raw material of poetic insight can only be properly and adequately expressed through the constraints of poetic form; in a later essay Blackmur refers to how “all art is in a sense the daydream arrested and compacted in form” (POI 17). For this reason he calls for the poet to hold to the traditions of form and literary convention by which one can make sense of the disordered products of imagination and insight.

Blackmur follows Tate in using Yeats as an emblem of the benefits of such a system, writing of *A Vision*, that it provides a “system affording the poet’s imagination the chance to create what it chose: it gave backing, movement, situation to the intuitive assertions, and the intuitions, working backward, make the rest seem concrete” (LAG 115). To Blackmur there is chaos underlying all thought and discourse. An artist can use this chaos and produce art as long as he is aware of this quality. Knowing the implicit limitation, he is inoculated against expecting too much. A problem arises when this fact is ignored, and the “preconscious” state is approached with the expectation of revelation or insight:

There is no conformity which is exclusive, no order which is complete, and there is no conforming order worth mustering which does not invite, for its life, the constant and random supply of fresh disorder. Cholas is not what we must exclude; it is what we do not know, or ignore, of the behavior which, in all the versions of time and space we can manage, forms our lives, and order is how we arrange them with the behavior of lives past, and to come (PI 143).

There is a possibility of arrangement through poetry that comes from conciliation with the past and the recognition of limitation. Blackmur uses Hart Crane as an example of a poet who might have saved himself had he recognised this fact; other modern poets, contemporaries of Crane, have “escaped the contagion” (DA 139) for that exact reason, yet for Crane, “the poet succumbed with the man” (DA 140). The inability to separate the self from the poetic effort undermines the “ordering” faculty of which poetry can be capable, and dooms both poetry and poet to the type of romantic failure in which the mind itself suffers, due to its inflation of the self as the content of the poem: “It is perhaps, too, what killed Crane the man, - because in a profound sense, to those who use it, poetry is the only means of putting a tolerable order upon the emotions” (DA 128).

Poetry is at the forefront of defining man’s limitations, demonstrating his ignorance and therefore his humility. By its very nature poetry cannot be made to conform to the demands of a specific social need or exigency; by “the very refusal it makes to come to terms with the leading features of the actual mind of the society which confronts it”, it is ever situated outside of immediate knowledge (PI 7). This leads to a difficulty of interpretation in modernity, a “problem of communication” in Blackmur’s terms, and stems from a society which lacks the organic social structure beneficial to the artist: poetry has “become excessively difficult in a society which tends to reject the kind of faithful conventions under which the artist has usually worked”. The poet has the duty of trying to say that which cannot be said. This can only ever be alienating in a world dominated by the language of clear cause and effect. The poet’s task is by definition an impossible and tragic one; as Kramer has noted: “Blackmur’s defence of obscurity thus rests firmly on the idea that the poet must try to express his knowledge of an adventure into a realm of inexpressible reality.”³⁹³ The poet cannot help but be a tragic figure. By allotting the poet a greater scope for intuition, Blackmur has simply increased his capacity to fail. Although Blackmur appears to establish a possibility for the transmission of knowledge, absolute understanding is always subverted by the element of uncertainty: “the poems remain obscure until the reader takes out what the poet puts in. What still remains will be the essential impenetrability of words, the bottomlessness of knowledge” (LAG 241). The presence of “what still remains” utterly precludes the possibility of any romantic vision. Poetry is a better expression of reality than scientific language because it recognises the “bottomlessness of knowledge”; science assumes perfect transmission with no unaccounted-for elements. The pretence to absolutism found in scientific language is hubris; to Blackmur, “reason is the great myth” (LAG 103). Foster is incredulous that the same critic who once demonstrated “suspicions of ‘mystical’

³⁹³ Maurice Kramer, “A Critic’s Obscurity: R.P. Blackmur”, *College English*, Vol 22, No 8, (May 1961), pp. 553-555, p. 555.

poetry”, i.e. romantic poetry, is now accommodating “a kind of anti-intellectualism”³⁹⁴, but the two positions are clearly not mutually exclusive. Blackmur’s “anti-intellectualism” is acceptance of the limits of what can be known, and for this reason, “ignorance is the humbled form of knowledge” (LH 95). This is not a concession to mysticism, but rather a rejection of the exalted claims of the language of the type of ideology he had positioned himself against.

The poet is inherently limited by not being able to write poetry greater than that of the society in which he lives. He still serves a moral function, as in the instance of Eliot, who, in *The Waste Land* “only showed certain people their own illusion of disappointment” (LAG 183). In so doing, the poet remains outside modern, disintegrating society, the better to take its temperature: “the incentive of the artists themselves should have remained fixed on that living relation between anarchy and order” (PI 13). Blackmur sought to define “the role of the intellectual” and described the poet:

It is his obligation to see what is likely to happen and be prepared to deal with – to respond to – what does actually happen. He will therefore keep himself a little outside the avowed interests of the society – or the institution – which he serves. His true allegiance will be to the contentious, dark, problematic, reversible nature of the experience with which the mind deals. That is to say, his allegiance is to the whole enterprise of the mind, and far from being remote from it, it will move him from both without and within. That is why he will be skeptical of any particular commitment and will be rebellious to any attempt to make conformity a simple or narrow thing. Like Dante, he will be rebellious to merely social or political authority (PI 101).

The poet must stand outside of the one society to which he belongs, so that he can be “be concerned with the separable content of literature” (LAG 385). Despite his necessary distance from society, the poet possesses an imperative to offer a cultural critique through his heightened intuition and immersion in the tradition, one which might be instructive or illuminating, particularly in its harkening back to more organic and traditional social structures: “he deals with the great enterprise of society as a poetic experience” (LAG 102). The poet should not be misled by an impossible urge to “change life”, or “or to change man and to bring him into direct contact with existence” (PI 19-20). The poet’s status is that of an outsider, an individual with insight not shared by the majority of his contemporaries; this means that his poetry is of limited usefulness to most people. Alienation is the inevitable result, and the poet is doomed to replay the role of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, ignored and derided by those he sought to illuminate. The inevitability of failure characterises the poetic effort, and as such becomes a representation of human existence: “life, as Shakespeare was constantly observing, is an imperfect play” (PI 103). Accordingly, despite Blackmur’s apparently prescriptive

³⁹⁴ *New Romantics*, p. 91.

formulations for the poet's social duty, he knows the entire effort to be unrealistic: "this is no doubt an impossible ideal" (PI 101). The writer must aim for perfection; Blackmur describes Eleonora Duse, who "spent her life transforming bad plays into masterpieces of acting", adding that "the writer must do something like Duse" (PI 103). The poet has only the "imperfect play" of reality as his raw material, yet must give it form and aspire to perfect it: "he formalizes behaviour to celebrate it or to make it tolerable or meaningful ... this is his supreme role as an intellectual" (PI 103).

Religion and Myth

Generally speaking Blackmur does not encourage doctrine or religious authority in the same enthusiastic manner as Tate or Hulme, principally due to the anarchistic space he determines for the poet, but without it the product of the poet's access to the "actual" is raw and formless.³⁹⁵ The second phase of poetic insight is investment in form, a necessary component of producing poetry that is not merely chaotic. It is in this phase that religion can be of great value. The religious belief that formed an aspect of the medieval worldview, for example, unified poet and reader with a pre-existent cultural space in which the poet's language can operate freely: "it makes a connection between the poem and its subject matter and provides an adequate mechanics of meaning and value" (LAG 80). Modern man, however, lacks this implicit cultural topography: religion and magic "are in our day either taken as modes of escape or their animating influence is ignored" (LAG 164). Blackmur makes clear that poetry is not only no substitute for religion, but that "the poet has to put his religion itself into his poetry" and "it [poetry] has not replaced or in any way taken over the functions of religion" (LH 202).³⁹⁶ The poet can no longer stand in the midst of a supporting culture, so must stand apart from it as poet-anarchist. His task has become much more difficult, even impossible:

The poet... is under the constant necessity of erecting his beliefs into doctrines at the same time that he represents their emotional or dramatic equivalents. He is in fact, in much the same position as Dante would have been had he had to construct his Christian doctrine while he was composing *The Divine Comedy*: an impossible labour (LAG 90).

³⁹⁵ See "Religious Poetry in the United States", in *Outsider at the Heart of Things*, pp. 211-222. Crowley has tied Blackmur's sense of the value of religious orthodoxy to the poetry of Robert Lowell. Sue Mitchell Crowley, "Mr Blackmur's Lowell: How Does Morality Get Into Literature?", *Religion & Literature*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Autumn, 1987), pp. 27-47. Fraser mentions how "Catholicism was always out there, a possibility on the edges of his mind", a product of his interest in the "order or organization" of the western imagination. "R.P. Blackmur at Princeton", p. 558.

³⁹⁶ One critic ties this attitude of Blackmur's directly to a process analogous to the dissociation of sensibility: "It is not only that poetry cannot do the work of religion; but also that religion cannot do the work of religion [...] something 'has happened' to the religious way; it is no longer available to use". R.W.B. Lewis, "Casella as Critic: A Note on R.P. Blackmur", *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Summer 1951), pp. 458-474, p. 472.

Blackmur identifies Yeats as a poet who laboured to construct his own doctrine. Even Yeats, however, is limited to constructing only an individually-centred belief structure that is nigh-inaccessible to most readers: "If the edifice that he [Yeats] constructed seems personal, it is because he had largely to build it for himself, and that makes it difficult to understand in detail" (LAG 96). The failures of Yeats' poetry is not attributable to Yeats himself, who accomplished much with limited resources, but rather of the society in which he operated: "it was the rational defect of our society that drove him to it [magic]" (LAG 104). The "rational defect" here indicates a deficiency of the rational intellect, which would otherwise serve as the organising principle of poetry, allowing the chaos of the actual to be "fructified" into poetry of immediate value and meaning (LAG 80). Deprived of "the advantage of a rational superstructure that persists and which we can convert to our own modes" (LAG 97), the potential for the transmission of poetic insight along cultural relays is utterly impeded. In an essay on Eliot, Blackmur states that "you cannot substitute a private for an institutional religion or philosophy" (LAG 165). This piece is an interesting companion to the Yeats essay, serving to construe the "operative advantage of an objective religion on the material of dramatic poetry": (LAG 166)

The Church, which is religion embodied, articulated and groomed, concentrates and spurs the sensibility, directing it with an engine for the judgment of good and evil upon the real world; but it does not alter, it only shapes and guides the apprehension and feeling of the real world. The facts of religion enlighten the facts of the actual, from which they are believed to spring (LAG 167).

Blackmur advocates religion solely for its pragmatic advantage: "it is, in short, a way of handling poetic material to its best advantage".³⁹⁷ (LAG 168) The preconscious remains incommunicable otherwise - poetry is suspended between the two exigencies of the actual and the rational imagination. Scientific language has disrupted the latter, and therefore prevented the expression of the former. Religion can reform the link between the actual and the rational imagination by the sense of mystery and the validation of ignorance that it retains. Christianity is utterly non-romantic and non-scientific because of its essential humility. Blackmur cites a Christian prayer:

Teach us to care and not to care

Teach us to sit still (LAG 171)

³⁹⁷ This is reflected in Blackmur's interest in Stevens' "Supreme Fiction", much like Ransom. See "Wallace Stevens: An Abstraction Blooded" (LAG 250-259) See also Philip Hobsbaum, "The Critics at the Harmonium: Blackmur and Winters on Stevens", *Bulletin*, No. 11 (Dec., 1965), pp. 43-57.

He writes that this prayer “represents in an ultimate form for poetry one of the great aspects of the church – its humility” (LAG 171). In divesting the romantic consciousness and embracing ignorance (in Blackmur’s positive sense of the term) one can become part of something greater, a cultural-religious superstructure, much debased but still possessing some residual potency, that stimulates the rational imagination:

The church is the vehicle through which human purpose is to be seen and its teachings prod and vitalize the poetic sensibility engaged with the actual and with the substrata of the actual. Furthermore, and directly for poetry, the church presents a gift of moral and philosophical form of a pre-logical character; and it is a great advantage for a poet to find his material fitting into a form whose reason is in mystery rather than logic (LAG 175).

In an unpublished draft from the early 1940s, “The Spoils of Henry James: A Special Case of the Normal” (an appendix to *Studies in Henry James*), Blackmur explores a similar theme in the work of Henry James, whom he regarded as one of his most prominent influences.³⁹⁸ James is a “special case of the normal”, he attempted the type of externalisation of self upon which non-romantic art is founded, yet succeeded only in elevating the “conventions of society” to the intense, almost religious height into which he could place his investment.³⁹⁹ In this he accomplished some mild success, somewhat like Yeats with his idiosyncratic mysticism; James made an altar of convention at which to worship and forget himself. In this essay we see perhaps Blackmur’s clearest statement of the advantages which a proper, traditional system can offer for the poet. James’ cult of normality is a vastly inferior strategy compared to what might be offered by religion, of which James is described as having no time for:

He both lacked and never seemed to miss, except for their value as social conventions – as conveniences for imagination – the sense of history and the sense of religion and the sense of philosophy (HJ 235).

³⁹⁸ James is the second of Blackmur’s self-acknowledged influences, after only Adams. Makowsky attaches the prominence of these influences to Blackmur’s autodidacticism: “instead of formal instruction, Blackmur chose education by emulation”. “Editor’s Introduction” (HJ 1). The influence of Blackmur on the reception of James is explored in Linda Simon, *The Critical Reception of Henry James: Creating a Master* (New York: Camden House, 2007), pp. 33-42. See also John H. Peterson, *The Prefaces of Henry James: Framing the Modern Reader* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), pp. 18-25 and *Henry James in Context*, ed. by David McWhirter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 403-434.

³⁹⁹ Anderson draws attention to how Blackmur “credited James with an altogether normal capacity for everyday responses” and failed to perceive how “James found a consummation in his work which supplanted every other consummation”. Quentin Anderson, “Why R.P. Blackmur Found James’ ‘Golden Bowl’ Inhumane”, *ELH*, Vol. 68, No. 3 (Fall, 2001), pp. 725-743, p. 741. This unpublished essay, “A Special Case of the Normal”, addresses this theme quite directly, foregrounding James’ normalness of extremes.

James' capacity to create art, therefore, is much limited. Unlike the "churchmen and poets" of the past, who could draw from "the realm of the ideal as the availing source of conviction, even in heresy", James cannot make a meaningful "allegiance" that is presiding in his work, only having the general social convention (HJ 239). This is an emblematic problem of modernity, in which there can exist "no more sanction than the intelligence itself" (HJ 238). We see here the specific type of dissociation of sensibility that Blackmur envisions, not grounded in a literal historical timeframe, but only a sense of the steady diminishment of useful supernaturalism:

It has fallen out that we live in a new era [...] It is not the world that is new. The old world survives, and the old insights; those, no others. What is new is merely that the individual has not only, as always, to recover that world and those insights, but has also to regard them, once recovered, as without order or authority beyond that of his own mind. What is new is the absence of supernatural order (HJ 238).

Although the mind now seems to stand on its own two feet, this is not a positive as "there is no footing not quicksand" (HJ 238). The imagination accomplishes nothing of value under its own support; Blackmur hearkens back to Crane's "godhead of the imagination", calling it "only primitively human". Without myth or a spiritual world man is incapable of externalising his imagination. It is in that action of externalisation that Blackmur sees the value of myth; the type of belief is not important, perhaps even in the past the imagination suffered from what we might see as the characteristically modern limitation: "It may be that this has always been so". But what is critical is "that was not how men thought as they went about their work". To believe is enough, this act of faith is sufficient to draw meaning from something other than the self. The effort is all.

A balance must be maintained in art between the "ideal" and the "actual"; this mirrors to an extent Tate's idea of "carrying the bottom up with you". Dante is presented as an example of this balance, whose ideal approaches the actual: "the nearer it approaches the actual the more greatly ideal the creation will seem. This is the force of Dante's ideal hell, that it approaches so close to the actual of his life" (HJ 79). Although it seems counterintuitive to think that religion might bring the artist closer to the actual, the grounding force of religion or myth establishes a balance between the ideal and actual precisely because it prevents the ideal self from rising to excessive heights. The competing "ideals" of supernaturalism counter the one dangerous ideal of the self. This is of inherent advantage for art, and the lack of it is to James' disadvantage: "His very faith in his powers kept him from using them to their utmost" (HJ 70).

The Numen and the Moha

Perhaps the definitive statement of Blackmur's philosophical position can be found in his 1954 essay "Between the Numen and the Moha", in which Blackmur's stated interest is to see "how it is that morals get into literature" (LH 289). Said calls it Blackmur's "one major attempt at a theory of literature".⁴⁰⁰ It is certainly one of the most idiosyncratic, if not strangest, attempts at defining a position in his career.

Blackmur identifies two dominant phenomena in human nature for which he provides new terms. The first is the "Numen", something roughly equivalent to the sublime, a motivating force in individuals and in civilisation that drives forward progress.⁴⁰¹ The "Moha", contrastingly, is that which undermines and upsets the Numen, "the basic, irremediable, irreplaceable, characteristic, and contemptuous stupidity of man confronted with choice of purpose" (LH 293-294). These dual forces stand at either side of human consciousness and, consequently, society. The dominance of their influence removes from man his agency, as Jones points out: "Man in this view, moves towards and is moved by what he cannot know."⁴⁰² What is desirable is a balance between the two. Too much of one and civilisation veers into either blind scientific-romantic confidence or pure barbarism. Over the long eons of the past humanity has developed a variety of factors to achieve a balance between the two. Blackmur constructs a grand "mandala" of these influences, which include: "*Filosofia* [...] under philosophy we should find Scientia, the common sense of the perpetual pagan world – the absolute knowledge of the tribe", "*Lore*, the chief lady of our daily devotions, all our skills and knowledge of being we never knew we learned", "the grim goddess *Fortuna*", "myth [...] namely plot, the soul of action", "*Historia*, for *Historia* claims the right to interpret and theorise the story as it seems to her fitting", "*Poetry* [...] she needs in her corner no companion but the grand heaving figure of the unconscious with which she works and which she transforms into conscience". The combined effect of these forces is an infinity of different permutations, each combining with the others like free radicals and interacting variously with the Numen and the Moha in the centre. They are, taken together, "the real riches of the human mind, our ancient resource" (LH 298). The potential of individual elements, and the Numen and Moha themselves, to become dominant and unbalance the mandala, threatens the unity of human consciousness. The dominance of science, which should rightfully exist beneath philosophy, in modernity, is an example. The mandala is a

⁴⁰⁰ *Reflections on Exile*, p. 252.

⁴⁰¹ The term relates to "numinous". Robert Penn Warren makes use of the term in a similar vein: "The 'made thing' becomes, then, a vital emblem of the struggle toward the achieving of self, and that mark of struggle, the human signature, is what gives the aesthetic organization its numinousness. It is what makes us feel that the 'made thing' nods mysteriously at us, at the deepest personal inward self." Robert Penn Warren, *Democracy and Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 69.

⁴⁰² Wayward Skeptic, p.22

testament to a deep past, a type of wisdom of the ages, and carries with it a sense of the dissociation of sensibility. Those in the past were different to those in the present because they had more of an awareness of these competing forces and could more easily conceive them in totality:

The ancients are those who were before us, those who were nearer the gods and nearer chaos than we are. [...] The ancients saw both the gods and behavior – the *Numen* and the *Moha* – in something like a single experience and in their poetry made myths which were the plots of the relations between the two (LH 300).⁴⁰³

The idea of a “single experience” of reality immediately summons to mind the “unified sensibility”, but Blackmur, perhaps predictably, is quick to undermine any such absolute notion: “Unity is either one of the great creations of the mind, approaching reality, or it is the chimera looming in the rancorous fog of wanhope; and sometimes it is both” (LH 299). The ultimate sense is that it does not particularly matter; as his essay on James makes clear, it is the fact that men are willing to believe in it that is sufficient for it to have value.

Blackmur differentiates “literature” from the poetry of the mandala (a force of the psyche): it can have a greater purpose, as it is “full of the *Lore* of all modes” (LH 296). It is the lore of the varying interrelations of the differing forces: “Literature is our account of such survivals and failures to survive” (LH 305) In this it transcends any other force of human consciousness:

Thus we see in literature the constant effort to create new forms of order, new theoretic forms for the conflict, or the fusion, of the reality which is revelation or epiphany [...] This is our effort to find theoretic forms for the struggle in us between the alleluia and the hallelujah, between the Numen and the Moha (LH 306).

Most important of all is literature’s capacity to emphasise limitation in behavior, as it “undermines both our aspirations and our institutional or dogmatic morality” and can therefore counter romantic thought: it has “always known how to estimate Rousseau’s vision on the dusty noontime road: that the evil in our lives comes from our institutions” (LH 305). Blackmur’s analogy has the effect of making life seem like a Greek tragedy. Man is once again buffeted by fates beyond his control; only able to petition certain Gods (here somewhat in the sense of Ransom’s *God Without Thunder*) for surcease. It is unromantic by design, serving to point towards “the dark mess within and without and in back of us which men call chaos” (LH 300). Every part of the system, it seems, is optimised for the

⁴⁰³ According to Blackmur, “Something of the same sort seems to have taken place in the work of Dostoievski, Joyce and T.S. Eliot” (LH 300)

purpose of limitation. The highest morality, for Blackmur, stems from gesturing towards the “beautiful unreason underneath” (LH 303).

Henry Adams

The development of Blackmur’s critical style throughout his intellectual life can be pegged almost unerringly to the fluctuations in his particular relationship to Henry Adams.⁴⁰⁴ No figure is more significant in the formation of Blackmur’s literary and social ideas and Adams stands as a forebear and vicarious mentor over almost the entirety of Blackmur’s work. Blackmur even “took his cue from Adams”, according to Russell Fraser, by declaring himself a Conservative Christian Anarchist.⁴⁰⁵ At different times the ideal which Adams represented to Blackmur varied, and almost as a direct result of these revisions we can detect the vital movements in Blackmur’s ideas. The relationship between Blackmur and his forebear is one that is constantly and acutely aware of its own posterity. The dominant issue, to which Blackmur often returned in his work and for which Adams was a recurrent point of reference was that of “the alienation of the artist” in “a society increasingly less aesthetically-minded”.⁴⁰⁶ (PI 9) According to Jones, the Adams project for Blackmur was his “aesthetics”.⁴⁰⁷

In “Three Emphases on Henry Adams”, Blackmur’s first published essay on Adams, Blackmur writes “the problems he [Adams] posed of human energy and human society are felt at once to be special and emphatic articulations of our own problems” (HA 3). In this essay, Blackmur grounds his own theory of the “rational imagination”, the equilibrium between imagination or creativity and formal reasoning or rationality, in Adams’ experiences. Adams acts out on Blackmur’s stage the psychodrama of the failure of language to express the pure extent of imaginative experience. According to Blackmur, it is this very failure to mediate between the two that guarantees Adams’ unique greatness; although Adams himself viewed his incapacity to put knowledge into rational form, Blackmur argues that this fosters the necessity of the development of a historical proxy to act as a vessel for his imagination, a “provisional imagination”. In works such as “King Richard’s Prison Song” Adams is capable of developing a correlative for his own imaginative faculty. The critic seeking

⁴⁰⁴ A comprehensive summary of Blackmur’s *Henry Adams* project is provided in Russell Fraser, *A Mingled Yarn*, pp. 124-153. Blackmur’s failure to complete it in his lifetime was perhaps because, as Fraser puts it, “Sisyphus grows familiar with his stone”, p. 124.

⁴⁰⁵ “R.P. Blackmur: “The Politics of A New Critic”, p. 561.

⁴⁰⁶ Other approaches to the theme of failure in Henry Adams include William Dusinberre, *Henry Adams: The Myth of Failure* (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1980), Denis Donoghue, “The American Style of Failure”, *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 82, No. 3 (Summer 1974), pp. 407-432, Gavin Jones, *Failure and the American Writer: A Literary History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 1-16, Brook Thomas, “The Education of an American Classic: The Survival of Failure”, in *New Essays on the Education of Henry Adams*, ed. by John Carlos Rowe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 23-48.

⁴⁰⁷ *Wayward Skeptic*, p.134.

to understand an artist, or indeed the artist seeking to found his ideas on firm historical foundation, must carry out an imaginative adoption of the mindset and ideas of this precedent's particular belief. This foundational principle is vital to art, and it is only a literal and firm belief in it that can offer an invocation of historical value. Blackmur sees this process as entirely possible, and even essential for the continuing capacity of art to function in the modern era. Blackmur is participant in this process, finding in Adams an imaginative function that can illuminate concerns that would otherwise lack terms of expression. This pattern would continue to manifest throughout Blackmur's career; Blackmur's later idea of the "symbolic imagination" is foreshadowed by his work on Adams' concept of the Virgin in "The Expense of Greatness" and later expanded significantly in the essay "The Virgin and the Dynamo". A symbol, Blackmur writes, is the apotheosis of the provisional imagination, found between the rational and imaginative faculties, and shining at the very centre of the equilibrium between these two dichotomies.⁴⁰⁸ It is towards such a symbol that a mind can comport itself and find union between rationality and creativity; the Virgin offers, for Adams, the most pronounced and identifiable example of this process.

In this sense, "The Expense of Greatness" offers an interesting comparison to Ransom's *God Without Thunder*. Adams offers a paradigm of the poetic mindset alienated from a society characterised by its pursuit of perfectibility. The keystone of what Blackmur determines as Adams' insight is this exact comprehension of society's imperfection: "he witnesses its radical imperfection and is himself produced by it."⁴⁰⁹ (LH, 81) This incompatibility with society leads Adams to embrace the ideal of the "Virgin": a representative of social cohesion debased in the culture of modern America and now possessing only a vestigial authority. Adams' own imperfection prevents him from participating in the immediate sensibility idealised by the virgin image, however, as he is a product of an imperfect society: "The Virgin's orders were the best ever given: obeyed they made life contribute to great art and shine in it; but he had nothing with which to accept her administration" (LH 92). The Virgin here serves a representative function analogous to Eliot's dissociation of sensibility, or the Agrarian New Critics dream of an idealised rural South.⁴¹⁰ She represents a unified ontology of world and man: she

⁴⁰⁸ Jones calls the symbolic imagination a "hybrid power". *Wayward Skeptic*, p. 136. Pritchard theorises that Blackmur rejects the humanism of Babbitt precisely because he leaves no room for the "symbolic imagination"; in response Blackmur turns Babbitt into a symbol himself: "Blackmur's aim is to create a supreme fiction called 'Irving Babbitt' which will school the urgency of our reading Babbitt, and make us confront afresh that intransigent figure". William H. Pritchard, *Shelf Life: Literary Essays and Reviews* (Boston; University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), p. 92.

⁴⁰⁹ Eliot would say of Adams, "Wherever this man stepped, the ground did not simply give way, it flew into particles." "A Sceptical Patrician", in *The Athenaeum* (23 May 1919), pp. 361-362. In this Eliot sees him as symptomatic of an American "Patrician" or New England mind. See Denis Donoghue, "On 'Gerontion'", in *Reading America: Essays on American Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 148-149.

⁴¹⁰ Gelpi compares Eliot's dissociation of sensibility to Adams' view of "the modern declension from the High Middle Ages of the twelfth century". Albert Gelpi, *A Coherent Splendour: The American Poetic Renaissance*

embodies the theology of Aquinas, the cathedrals, in essence the inextricable link in the middle ages between society, individual and religious belief. She becomes in modernity a relatively impotent figure, largely divorced from the cultural matrix that invested value in her. Adams sees in her the grand unifying principle of earlier ages: “the cumulus and unity of energy”, degraded by “seven centuries of time” which made “life too complicated for the old answers to fit” (LH 93). Blackmur uses Adams to illustrate the argument that failure and incompleteness offer the domain for the artist in the modern age and, in a fashion similar to Ransom and Tate, that it is only by comporting oneself towards a belief system (defunct or futile as it might be) that great art becomes a possibility:

The greatness is in the effort itself [...] It is in the acceptance, with all piety, of ignorance as the humbled form of knowledge; in the pursuit of divers shapes of knowledge – the scientific, the religious, the political, the social and trivial – to the point where they add to ignorance, when the best response is silence itself. This is the greatness of Adams as a type of mind. As it is a condition of life to die, it is a condition of thought, in the end, to fail. Death is the expense of life and failure is the expense of greatness (LH 95).

The effort is all. Blackmur arrives at the conclusion that the most exalted form of knowledge is an awareness of one’s own ignorance.

The positive concept of failure in Adams, as in Blackmur, stems from radical skepticism. Knowledge is a myth, because whatever is known always remains subject to falsification. Ignorance, then, is a much more fitting term for the object of the mind than knowledge.⁴¹¹

Perfection is an impossible ideal, but rather, comporting oneself towards an absoluteness of belief might allow one to capture a sense of great art, if only through the actual failure that such a process entails, “the positive ignorance which is the final form of contradictory knowledge” (LH 95-96). As such, Blackmur posits that faith, rather than reason, is the *modus vivendi* to great art, and it is in the failure of faith to offer any immediate romantic insight that leaves effective ignorance as the most insightful form of understanding and a provisional unifying principle. Blackmur is less dogmatic than Ransom, he acknowledges that “the great heresy, surely, is the gospel of unity” (LH 96). In this we can see Blackmur’s skepticism towards any the revival of a unity of sensibility such as existed in previous ages. Nonetheless, “the principle of unity carried to failure showed the most value” (LH 96). Failure, ignorance and incompleteness are the watchwords of Blackmur’s critical lexicon, all of which

1910-1950 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 116. See also Frank Kermode, “Counter-Revolution”, in *Puzzles and Epiphanies: Essays and Review 1958-1961* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2015) pp. 48-49.

⁴¹¹ *Wayward Skeptic*, p.114.

posit man's failure as the most valid means of insight, underlining the seemingly paradoxical notion that ignorance is the most valuable form of knowledge, expressing as it does, the essential ontology of man's limitation and grounding the worst excesses of romantic abstraction. In this awareness, the provisional imagination can develop, and through an effort of identifying with the past, ideas such as the Virgin can offer a form of the symbolic imagination, and as such the artist can receive inspiration through feeling an imaginative link to something centuries distant.

Adams offers, for Blackmur, an optimistic case study for the isolated imagination in the artistically depleted world. His example demonstrates that the resources of the past can be exploited across the bridge of time and made use of in the twentieth century. Although Adams never moved beyond a conscious awareness of his own failure, it fell to Blackmur to find in this failure the exact cause of artistic merit. Individual failure is the spur to seeking an individual externalisation, and has created a vital chain of symbolical transmission between medieval Christianity, Adams and eventually Blackmur himself.

The world into which Adams was born is one which is repeatedly described by Blackmur as fragmented. In the opening chapter of "The Virgin and the Dynamo", he explains it:

By 1870 the common or confederative polity of Europe – with its limited sovereign ties and limited competitions, its concert of nations and balance of powers, its predominant civil and human rights and its rising notion of parliamentary responsibility – had been destroyed except in Great Britain and her colonies, and in the United States, where they survived, but only in their internal political aspects ... The ideal of concert had been replaced by the obsession – and the fear – of dominion (HA 23-24).

Even the Catholic Church found itself enmeshed "in the common competition for naked power which it had been its historic and religious mission to redeem by the occult powers of imagination and charity and love" (HA 24). This idea of a loss of unity over time is the keystone of Blackmur's historicism. On the same page he mentions the development of Thermodynamics as one of the "new and explosive studies" of the mid-nineteenth Century (along with Evolutionism, Accounting and Electromagnetism); and it is perhaps no coincidence that Blackmur's theory of history is evocative of a key Thermodynamic principle: the movement of things from a state of order to chaos: "yielding before the daily evidence of increasing and extending complexity" (HA 234). The expansion of human knowledge beyond the comfortable constraints of the medieval/renaissance worldview is a relentless and exhausting process leading eventually to darkness, much like the inexorable expansion of the universe towards heat-death. In this case, the result of man being "put in

possession of vast new stores of energy”, specifically the scientific and mechanising impulses, led to the ordinary man’s level of knowledge equating to only “a kind of detailed helplessness before enormous aggregates of supersensual energy” as a result of society becoming less unified and comprehensible (HA 25). This harkens forward towards the famous opening line of Blackmur’s essay “Toward a Modus Vivendi”: “Henry Adams used to argue that the great question was whether the American mind could catch up with American energy” (LH 3). One is detached from the other; the individual man is no longer a participant component in the world or society, he can find no source of inspiration or social unity to involve himself in. He is instead subject to:

... incomprehensible dogmas, novel routines and pressures, and incalculable wastes of inertia[...] Violence, randomness, flatness: a kind of new ignorance willfully acceded to, a raw determinism, a mechanics of fate, which taken literally, obliterated or at least mutilated the individual in the mass of society (HA 25).

This is the product of the “optimism of materialism”, Blackmur’s synonym for the romantic or scientific mindset which came to dominance in the rational age of the Nineteenth Century and was excoriated in less vague terms by Blackmur’s more political contemporaries in the Agrarian movement (HA 25). Blackmur does not argue that there is no scope for individual dignity in this “mass” society, nor that there is no scope for individuality when confronted by such forces. Such a situation merely fosters the belief in one’s own helplessness, rather than causing actual helplessness. There is a definite scope for the “pessimist” (the unoptimistic - or unromantic) such as Adams to struggle against the morass of a bankrupt culture and invest belief in the sacrosanct imagination. Blackmur uses Adams to show that the passionate struggle for the symbolic imagination is not impossible in the materialist era and can be achieved through an effort of will. This is how Blackmur characterises Adams’ works, the *Education* and *Chartres*, “symbolic action by one man against the infinite forces which drive upon and within him” (HA 28). Blackmur holds Adams’ symbolic imagination in contrast with the empty symbols of materialism, referencing *Laissez faire*, survival of the fittest and thermodynamic principles, which are mere slogans masquerading as actual symbolical values. These great guiding principles of the material age offer no potential for cohesiveness in any social sense; each claims to describe and symbolise “some vast field of human or natural energy”, yet they fail to possess what Blackmur describes as an “occult” significance (HA 28). Here Blackmur refers to the unknowable component that is an essential aspect of the true symbol; a concept such as survival of the fittest holds an inherent claim to self-assured completeness; it does not transcend or point beyond itself, rather it holds itself to be, autonomously, the reserve of the sum total of the knowledge it represents. A true symbol is unintellectual, indicative more of an

enlightened ignorance than any representative property. It serves to indicate what thought cannot penetrate, rather than summing up a certain field of thought.

Blackmur ties Adams' life into his overarching argument of social disintegration. He is born during the first flourishes of materialist thought, graduates from Harvard just as *The Origin of Species* is published and the new sciences are blooming, "an education that has become both universal and largely technical" (PI 9). He lives through the political uncertainties of his time and finally, in a poetic passage at the end of "King Richard's Prison Song", is described as dying in closing moments of the Great War:

Much of the world was filled to echoing with the terrifying noise of their last push. The universe had not only abandoned him, but also seemed to abandon itself (HA 336).

Blackmur repeatedly places the events of Adams' life in parallel with the events of the world. He almost appears to be making Adams into a dramatic image: the man victimised by a disintegrating society that could offer him nothing, yet in his founding a cohesive symbolic imagination provides a paradigm of indefatigable human will. There is no doubt a literary purpose at play here, almost a myth-making on the part of Blackmur. Blackmur declares himself participant in the same type of symbolic imagination as Adams; instead, for Blackmur, it is Adams himself who fulfils this role. Blackmur states quite clearly that the actual truth of a thing does not conflict with its usefulness as a symbol. In a later chapter of "The Virgin and the Dynamo", describing Adams' somewhat imaginative ideas of the Virgin's role in medieval society, Blackmur writes that when Adams "romanticizes a fantastic or eccentric impulse", one must consider it in light of "what depths that impulse came" – it is only the "pretence of denial" that offers "the chief obstacle to its expression today" (HA 197). The development of symbolic value, then, is an entirely idiosyncratic process.

A conscious desire to belong to a tradition is a cornerstone of both Blackmur and Adams' philosophy. Blackmur's evolution of this theory demonstrates that a literal or real tradition isn't required for the individual to derive symbolic meaning from it. Blackmur argues that the imaginative faculty itself can fulfill this purpose. "Adams' bees ventured widely", Blackmur tells us, "and the harmony - or unity – within the hive is because the honey of imagination is brought together from so many familiar flowers" (HA 179). This is a species of harmony assembled and maintained through an entirely imaginative effort: "his book is the story of that imagination, and that was honey too."

There is certainly something charming in the naivety of Adams' medievalism; his idea of Mont-Saint-Michel offering "the simply and directly felt unity of God" is an old romantic fallacy: cathedrals are a testament as much to conflict as harmony. The historical validity of the point is not of particular

relevance to Blackmur; as we have seen, it is rather the value the imagination imparts that serves the artistic function. That Adams addresses his *Life* to his nieces is an important point, Blackmur calls this a “conceit”, something that serves an intellectual or literary purpose (HA 181). Later Blackmur refers to “the reader... the most favoured possible niece”. They are a means of Adams addressing his own innocence and of bypassing the “limited effrontery of intellect” (HA 194).

Adams’ particular failure, which Blackmur holds to have facilitated his great success, was his inability to see the validity in his own method; a validity that Blackmur confirms on his behalf. Adams was incapable of seeing an imaginative unity with the past as an ends unto itself. In his letters and books Adams writes of seeking out a literal and genealogical posterity,

I am sure ... that in the Eleventh century the majority of me was Norman, - peasant or prince matters nothing, for all felt the same motives, - and that by some chance I did not share the actual movement of the world but became a retarded development, and unable to find a place.

Further, Adams’ belief that “Normandy was a kind of New England in Europe” is similarly indicative of his complicated efforts to draw a desperately literal connection to the tradition that he feels he is a part of (HA 185). Adams’ search for a verifiable and rationally provable sort of unity is an anathema to the actual unity he managed to ground.

The imaginative potentiality of the symbol extends back beyond the medieval Virgin; Adams in fact “places the Virgin as the end-form – so far in Western society – of the impulse which had created Astarte, Isis, Demeter and Aphrodite” (HA 198). The scope for unity is limited solely by the imagination of the individual. The “so far” in this sentence is indicative of a hopeful view of society’s potential for renewal. Like Eliot and other New Critics, Blackmur links poetry explicitly to the general health of a culture. Henry Adams offers for Blackmur a prime example of his views on the role of the poet in society. Adams’ Boston is a microcosm that “stand[s] for the universe”, and in this environment Adams noted, as Blackmur does, that “the sense of poetry had weakened like the sense of religion.” This is the result of society becoming scientific and mechanical; as such, poetry offers “a reaction against society rather than, as formerly, the favourite expression of society itself” (HA 230-231). Adams, the pessimist born in the age of reckless optimism, is at once dramatic image and a cipher for the rest of Blackmur’s work. There is, then, an inherent prescription in Blackmur’s exegesis of Adams for the possibility of the poetic impulse in society to be re-established. Blackmur writes that the despotism of the urban-industrial state can only be prevented by “new mental power, only a new incarnation of religion into culture – T.S. Eliot’s language” (HA 246). For Blackmur, the

continuing ability of the individual poet to find a vicarious escape from society through the symbolic imagination is enough of a cause of hopefulness. Eliot's approach is a lifeline of sorts. The poet serves a particular purpose, as long as he exists, even in the extreme minority, "to raise man, by past example confronted with present condition, to his highest intensity". From this view of the poet's role in society we can understand Blackmur's particular interpretation of one of Adams' vague statements that "art had to be confused in order to express confusion". Blackmur dismisses Yvor Winters' understanding of this passage: that the artist is an inherently confused type of person, or that art should be expressed in confused or spontaneous forms.⁴¹² Instead, he concludes that it means the artist "had precisely to put chaos in order, with what aids in form he could muster and with as few cheats in perception as possible". Confusion here means the unique poetic ability to hold contradictory ideas in equilibrium in the imagination: "of seeing the flux fully – of seeing the surface with its depth and opposite" (HA 235-236). Confusion is the same type of charged word as ignorance in Blackmur's usage. Poetry, then, serves as an organising principle of complexity.

The value of the symbol is inherently "occult", it points beyond itself towards something unknowable. The symbol serves no useful purpose unless it serves to express our understanding of something that is impossible to express in any other way. Blackmur tells us that "true symbols cannot do the work of the intellect" (HA 29). The symbol becomes bankrupt when it seeks to be autonomous and represent nothing other than itself as sum total of a certain field of knowledge. The same applies to man; such symbols easily mislead because man himself is prone to the fallacy of thinking himself autonomous. Knowledge of our own ignorance is knowledge of our limitation, and this is something that these symbols underline:

Thus the validity and necessity of symbols depend on the human situation in which the mind realizes that it is dealing with energies beyond its descriptive knowledge or that it is helpless under the pressure of energies of which it has no direct knowledge at all.

The symbolic imagination, as an idea, is the principal result of Blackmur's intellectual development. It grew from his notions of the rational imagination, in which creativity and reason are balanced, through the provisional imagination, where the mind seeks order by internalising the mindset of another artist or time, finally arriving at the symbol as the key expression of a balanced imagination

⁴¹² Blackmur's ambiguous respect and hostility towards Winters is on display in "A Note on Yvor Winters": "If only Mr Winters had been dead twenty odd generations like Plato and Aristotle, or three generations like Arnold and Pater, the task would be easy and grateful for it would amount to little more than remarking that most of the principles of thought turn out to be foibles of manner and crotchets of personality: touchstones that get in the way of facts if taken seriously, but illuminating enough if taken, as they mostly are, as contributory facets of fact." R.P. Blackmur, *The Expense of Greatness* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1958), pp. 168-169.

that is capable of expressing itself to its fullest capacity. The debt this development of ideas owes to Adams cannot be overstated. Adams himself offers a Linnaeus-type example of the development of the imaginative mind. When Blackmur writes of the “human situation of Henry Adams” he is offering a paradigm of the artistic mind sequentially developing through the different stages of creative thought:

Neither the descriptive laws of energy made by his own age nor the symbols which happened to survive from the last age seemed to him adequate to cope with the energies he actually felt at work. Nor did the private symbols he had discovered in his own life satisfy his needs once he put them in a full context. He had therefore to repeat, to attempt to re-create, old symbols for old energies, and he had to do this on the most objective possible level, which alone would be adequate (HA 29).

Discontent with his own age is the first symptom; this is the general situation of all artists, it is worth recalling Blackmur’s definition of “poetry as revolting instinct” (HA 231). Secondly, Adams’ mind moved towards using private symbols, but these are devoid of any sort of context, serving merely as empty signifiers. This, it could be argued, is the stage of the romantic poet. Finally, Adams reached back into the past and fixated upon the symbol; not to arbitrarily misappropriate to illustrate a modern concept, but rather to be appreciated on its own terms as a means of transcending the rational consciousness.

Religion and poetry intertwine almost inextricably in the concept of the symbol. Blackmur makes this connection explicit: poetic insight is analogous to “emotion of living religion” specifically, what Adams terms “the struggle of his [man’s] own littleness to grasp the infinite”. The implication is that a society without religion is a society without art. A symbol such as the Virgin is a symptom of a unified culture. Blackmur uses Adams’ assessment that “the nineteenth century was indifferent to what it could not understand, while the thirteenth century cared little to comprehend anything but the incomprehensible” to develop a point which “applies to the whole problem of poetic insight”, that ignorance is the most specialised and useful form of knowledge: “One has to possess one’s ignorance like knowledge”. Philosophy, poetry and art are all “efforts to make use of true ignorance” and should be approached more in the sense of the prayer of the supplicant before the Virgin (HA 192-193).

Henry Adams is for Blackmur both a product of his society and a lesson in the continuing potentiality of art. “For Adams, the failure to found an artistic sense in his own led to the development of his symbolic imagination, as such “failure is the expense of greatness” (LH 95). It is the effort of belief -

the forced comportment towards ignorance - that is important. The actual focus point of the belief is described by Blackmur as a heresy – a fiction, we are told “the great heresy, surely, is the gospel of unity”. Yet it is in the very action of striving towards this unity, in Adams’ case represented by the Virgin, that “the final form of contradictory knowledge” can be realised. It is a triumph of failure, an ignorance knowingly embraced. It is useful because it drags the mind away from self-obsession and fosters in it instead a pronounced sense of essential limitation and fixity. To be ignorant is to quake before the unknowable and to realise the value of an essential truth, that it is “a condition of thought, in the end, to fail”, just as it is a condition of life to die (LH 95-96).

Chapter 8

Conclusion: New Critical Afterlife

I have endeavoured to prove that the construction of what I have termed a doctrine of imperfection is at the centre of the critical work of each of the subjects of this study. Some accounting, however, should be made for the differences between them. In the introduction I pointed towards three particular strategies that could be used to define the critical forms that the doctrine of imperfection can take in the course of New Critical practice.⁴¹³ There must be, I am certain, other concurrent imperfecting strategies that I have not identified. In the case of each critic, certain strategies are in the ascendant, others less so. Yet the sum total of all is roughly equivalent. In Hulme we see the religious strategy at the forefront: having “discovered” original sin, Hulme sees in its practical application the most adroit method of turning man once again into an imperfect creature. His medievalism also testifies to a historicising sense of the usefulness of the past for conveying a similar lesson, but it is religion that is at the forefront. Richards advocates the poetic strategy: language is his arena for challenging the scientific mainstream in modernity. His later work with *Basic English*, although perhaps misguided (at least by Leavis’ standards), represents a continuation of his view of language’s primacy as a means for enacting positive change in the modern world. Richards’ critical work of the 1920s and 30s demonstrates a recurrent concern for identifying cultures that existed prior to the “dissociation” that has divided man in modernity, to serve as an educative lesson. To Leavis, language also represents the domain in which imperfection must be established. Poetry, such as Blake’s, is at the forefront of reminding the educated, university-based elites of the flame that it is their responsibility to keep alive: the essential truth of man’s limitation, against the grain of romantic perfectibility. Ransom’s “necessary fictions” blend poetry and religion together: in his work the religious attitude, through the “miraculism” of metaphor becomes a poetic exercise in imperfection. For Tate, the historical strategy is dominant: literature serves predominantly as a means of demonstrating a dissociation of sensibility. Dante testifies to great art because his sensibility is unified, Emerson projects his romantic subject-self outwards and accordingly suffers aesthetically. All art, to Tate, is measured somewhere on the spectrum between them; those artists who are still

⁴¹³ The poetic strategy, the historical strategy and the religious strategy

valuable in later days are those who, through some ingenuity, have managed to resist dissociation. In Blackmur we see a balance between all three strategies: poetry, history and religion all point equally to an essential state of uncertainty. The only adequate response is ignorance. Generally, between these critics, the combined effect is roughly equal. All of them bear at least a trace element of each of the three strategies and all of them are, in their own idiosyncratic ways, constructing an imperfecting doctrine as a direct challenge to modernity.

In *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, Eliot writes “a doctrine only needs to be defined after the appearance of some heresy”.⁴¹⁴ It might be somewhat doctrinaire to think of the developments in criticism that superseded the New Criticism to be purely a heresy of what went before; post-structuralism and deconstruction certainly had their own chain of development in continental philosophy. Yet it seems reasonable to point to the enthusiasm with which these new ideas were embraced in the Anglo-American academy as constituting a direct reaction against the New Criticism and what it stood for. Perhaps it is only with the drift away from this type of abstract theory in recent years that a fair reappraisal of the New Criticism is possible.

After all, as we are told, the New Criticism is dead. This is a recurrent sentiment among later critics. To Lentricchia, “it is dead in the way that an imposing and repressive father-figure is dead.”⁴¹⁵ Firchow relates how those who wished for its demise “pronounced their farewells at the graveside with varying degrees of glee.”⁴¹⁶ Another recent critic recounts:

Among the pugnacious practitioners of academic literary studies, who agree among themselves on almost nothing, there is one consensus: the New Criticism “that is, the *old* New Criticism associated with the names of T.S. Eliot, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks”, *that* New Criticism is over, finished, defunct.⁴¹⁷

There seems a vested interest in ensuring the nails are securely in the coffin, or something akin to a fear of disturbing the dead. Arthur Quiller-Couch wrote that “of all dust, the ashes of dead controversies afford the driest.”⁴¹⁸ Ultimately what is the value in disturbing that which has been so neatly filed away? An obligation of the literary critic is, I believe, the effort to find value in and appraise that which would otherwise be forgotten, most often against the current of popular consensus. There is a very great deal in the New Criticism that has been largely ignored as it does not

⁴¹⁴ T.S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (Faber & Faber, 1983), p. 13.

⁴¹⁵ *After the New Criticism*, p. xiii.

⁴¹⁶ *Reluctant Modernists*, p. 257.

⁴¹⁷ R.V. Young, “The Old New Criticism and its Critics”, *First Things* (August 1993), <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1993/08/004-the-old-new-criticism-and-its-critics>

⁴¹⁸ Arthur Quiller-Couch, *On the Art of Reading* (Cambridge University Press, 1924), p. v.

fit with the epitaph-like summations afforded in dictionaries of literary history. If the New Criticism is dead then its ghosts are surely still around; even the logic of post-structuralism acknowledges this.⁴¹⁹

The New Criticism has passed out of living memory, at least in terms of it being an assumed critical “monolith” to rebel against. The resistance now, perhaps, is instead against the type of postmodern critique that has dominated the academies. This should not be thought of as a battle of Left versus Right, but rather of the subversive against the dominant and unchallenged. There is always an allure in that which is occulted, neglected or repressed. For this writer at least, texts like *God Without Thunder* or “Between the Numen and the Moha” have all the strangeness and majesty of the scriptures of forgotten religions. John Julius Norwich, the prominent historian of the Eastern Roman Empire, describes his original attraction to that period of history as stemming from its occultation:

Byzantium seemed to be the victim of a conspiracy of silence. I cannot honestly remember its being mentioned, far less studied; and so complete was my ignorance that I should have been hard put to define it even in general terms...⁴²⁰

The very fact of the comprehensive consensus, the New Criticism is dead, brings about the desire to question. A recent article makes a clarion call, “in short, it’s not time to further bury the New Critics. It’s time to raise them from the dead.”⁴²¹ There have been several similar efforts that point to a tendency or desire to question old assumptions, and reopen old debates.⁴²² The gulf of time has also allowed a degree of nostalgia, with some young observers happy to look back and see that “one of the great successes of academic New Criticism was to keep explicit political agendas out of literary academia while it could.”⁴²³

The primary intention of my thesis has been to provide a new set of terms by which the New Criticism might be defined. In so doing I have not limited myself to the traditionally-defined New Criticism exclusively. Instead I have attempted to demonstrate a fundamental fluidity that characterises the traditional boundaries that define critical movements, based as they are on habits or outcomes instead of a comprehensive analysis of underlying premises. The “New Criticism” as definition has always been a best-fit solution. A space exists for a more comprehensive

⁴¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

⁴²⁰ John Julius Norwich, *A Short History of Byzantium* (London: Penguin, 1997), p. xl.

⁴²¹ Micah Mattix, “It’s Time to Return to the New Critics”, *Public Discourse* (December 17, 2013), <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2013/12/11032/>

⁴²² See *Rereading the New Criticism, The New Criticism: Formalist Literary Theory in America*, Peter Quartermain, “Reading the Difficult: A New Critique of the New Criticism”, *Poetry Magazine* (October 1, 2013), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70059/reading-the-difficult>

⁴²³ Glenn W. Butler, “New Criticism: The Challenger, the Winner, and the Lasting Legacy”, *Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2006).

categorisation that could encapsulate certain modernists, the New Critics themselves, and later thinkers, who all tread the same ground. Is Hulme a New Critic? Or are the New Critics Hulmeans? To provide a comprehensive answer to this question, and to provide a solid foundation within which they might be linked, would require an entirely new definitional groundwork. I have not aspired to offer any such new categorisation in precise terms, but I have gestured towards the possibility of a better terminology.⁴²⁴ As I have suggested, perhaps the conservatism of the New Criticism caused it to resist self-definition; it is for this reason that the New Critics themselves allowed only the most superficial or arbitrary of qualities to serve as a designation. Had they been inclined to think of themselves ideologically, then the propagation of the doctrine of imperfection might have been a movement with as much intellectual (and perhaps political) force as Marxism has proved to be for the Left. It certainly, I would argue, possesses a similar rational consistency and dogmatic appeal. My definition accordingly points beyond itself to a wider field of possible integrations, not only in the sphere of conservative thought, but also in the sense of any who reject the perfectible foundation as a presupposition for human nature. I have endeavoured to offer a new understanding of the New Criticism. It is worth considering the possibility of further uses that might be made of the old material when it is considered in this new light.

The Literary Sphere: New Formalism and Surface Reading

In the literary sphere, a reinvigoration in recent years of “formalist readers” has widened the scope for a variety of New Critical reconsideration. Marjorie Levinson identifies it as one of the “candidates for reinvestiture” in her essay on the aims of the New Formalist movement.⁴²⁵ This manifesto bears several hallmarks which are familiar. The intention to emphasise formal components of texts is motivated by a desire to subvert the absolutist presumptions of what she groups together as “new historicism”.⁴²⁶ In this we might sense a commonality with the critics who, the better part of a century earlier, had begun from a similar working position (Levinson even uses the word “positivist” as a pejorative). The new formalist project is to, through a recognition of its “formal address”, prioritise in literature “a set of responses that work to enhance and sustain our humanness [...] our

⁴²⁴ In a similar way, the New Critics themselves point to why the old terms are a bad fit. Just as a “New Critic” does not stand up in definitional terms, so to the concepts of romantic and classical are subverted by their work, despite the prominence they often ascribe to them. As an example, to Leavis, Blake is characteristically unromantic.

⁴²⁵ Levinson also perceptively points to the flaws in the purely formalist assumption of the New Criticism: “the New Criticism was more historical and more activist in its notions of form than reputation has it and that new historicism’s notion of form was both more formalist and more agential in its working ideas of form than current practice suggests. In other words, the sharp antithesis between the two isms falsifies them both.” Marjorie Levinson, “What is New Formalism?”, *PMLA*, Vol. 122, No. 2 (Mar., 2007), pp. 558-569, p. 563.

⁴²⁶ She clarifies, “new historicism serves as a catch-all term for cultural studies; contextual critique; ideology critique; Foucauldian analysis; political, intersectional, and special-interest criticism; suspicion hermeneutics; and theory.” *Ibid*, p. 559.

sense of shared humanness, our sense of wonder, our awareness of ‘the non-centrality of the subject-position’”, all of which are “under siege by the collective forces of modernity and by the more restricted ranks of new historicists”.⁴²⁷ Ultimately the aim is an escape from readings which venerate only “our own untrammelled invention”. To circumvent this type of, dare I say, romantic reading, Levinson advocates a type of “learned submission”:

That complexity (a leitmotif throughout new formalism), which is attributed to the artwork and recoverable only through a learned submission to its myriad textual prompts, explains the deep challenge that the artwork poses to ideology, or to the flattening routinising, absorptive effects associated with ideological regimes.⁴²⁸

Simultaneously, another movement of “surface readers”, who bear some links and overlap with the new formalists, have started from a similar set of working principles. They position themselves against “a variety of critical styles in the second half of the twentieth century [which] were marked by a utopian strain and a striving for redemption”.⁴²⁹ In so doing they demonstrate a comparable urge for a type of humility that counters the movements against which they have arranged themselves, particularly the image of literary critic as, perhaps, romantic hero:

Jameson’s image of the critic as wresting meaning from a resisting text or inserting it into a lifeless one had enormous influence in the United States, perhaps because it presented professional literary criticism as a strenuous and heroic endeavour, one more akin to activism and labour than to leisure, and therefore fully deserving of remuneration.⁴³⁰

Accordingly, surface readers “place noticeably less faith than many other critics in the heroic qualities of art, and they understand their critical activity as something other than wresting truths from the hidden depth of resisting texts.”⁴³¹ The project, instead, is to allow the text, in its formal wholeness, to stand as a resistance to ideology that would co-opt it and put it to work for a specific ideological agenda: “Immersion in texts frees us from the apathy and instrumentality of capitalism by allowing us to bathe in the artwork’s disinterested purposelessness.”⁴³²

Although both of these groups mention the New Criticism in passing as a vague precedent, neither use it substantially as a basis for any sort of praxis. Levinson identifies a principal flaw, the reason

⁴²⁷ Ibid, p. 560.

⁴²⁸ Ibid. It is not hard to imagine the phrase “learned submission” appearing in an essay by Blackmur or Tate.

⁴²⁹ Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction”, *Representations*, Vol. 108, No. 1 (Fall, 2009), pp. 1-21, p. 16.

⁴³⁰ Ibid, pp. 5-6.

⁴³¹ Ibid, p. 13.

⁴³² Ibid, p. 14.

why it cannot serve in the cause of new formalism, in the New Criticism's "failure to provide a workable definition of literary knowledge."⁴³³ Establishing the consistent effort of the New Criticism to institute a doctrine of imperfection provides an answer to Levinson's charge. In unknowledge or the unromantic image we have a working definition. The New Critical effort was to provide a self-undermining type of knowledge that pointed to its own limitation and failure. It is by design anti-capitalism and anti-science. For this reason it is easy to imagine that it might be put to use in the type of project that Levinson envisions. If we look past the particular textual strategies of the New Criticism, what exists most basically is scepticism at the ideological potentialities of language. Imperfection could well be the means to this end.

The Political Sphere: Steve Bannon as New Critic?

If we accept my recharacterisation of the New Criticism as a movement specifically comported around issues pertaining to perfectibility, then a reconsideration of the New Critics' work might bear some significance for political theory. John Passmore's definitive *The Perfectibility of Man* traces the conflict over this issue back through two thousand years of history and demonstrates the widespread resonances that the seemingly abstract idea of perfectibility can have. Perhaps the complete absence of any critical work on this, as I have tried to demonstrate, absolutely fundamental quality of the New Criticism is, in fact, a testament to how occulted the question of perfectibility usually is. In addition, perhaps it is only by liberating the New Criticism from the perception of narrow formalism and pointing to their actual practice as consistent commentators on society, culture and politics, that they might be opened up for consideration in a wider field.

Pankaj Mishra's recent work *Age of Anger*, described as "the first essential read of the Trump era" and "the first must-read of our frightening new era", demonstrates a clear subtext of anti-perfectibilist historicising.⁴³⁴ Mishra traces the genesis of contemporary anti-populist movements back through a historical framework of theories of perfectibility. He identifies a primary problem in the modern political sphere to be the wide gulf between intellectual concepts of human nature, founded on romantic ideals, accompanied by an absolute faith in the "quasi-religious belief in continuous progress [...] the onward march of history", and the reality, in which "history seems to have come full circle".⁴³⁵ The problem as he sees it is in the underlying fact of human imperfection, which means that people will never neatly fit into the programmes and utopias predicated on their potential to be made perfect. The rise of demagogues, who offer the possibility to satiate "a

⁴³³ "What is New Formalism?", p. 564.

⁴³⁴ Suzy Hansen, "The First Essential Read of the Trump Era is Here", *Vogue* (February 15 2017) <https://www.vogue.com/article/age-of-anger-pankaj-mishra>

⁴³⁵ Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger* (London: Allen Lane, 2017), p. 327.

romantic urge for flashy self-transcendence” are a symptom of this problem. This also explains the aggressive reinsertion of religion back into the political domain: “Today the belief in progress, necessary for life in a Godless universe, can no longer be sustained, except, perhaps, in the Silicon Valley mansions of baby-faced millennials.”⁴³⁶ The rise of anti-populist sentiment, dictators and violent religious movements can be traced to a fundamental distinction between views of human nature: the perfect and the imperfect. As long as the essential imperfect isn’t at the heart of political discourse, there will always be forces arising to fill the void and provide a “shortcut” to the perfected future that was promised but is so patently lacking in the actual world. To foreground the essential imperfect is, by this logic, to close the gap between expectation and reality and circumvent the particular appeal of demagogues or radical religious movements.

Mishra creates a vision of history, which begins with “a religious or medieval society [...] one in which the social, political and economic order seemed unchangeable”.⁴³⁷ This unified sensibility was broken down, however, by “the ambitious philosophers of the Enlightenment [who] brought forth the idea of a perfectible society – a Heaven on Earth rather than in the afterlife.” This was a “traumatic break with the past” and its consequences are that we are now “condemned to be free”.⁴³⁸ Perhaps most perniciously, human beings are made the measure of the universe at the expense of the divine: “Power in secularising Europe had been unmoored from its location in the transcendental and made immanent in society; it came to be seen as originating in the will of human beings.”⁴³⁹ Although Mishra’s book has been permitted to offer an idiosyncratic, unacademic vision of history by virtue of its “popular history” categorisation on bookshop shelves, one could argue that it has precedents in the historicising activities of the New Critics, to whom the past was also a strategic or usable domain for foregrounding the essential imperfectness of human nature. Much like Mishra, the New Critics began from the simple starting point of looking at the world and finding it unsatisfactory.

Further evidence of the anti-perfectibilist instinct arising as a political consideration can be found in the ideology of Steve Bannon, the dominant intellectual force behind Donald Trump’s successful campaign for president of the United States. *Generation Zero*, one of Bannon’s populist documentary films, serves as propaganda for his vision of society and history, and demonstrates a clear sense that part of the problem with modernity is its underlying notion of perfectibility. A representative sentiment from the film is: “When men stop believing in god, they don’t believe in

⁴³⁶ Ibid, p. 344, p. 324.

⁴³⁷ Ibid, p. 156.

⁴³⁸ Ibid, p. 338, p. 326.

⁴³⁹ Ibid, p. 327.

nothing, they believe anything. The intense focus on the self led to a sense that the self is really God".⁴⁴⁰ Compare this to T.E. Hulme in 1909: "The instincts that find their right and proper outlet in religion must come out in some other way. You don't believe in God so you begin to believe that man is a God." (CW 62) The theme is returned to in another film of Bannon's, *The Torchbearer*, in which the following is claimed: "With the Fall, death entered into human history. Now all creation is subject to its bondage to decay. Having made ourselves God we turned inward. In the absence of God, Man becomes the determiner of all things."⁴⁴¹ Bannon instrumentalises religion for practical, political purpose; his true convictions are no doubt as firmly held as those of Hulme or Ransom.

In both of these instances, Mishra and Bannon, we see something similar to the precedent set by the New Critics decades earlier. In this "new imperfection", we can see the application of similar strategies: Mishra's historical strategy and Bannon's religious strategy both have at their core an attempt to reinsert the terms of imperfection into the political domain.

If we look back to the New Criticism and bear these similarities in mind, it might be possible to find precedents for pertinent political issues that seem to be at the forefront of contemporary debate, in particular, in the question of *why* certain thinkers are keen to make the world imperfect. Is it because this is integrally the case? Or is there an underlying motivation that simply desires to make it seem like this is so? Perhaps a study of the New Criticism along these lines would provide an insight into the way this type of conservative mind operates, something that would perhaps prove useful in this day and age.

Final Thoughts

Ultimately I return to where I began. What is a doctrine of imperfection, other than the product of an impulse or a simple prejudice? We began also with an uncertainty, that it is "notoriously difficult to define modernism in any secure or stable fashion".⁴⁴² New Criticism has, for most of its history (and afterwards), proved the same. What I have attempted to offer is a definition that does not challenge existing cultural, chronological or genetic classifications, but can stand instead alongside them, as a means of drawing together individual, disparate thinkers who shared commonalities by working from a shared starting point and moved in a similar direction with comparable practices. I have endeavoured also to prove the fundamental logical *consistency* of this position, both across the careers of these critics, and across the wider grouping. The drive to construct and proselytise a

⁴⁴⁰ *Generation Zero*, dir. by Stephen K. Bannon (Citizens United Productions, 2010).

⁴⁴¹ *The Torchbearer*, dir. by Stephen K. Bannon (Citizens United Productions, 2016).

⁴⁴² *Poetry, Modernism and an Imperfect World*, p. 2.

doctrine of imperfection is not limited to modernism or the New Criticism, but reflects instead a fundamental approach to human nature.

Although I have pointed to further uses that might be made of the New Critics, perhaps it is ultimately unlikely that they might realistically be reinvigorated for this type of project. Perhaps there is too much of a stain of the Southern plantation or the chronically old-fashioned concern for prescribed “canons”. As I pointed to in my introduction, the most optimistic outcome is likely to be the continuing salvage project of extracting small fragments for “redemption”, whilst ultimately bearing in mind the toxicity of the material in its entirety.⁴⁴³ William Empson has retained his credibility, most likely due to his more progressive political sensibilities. Richards has an afterlife as a niche theorist of rhetoric in specialist journals, and Leavis clings on as a footnote to Wittgenstein and, occasionally, an oddity in a history of the culture wars (usually in the story of the Snow controversy).⁴⁴⁴ The Southern Agrarians retain some interest in purely historical terms. Brooks and Wimsatt, despite, or perhaps because of, their formalist rigidity, survive as the Linnaeus-type definitions of the movement. Any literary glossary will, almost exclusively, carry a description of their practice under the general entry “New Criticism”. Blackmur has perhaps suffered the most: although once thought of as the “America’s best critic”, he is now barely read at all.⁴⁴⁵ As I have pointed out, however, to assert the primacy of imperfection as the dominant agenda of the New Criticism has the effect of transporting Blackmur to the forefront of the grouping. In his specific, repeated attempts to formalise the value and theory of “ignorance”, he acknowledges the doctrine of imperfection in a way that several other New Critics (such as Richards) only do indirectly.

What is common to the all of them is the attempt to create a positive alternative for the establishment of meaning against the grain of scientific modernity. This is, perhaps a characteristically American exigency, as one critic has pointed out, writing of Robert Penn Warren:

He knew that a respect for one’s cultural heritage does not perpetuate past injustice but is, instead, the best safeguard against any future attempts to naively assume the superiority of one’s culture over another’s. He also knew that Americans have a tendency to elevate

⁴⁴³ Ransom, for example, has been picked out for notice because of some suggestion of gender multiplicity in his work. See Ann Mikkelsen, “Roger Prim, Gentleman” and Aaron Shaheen, “Androgyny and Social Upheaval: The Gendered Pretext for John Crowe Ransom’s New Critical Approach”, in *Rereading the New Criticism*, pp. 65-82.

⁴⁴⁴ See “The Culture Wars”, *Great Thinkers in their Own Words*, BBC Four, 16 August 2011. A dramatisation of the conflict between Leavis and Quiller-Couch has also been broadcast, “The Last Romantics”, BBC 2, 29 March 1992.

⁴⁴⁵ Russell Fraser, “R.P. Blackmur: America’s Best Critic”, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Autumn, 1981), pp. 569-593.

themselves above history and above human nature in the belief that they alone can create a “city of the hill”.⁴⁴⁶

But the problems of America are the problems of the world, as Leavis noted: “superior advancedness is portentously influential”. (ELOT 25) In Tate’s concern for the role of the man of letters in society we can detect this exigency. The vision of the university in Leavis’ criticism, similarly, is as a vital, living force for social improvement. In this there is a sense of the possible role an intellectual might play in society. Not as a commentator or participant in the maintenance of the status quo, but as a vital means of perpetuating a specific, palliating doctrine for the problems of modernity. Ultimately we see in the New Criticism an attempt to provide a solution to the problem of the modern human condition in a deracinated culture, pointing to a means of healing dissociation through faith, rather than simply acknowledging the inevitability of fracture. According to Mark Jancovich,

What distinguishes postmodernist criticism from modernist criticism is that while modernism sought to achieve differentiation through the creation of alternative forms, postmodernism seeks to achieve it without producing an alternative. It deconstructs existing forms but refuses the project of reconstruction. The shift from the New Critical interpretation of the text as a “struggle for unity and meaning” to the postmodern rejection of totalisation or meaning is not a liberating one. Rather it constitutes a rejection of social engagement and a retreat from public discussion and debate. [...] The difference is that the New Critics valued the “struggle for meaning” as an attempt to define a position in relation to the modern world. Postmodern criticism, on the other hand, values the “refusal of meaning”, and maintains that any attempt to define a position limits the productivity of language.⁴⁴⁷

In order to define a position, rather than exist purely in postmodern uncertainty, it is necessary to countenance something like a “necessary fiction”. This type of activity is inherent in the formation of groups within society, as has noted by a variety of critics, such as in Hobsbaum’s “invented tradition” or Anderson’s “imagined communities”. To begin from a starting point of fictionalisation, which, it seems is the only *possible* starting position for a tradition in a deracinated modernity, is to raise the question of whether it is even possible to believe in something that one knows is invented. The New Critics addressed this directly. The simple act of comporting ourselves *towards* that fiction is sufficient to charge it with meaning and allow an escape from both the romantic subject-self and

⁴⁴⁶ Robert S. Koppelman, *Robert Penn Warren’s Modernist Spirituality* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), p. 148.

⁴⁴⁷ *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism*, p. 154.

the totalising scientific society which is the outward product of it. This is, in a way, their unromantic image. It knows its impossibility. It must, by necessity, lead to futility, ignorance, limitation and imperfection. But that is the point. The language of imperfection offers an alternative discursive strategy in a modern situation that otherwise offers no alternatives at all. Perhaps this is the nature of its subtle and growing appeal. An unromantic image is, after all, most needed in a romantic age.

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