

LITERARY CRITICISM AS IDEOLOGY:

A CRITIQUE OF THE NEW CRITICISM

by

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Literary Criticism as Ideology: A Critique of the New Criticism

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ABSTRACT

There can be little doubt that the New Criticism has dominated literary criticism in Canada and the United States for the last thirty years. How can we explain this domination? I have attempted to answer this question by constructing a dialectic between history and theory. This study has therefore two sections: (1) an account of the critical and social origins of the New Criticism through an analysis of the relation of the structure of modern bourgeois culture, represented by Matthew Arnold and T.S. Eliot, to the structure of modern American capitalism; and (2) an analysis of New Critical theory, represented by John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks and W. K. Wimsatt, and its practical applications in the studies of poetry, drama and the novel. As literary critics, we have lost touch with our critical history and it is the function of this study to provide such a history.

The methodological approach has been historical materialism which accordingly defines the New Criticism as a dialectic between the commodification of literature and the mystification of subjectivity. New Criticism is therefore conceived as an appropriate ideological form of literary criticism because it reflects the economic structure of late capitalism.

I conclude that the success of the New Criticism can be attributed to its ethos of productivity where intellectual activity is transformed into alienated intellectual labour. New Criticism is thus able to overcome the cultural and political

bias against intellectual activity by becoming structurally identical with non-intellectual labour.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In History and Class Consciousness George Lukacs characterized modern thought as an 'exactitude complex', the tendency to reduce knowledge to facticity.<sup>1</sup> But this tendency, Lucacs argues, is assumed to be "natural" in capitalism because it expresses the identity of material and "spiritual" production in which the former is ultimately determinate. Thus in contrast to pre-capitalist societies the products of thought now bear the stamp of commodities and are subject to the same values, exchange values, Moreover not only does knowledge take on the aura of commodities, but the mental labour upon which this production depends must be considered passive and therefore the antithesis of creativity.

Essentially Lukacs's critique of capitalism rests on the supposition that bourgeois intellectual culture has no active or creative principle and passively submits to the domination of capital over society. It is not so much the ideals of research, the pursuit of "objective truth", that is at issue but rather the subjective means by which those ideals are to be achieved. Objectivity only makes critical sense if understood as a relationship between thought as meaningful subjectivity and reality as an experienced phenomenal world. The critical assumption of a neutral subject deprives the activity of research of meaning while presupposing that the objects of research can be abstracted from their socio-historic context without damage to their basic substance. Bourgeois

thought can be said to "reflect" the dominant mode of production in so far as the objects of bourgeois research assume a fetishistic character--a "false" autonomy--and their reproduction as knowledge appears to follow an economic logic which assures their character as commodities.

Such is the case with the New Criticism. Unlike other disciplines in the humanities literary criticism is radically modern and inseparable from the rise of the modern university. Formerly literary criticism was considered either the domain of writers as a justification of their aesthetic practice or it functioned within the general rubric of aesthetics.<sup>2</sup> But as John Gross has pointed out the creation of literature departments at the beginning of the twentieth century led not only to the institutionalization of literature but also to the narrowing of aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence the limitation of inquiry about literature to the autonomous text reduces the nature of intellectual inquiry to carefully circumscribed boundaries which in turn become seen as the limits of meaning and value. While pretending to produce significant research into the nature of poetic language and while assuming that this research also illuminated a subjectively total structure of literature, the emphasis on textual self-sufficiency imposed rigid limits on literary contexts, particularly in terms of the cultural importance of literature. The logical outcome of this methodology was that literature became an abstraction, a commodity, because its meaning was no longer dependent on a social context



either in terms of the genesis of a text or in terms of a historically conditioned readership.

The following study defines the New Criticism as the most typical form of literary criticism in the period of American expansion following the end of the Second World War. It is hardly original to point out that the formalist methodology of the New Criticism is intrinsically incapable of grasping literature as a specific form of culture because its claim to objective interpretation of literary texts is mediated neither by the socio-historic dynamic of literature nor by the ideological viewpoint of the critic. But if the transcendence of New Criticism could be effected on a purely rational basis then New Criticism would have disappeared long ago. The critical issue is then, What is the basis for the ideological efficacy of the New Criticism?

The answer to this problem lies in the relationship between the critical values of the New Criticism and the economic values of post-war American society. In a society that accepts the transformation of human potentialities into marketable commodities the distinction between humanly meaningful subjectivity and subjectivity as a mere means for the production of commodities becomes blurred. Subjectivity is reduced to an abstraction because there are no adequate forms for its social expression and as a consequence social activity takes the form "given" under capitalism--rationalized economic activity. The New Critics simply took for granted that the subjective response

to literature could only be discussed in terms of the language and the technique of the text and thus discovered a rationalization for banishing subjectivity from criticism.

The denial of subjectivity in its most traditional domain --aesthetics and critical thought--is analogous to the experience of the labourer. In both cases the subject is alienated from the production of socially useful objects the value of which is a function of market fluctuations. Furthermore, as social reality becomes more complicated and dehumanized the intellectual expressions of subjectivity becomes increasingly polarized between mysticism on the one hand and "productivism" on the other--what Marx calls the 'fetishism of the commodity'.<sup>4</sup> It comes as no surprise then that the bourgeois ideals of objectivity should become identified with rationalized systems since the reality that confronts the bourgeois is not only rationally impenetrable but is itself devoid of subjective meaning.

But if the reality has no subjective meaning then where is meaning to be found? The solution, albeit an inadequate one, is discovered in the ethos of value free research where the objects of inquiry are isolated from their socio-cultural context by means of an objectivist methodology within the specialized discipline. Furthermore an ego structure develops whereby the validity of research is equated with productivity per se, with the production of intellectual commodities and these are in turn evaluated by the ideological needs of the particular

discipline. As Philip Rahv has noted this fetish of productivity has proved antagonistic to genuine creativity because the lure of the finished product takes precedence over the experience of imaginative discovery.<sup>5</sup>

To recapitulate: modern thought is unable to distinguish human potentiality from its historical expression because the productive imperatives of capitalism are assumed to prescribe the limits of human activity. The dismemberment of the personality that is part and parcel of social life in capitalism unconsciously directs people to find forms of identity in the immediate reality rather than suffer the possibilities of greater alienation in the pursuit of alternatives. The inability to imagine a political transcendence of capitalism is a function of an ideology that denies the possibility of social objectification of humanly meaningful subjectivity while assuming that the transformation of human objectifications into commodities is the universal form of all human activity.

The above dialectical movement describes the structural basis of modern conformist thought but the question remains how the New Critics develop a particular ideology for the study of literature. There can be little doubt that, at least in Canada and the United States, the New Criticism has dominated the study of literature for the last thirty years. It is true that the decade that witnessed the appearance of the writings of Blackmur, Ransom and Tate was characterized by polemics against established approaches to criticism (Biographism,

humanism and historicism), but by the middle of the 1950's the tide had turned and the particular principles of the New Criticism were fast becoming identical with the principles of all literary criticism.

What were the factors that contributed to this phenomenal success? Certainly at one level New Criticism is peculiarly national and its rise corresponds to the consolidation of monopoly capitalism and the economic boom of American industry.<sup>6</sup> The ideological consequences of monopoly capitalism can hardly be understated. Not only was productivism given a new life but it was done so in an atmosphere of conformism. As the following comment by Ransom makes clear this ideology extends well beyond industrial ethics:

...where are the professor of literature? They are watering their own gardens: elucidating the literary histories of their respective periods. So are their favorite pupils.

It is not so in economics, chemistry, sociology and architecture. In these branches it is taken for granted that the criticism of the performance is the prerogative of the men who have had the formal training in its theory and technique.<sup>7</sup>

This enthusiasm for skills, although rarely as explicitly stated, is always implicit in the theory of practical criticism. These remarks, written in 1938, might perhaps be excused on the grounds of naivete but they contain the germ of future critical practice: the development of practical skills is a function of quantitative production which has no other justification than the advancement of the discipline.

This propensity for production is however only one side of the ideological dynamic of the New Criticism; the other is the alienation of the reader from the process of production. There is no argument that the formalist methods of New Criticism, which emphasize close attention to language and literary structure, are valuable and have produced many original and genuine insights about literature. The difficulty arises in the central assumption that the 'mode of existence of a literary work' is a

...system of norms of ideal concepts which are intersubjective. They must be assumed to exist in a collective ideology, changing with it, accessible through individual experience, based on the sound-structure of the sentences.<sup>8</sup>

While it is true that the 'norms of ideal concepts' are only accessible through individual experiences this by no means implies that literature can only be discussed in terms of its intrinsic qualities--language and structure. Criticism cannot take for granted the reader who, as a component of the literary process, must be illuminated in terms of concrete socio-historic forces. Nor is it legitimate to assume that language has a determinate objectivity--it only exists through the reader. The failure of the New Critics to address themselves to these issues leads them to the preposterous assumption that the abstract immediacy of the text is itself an aesthetic and cultural totality.

But it is precisely this reduction of aesthetic experience to language and structure that allows criticism to proliferate

as textual criticism. And, as I have argued, a text that is abstracted from the reader qua socio-historic subject must be considered to function as a commodity. When literary criticism becomes the demonstration of literature as commodity the quality of research becomes sacrificed to the logic of capital which is neither interested in the experience of literature nor in the intellectual development of the individual critic.

The authoritarian structure of the New Criticism becomes clear if we look at W. K. Wimsatt's essay, "Explication as Criticism". Wimsatt begins by arguing that an explicative critical theory arises naturally from a holistic aesthetics:

The success of explication in persuading us of literary value is a kind of practical test of how well aesthetic theories of order and wholeness do apply to literary works. More precisely, a practical affinity between holism and explication arises because organization and wholeness are matters of structure and hence also of implication.<sup>9</sup>

But what are the criteria of success? Do we evaluate the validity of a critical theory simply on its capacity to generate critical articles or on its capacity to interpret literary works? Obviously value, for Wimsatt, is quantitative since 'explication' is seen to facilitate the production of critical articles. He makes no attempt, for example, to demonstrate the relationship of structure to the historical value of texts: structure is asserted as the essence of literary texts but what is the essence of structure? For Wimsatt, who wants an aesthetic theory concerned only with linguistic order and wholeness, these probably sound like ludicrous questions. But the issue remains even if Wimsatt asks the question, How do we write about literature? The failure to provide even tenta-

tive solutions merely reveals that Wimsatt's actual purpose is the development of an ethos of literary criticism that is only peripherally concerned with the social function of literature.

Given Wimsatt's ideological predispositions it should come as no surprise that holism is taken as a subjective truth:

Yet the validity of partial value as a general principle in tension with holism seems obvious. The whole with which explication is concerned is something elastic and approximate.

All in a poem...may be assimilated by the peculiar process of a given poem. Poetry is the art that most readily transcends the simple pleasure principle and illustrates the principle of structure and harmonious tension.<sup>10</sup>

Holism, the principle of reconciliation of the parts with the whole, is assumed to be self-evident to any reader of poetry. Wimsatt seems apparently unaware that the "affectivism" he finds so abhorrent in Richards is here given an even more severe expression. That is, while claiming to provide an objective framework for poetry he never transcends the most blatant subjectivism. Literature, rather than providing a means for interpreting human experience, is reduced to mere ornamentation: the reader is only allowed to contemplate beauty as a thing outside of himself. Literature, like Yeats's Byzantine world, is frozen in time without life or death.

The corollary of holistic aestheticism is a mechanistic relation of the parts to the whole. Wimsatt argues that the parts have only two forms of discourse--the explicit, a statement has direct reference to reality, and the implicit,

a statement that coheres to the structure of reality. Poetic discourse, by creating a harmonious tension between these forms, expresses an extra dimension of correspondence or explicitness, the symbolic or the analogical. Just as it is the function of poetic discourse to transcend the polarities of explicit and implicit statements, so it is the function of criticism to explicate that transcendence. For Wimsatt explication as criticism is demonstration of understanding, because it shows what a poem literally means, and value, because a poem is not a poem if the polarities are unbalanced. Wimsatt is quick to point out that

actual disvalue in poetry arises when some abstractly true or correct attitude is blurred or garbled in symbolic or stylistic incoherencies, or (more flagrantly) when some false assertion or attitude is invested with specious forms of coherence....Or again, a poem can be given an illusion of depth through the introduction of apparently real but actually phantasmal or irrelevant symbols.<sup>11</sup>

However Wimsatt's view that explication, even in its widest sense, can both evaluate a literary text and provide a method for understanding its meaning is seriously inadequate. A text only possesses an abstract immediacy and can only be transformed into literature through the mediation of the reader who is not a simple repository for 'organization and structure'. This cultural dialectic between reader and text determines the value of the poem and explains why Donne's poetry should suddenly be "discovered" by a generation in desperate search for an authoritarian tradition that could dissolve its existential



## Angst.

What then is the function of the reader for Wimsatt?

Wimsatt explains that

the end-means relation in literature (so far as the end is outside the means) is a relation between us the readers and the poem, the means of which the poet may indeed be aiming at us. Inside the poem there are no ends and means, only wholes and parts.<sup>12</sup>

For Wimsatt the authority of the text is beyond challenge but who, if not the reader, determines that authority? Wimsatt is trapped in a circular epistemology--which comes first, the reader or the text? By choosing to break the circle by depriving the text of cultural value and the reader of active consciousness Wimsatt reveals explication to be an expression of an impoverished culture, a culture that can no longer achieve sublimation through aesthetic experience.

But it is perhaps in his discussion of literary value that Wimsatt is most revealing. He writes:

...values are continuous with and embodied in experience, in the facts and the structure of the facts.... Furthermore, since value is an indefinitely flexible and analogical concept, co-extensive with form and being, a something which is always the same--there is no excuse for intruding special terms of appreciation and evaluation into our elucidative criticism. Value is always implicit and indefinable. It looks after itself.<sup>13</sup>

Wimsatt's cavalier rejection of 'special terms of appreciation and evaluation' can only be fully understood in terms of the critical "transformations" forced on the text and the reader. Since the text has been deprived of cultural value and the reader has become the explicationist critic, the need for a

theory of value is summed by the theory of method which is itself a consequence of a neutered text.<sup>14</sup> To put it more schematically: the "de-cultured" text is the negation of a theory of value and the precondition of a theory of undifferentiated literary forms while the rationalized reader is the sine qua non of methodological "rationalization". Furthermore, since the failure to develop a theory of literary value implies the identity of rationalized research and the uniformity of literary forms, so research is categorized quantitatively in the same measure as literature is categorized formalistically.<sup>15</sup>

The effect of the New Critical project is to negate the traditional function of literature as the simultaneous expression of the ideals of a culture and a critique of the impossibility of achieving those ideals within immediate cultural forms. Literary criticism, on the other hand, by finding no other rationale than the explication of texts, is unable to develop as cultural activity because it chooses to follow the logic of capital and becomes rationalized labour. Yet this particular form of intellectual labour cannot be isolated from the general form of modern bourgeois culture. As Walter Benjamin has pointed out the effect of a consumer society is to reduce all cultural production to the values of the market which presupposes the ignorance of the buyer.<sup>16</sup> Further, because this ignorance can never be admitted an exaggerated ideology of taste develops which, because it is a "rationalization", defies rational analysis.

In the following study of the New Criticism I will contend that the critique of Victorian culture that is initiated by Matthew Arnold and further developed into a critique of humanist culture by T.S. Eliot provides the basic teleology of the New Critics. At the same time however, I think the New Criticism is essentially discontinuous with this movement because it forsakes the problem of culture, so central to Arnold and Eliot, for the problem of science. The effect of this development is two-fold: (1) literary aesthetics is transformed into an ethics of literary criticism; and (2) the notion of culture is transformed from the alienated subjectivity of the individual to the abstract text. This process makes use of the practical criticism of I.A. Richards, but its real determinant is the intrusion of monopoly capital into North American intellectual life.

## II. CRISIS AND REACTION: ARNOLD, HUME AND ELIOT

Literary historians have often referred to Matthew Arnold as the father of modern literary criticism.<sup>1</sup> This judgment, however, becomes problematic because the major proponents of modern literary criticism, namely T.S. Eliot and John Crowe Ransom, have unequivocally condemned Arnold as a Victorian moralist. It would not be very fruitful therefore to trace the literary influences of Arnold on his followers who for the most part are not "Arnoldians". I therefore propose a more productive tactic which is to argue that Arnold initiated an ideological programme for literary criticism. Although the ideological needs of Victorian capitalism are quite different from those of American monopoly capitalism the function of literary criticism has substantially remained the same; that is, literary criticism continues to contribute to the ideological control of the bourgeoisie over capitalist society.

Before entering into a discussion of the form of Arnold's ideological programme it will be necessary to clarify the critical use of "ideology". To begin with ideology must not be confused with propaganda; the former is concerned with the form and the latter with the content of knowledge:

What most sharply distinguishes a propagandistic from an ideological presentation and interpretation of the facts is precisely that its falsification and manipulation of the truth is always conscious and intentional. Ideology, on the other

hand, is mere deception--never simply lies and deceit. It obscures truth in order not so much to mislead others as to maintain and increase the self-confidence of those who express and benefit from such a deception.<sup>2</sup>

The importance of ideology is not that it renders all thought historically relative, as Popper, Kuhn and the sociologists of knowledge would have it, but rather that all thought is rooted in historical experience. Ideology should therefore be considered as the relationship between individual subjectivity and social objectivity which Arnold Hauser describes as follows:

Obviously, man creates ideologies, but not without certain preconditions; and it is in these preconditions that lies the clearest demonstration of the supra-individual character of ideology, its social objectivity and autonomy. Men do not create ideologies out of an arbitrary whim. Otherwise ideologies would be nothing but fabrication, figments of the imagination, or poetic fancies. However, although it constantly recurs, the contradiction between men as an ideology-creating psychological subject and man as ideologically created sociological object is not irreconcilable. It merely expresses man's dual identity, his individual and simultaneously social character, which is the basis of the dialectical essence of his whole life. The criticism to which he subjects his ideology is as incapable of transcending the ideological dependence of his own thought as the fact that his own thought has a social basis can prevent him from coming into, and remaining in conflict with, his social environment!<sup>3</sup>

The second major point about ideology concerns the political structure of the 'social environment' and under capitalism this inevitably means the relationship of thought to the class struggle. More particularly, it is the function of intellectuals to maintain the 'hegemony' (to use Gramsci's term) of the ruling class within the cultural sphere of society.

Gramsci explains the relationship between knowledge and the dominant mode of production as follows:

Every social class, coming into existence on the original basis of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates with itself, organically, one or more groups of intellectuals who give it homogeneity and consciousness of its function not only in the economic field, but in the social and political field as well: the capitalist entrepreneur creates with himself the industrial technician, the political economist, the organizer of a new culture, of a new law, etc.<sup>4</sup>

Gramsci's argument rests on the fact that, while intellectuals constitute a specialized social group, their relationship to the 'world of production' is mediated by the 'whole social fabric...and by the complex of the superstructure of which the intellectuals are in fact "officials"'.<sup>5</sup> The critical function of the cultural historian is therefore to determine in what sense thought reflects the prevailing class structure of society and, in the case of bourgeois thought, the ideological means by which that structure is maintained.

The basic structure of Arnold's ideological project is most clearly formulated in Culture and Anarchy, his best known work. Since the French Revolution England had been the stage for a series of militant working class social movements with Chartism playing the leading role. And, in view of the upheavals in Europe in 1848 and the disturbances in Ireland, it was natural that the English bourgeoisie should regard revolution as a very real possibility. At the same time England was beginning to lose its industrial dominance over Europe. In short, English capitalism was undergoing its first major crisis. In response to these conditions the English bourgeoisie had to

consolidate its power and this meant minimizing the conflict between the landed and merchant bourgeoisie and the industrial bourgeoisie. This alliance is at the centre of Culture and Anarchy and is represented by the conflict between Hellenism and Hebraism.

The conscious motive for Culture and Anarchy is not the fear of revolution but rather the fear that spiritual experience is disappearing from bourgeois culture. This feeling is hardly unique to Arnold but is shared by most intellectuals of the age. However for the bourgeois intellectual this anxiety becomes a crise de foi because it calls into question his loyalty to capitalism and consequently the social values of his own class. Arnold chooses to defend the industrial bourgeoisie on the grounds that it created a prosperous society, but criticizes it for its utilitarian zeal which trivialized the importance of the national spiritual tradition which was the creation of the aristocracy.

Arnold does not formulate this conflict in terms of class but rather as a psychological duality within the bourgeoisie. More importantly, Culture and Anarchy only takes on ideological value because it is a psychologistic abstraction of a historically genuine conflict. Arnold distinguishes between Hebraism and Hellenism as follows:

But while Hebraism seizes upon certain plain, capital intimations of the universal order and rivets itself, one may say, with the unequalled grandeur of earnestness and intensity in the study

and observance of them, the bent of Hellenism is to follow, with flexible activity, the whole play of universal order, to be apprehensive of missing any part of it, of sacrificing one part to another, to slip away from resting in this or that intimation of it, however capital. An unclouded clearness, an unimpeded play of thought, is what this bent arrives at. The governing idea of Hellenism is the spontaneity of consciousness; that of Hebraism, strictness of conscience.<sup>6</sup>

The Hebraistic ideal can be loosely equated with bourgeois morality which finds its true form in practical activity and in the pursuit of sensuous materiality, the 'unequaled grandeur of earnestness'; but the ideal is not introspective and hence cannot produce an aesthetic culture. Hellenism, by contrast, is the essence of aesthetic culture because it does not recognize any practical limits; it is 'an unimpeded play of thought'. However whereas Hebraism can form the basis of both a society and a culture, albeit in an impoverished form, Hellenism must reject all historical forms because it is the expression of the autonomous and free mind. But it should be clear that Arnold's radical separation of culture from society reflects his ideological attitude to capitalist society because the destruction of the Hellenist subject (i.e. the aristocratic man of leisure) is not only a consequence of capitalist development but is also essential to that development. Without doubt Arnold's appeal to Hellenism is politically naive, but ideologically it creates the illusion that a basis for solidarity and creativity can be found within the bourgeoisie. The basis for Arnold's cultural critique is not, even in idealist



terms, a negation of bourgeois society but is instead an expression of his partiality to that society. What Arnold wants is a bourgeois social reality that recognizes the necessity of pure speculation; in nuce, Arnold wants a society that can accept him as a useful social type.<sup>7</sup>

When Arnold interprets the concrete forces of history as manifestations of a natural psychology, the 'strictness of conscience', he therefore deceives his readers, as well as himself, into thinking that the corrective to the de-spiritualization of the self is to be found not in history but in a complementary psychology, the 'spontaneity of consciousness'. Arnold is therefore able to provide the basis for a renewed faith in capitalism with a mythology of natural history without acknowledging the political crisis of capitalism.

But although Arnold can mystify the crisis he cannot make it disappear and it returns in the following two ways. Firstly, his dualistic formulation of subjectivity qua Hellenism leads to mysticism because it has no concrete forms of expression. Secondly, his practical method of 'disinterestedness', which is intended to join partiality and objectivity, is forced to identify "high" culture with a transcendent form of the bourgeois State. In effect the State becomes the real point of departure for cultural ideology or, what amounts to the same thing, Culture becomes an ideological apparatus of the State. Consider Arnold's description of disinterestedness:

It is of the last importance that English criticism should clearly discern what rule for

its course, in order to avail itself of the field now opening to it, and to produce fruit for the future, it ought to take. The rule may be summed up in one word -- disinterestedness. And how is criticism to show disinterestedness? By keeping aloof from what is called the "practical view of things"; by resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all the subjects which it touches. By steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas, which plenty of people will be sure to attach to them, which perhaps ought to be attached to them, which in this country at any rate are certain to be attached to them quite sufficiently, but which criticism has certainly nothing to do with. Its business is, as I have said, simply to know the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas. Its business is to do this with inflexible honesty, with due ability; but its business is to do no more, and to leave alone all questions of practical consequences and applications, questions which will never fail to have due prominence given to them.<sup>8</sup>

This passage taken from "The Function of Criticism" (1864), provides an essential link in Arnold's thought between his prescriptions for the 'grand style' in "On Translating Homer" (1861) to his identification of Culture with the State in Culture and Anarchy (1869). The common informing principle of these writings, what Arnold calls the 'style', is the distinction between private (i.e. eternally human) spirituality and public (i.e. historically mutable) ideology. Arnold's critique of English translations of Homer, particularly Newman's rests on the fact that English ideology recognizes no distinction; it publicizes the private. The 'grand style' therefore opposes the practical democratization of culture

which reduces spiritualization to an unproblematical and immediate empiricism. In Marcuse's terms, Arnold is defending an 'affirmative culture' in which the limitless happiness of the soul cannot be measured by the standards of practical necessity.<sup>9</sup>

When Arnold talks of 'criticism' and 'disinterestedness' he is trying to formulate a critical language for discussing Culture without resorting to the language of 'ulterior, political and practical considerations' -- a language that can discuss Culture without compromising the dualistic formulation of human nature. To put the matter more succinctly, he wants the unity of aesthetics and culture and the disunity of culture and political society. Only by recognizing this duality can we hope to resolve the apparent dichotomies in Arnold's writings--the humanist man of letters of "The Study of Poetry" and the pragmatic imperialist who argued against political freedom in Ireland.<sup>10</sup> For Arnold, Culture is the truth of eternal spirituality that can only be validated by the march of bourgeois progress. In spite of his attempt to overcome the active and objectifying principle of Hebraism Arnold was unable to evade the social dialectic of Victorian capitalism.

In "The Study of Poetry" this dialectic co-opts Arnold's idealistic poetics: in order to establish the autonomy of culture Arnold is forced to rely on the empiricism of capitalist society. That is, the touchstone theory of poetry is

nothing else but the aesthetic expression of the ideology of progress where facts are assumed to speak for themselves.

Arnold begins, innocently enough, by recapitulating the basic premise of poetry (and culture) as the eternal need to feed and clothe the human mind:

We should conceive of poetry worthily, and more highly than it has been the custom to conceive of it. We should conceive of it as capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies, than those which in general men have assumed hitherto. More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console, to sustain us.<sup>11</sup>

Poetic appreciation is the remedy for the culturally impoverish-  
ed mind; it is the means by which the autonomous subjectivity of mankind can be confirmed. Poetry is therefore asked to assume the function traditionally assigned to religion and philosophy:

...our religion, parading evidences such as those on which the popular mind relies now; our philosophy, pluming itself on reasonings about causation and finite and infinite being; what are they but the shadows and dreams and false shows of knowledge?<sup>12</sup>

But how is poetry to succeed where religion and philosophy have failed? More importantly, how will the reading public recognize the intellectual and spiritual power of poetry? The answer, claims Arnold, lies in the erection of adequate standards of criticism:

But if we conceive thus highly of the destinies of poetry, we must also set our standards for poetry high, since poetry, to be capable of fulfilling such high destinies, must be a poetry of a high order of excellence. We must accustom ourselves to a higher standard and to a strict judgment.<sup>13</sup>

Hebraistic culture produced two forms of criticism: the 'historic' and the 'personal'. Arnold argues that both share in the limitations that characterize all forms of Hebraism. The 'historic' judges poetry only in terms of the 'development of a nation's language' and is hence liable to determine value by the standards of national chauvinism; the 'personal' estimate, on the other hand, lacks any form of objective criteria but judges poetry by momentary 'affinities, likings and circumstances'. In both cases there is a serious lack of critical standards with the consequence that English poetry tends to be over-rated.

In contrast, Arnold proposes that the European classics (e.g. Homer, Dante, Shakespeare) be the standards from which to judge English poetry. Only by recognizing the true potentiality of poetry, Arnold argues, can a genuine but national poetry be achieved:

So high is that benefit [of reading the classics], the benefit of clearly feeling and of deeply enjoying the really excellent, the truly classic in poetry, that we do well, I say, to set it fixedly in our minds as our object in studying poets and poetry, and to make the desire of attaining it the one principle to which, as the Intimation says, whatever we may read or come to know, we always return.<sup>14</sup>

Arnold then proceeds to present us with a series of quotations from the classics whose power he assumes to be self-evident to all readers. Furthermore, he refuses any attempt at interpretation which, he claims, would only compromise the substance of poetic truth, beauty and seriousness:

The characters of a high quality of poetry are what is expressed there. They are far better recognized by being felt in the verse of the master, than by being perused in the prose of the critic. Nevertheless if we are urgently pressed to give some critical account of them, we may safely, perhaps, venture on laying down, not indeed how and why the characters arise, but where and in what they arise. They are in the matter and substance of the poetry, and they are in its manner and style. Both of these, the substance and the matter on the one hand, the style and manner on the other, have a mark, an accent, of high beauty, worth, and power. But if we are asked to define this mark and accent in the abstract, our answer must be: No, for we should thereby be darkening the question, not clearing it. The mark and accent are as given by the substance and matter of that poetry, by the style and manner of that poetry, and of all other poetry which is akin to it in quality.<sup>15</sup>

But the power of poetry cannot merely be relegated to aesthetic platitudes. This is particularly so for the Victorian reading public who needed to know more concretely the contemporary relevance of classical literature; they needed to know what Dante's poetry had to do with their own experiences. Arnold not only refuses to deal with these issues but by quoting isolated passages ('touchstones') he implies that aesthetic experience is a function of language, albeit evocative language--it is not something that can be "explained". In effect, by separating poetic meaning from public meaning Arnold renounces the possibility of critically discussing and interpreting poetry. For Shakespearean drama is not merely the aestheticizing of language; it is also the dramatization of social conflicts which remain as valid, mutatis mutandi, for the Victorian as for the Elizabethan audience. The critical

issue is to discover in what way the function of a literary work alters historically, but since such a task inevitably involves the social consciousness of the reader it is ideologically inappropriate. The appeal to the eternal empiricism of textual meaning is indirectly an appeal to the eternal empiricism of capitalist prosperity and, as a consequence, the development of a historical hermeneutic for literature must be seen as a threat to the "psychological" foundation of capitalism.

Arnold's touchstone theory is the cornerstone of the conformist literary criticism of the twentieth century. What makes Arnold problematic for the modernists is not his empiricism but his unity of aesthetics and culture which is inseparable from the historical structure of Victorian capitalism.

It was the voice of T.E. Hulme that ushered in the modernist reaction to Victorian liberalism through a critique of Romanticism which is nothing other than an attack on the humanistic values of the nineteenth century. Hulme's critique, however, is not merely a negation of Romanticism for the modern age but a negation that does not recognize any historical boundaries. But because Hulme still shares in the liberalist tradition of identifying the principles of a society with the character of its art he is only the forerunner of a new type of intellectual. What makes Hulme discontinuous with liberalism is that society has become an abstraction; it has lost the concrete image expressed by Arnold as Hebraism. Culture is no longer the precondition of art forms because the

model of perfectability has passed away from man and back into the absolute deity. It is no longer a question, as in Arnold, of the possible autonomy of human spirituality but of the irrelevance of human history in the determination of art forms. "Classicism" replaces the autonomous aesthetic ideals based on culture with an autonomous art based on visionary mysticism. Art, for Hulme, may suggest certain organizational principles for society but it is a society intended to defy historical logic. Classicism becomes "ought-ridden" because it wants to negate bourgeois culture without resorting to the historical forms that gave it birth.

But what had happened to bourgeois culture between Arnold and Hulme? Why had the ideology of progress proved so utterly inadequate for the subjective needs of the Edwardian bourgeoisie? Partly the answer can be found in the inherent contradictions of Arnold's psychologism, so that "Hellenism", far from protecting individual spirituality had actually precipitated its destruction by denying it access to empirical forms of experience. Secondly, the "Hebraistic" assumptions of an organic social unity had proved illusory not only because the "natural" forms of working class expression were not identical with bourgeois Hebraism but also because British capitalism was suffering from French, German and American competition. And, as one writer puts it, territorial expansion is a poor substitute for economic productivity.<sup>16</sup> Consequently the ideology of progress was effectively weakened without any alternatives clearly visible on the horizon.

Hulme's critique of Romanticism, the expression of this



negativity, rests on the assumption that man is 'an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant'.<sup>17</sup> Man is an instinctual animal who cannot determine the forms of experience but only the content; and this is an absolute truth that embraces art, politics and sexuality. Most importantly, the religious attitude is seen as a fundamental feature of all human nature. Regarding the similarity of classicism and materialism Hulme makes the following comment:

It would be a mistake to identify the classical view with that of materialism. On the contrary, it is absolutely identical with the normal religious attitude. I should put it this way: that part of the fixed nature of man is the belief in the Deity. It should be as fixed and true for every man as the belief in the existence of matter and in the objective world. It is parallel to appetite, the instinct of sex, and all other fixed quantities.<sup>18</sup>

Taking classicism as his point of departure Hulme is able to develop the central theme of modernism, the dialectic of tragedy and order. Hulme defines the tragic experience as

...the closing of all roads...and the realization of the tragic significance of life....Such a realization has formed the basis of all great religions, and is most conveniently remembered by the symbol of the wheel. This symbol of the futility of existence is absolutely lost to the modern world, nor can it be recovered without great difficulty.<sup>19</sup>

History has shown that as human ideals become more removed from actual experience, individuals lose sight not only of their own needs but of human nature in general. This lack of faith in social progress has the two-fold effect of conformity

to the status quo which combines with an idealization of past epochs. The passing of the age of prosperity had left a residue of empty ideals and Hulme's response was to equate emptiness with ideals per se: he is the modernist guru of what Lukacs calls the 'cult of immediacy', albeit in its negative form. Hulme accurately recognizes the impoverished character of contemporary existence but, rather than analyzing its socio-historic causes, he takes the impoverishment to be ontological because history is determined not by men but by a supra-human Will. Hulme argues that it is a fallacy to believe, as did Romantic capitalism, that the human is continuous with the divine and he therefore idealizes the Renaissance when men were men and gods were gods. The authoritarian symbol of the wheel therefore takes on a heightened relevance for the modernists; because if the content of human experience is abstract--experience is seen as cyclical and therefore historically meaningless--then the forms of human experience only become concrete because they are externally imposed. The wheel, therefore, provides an ideology for uncritically accepting impoverished experience qua human experience while placing the forms of human experience beyond human understanding.

But if the actual experience of human history is assumed to be inherently futile, what then are the solutions? Hulme's answer is unequivocal--submit to order:

A man is essentially bad, he can only accomplish anything of value by discipline--ethical and

political. Order is thus not merely negative, but creative and liberating. Institutions are necessary.<sup>20</sup>

and again:

Man is an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant. It is only by tradition and organization that anything decent can be got out of him.<sup>21</sup>

However this conception of order becomes problematical because it is not empirically given but must be recognized by the same imagination that is constantly questioning the objective character of order. Under these conditions how is tragedy to become meaningful if it is identified with conformity?

Yet although the identity of tragedy and order has questionable cultural value it is nonetheless the formal basis of a highly productive aesthetics, namely modernism. But despite modernism's record of productivity it has not been able to overcome the conflict between the artistic imperative of a creative imagination and a merely inherited spontaneity (i.e. naturalism). For if the 'great aim [of art] is accurate, precise and definite description'<sup>22</sup> and if it 'is essential to prove that beauty may be found in small, dry things'<sup>23</sup> then how can the artist be considered "creative"? Furthermore this impasse is not transcended by equating creativity, as Hulme does, with a practical facility in a particular medium. The problem remains because the forms of nature and language are given; they do not require a creative consciousness for their existence. The artist becomes a producer of literary forms which are determined not by the artist but by the society that

gave birth to those forms, namely capitalism. In effect, art takes on the character of a "commodity" because its value is no longer one of "utility" but is determined in the sphere of "exchange".<sup>24</sup> In other words, the function of art now becomes the legitimation of the social norms of capitalism. Art loses its universal character not because it has become eclectic and esoteric but because it has become introverted, because the problem of art has become a problem of method, a problem of technology.

But for modernism Hulme is but a voice in the wilderness, it is Eliot who is its true Messiah. Dissatisfied with the cultural milieu of the United States Eliot nonetheless comes to England with the mission of transforming the wasteland of liberal humanism into a neo-classical metropolis. Terry Eagleton has accurately described this momentous event as follows:

...Eliot came to Europe with the historic mission of reviving and redefining the organic unity of its cultural traditions, and reinserting a culturally provincial England into that idealist totality. He was, indeed, to become himself the focal-point of the 'European mind', that richly evolved, unruptured entity mystically inherent in its complex simultaneity in every artist nourished by it. English literary culture, still in the grip of ideologically exhausted forms of liberal humanism and late Romanticism, was to be radically reconstructed into a classicism which would eradicate the last vestiges of 'Whiggism' (protestantism, liberalism, Romanticism, humanism) in the name of a higher corporate ideological formation defined by the surrender of 'personality' to order, reason, authority and tradition.<sup>25</sup>

As Eagleton's comments make clear the English literary bourgeoisie was in desperate need of a new Bible and it was therefore with jubilation that they greeted the publication of Eliot's Sacred Wood in 1920. Once this text had been supplemented with the publication of "the Metaphysical Poets" (1921) and "The Function of Criticism" (1923) a new theological doctrine would emerge which would find its greatest apostles in the Scrutineers and the New Critics.

Eliot argues that in The Sacred Wood he is primarily concerned with the 'integrity of poetry' so as not to confuse it with culture as the Victorians had done.<sup>26</sup> Rather, he sees poetry as a unique form of experience:

We can only say that poem, in some sense, has its own life; that its parts form something quite different from a body of neatly ordered biographical data; that the feeling, or emotion, or vision, resulting from the poem is something different from the feeling or emotion or vision in the mind of the poet.<sup>27</sup>

The above view will prove to be significant in the development of the New Criticism but at this point in my argument it is only important to point out the difference between Eliot and Hulme regarding the poetic object. For Hulme the substance of poetry can be reduced to the natural world, but for Eliot this substance is bathed in a mystical aura. In short, Eliot transforms the commodity as a means of exchange to a commodity which hides exchange relations; that is, he fetishizes the commodity.

But Eliot's advance beyond Hulme was not confined to

poetics. He also suggested how his poetics could be put into critical practice:

It is part of the business of the critic to preserve tradition--where a good tradition exists. It is part of his business to see literature steadily and to see it whole; and this is eminently to see it not as consecrated by time, but to see it beyond time; to see the best work of our time and the best work of twenty-five hundred years ago with the same eyes.<sup>28</sup>

Yet it is clear that the identity between poetics and critical practice can only be posited. But how could it be otherwise? For if the essence of poetry does not reside in historical experience then criticism cannot mediate between poetics and a poetic object because its task is not the development of poetics but simply its legitimation. It comes as no surprise then that Eliot should want to banish interpretation to the realm of the 'presentation of the relevant facts that the reader is not assumed to know'.<sup>29</sup>

That Eliot is concerned not with what literature is but with what it ought to be is nowhere more evident than in his analysis of Hamlet. Eliot's fundamental objection to the play is that it lacks a formal principle appropriate to its empirical content. Eliot begins by arguing that

Shakespeare's Hamlet, so far as it is Shakespeare's, is a play dealing with the effect of a mother's guilt upon her son, and that Shakespeare was unable to impose this motive successfully upon the "intractable" material of the old play [The Spanish Tragedy].<sup>30</sup>

For the purposes of this study it is enough to point out that Eliot's analysis suffers from two fallacies--his failure to adequately identify the content and his theoretical assumption

that form is simply an objective 'correlative' to content.

To assume that the political structure of Denmark functions simply as a context for the social and psychological conflicts of the major characters is to misunderstand the intention of the play. Hamlet is essentially an exploration of the relationship between the State and society in a period of crisis. For Shakespeare this relationship has two levels. Firstly, the personal conflicts ('a mother's guilt upon her son') within the State have their origins not in the sphere of divinity but in the social structure, that is, kings are not only mortal but equally participate in the anxieties of other mortals. Secondly, a state that is corrupted by human anxieties (greed, jealousy) loses its political legitimacy for directing society. Implicit in the relationship between the State and society is the contradiction between individual needs and political necessities. This contradiction forms the basis of Hamlet's tragic dilemma: if he succumbs to "ordinary" human instincts he calls the existing State into question but if he supports the existing State he calls his human instincts into question.

Eliot cannot see this and his mechanistic schema, his notion of an 'objective correlative', deprives literature of an active and creative principle by insisting that the forms of literature must follow pre-conceived and rationalized patterns. This highly influential concept of Eliot's needs further elaboration. Eliot explains it as follows:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of the particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately given, the emotion is immediately evoked.<sup>31</sup>

Since for Eliot the origin of artistic creation lies in the fixed ontological structure of "things", art has no imperative to interpret social and historical experience. But, as Eliot's critique of Hamlet shows, this is ultimately not a question of epistemology but one of value, since literature that has a more direct social form is inferior in quality to art that confirms the eternal truth of reification.

Parallel to the problematic of form is the problematic of content; namely, what is the emotion that is objectified in 'sensory experience'? Eliot attempts to answer this question in "The Metaphysical Poets". He begins by discarding the standard definitions of the Metaphysical movement which, he argues, have failed to come to terms with the diversity of a movement that includes Donne, Jonson and Crashaw. Eliot believes that the central aesthetic principle of this movement is the 'contrast of ideas' by which the 'heterogeneity of material [is] compelled into unity by the operation of the poet's mind [which] is omnipresent in poetry'.<sup>32</sup> More specifically, this principle can be seen as the contrast between a simple language and a complicated syntax:

It is to be observed that the language of these ideas is as a rule simple and pure; in the verse



of George Herbert this simplicity is carried as far as it can go--a simplicity emulated without success by numerous modern poets. The structure of the sentences, on the other hand, is sometimes far from simple, but this is not a vice; it is a fidelity to thought and feeling. The effect, at its best, is far less artificial than that of an ode by Gray. And as this fidelity induces variety of thought and feeling, so it induces variety of music.<sup>33</sup>

This fusion of 'thought and feeling' is what Eliot calls 'sensibility', the ability to feel a thought as 'immediately as the odour of a rose'. Eliot collapses all emotional experience into sensory experience and thereby justifies his failure to discover a social basis for aesthetics. Rather, aesthetics becomes religion which only opens its doors to the converted.

It comes as no surprise then that the literary tradition that Eliot wants to reaffirm is a religious tradition which begins to disintegrate with Milton, the poet of the Puritan Revolution:

The poets of the seventeenth century, the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience. They are simple, artificial, difficult, or fantastic, as their predecessors were; no less nor more than Dante, Guido, Calvacanti, Guinicelli, or Cino. In the seventeenth century a disassociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered; and this disassociation, as is natural, was aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden. Each of these men performed certain poetic functions so magnificently well that the magnitude of the effect concealed the absence of others. The language went on and in some respects improved; the best verse of Collins, Gray, Johnson, and even Goldsmith satisfies some of our fastidious demands better than that of Donne or Marvell or King. But while the language became more refined, the feeling became more crude.<sup>34</sup>

This 'disassociation of sensibility' culminates in the anti-authoritarianism of Romanticism when poets 'revolted against the ratiocinative, the descriptive; they thought and felt by fits, unbalanced; they reflected'<sup>35</sup> (italics mine). Of course the question of authority (or order)--the point of departure for both the Romantics and the Metaphysicals--is more than an aesthetic problem for it is rooted in their respective socio-political attitudes. The Romantic movement, moreover, is only the culmination of freedom as an artistic principle--its genesis is to be found not in Milton but in the politically conscious Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists:

...the early seventeenth century in England was a time of radical transformation in attitudes. Then as never before man's inborn freedom, his natural state of equality, his right to rebel against tyrants, were canvassed as vital issues. Of all forms the theatre was the most public and the most responsive to the spirit of the age....Only forty years after the stage revolts of Hamlet and the revenge plays, Charles I and his court were driven from London. The sons of the apprentices who hissed Webster's Dukes and Cardinals on the stage defeated the cavalier armies in the field. Bussy's affirmations of 'man in his native noblesse' became the guiding principles of the Levellers. But if Jacobean tragedy was a sounding board for the ideas of a new age of protest, these ideas themselves sprang from a libertarian tradition that deserves to be better known.<sup>36</sup>

The Metaphysicals are not therefore the bearers of an unbroken tradition that stretches back to Dante but are in reaction to the dominant tradition since Shakespeare. On the other hand, the historical relations of the Metaphysicals and the Modernists to radical literary traditions are strikingly

similar. Both movements reacted to the dramatic social and political changes of their eras with a radically social aesthetics, an aesthetics which gives the complexity of form the predominant function within the creative process. Eliot is unequivocal on this point:

It is not a permanent necessity that poets should be interested in philosophy, or in any other subject. We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into its meaning.<sup>37</sup>

In Eliot's poetics there is a fundamental contradiction between the sensually objective form of poetry that is affirmative of the commodity form of capitalist social relations (i.e. the abstract social relations between things), and the subjective content of poetry that is openly critical of capitalist social relations (at least in so far as the latter is the complicit agent of the 'disassociation of sensibility'). Eliot's attempt to overcome this contradiction through a theory of the impersonality of form only exacerbates the problem:

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape these things.<sup>38</sup>

Eliot, of course, refuses to explain why anyone would want to escape from emotion but his prescriptions can, I think, be taken as symptomatic of a desperate age when emotional experience is

painful experience. Ultimately Eliot is unable to come to grips with literary reception. His terms of poetic appreciation-- 'personality', 'emotion' and 'sensibility'--are empty abstractions which resist concrete application and as such are of little use in the analysis of the material content of poetry.

Eliot's failure to resolve the tension between the form and content of poetry threatens the validity of his poetic ontology. Consider, for example, the following statement on tradition and appreciation:

...a poet's significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for comparison and contrast, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical criticism.<sup>39</sup>

There can of course be no serious critical argument against relating individual works of art to a historic and aesthetic totality but first the particular aesthetic value of an individual work of art must be demonstrated; otherwise it does not matter what works of art form the basis of an 'ideal order'. But the determination of value can only proceed from the development of a literary hermeneutic otherwise the constitution of an 'ideal order' becomes a function of personal predilection. For Eliot, however, the development of a hermeneutic would destroy the very foundations of his aesthetics because sensory experience is not translatable into a critical language or method--it is an end in itself. Herein lies the basic problem in Eliot, for how can the lack of a theory of value be reconciled with the prescriptions for the "objective" forms of literature?

But the weaknesses of Eliot's aesthetics become strengths

when viewed from the perspective of bourgeois ideology. For while suggesting how poetry can be rationalized through critical practice, Eliot's sensibility maintains the illusion of the inalienability of bourgeois individualism as the natural form of subjectivity. Ultimately the fragile balance between subjectivity and objectivity becomes hypostasised into an ontological tension where subjectivity is identified with the mystery of human nature and objectivity with the empiricism of facts. Literary criticism is thus raised to the status of a science that is justified on religious grounds. Eliot writes:

Comparison and analysis...are the chief tools of the critic. It is obvious indeed that they are tools, to be handled with care, and not employed in an inquiry into the number of times giraffes are mentioned in the English novel. They are not used with conspicuous success by many contemporary writers. You must know what to compare and what to analyse...Comparison and analysis need only the cadavers on the table; but interpretation is always producing parts of the body from its pockets, and fixing them in place. And any book any essay, any note in Notes and Queries, which produces a fact even of the lowest order about a work of art is a better piece of work than nine-tenths of the most pretentious journalism, in journals or in books.<sup>40</sup>

Eliot may complain about the irrelevance of giraffes to literary criticism but he does not suggest any concrete correctives: what are the evaluative principles that distinguish 'facts even of the lowest order' from irrelevant facts? Eliot's appeal to good taste is a poor substitute for a formulation of critical restraints, because if a 'creation, a work of art, is autotelic', then any fact is legitimate for critical scholarship.

Eliot's statement that criticism is the 'elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste' is therefore an ambiguous legacy for the New Critics because although 'elucidation' can be transformed into a theory of explication, nothing can be done with the problem of taste. Instead the New Critics must consult the practical literary psychology of I.A. Richards whose derivative behaviourism provides a methodological complement to positivistic explication and therefore creates the possibility of a critical system.

### III. THE METHODOLOGICAL SOLUTION: I.A.RICHARDS AND THE POSITIVIST CRITIQUE

In order to appreciate the function of I. A. Richards's work in the development of New Critical theory, it must first be recognized that he is only a methodological and not a substantive complement to Eliot. It is not what Richards has to say about literature that counts but how he says it. George Watson has pointed out that it would be a mistake to assume that Richards and Eliot shared the same intellectual tradition:

The most elementary mistake one could make about the criticism of I. A. Richards--it is also one of the commonest--is to suppose that he pioneered a school of twentieth-century criticism of which Eliot is a member. The date alone forbids such a notion: Eliot is the older man by five years, and his first, and best, critical work, The Sacred Wood (1920), appeared before Richards had published at all. Richards is simply the most influential theorist of the earlier century as Eliot is the most influential of the descriptive critics; and, as so often, practice anticipates theory.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, Richards's substantive critical interests--communication, evaluation, psychology--threaten the self-referentiality of New Critical poetics and are therefore conspicuously negated.

To clarify the particular needs that New Criticism sought to gratify in Richards it would be helpful to consider John Crowe Ransom's critique of Eliot in The New Criticism. Ransom begins by stating his fundamental sympathy with Eliot's critico-aesthetic project:

One of the best things in his influence has been his habit of considering aesthetic effect as

independent of religious effect, or moral, or political and social; as an end that is beyond and not co-ordinate with these.<sup>2</sup>

Ransom goes on to argue that Eliot with his autotelic view of literature not only provides the basis of New Criticism but endows it with historical legitimacy:

It is likely that we have had no better critic than Eliot. And if Eliot is one of the most important sources of a new criticism, it is because the new criticism is in part the recovery of old criticism.<sup>3</sup>

However, in spite of his sympathies for Eliot, in particular for his suggestions for objectifying the text (the 'objective correlative') and for creating a literary 'tradition' as a context for that objectification, Ransom finds two essential weaknesses in Eliot. The first concerns what Ransom calls Eliot's 'theoretical innocence':

There is in Eliot an immediate critical sense which is expert and infallible, but it consists with a theoretical innocence. Behind it is no great philosophical habit, nor philosophical will, to push it through to definition.<sup>4</sup>

Ransom feels that Eliot's worth as a critic comes from his intuitive grasp of literature but, he argues, this leads to inconsistency and ultimately to a kind of superficiality. What Eliot lacks is a systematic critical theory that could validate his perceptions by extending them into a coherent aesthetic totality. As an example Ransom cites the conflict in Eliot's writings between tradition and innovation:

I think Eliot is using the poet, under a pretty metaphor of a rather theoretical or Hegelian kind, not to make his poem too new; if he will conform closely with the tradition, the tradition in turn

will condescend to conform a little with him. What is not suggested to the poet is that he might use his own head and make an aesthetic judgment of the new thing he is doing.<sup>5</sup>

The second weakness that Ransom finds in Eliot in his elitism, his unwillingness to deal with the practical problems of criticism:

Eliot is one of the foci of a distinguished group of literary men with whose sentiments I have always had complete sympathy: I am convinced of their rightness, but not of what I should call their righteousness; for they do not propose to have commerce with the world.<sup>6</sup>

This is a revealing statement for Ransom since it reveals his preoccupations with the "democratization" of criticism as a contradictory paradigm which accepts the substance of Eliot's negation of contemporary socio-aesthetic values but rejects the form by which they are negated. In other words, Ransom recognizes the potential for "commodification"\* as mass manipulation in Eliot's criticism although Eliot constantly thwarts the potential by appealing to an innate theory of intuition and thus makes 'sensibility' unattainable by experience. Further, and correctly, Ransom feels that the contradiction between 'rightness' and 'righteousness' threatens Eliot's "system" with a practical nihilism so that his achievements--the 'objective correlative' and his hermeticist aesthetics--are rendered impotent. Ransom writes:

"Feelings" and "emotions" are the jargon of poetic theory with the new critics, and with the best ones

\*I use the term "commodification" to denote the process by which an object of utility (e.g. literature) is transformed into an object of exchange, a commodity. For a fuller discussion see previous chapter.



it is Eliot's usage which provides the sanction. The half communication that results is painful to the humble reader and suggests that there is something esoteric in the vocation of criticism, and that Eliot is initiated but the humble reader is not.<sup>7</sup>

In effect, the unproblematical importation of Eliot into New Critical theory is in practice a threat to its ideological efficacy. Ransom's solution is characteristic of New Criticism: rather than questioning Eliot's mystical idealism, he merely superimposes a particularly practical terminology on that mysticism:

One of the contributions of this argument [emotions and feelings] to theory is the aesthetic truth that the emotion we have for the artistic object cannot be the same as the emotion we might have had for the natural or original object; we have often received that truth through the doctrine of "psychic distance", or of artistic "detachment", or even of art as "imitation". But in what lies the difference in the emotions? And what is a "transmuted" emotion? I think it is impossible to talk clearly about these matters until we drop the vocabulary of emotions and talk about the respective cognitive objects, or the cognitive situations which identify them.<sup>8</sup>

Ransom's solution, the methodological dualism of 'logical structure' and 'irrelevant texture', need not concern us here. What is important is Ransom's desire for a neutral objectivist language that is not in any serious sense critical or interpretative; it is not intended to question the mystical substance of Eliot's 'sensibility' but merely to endow it with a descriptive aura.

Ransom simply assumes a materiality in language that can transcend the insubstantiality of conceptualization and that this is the historical lesson of science:

But there is a difference between saying "hypothesis" and saying "revelation". Probably the better thing we have gained from our progress in science has not some substantive or material benefit, but a methodological one. We know how we are thinking when we think; we can think critically, self-consciously, and with the intent not to deceive others.<sup>9</sup>

Of course if science always operated on this principle it could not have advanced beyond its initial premisses since under Ransom's definition truth is identified with method.

Max Horkheimer has observed a similar process among positivist philosophers who claim that

their own insights are scientific, holding that their own cognition of science is based upon the observation of science; that is, they claim that they treat science in the same way as science treats its own objects by experimentally verifiable observation. But the crucial question is: How is it possible to determine what justly may be called science and truth, if the determination itself presupposes the methods of achieving scientific truth? The same vicious circle is involved in any justification of scientific method by the observation of science: How is the principle of observation itself to be justified? When a justification is requested, when someone asks why observation is the proper guarantee of truth, the positivists simply appeal to observation again. But their eyes are closed. Instead of interrupting the machine-like functioning of research, the mechanisms of fact-finding, verification, classification et cetera, and reflecting on their meaning and relation to truth, the positivists reiterate that science proceeds by observation and describe circumstantially how it functions.<sup>10</sup>

It is precisely the deception that Horkheimer notices in positivist philosophy that is lacking in Eliot, and Ransom clearly realizes that if New Criticism is to become an ideologically persuasive movement it must adopt a methodology

that is ontologically appropriate to literary criticism without departing from the modern forms of mass manipulation that had been successfully effected in social science and philosophy.

But where could Ransom discover a solution to this dilemma? Although, as I have earlier suggested, there are empiricist underpinnings in the criticism of Arnold and Eliot, they are merely underpinnings and not conscious informing principles. When Ransom is forced to consult I. A. Richards it is with some misgiving, since in The World's Body (1938) he had been content to reject Richards as a psychologist:

[Richards]...is not the man to let...[meaning] reside in the object experienced, he has to have the complexity in the head of the subject experiencing; that is, it is not constitutional to nature but to mind. This is arbitrary and unnatural; it is a psychologism.<sup>11</sup>

Essentially this critique remains unmodified but Ransom is now able to recognize that the methodological paucity of the modernist criticism with which he sympathizes requires that a distinction be made between the formal method of Richards's psychologism and the experiential content of that psychologism. However, as the almost total absence of critical writing clearly demonstrates, Richards remains the skeleton in the New Critical closet. George Watson has succinctly commented on this historical irony:

Richards's claim to have pioneered the Anglo-American New Criticism of the thirties and forties is unassailable. He provided the theoretical

foundations on which the technique of verbal analysis was built. The fact, on the whole, has proved an embarrassment to the New Critics; Richards's theories are appallingly vulnerable, and have been under expert fire from philosophers and psychologists for many years; and further, his own books since the twenties have grown increasingly eccentric. He is one of those unfortunate thinkers whose later works tend to discredit not only themselves and their author, but earlier books as well.<sup>12</sup>

Thus since Richards's importance for the New Critics is of a highly particularized kind I will primarily confine my discussion to Ransom's critique of Richards in The New Criticism. However before proceeding to this critique a brief outline of Richards's aesthetics will be necessary.

Richards as a psychologist premisses his aesthetics on the basis that aesthetic experience is continuous with other human experiences. This continuity, Richards argues, consists in the fact that all human experience is the striving to satisfy impulses through economical organization. Richards maintains that impulses are activated by stimuli which determine the form of the experience. Aesthetic or poetic experience is thus defined by the nature of their stimuli and is distinguished from mass forms of communication by the evaluative category of 'stock responses'. Art, for Richards, is a concentrated form of action; it cannot be satisfied with the unproblematical presentation of events but must formally cohere to social experience. This is the basis of Richards's theory of organic unity in poetry where the organization of impulses can be most fully realized. It is a short step to go

from the mind of the reader (Principles of Literary Criticism) to the poem as stimulus (Practical Criticism) which is in turn broken down into its component parts--'tenor', 'vehicle', 'irony', etc. as the formal categories of verbal analysis. In one way Richards's method is radically formistic in Stephen Pepper's sense of normative conformity;<sup>13</sup> that is, the method contains no specific principles for challenging the materiality of the text. This is a consequence of a behaviouristic model where the dualism of stimulus and response effectively exiles any genuinely evaluative criteria: there is no mechanism within the model for determining the genesis of response, it is locked into the circle of stimulus. This difficulty is further exacerbated in "traditional" literary criticism where a theory of literary creativity is assumed to be the same as a theory of literary creation. In other words, lacking a theory of literary forms, Richards and the New Critics are unable to discover any object for criticism other than methodology.

Consider then Ransom's critique of Richards. He begins by accepting the importance of Richards in the development of New Criticism and in a footnote apologises for his earlier abuse of him:

I used to abuse Mr. Richards as a critic walking in philosophical darkness, and to want to dismiss him. For example, I have written too crudely about him in one of the essays in The World's Body, though I do not think that substantially I shall recant from my argument there. But a great many young graduate and even undergraduate thinkers with whom I have had dealings have defended him,

and let me know they were his men. I concluded that there were merits in Richards I had not allowed for, and I have been led to make a more thorough appraisal. I remark now that I think he has done infinitely more good than harm.<sup>14</sup>

From this note we can expect three motifs in Ransom's essay:

(1) a rejection of Richards's psychologism because it contradicts the autotelic theory of literature; (2) a validification of Richards's methodology because it creates the possibility of practically discussing literature while affirming a literary ontology; and (3) a prolegomenous outline of New Critical theory as a synthesis of positivist method and commodified aestheticism.

We can best understand Ransom's critique by considering his analogy of poetry with the democratic state:

A poem is a democratic state, hoping not to be completely ineffective, not to fail ingloriously in the business of a state, by reason of the constitutional scruple through which it restrains itself faithfully from a really imperious degree of organization. It wants its citizens to retain their personalities and enjoy their natural interests. But a scientific discourse is a totalitarian state. Its members are not regarded as citizens, and have not inalienable rights to activities of their own, but are only functions defined according as the state may need them to contribute to its effectiveness.<sup>15</sup>

Ransom considers that poetry is primarily cognitive in function in the same sense that the democratic state is primarily economic in function. Freedom is therefore contingent on the efficiency of the organizational structure, on the ability of knowledge and capital to satisfy the requirements of ontological necessity. The supra-rationality of scientific

discourse, on the other hand, is totalitarian since the ontological necessities can never be satisfied. However Ransom's dualism is illusory since the economic system has no concerns with human freedom but only with economic freedom; that is, citizens only 'retain their personalities and enjoy their natural interests' if they are expressed through economic categories. This is equally true of knowledge in poetry, at least as far as Ransom defines it, because poetic freedom or 'local texture' is bound by the needs of reified knowledge. Further, just as the distinction between social democracy and totalitarianism is often more formal than substantive the same can be said of Ransom's poetics and positivist science which function mutually rather than antagonistically.

In contrast, Richards's emphasis on experience as the essence of poetry sounds very much like anarchism. Ransom writes:

...when we analyse poetry in cognitive terms we allow, incidentally, for all appropriate emotions and attitudes; that is, for all that can find their excuse, or their chance, in the text. But in this procedure we are not tempted to explore the fantastic possibilities that arise once we set up the notion of emotions and attitudes as independent entities. Nor do we have to skip back and forth between "objective" and "subjective" considerations, a very embarrassing policy and especially mortal to the objective side of analysis.<sup>16</sup>

Whereas Richards's psychologism tends towards subjectivism, so that 'emotions and attitudes' appear as 'independent entities', Ransom's cognitive objectivism tends to banish subjectivity altogether from literary criticism. His highly

moralistic language--'allow', 'embarrassing', 'mortal'-- suggests his repressive fear of human feelings since if they were taken seriously they would threaten his whole critical project, the 'objective side of analysis'.

There is of course a serious weakness in Richards's reduction of poetics to affectivist experience but Ransom seems to think that the only critical choices are between poetry as knowledge and poetry as experience. He cannot see that criticism must construct a historical dialectic that unites these polarities. His revealing analogy of poetry as the democratic state in part explains why this construction remains beyond his critical vision since he wants poetry, in a crudely naturalistic fashion, to conform to the commodified structure of capitalism.

Let us now turn to the question of Richards's method, his true worth as far as Ransom is concerned. Ransom observes that Richards fuses 'nominalism', the view that language refers to the objective world, and 'positivism', the belief in the perfectability of science. This fusion is Richards's major contribution to literary criticism. Ransom writes:

Nominalism and positivism are strange-looking yokefellows for undertaking knowledge, but it must be said that they work very well together. It may be that the philosopher as positivist will have to make some concessions as to the validity of referents not generally attended to in the sciences, and on the other hand that as a nominalist he will have to entertain some misgivings as to



the pure scientific referents. Between them, the two biases do at least offer a dramatic setting for a furious effort towards bigger and better knowledges. I believe they suit a sort of pioneering, start-at-the-bottom Americanism, and are an excellent strategy for us, as I idealize our national temper and prospects of knowledge. The thinker, or the group of thinkers, has all the room in the world to grow. But there is evidence for believing that honest nominalist-positivists in the course of their careers will come to have more commerce with metaphysics than they had contemplated.<sup>17</sup>

In undiluted form Ransom states the essence of New Criticism as analogous to American expansionism. His economic language reveals the form that he hopes criticism will take: that is, metaphysics ought to be commodified in a specifically national way. Criticism must be conceived as a new product that desperately needs sophisticated marketing procedures to ensure its success in American society. Ransom, in spite of his objections to Richards's psychologism, feels that the latter's nominalist-positivism is precisely the methodology that can transform New Criticism into a competitive commodity in the American academic market.

Regarding Richards's Practical Criticism Ransom makes the following comment:

In criticizing the students' ability to read the meaning of the poetry, Richards reveals himself as an astute reader. He looks much more closely at the objective poem than his theories require him to do. His most incontestable contribution to poetic discussion, in my opinion, is in developing the ideal or exemplary readings, and in provoking such readings from other scholars. Rather qualified in comparison would be the value of his critical

discussions; they have been extremely provocative in the rise of a new criticism, but this has often been compromised by what I regard as his errors.<sup>18</sup>

The determinate concept in this passage is that Richards was 'provocative in the rise of a new criticism'; that is, Richards's indirect value for Ransom lies in his errors that are a function not of method but of aesthetic principles. By analysing Richards's basic errors of metaphor, tragedy and irony, Ransom hopes to suggest a positive direction for a new criticism.

Richards discusses the concept of metaphor in terms of 'tenor' and 'vehicle' which give metaphor the character of unity. Tenor is the underlying context upon which is superimposed 'foreign content', the vehicle. Thus metaphor is a 'semi-surreptitious method by which a greater variety of elements can be wrought into the fabric of the poetic experience'.<sup>19</sup> But Ransom's dualism cannot accept Richards's monistic unity although he does accept the terminological validity of 'tenor' and 'vehicle'. Ransom therefore proposes the following correction:

I...feel disposed...to argue for a logical propriety, a specific "point of analogy" as the occasion for any given metaphor; and then for brilliance and importance in the body of the vehicle in its own right. But it seems to me scarcely open to question that the vehicle must realize itself independently and go beyond its occasion....In doing this the vehicle becomes irrelevant to the structure of the argument, and asserts the poetic undertaking to incorporate local texture.<sup>20</sup>

Ransom wants to subsume all poetic particularities to his dualistic totality in which the alienation of the subject (vehicle) from the object (tenor) is considered 'scarcely open to question'. Or, what amounts to the same thing, the freedom of the subject to experience is sacrosanct and therefore resists concrete interpretation, whether that be psychological or cognitive. Only the object, because it is analogous with the reified world of commodities, can be subjected to semantic criteria.

Richards's tragic theory is, by and large, a translation of Aristotlean katharsis into behaviouristic psychology; that is, the conflict of pity and terror constitute an 'ordered single response'. In contrast, Ransom simply makes tragic theory an aspect of his poetics:

The tragic effect is a testimonial to the homely and reactionary honesty of poetic cognition. But its accomplishment does not depend upon its having extended, or contracted, or modified the peculiar poetic technique, which consists in the provision of texture.<sup>21</sup>

Tragedy is simply reduced to an unproblematical logical structure that differs from other poetic discourse only by virtue of its negativity. Ransom's theory of tragedy, it must be conceded, is a weak link in his poetics. But it is logically consistent with his cognitive dualism which makes no allowances for the fundamental distinctions between genres.

Finally there is the question of irony, perhaps Richards's most influential concept. Richards defines poetic irony as

the extraordinary heterogeneity of the distinguishable impulses. But they are more than heterogeneous, they are opposed. They are such that in ordinary, non-poetic, non-imaginative experience, one or other set would be suppressed to give as it might appear freer development to the others.<sup>22</sup>

It is because irony applies to a limited body of literature that Ransom is sceptical of its value as a critical principle. Ransom argues that Richards has failed to distinguish between irony and texture: the former is appropriate to tragedy where 'the artist works over the practical failures in human life, and the ambiguous anticlimactic half-successes' and the latter refers to art that 'celebrates the practical successes as a matter of course and not the failures'.<sup>23</sup> More particularly, Ransom objects to Richards's identification of the object (poetic meaning) with the subject (irony) which assumes an experiential totality that confronts social reality instead of structurally confirming that reality. Ransom writes:

For here is a primary anomaly about a work of art that reflects a mortifying law in our economy: in art we can experience our situation more intimately and sensitively, but the condition is to understand that it is not the real but only the imaginal situation, and that the real one has passed. In life we are gross and practical, and it disparages us as much as it pleases us that in art we may be delicate and sensitive.<sup>24</sup>

Ransom presents his social and political attitudes without equivocation and he does not want art to threaten them. He regards the methodology of science as ontologically descriptive and therefore faults Richards's psychologism for confusing art with life. Ransom certainly does not see that beneath the delicacy and sensitivity which he attributes to

art lies the 'gross and practical' as expressed in his alienated critical practice. The illusion in which he participates is that the 'mortifying flaw of our economy' separates art from life, whereas the historical truth is that all human activities--artistic and practical--are determined by the iron law of reified commodities.

#### IV. NEW CRITICAL THEORY: THE ETHOS OF LITERARY CONSUMERISM

##### I

One of the most fundamental mistakes that can be made about the New Criticism is to assume that its theoretical principles of practice are consistent throughout the movement. Or, to pose the problem differently, it is a mistake to assume that New Criticism possesses an unequivocal leader in the person of John Crowe Ransom. This is the critical error not only of the supporters of New Criticism such as John Stewart<sup>1</sup> but also of its critics of which John Fekete is the most recent example.<sup>2</sup> This assumption leads to two misrepresentations of the structure of New Criticism: it gives New Criticism an excessively regionalistic character by tracing the origins of Ransom's thought to the obscurantist Fugitive and Agrarian movements; and it exaggerates the theoretical substance of Ransom's writings. What is crucial to recognize is the passivity of New Criticism in the determination of theory: New Criticism is essentially a reflection of the commodified structure of capitalism and this structure must be distinguished from the ambitious initiative shown by particular New Critics who activate a passivity but do not "create" a theory. Furthermore it is this feature that effectively subverts a critical consciousness in critical practice so that by the late fifties and early sixties most academic literary critics have no awareness of their critical presumptions. On the contrary, critics define their attitudes

their own mechanistic creative practice with the principles of criticism; (2) the partial negation of the poeticist model in favour of a more purely critical model as exemplified by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren; and (3) the final transcendence of the poeticist model and the development of a rigidly academic praxis as exemplified by W. K. Wimsatt.

## II

The two key statements of the first dialectical moment are most certainly Ransom's final essay in The New Criticism, "Wanted: An Ontological Critic" and Tate's essay, "Tension in Poetry". In accepting that these essays comprise the first moment of New Criticism it should be recognized that this is not a chronological construction but rather a logico-historical structure; that is, the alliance between Ransom and Tate has its origins in the Fugitive movement and in their mutual interest on the creative demands on the modern artist which has a directly personal meaning for them.

In "Wanted: An Ontological Critic" Ransom wants to identify two aspects of his own poetics with critical theory: his dualistic ontology of poetry--his well known distinction between a 'loose logical structure' and a 'good deal of local texture'--and his view that poetry avails to the reader a particularized order of knowledge. Ransom writes:

I suggest that the differentia of poetry as discourse is an ontological one. It treats an order of existence a grade of objectivity, which

cannot be treated in scientific discourse....Poetry intends to recover the denser and more 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.<sup>3</sup>

The task of criticism is therefore seen as the demonstration of this ontological truth. But rather than examining the truth content of this ontology with reference to the functional dynamic of literature in Western culture Ransom is content to rest his argument on the difference between art and science where the latter is conceived merely as an alternative cognitive system.

Ransom distinguishes between the scientific symbol and the aesthetic icon as follows:

The sign which science employs is a mere sign, or "symbol", that is, an object having no other character--for the purpose of discourse at least--than that of referring to another object which is its semantical object. For example, symbols are algebraic characters; or words used technically, as defined in the dictionary, or defined for the purpose of a given discourse in the discourse itself. But the aesthetic signs are "icons" or images. As signs they have semantical objects, or refer to objects, but as iconic signs they also resemble or imitate these objects.<sup>4</sup>

But there is a difference between knowledge about unmediated nature, the sphere of science, and knowledge about humanly mediated nature, the sphere of the humanities and social sciences. In other words, it is not merely what objects signify or represent but also how they are materially determined and the degree to which their existence is effected by historical processes. The parallel of aesthetic and scientific discourse



is therefore artificial and must be considered as an ideological rationalization to justify the critical reification of literature, to make the distinction between art and technology substantive rather than functional.

Having established the concreteness of the iconic art object as opposed to the abstract symbolic scientific object, Ransom then proceeds to examine the underlying principle that vitalizes the concrete icon, namely metre. Commenting on traditional poetics as being overly particularized Ransom writes:

If the unsatisfactoriness of poetic theory, which strikes us so painfully, is due to the absence from it of radical philosophical generalities, the fault must begin really with its failure to account for the most elementary and immediate aspect that formal poetry wears: its metrical form. The convention of the metrical form is thought to be as old as the art itself. Perhaps it is the art itself. I suggest that the metre-and-meaning process is the organic act of poetry, and involves all its important characters.<sup>5</sup>

Although it can be argued that the metrical form is the means by which the sensuous content of poetry is achieved (although hardly as important as the experiential material of poetry) it cannot be argued that the metre is the sensuous content as Ransom would have us believe. However I do not want to argue that the substitution of metrical analysis for an analysis of socially meaningful subjectivity is simply a critical error for Ransom. Rather it seems to me to suggest Ransom's inability for (or fear of) serious introspection that is the condition not only of the modernist angst which erects rigid character armour to protect a fragile subjectivity but also of a reified shift in critical

perspective where the analysis of poetry is not considered from the point of view of a generalized culture but instead from the point of view of academic scholarship and class room praxis. In other words it is not merely the empirical content of Ransom's critical theory that is at issue but also the implicit use for which that content is intended. In fact it becomes fairly clear that Ransom's methodology is not intended as a basis for critically discussing the cultural meaning of poetry but is rather intended to oppose such a reading, to make poetry merely a vehicle for scholarship.

Having established that the essence of poetry is the relationship between metre and meaning Ransom then proceeds to construct a four-level grid to demonstrate the interaction between formal necessity (determinate sound-structure [DS] and determinate meaning [DM]) and creative freedom (indeterminate sound-structure [IS] and indeterminate meaning [IM]). With absolute candour Ransom argues that criticism is the delineation of these elements:

I cannot but think that the distinction of these elements, and especially of DM and IM, is the vocation par excellence of criticism. It is more technical than some other exercises that go as criticism, but more informed. It brings the criticism to somewhat the same level of professional competence as that of discussions sometimes accorded to paintings, and that which musicians accord to music; which means I think, an elevation of our normal critical standard.<sup>6</sup> (emphasis mine)

In this statement Ransom's bias stands out clearly: he is more interested in the relationship of his grid to 'professional competence' than in its capacity to illuminate the affective

power of poetry.

However, although Ransom insists on a dualistic ontology as a basis of literary criticism he is obliged in critical practice to pay more attention to the indeterminate elements of poetry, the texture which constantly co-opt the determinate elements, the logical structure. By way of admission he writes:

It is not telling the whole truth to say that Shakespeare and other accomplished poets resort to their variations because the determinate meaning has forced them into it. The poet likes variations regardless of the meanings, finding them essential in the capacity of a sound-texture to go with the sound-structure.<sup>7</sup>

Thus although the creative process may be initiated by certain logical necessities the ultimate meaning of poetry must be discovered in the complexity of the total structure, and it becomes the task of the critic to attend to the particular details of language, its metre and euphony, that is the basis of that complexity.

Ransom is curiously unaffected by this apparent contradiction in his system so that finally the only structure that can be attributed to poetry is heterogeneity which is no structure at all:

A wonderful "fitness", harmony, or propriety, even an enduring stability, seems to obtain in the combination of the semantic property and the phonetic property into a fine poetic phrase. It is something we all feel, and I believe it is the fact we need to account for here. But what is the law of its corporate existence? The law is an ontological one: the two properties shall not be identical, or like, homogeneous; they shall be other, unlike, and heterogeneous. It is the law of

the actual world everywhere; all sorts of actual things are composed on this principle.<sup>8</sup>

But if the cognitive content of poetry cannot be isolated, or if its relationships to the texture cannot be critically demonstrated how is it possible to talk of meaning at all? Ransom wants poetry to possess an organic unity but he does not want to commit himself to determining the informing principles of that unity except in the most abstract sense ('It is the law of the actual world everywhere'). And since the concrete informing principles are not available for critical dialogue, criticism can only describe the poetic surface. Poetry is reduced to the word or the phrase and criticism to statistics. Ransom's ontological argument is ultimately devoid of substance; it is unable to concretely define the poetic experience and therefore becomes a convenient rationale for avoiding the crucial issues of genesis and function that are both aesthetic and social and must be examined in a genuine poetics. It is surely a strange tactic to appeal to our innate perceptions to validate a critical theory when the theory is supposed to explain those perceptions.

In "Tension in Poetry" Allan Tate wishes to demonstrate a similar idea of unity where good poetry expresses a dynamic "tension" between the denotation ('extension') and connotation ('intension'). As with Ransom, the task of the critic is to 'examine and evaluate' the whole poem which is 'the "result" of a configuration of meaning'.<sup>9</sup> But just as Ransom cannot critically practice his theory but must expect his readers to merely accept his ontological assumptions so Tate, who having

defined his theory of poetic tension, then proceeds to analyse the material text without recourse to its subjective structural principles.

A major difference between Ransom and Tate is that the latter never fully subverts his reactionary political principles to an academic neutrality. For example, he is quite willing to subsume all political and social poetry with which he does not sympathize under the rubric of romantic 'sentimentality'. Discussing Edna Millay's poem "Justice Denied in Massachusetts" Tate writes:

Miss Millay's poem was admired when it first appeared ten years ago, and it is no doubt still admired, by persons to whom it communicates certain feelings about social justice, by persons for whom the lines are the occasions of feelings shared by them and the poet. But if you do not share those feelings, as I happen not to share them in the images of desicated nature, the lines and even the entire poem are impenetrably obscure.<sup>10</sup>

Of course there is nothing obscure about the poem; it is very direct in its condemnation of the Sacco and Vanzetti execution but it provides a convenient point of departure for the kind of aestheticized poetry that Tate prefers and which validates his poetics, namely the Metaphysical poets at the denotative or extensive pole and the Symbolist poets at the connotative or intensive pole.

For Tate what distinguishes this poetic grid from the poetry of 'sentimentality' (a counter grid extending from romanticist display of feeling to the hard poetry of direct

communication) is not primarily a structural unity, which of course can be just as easily discovered in Shelley's political philosophy as in Donne's aestheticism, but in the fact that a 'good poem' requires no recourse to non-poetic social experience because its value is contained by the intensive and extensive manipulations of language. Consider, for example, the following statement on the importance of the poet's philosophy:

For, in the long run, whatever the poet's 'philosophy', however wide may be the extension of his meaning--like Milton's Ptolemaic universe in which he didn't believe--by his language you shall know him; the quality of his language is the valid limit of what he has to say.<sup>11</sup>

But how can Paradise Lost be read seriously without paying attention to Milton's philosophy or is it to be taken as one long lyrical poem? Or, when Tate says that the 'meaning of poetry is its "tension"' is he merely talking about experience? In any case the difference between meaning and experience remains beyond Tate's critical grasp. For example, when he says that the meaning of "To His Coy Mistress" is the 'conflict of sensuality and asceticism' Tate is satisfied to conclude his discussion of the poem on that note. But what does that conflict mean? How does that conflict arise? Is there a conflict at all or are sensuality and asceticism reciprocal aspects of a larger dilemma? All these questions need to be considered but Tate, like Ransom, accepts the empiricism of the self-evident fact and feels no need to develop a literary hermeneutic:

introspection and critical practice are automatically assumed to be antagonistic activities.

The importance of Ransom and Tate is that they initiated the New Critical project, particularly with their emphasis on poetic language. But their experience as poets is a constant threat to the project because, like Eliot, they cannot refrain from appealing to an innate sense of poetic value which is most clearly expressed in their own poetry. Their critical language is often overly stylized and their critical theory is too often based in their own practice of poetic composition. It is the task of Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks to distance critical theory from theories of creative imagination and to bring it more into line with the needs of academic scholarship and class-room practice.

### III

Robert Penn Warren is the pivotal figure in the development of New Criticism; on the one hand he, like Ransom and Tate, was an accomplished writer quite apart from his literary criticism, while on the other hand he co-authored many literary studies with Cleanth Brooks that became required reading for literature courses across the continent. It becomes clear that Warren represents the passing of a particular type, the poet-critic, in the development of New Criticism in favour of a new character type, the scholar-critic. It has to be understood at this point that much of the creditability of New Criticism

derives from the fact that its leaders, Ransom and Tate, had practical experience as poets and could therefore speak from a position of authority. However once this movement had been successful in its initial trajectory, this authoritarian stance blocks the academic potential of New Criticism and must be negated. Robert Penn Warren must therefore be seen to represent the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity that characterizes the dynamic of New Criticism.

This dialectical movement is perhaps most clearly expressed in Warren's essay, "Pure and Impure Poetry" published in 1942. At one level, this essay prefigures Tate's theory of tension but at the same time Warren is more "democratic" than Tate since he repudiates 'mandarin detachment as the artist's ideal'. Consider Warren's distinction between pure and impure poetry. The pure poem, Warren writes,

tries to be pure by excluding, more or less rigidly, certain elements which might qualify or contradict its original impulse. In other words, the pure poems want to be, and desperately, all of a piece.<sup>12</sup>

The pure poem is the idealized poem where the ideals of the poet are presented unproblematically in the style of a manifesto, but Warren argues that there are hardly any great pure poems because poetry always requires some sort of reality principle, some sort of 'impurity' in order to make the purity humanly meaningful. Thus the distinction between pure and impure poetry is structural because the definition of purity will vary with individual poets and it is the task of great poetry to devise some



sort of balance between these poles.

Thus the real purpose of Warren's pure-impure formulation is to suggest a critical methodology for approaching poetic structure. Consider therefore Warren's definition of poetic structure:

Can we make generalizations about the nature of poetic structure? First, it involves resistances at various levels. There is the tension between the rhythm of the poem and the rhythm of speech (a tension which is very low at the extreme of free verse and at the extreme of verse such as that of "Ulalume", which verges towards a walloping doggerel); between the formality of the rhythm and the informality of the language: between the particular and the general, the concrete and the abstract; between the elements of even the simplest metaphor; between the beautiful and the ugly; between ideas; between the elements involved in irony; between prosaisms and poeticisms.

This list is not intended to be exhaustive; it is intended to be merely suggestive. But it may be taken to imply that the poet is like the jujitsu expert; he wins by utilizing the resistance of his opponent--the materials of the poem. In other words, a poem, to be good, has to earn itself. It is a motion towards a point of rest, but if it is not a resisted motion, it is a motion of no consequence. For example, a poem which depends on stock materials and stock responses is simply a toboggan slide, or a fall through space. And the good poem must, in some way, involve the resistances; it must carry something of the context of its own creation; it must come to terms with Mercurio.<sup>13</sup>

The essential aspect of Warren's theory of structure, even if he does not state it emphatically, is that poetry retains 'something of the context of its own creation'. That is, he is not arguing, as does Ransom, that poets try to reconstitute the world or to comment on that world from the sanctity of their subjectivity. On the contrary, he is arguing that poetry can

never isolate itself from social experience and that by implication the 'greatness of a poet depends on the extent of the area of experience which he can master poetically'.<sup>14</sup>

However in order to develop a serious social aesthetics it must first be established what kind of historical dynamic is implicit in social experience and what kind of mediations exist between social structure and literary forms. For Warren social forms (the impurities of poetry) are imported into poetry to keep the purity honest but in this dramatic process the tensions that exist in social experience are transcended in art; or, as Warren says, the poetic structure is a 'dramatic structure, a movement through action towards rest, through complication towards simplicity of effect'.<sup>15</sup> Thus although poetry is in this sense socially determined it is neither evaluative nor interpretive but only mimetic in the naturalist sense of representation. Social experience becomes fodder for poetry and in the act of its digestion social experience loses its contradictions and poetry becomes an ideological institution for affirming capitalist social reality.

Apart from developing a more social theory of literary creation Warren is also suggesting a method for reading poetry that stresses balance. By way of illustration let me quote Warren's analysis of the first stanza of Landor's poem, "Rose Aylmer":

The actual quality of the first stanza is hard, not soft. It is a chiseled stanza, in which formality is insisted upon. We may observe the balance of the first half and the second half of the third line,

which recapitulates the structure of the first two lines; the balance of the two parts of the last line, though here the balance is merely rhythmical and not a sense of balance as in the preceding instances; the binders of discrete alliteration, repetition, and assonance. The stanza is built up, as it were, of units which are firmly defined and sharply separated, phrase by phrase, line by line. We have the formal control of the soft subject, ritual not surrender.<sup>16</sup>

This passage illustrates the kind of criticism that was to become typical in future New Critical practice and it reveals the true meaning of Warren's idea of impurity; that is, social becomes synonymous with commodified. Throughout this passage no mention is made of the ideational or experiential content of the poem but only of formal qualities. Warren is continually referring to 'balance' and 'formality' which are expressed through the technical devices of the poem. At no point is any attempt made which might suggest why the poem is socially meaningful or that the poet has a serious subjective motivation for writing the poem. There is of course a validity in understanding the technical process of the poem but in isolation from its historical genesis and creative purpose such an analysis becomes critically meaningless; it is unable to explain the affective power of the poem and hence the historical value of our reading experience. The real function of Warren's method is therefore to provide a means of rationalizing our poetic experience for the purpose of academic production (or reproduction) of literary texts; the method is not intended to interpret our reading experience since its objectivist bias erects an insurmountable

barrier between the reader's social subjectivity and the material text.

These implications are explored more fully in Cleanth Brooks' essay, "the Formalist Critic", perhaps the clearest statement of the principles of New Critical practice. Philip Rahv has correctly called Brooks the 'model New Critic', a 'strict adherent of methodological purity'.<sup>17</sup> In fact Brooks' is central to the initial phase of New Criticism; he was a student of Ransom; he popularized the critical use Richards; he collaborated with both Warren and W. K. Wimsatt on important New Critical texts; and in his own right wrote perhaps the most important New Critical studies of poetry, namely Modern Poetry and the Tradition and The Well-wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry. In terms of the second moment of New Criticism he epitomizes a radically new type of critic, the academic scholar whose critical concerns are unmediated by creative impulses: he is the first professional.

"The Formalist Critic" is basically a manifesto for New Criticism and Brooks begins by stating 'some articles of faith':

That literary criticism is a description and evaluation of its object.

That the primary concern of criticism is with the problem of unity--the kind of whole which a literary work forms or fails to form, and the relations of the various parts to each other in building up this whole.

That the formal relations in a work of literature may include, but certainly exceed, those of logic.

That in a successful work, form and content cannot be separated.

That form is meaning.

That literature is ultimately metaphorical and symbolic.

That the general and the universal are not seized upon by abstraction, but got at through the concrete and the particular.

That literature is not a surrogate for religion.

That, as Allan Tate says, "specific moral problems are the subject matter of literature, but that the purpose of literature is not to point a moral.

That the principles of criticism define the area relevant to literary criticism; they do not constitute a method for carryout the criticism.<sup>18</sup>

Many of these issues have already been touched upon in this study and do not require reiteration. The general point here is that Brooks has rationalized literature as an object for criticism; literature may be recognized as a socially mediated form but such an attitude will have no relevance to critical practice. The historical importance of Brooks is not so much the content of his rationalization but rather the degree of that rationalization.

Consider his responses to the objections to New Critical principles. Brooks isolates two basic objections: (1) that New Criticism ignores the conditions necessary for the creation of literature, particularly the author as a real historical being and (2) that New Criticism does not take the reader into account in its analysis of a literary work. To these objections Brooks answers:

The formalist critic, because he wants to criticize the work itself, makes two assumptions: (1) he assumes that the relevant part of the author's intention is what he got actually into his work; that is, he assumes that the author's intention as realized is the "intention" that counts, not necessarily what he was conscious of trying to do, or what he now remembers he was then trying to do. And (2) the formalist critic assumes an ideal reader: that is, instead of focusing

on the varying spectrum of possible readings, he attempts to find a central point of reference from which he can focus upon the structure of the poem or novel.<sup>19</sup>

But these are scarcely answers to the question. It is obviously not an issue of mere intention in the case of a literary work's genesis but of the objective conditions which an author's subjectivity is both a response to and a consequence of. It is therefore not a question 'biography and psychology' as Brooks would have it but of recognizing that literature is the subjective history of a specific culture. It should therefore be the task of criticism to develop a historically self-conscious culture by demonstrating the relationships between the living literary past and the life of the present. The notion of the 'ideal reader' must be understood similarly; it is not, as Brooks claims, a 'defensible strategy...that all critics of whatever persuasion are forced to adopt.'<sup>20</sup> What Brooks should be doing is developing a concept of the historically conditioned self-conscious reader rather than of an ahistorical abstract subject. There is no ideal reader, although we can talk of readers who share assumptions, and it is clear that Brooks' reader is the academic critic who reads from the point of view of formalistic critical practice. More importantly, the concept of the ideal reader illuminates a central feature of New Criticism, namely, its failure to develop a self-consciousness of its critical activity. New Criticism always makes the assumption that there is no essential distinction between a particularized academic appropriation of literature and a non-academic generalized use

of literature. Whereas the distinction is a radical one: within the university literature is commodified for critical practice and within the society literature is commodified as unproblematical leisure activity.

#### IV

The final and transcendent moment of this initial phase of New Criticism is represented by W.K. Wimsatt's collection, The Verbal Icon. The importance of Wimsatt is two-fold: firstly, he affirms the rationalized critical project of Cleanth Brooks by eradicating any aspirations towards subjectivity that had been unconsciously retained as a result of the initial moment of New Criticism which Ransom and Tate had generated; and secondly, Wimsatt successfully locates the rationalized project on a national, and ultimately international, context. The importance of this location can hardly be overestimated since not only was Wimsatt able to move New Criticism from the domain of the Southern traditionalists, still implicit in the second moment, but he managed to do so at the University of Chicago, the bastion of the most sophisticated and articulate opposition to the New Criticism, the Neo-Aristotelians of which R.S. Crane, Elder Olson, W.R. Keast and Wayne Booth are the most influential spokesmen. Wimsatt, therefore, more than anyone else is responsible for the politicalization of New Criticism because he recognized that the success of his historical task depended not only upon making methodological objectivity an explicitly primary feature

of the critical project but also on explicitly attacking competing critical systems for their failure to achieve objectivity in critical practice.

Perhaps the two most influential essays in The Verbal Icon are "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy" because they are oriented so radically towards critical practice, the real source of the ideological affectivity of New Criticism. Wimsatt defines the critical importance of these fallacies as follows:

The Intentional Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its origins, a special case of what is known to the philosophers as the Genetic Fallacy. It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from psychological causes of the poem and ends in biography and relativism. The Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its results (what it is and what it does), a special case of epistemological skepticism, though usually advanced as if it had far stronger claims than the overall forms of skepticism. It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism. The outcome of either Fallacy, the Intentional or the Affective, is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear.<sup>21</sup>

It is only by fetishizing the poetic discourse which transforms a socially mediated subjectivity into an 'object of critical judgment' that Wimsatt can reject intentionalist and affectivist criticism. Wimsatt's task is further facilitated by the reductionist tendencies in these alternative modes of criticism which often do result in biographism and impressionism. But rather than taking seriously the critical problems that intentionalism and affectivism address--the socio-historic genesis of literary forms and the historic function of literature in



society--Wimsatt is self-righteously satisfied to demonstrate the impoverishment of their achievements. As Antonio Gramsci has argued, you cannot advance your critical position by attacking the opposition as its weakest point since such a strategy not only reveals a weakness in your own critical method but it also misrepresents the opposition.<sup>22</sup>

The critical point of departure for Wimsatt in attacking the reductions of poems in problems of authorship and readership is that poems are necessarily public and therefore only a method of impersonal objectivity can grasp their true essence. Wimsatt writes:

The poem is not the critic's own and not the author's (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). The poem belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge. What is said about the poem is subject to the same scrutiny as any statement in linguistics or in the general science of psychology.<sup>23</sup>

It is true that the poem is public--although I would rather call it social--but only in a very special sense; that is, its significance is determined by its capacity to aesthetically "typify" social experience. The fallacies of Wimsatt's critical base are that having defined poetry by its material text, he then proceeds to counter poetry as public property to poetry as private property as if subjective or artistic value could be measured in terms of capital, in terms of exchange value. It should be clear that this fallacy is a direct consequence of an ontology that dichotomizes a natural text from a historical context;

that is, the text has meaning that precedes any reader or author. The second fallacy proceeds from the first: the idea of 'public' or what Wimsatt elsewhere calls 'living and thinking present'<sup>24</sup> is taken to be self-evident; he makes no attempt to analyze or define what public or present means; as referents they are merely given. He seems oblivious to the fact that he has given these terms a highly particularized definition that is a function not only of his critical purpose but also of his historical conditioning--the commodified structure of American capitalism where rationalized culture is assumed to transcend historical determinations. Thus the problems of how poetry becomes public or what is the historical dialectic of the present never confronts Wimsatt's consciousness. It is a classic case of the confusion of ontology with anthropology.

One further point remains to be made about the historical intent of these essays. A fundamental need that New Criticism had sought to gratify is how literature or critical theory could be conceptualized so that the economic imperative of "publish or perish" could be made ethically viable and, as a corollary, the teaching of literature could be facilitated in undergraduate courses where an understanding of aesthetics and an acquaintance with a large body of literature can not be assumed as an aspect of pedagogy. The purification of intentionalism and affectivism from literary criticism must be understood as a response to this need. For by limiting literature to an abstract text the illusion of concreteness is maintained and thus the pro-

duction of critical articles becomes more a question of labour than of introspective imagination because no materials outside the immediate text are considered relevant to the "domain of criticism"; or, as Wimsatt writes, the 'verbal object and its analysis constitutes the domain of literary criticism'.<sup>25</sup> The productive imperative of English departments therefore becomes reasonable precisely because no accumulation of knowledge or critical understanding is necessary for that production. New Criticism can claim, at least in theory, that it is truly democratic since the critical restraint of the verbal object permits anybody from a graduate student to a full-professor to write structurally identical articles and it is only style that forms the basis of quality.

A similar illusion of democracy can be maintained in the classroom where the political equality of the student and teacher is based on their mutual acquaintance with the text and not on their interpretation of that text. Grades are therefore determined on the related basis of conformity in critical assumptions and the development of an acceptable literary style which opposes complexity to clarity. The learning process is therefore conceived as an acquisition of specific skills rather than as a dialectic of individualized imaginative discovery and social communication, and implies an interested audience and not one which simply translates papers into economic potentialities.

Finally, the question of the validity of the formalist methodology as measured against the normative trends of American

criticism (i.e. those trends that subordinated an analysis of the text to moralist or historicist considerations) must be considered. It is usual for critics, in spite of their opposition to New Criticism, to come to its defense because, by making the text, rather than pretextual sensibility, the point of departure, New Criticism brought literary criticism down to earth. This line of argument has only limited validity because it overstates the active principle behind New Critical theory. It has to be insisted that New Criticism is a historical phenomenon coming into existence with the successful rebirth of capitalism in America and that the close textual analysis which characterizes New Criticism is a passive reflection of that rebirth. It has to be recognized that in spite of the obvious weakness of former criticism there was always an assumption of the inalienability of human subjectivity. The intense commodification that accompanies American prosperity violates this assumption to its very core and it was the historical task of New Criticism to demolish the barriers of aesthetics that had traditionally protected subjectivity from the jaws of capitalism by openly denouncing the critical intentions and not merely the impoverished achievements of the "impressionists" and "historicists". New Criticism proved that its real intention was to make literature homologous with the reified structure of capitalism. New Criticism is not an "advance" on its predecessors but a negation of them; we need only think of the contemporary developments in European literary theory (Lukacs, Benjamin, Poulet, Russian

Formalism, Sartre, etc.) to see the distinction between "advance" which is continuous with and "negation" which is discontinuous with aesthetic traditions. New Criticism was therefore not an advance as aesthetics but certainly was "progress" from an ideological viewpoint.

V. NEW CRITICAL PRACTICE: PRACTICAL CRITICISM AND  
LITERARY GENRE

As I have stressed throughout this study the central factor in the success of the New Criticism lies in its commitment to practice such that theory often has the function of mere rationalization. In effect, we have to distinguish between a 'false theory (the critical interest in poetic ontology, the nature of poetic knowledge, the multi-dimensionality of poetic language, etc.) that is assumed to justify critical practice along correct literary lines and a true theory (the necessity within capitalist social relations to commodify all human activities) that assumes that productive labour is the only indication of objective truth which therefore vitiates the need for critical introspection where productivity often remains at the level of potentiality. In this chapter I want to examine two related aspects of this problem: (1) the inability of "explication" to represent poetic meaning and (2) the failure of New Criticism to develop an adequate theory of literary genre; that is, a theory that recognizes fundamental distinctions in the artistic purpose and the structure of aesthetic discourse between poetry, drama and the novel. These become related issues because the theoretical viability of New Criticism hinges on the poetic analysis; not only must it be demonstrated that a theory of drama and the novel can be poetically derived but the poetics itself must prove its worth when confronted with a concrete text.

Consider then Cleanth Brooks's analysis of Yeats's poem,

"Among School Children". The central aesthetic problem of the poem is the contradiction between the artist's relationship to art as a life giving activity and the artist's relationship to his own personal life as artless experience. Within the language of Yeats's poetry this is the contradiction between the idealized golden bird of Byzantium and the historical 'old scarecrow'. The greatness of "Among School Children" rests on this contradiction and on the honest intimacy by which it is communicated so that being left as a general aesthetic problem it becomes the genuine anxiety of a sensitive human being. The critical issue is therefore the demonstration of the tragedy of a poet's artistic idealizations which rather than giving more meaning to life instead accentuate the impoverishment of life and so threaten the entire aesthetic project.

It is manifestly clear that such a task is beyond the critical scope of Cleanth Brooks whose formalist method can only approach the poem as being about the 'nature of the human imagination itself'. Brooks begins by discussing the intricate balance and logical consistency of the poem:

The dramatic method is that of an apparently rambling and whimsical meditation which meanders toward no goal in particular. One item of reflection suggests another until, at the end of the poem, the stream of consciousness has flowed with all the seeming purposelessness of a real stream to a point far from its source, casually floating on its surface references to Leda, Plato, the ugly duckling, and a host of personal references.... There is an absolute economy of symbol. There is no waste motion. The poem moves, by what turns out on inspection, to be the shortest route, to its determined goal.<sup>1</sup>

Certainly as an analysis of the poetic surface these comments

are accurate but they need to be interpreted in terms of the larger issues of the poem. Beneath the surface of the stream are powerful currents; the 'meandering' stream is the illusion of art that tries to hide the anxieties of Yeats's life and particularly his sexual desires that never have been able to find adequate gratification.

It is a serious critical failure not to recognize this illusion as does Brooks when he interprets Yeats's fantasy of one of the school girls as simply a vehicle for the poet's symbology:

In Yeats's system of symbols, man and woman are related as two cones in his figure of the double cone--one waxing as the other wanes, waning as the other waxes--in dynamic synthesis. The sphere, by contrast, is a type of harmony and repose. The blending which they [Yeats and the school girl] experienced went beyond sexual attraction and repulsion: it was childlike unity of being.<sup>2</sup>

Brooks misreads the poem because he assumes that the artistic ideal is unmediated by Yeats's self doubts about his sexual identity. The tragedy of the poet, which is the aesthetic power of the poem, is that he is unable to go beyond 'sexual attraction and repulsion'; reality insists on compromising the ideal as Yeats makes clear in the fourth stanza:

And I though never of a Ledean kind  
Had pretty plumage once--enough of that,  
Better to smile on all that smile, and show  
There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow.

Yeats is obviously not merely identifying age with ugliness and youth with beauty but is rather trying to hide behind age to protect himself from the realization that there can be young scare



crows too. Artifice may try to dress up a scarecrow to look like a swan but art can never permit this deception:

World-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras  
 Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings  
 What a star sang and careless Muses heard:  
 Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird.

Pythagoras, like Yeats, is the hero of philosophy and the victim of reality. For Yeats the essence of art is that it symbolizes 'heavenly glory' while mocking the creator of that symbolization. This is the meaning of the famous last line ('How can we know the dancer from the dance'): the potentially perfect mind that conceptualizes the dance can never be separated from the imperfect body that gives the dance substance.

How does Brooks read the last stanza and how does he interpret the deliberately physical image of the dancer? To begin with he says that the generalizations of the last stanza are

really extensions of the metaphorical fabric of the poem. Throughout the poem, birth and growth and decay have run as motifs: more specifically, the egg, the fledgling, the full-grown bird, the scarecrow; or the babe at birth, the child, youth and maturity, Leda and golden-thighed Pythagoras, the man with sixty winters on his head.

And it is these metaphors which are continued in the concluding stanza. The very first word of that stanza, "labour", carries an element of the birth metaphor as an undertone. Labour is not merely work but the labour of childbirth as well. For the chestnut-tree there are no birthpangs: "labour is blossoming". For the great rooted blossomer it is just that--literally!<sup>3</sup>

By maintaining the analysis at the level of the 'metaphoric fabric of the poem' Brooks depersonalizes the poem; and this is particularly conspicuous with the personal imagery of the birds which do not merely represent abstract generalizations but express

the pessimism of an old man who was unable to live life to his satisfaction and whose greatest poetry is the humiliating exposure of his physical and social inadequacy. Yeats is caught in the contradictions of his art:

O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,  
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?

The beauty of nature and art is self given; actual life, on the other hand, cannot remain beautiful because it is determined by indeterminate subjectivity and when little girls become women they lose their unproblematical beauty and become sexually threatening.

Brooks argues that in order to understand the last stanza we must 'examine the bole and the roots, and most of all, their organic interrelations'<sup>4</sup> but on the assumption that we 'ought to do no less than to apply Yeats's doctrine to his own poem'.<sup>5</sup> But the question is, at least on the literal level, whether this is necessary. By comparing this poem to "Sailing to Byzantium" Brooks is abnegating his responsibility as a critic to deal with the problems of the immediate poem before proceeding to a comparative analysis. However this critical device enables Brooks to avoid the intimacy of the poem and to keep subjectivity out of the sphere of criticism. Thus Brooks can write:

The irony of both poems is directed, it seems to me, not at our yearning to transcend the world of nature, but at the human situation itself in which supernatural and natural are intermixed-- the human situation which is inevitably caught between the claims of both natural and supernatural. The golden bird whose bodily form the speaker will take in Byzantium will be withdrawn from the flux of the world of becoming. But so withdrawn, it

will sing of the world of becoming--"Of what is passed, or passing, or to come." Removed from that world, it will know as the chestnut-tree immersed in life, drenched in the world of becoming cannot know. Full life is instinctive like the life of Wordsworth's child. It is a harmony which is too blind to be aware of its own harmony. Here we have the dilemma of Wordsworth's "Intimations" ode all over again. The mature man can see the harmony, the unity of being, possessed by the tree or the lamb or the child; but the price of being able to see it is not to possess it in one's self, just as the price of possessing it in one's self is an unawareness that one does possess it.<sup>6</sup>

But can the human situation, particularly as it applies to these poems, be simply reduced to the intermixing of the natural and the supernatural? Is it simply irrelevant that Yeats was writing in Ireland in the early twentieth century? Can a golden bird know or a chestnut tree become or are these a poet's idealizations that reflect his simultaneous alienation and absorption in life? Furthermore if the poem is a 'controlled experience' what are the subjective criteria that determine the content of that experience? It cannot simply be argued that all we can do is to delineate the 'complex of attitudes' and anything more concrete would reduce the poetic experience.

It is clear that the formalist analysis that Brooks embraces cannot penetrate the meaning of the dance and the dancer but must dichotomize itself into either describing the movement of the dance or etherealizing the dancer as a mystical being:

...we cannot question her as a dancer without stopping the dance or waiting until the dance has been completed. And in so far as our interest is in poetry, the dance must be primary for us. We cannot afford to neglect it; no amount of personal history of the dancer will

prove a substitute for it; and even our knowledge of the dancer qua dancer will depend in some measure upon it: How else can we know her? "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"<sup>7</sup>

This failure to penetrate the meaning of poetry by limiting the analysis to poetic language and form becomes more exaggerated when applied to other literary genres. The difficulty that poetry presents is the ambivalence of its social determinations since the form of poetry is more explicitly subjective; its necessary condensation cannot express a social totality within its aesthetic form. Such a totality must emerge from the reader through the suggestive use of language. The same cannot be said of drama and the novel because their respective ontologies demand an immanent social "world" within the aesthetic form itself. The ideological successes of New Criticism in poetic analyses must therefore be partly attributed to the complexity of poetic structure where the social determinations are highly mediated: the illusion that poetry is primarily about language can be maintained by substituting a mystical subjectivity that knows no language for a social subjectivity that requires a non-aesthetic language. But when such a religious and linguistic model is applied to drama and the novel the illusion cannot be supported by the text and the critic must appeal to the "natural" sense of the reader--after all if poetry is literature so is drama and fiction.

Robert Heilman's essay, "Tragedy and Melodrama: Speculations on Generic Form", is a representative attempt to poeticize drama by making morality, as a paradigm of order, the essence

of tragedy and politics the essence of melodrama. Thus the primary purpose of the essay is to distinguish between the high drama of morality and the low drama of social experience. Heilman's point of departure is Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero as the 'good man who gets into trouble through some error or shortcoming for which the standard term is the tragic flaw.'<sup>8</sup> From this position he draws three assumptions: (1) that the tragic hero is a divided character; (2) that this division implies choice: 'there are alternatives and man must select one or another'; and (3) that this choice implies consciousness. Under the first assumption Heilman suggests three basic structures of the 'dividedness of humanity'. Firstly there is the division between civil order and guilt of which Hamlet and Antigone are typical representatives. In this type of tragedy the maintenance of civil order is simultaneous with an awareness of a 'counterimperative' of individual morality; the committing of an ambivalent act or the cancelling of a part of the hero's awareness would destroy the tragic sense. Heilman suggests that Hamlet would cease to be a tragic hero had he regarded the ghostly exhortations as tensions within himself because he would have stopped brooding about an imaginary evil and adjusted to the existing order. But this is a strange reading of Hamlet because it is precisely the ambivalence of these tensions that makes Hamlet want to adjust to the state. Such a misreading of the play is a function of trying to impose a moralistic model on a blatantly political situation. The source of Hamlet's

tragedy is that he is caught within a politicalized Oedipal conflict which can hardly be considered a heroic flaw unless we are all heroes.

The second structural division that Heilman notes is the division between 'moral ordinance' and 'unruly passion' as typified by Doctor Faustus and Macbeth. Heilman writes:

Tradition and community give an ordinance, but egotism drives one away from it. Macbeth seeks power through politics, Faustus through intellect; what makes them tragic, as ordinary power-grabbers are not, is that neither of them can ever, in yielding to impulse, force out of consciousness the imperatives that he runs against.<sup>9</sup>

Finally Heilman suggests the division between impulse and impulse as in Ibsen's plays. However the critique of moralism remains pertinent because in each case the dismissal of society as a determinate tragic force dilutes our understanding of the dramatic sources for tragedy. It is certainly true that the primary effect is felt through the hero but the social definition is historically changeable and consequently we must investigate the socio-dramatic context because it provides the objective conditions for tragedy and informs the character structure of the hero. Further, it is in this sense that all heroes are also victims because the content of their heroism is determined by their social experience.

It is precisely the historical dynamic of social experience that Heilman wants to ignore because it allows him to moralize tragedy and affirm social reality. Heilman considers that tragedy provides

an indispensable means of contemplating human catastrophe: the idea that calamity may come from divisions within human nature and within the ordering of life. The idea that man may choose evil. The idea that potential evil within him may overcome him despite resolution or flight. The idea that brutal events may come out of the normal logic of character. The idea that man is never safe from himself. The idea that the knowledge of such ideas is essential to the salvation of the individual and to the health of institutions.<sup>10</sup>

Such an idealistic conception of tragedy can never account for the development of dramatic forms because history is not merely a source for dramatic content it also determines the forms themselves. It is worth noting two related strands in Heilman's conception of tragedy. On the one hand his morality expresses a bourgeois individualism in which the real world of tragedy is contained within the sanctity of the hero's private psyche. While on the other hand the models of tragic drama, with the possible exception of Ibsen, never go beyond the Elizabethan era. Heilman is able to find countless examples of post-Elizabethan melodramatic forms without questioning why there are no significant tragic forms in the last three hundred years. But this is not an unresolvable contradiction because the historical distance of the great tragic forms allows an ahistorical illusion in which the 'human catastrophe' is an unmediated form of bourgeois individualism. It never occurs to Heilman that the reason that the hero is mediated by reality in 'melodrama' is because those plays depict the historical conditions necessary for the birth of the bourgeois type.

Heilman's preoccupation with the moral epistemology of tragedy is paralleled in his definition of melodrama as the drama of "disaster" by which he means that dramatic misfortune is determined by events external to the hero. There are two further consequences of this formulation: (1) the hero is necessarily a victim and (2) the dramatic structure implies a quantitative view of life in which death becomes more meaningful than consciousness. Heilman wants to pretend that the distinction between tragedy and melodrama is not evaluative but such a pretense is blocked by the fact that melodrama as serious drama has close affinities with "popular" drama. As a consequence the best examples of melodrama can be found in plays like Synge's Riders to the Sea, Duerrenmatt's The Visit and O'Neill's The Iceman Cometh. There can be little doubt that not only are these plays dramatically inferior to "true" tragedy but their modernity is implicitly assumed to be the source of that inferiority.

Furthermore when Heilman cites Webster's The Duchess of Malfi as one of the 'great dramas of disaster' he reduces its aesthetic scope to the banality of modern melodrama:

...[in The Duchess of Malfi] a charming and innocent woman is tortured and destroyed by her cruel brothers. She is not presented tragically; she does not, like great herois, "earn" her fate. Her honourable conduct simply happens to run afoul of the purposes of her vicious brothers. Lear, on the other hand, has made Goneril and Regan effacious in the world; they are projections of a part of his own divided nature. Lear has made his world in a way that the Duchess has not. Webster presents the evil brothers as autonomous



--like a flood or holocaust that destroys. This is not to deny the existence of autonomous evil; it is simply to say that it is not the world of tragedy. 11

Of course any sensitive reader of Webster's play will not find his characters one-dimensional stereotypes but will recognize that their morality is a function of their relationship to the state. Clearly for Heilman the state is not fit subject matter for tragedy because it makes morality contingent, not upon individual will, but upon the quality of social experience which the state necessarily structures. Heilman's complementary analysis of King Lear reveals the critical consequences of his rigid tragic model since it is clear that Goneril and Regan are far more than projections of a divided nature but express the political consequences of a State that is no longer self-conscious about its social responsibilities. The fundamental distinction between the two plays is therefore historical: Shakespeare depicts the anarchic potentiality of the Elizabethan state while Webster depicts its realization. Thus Lear can make his world, not because Shakespeare has a truer artistic vision, but because political ethics can be identified with historical reality. The gradual disintegration of ethical responsibility and the rise of Puritanism deny the identification with historical reality and it is this dynamic that informs Webster's dramatic vision.

Heilman's 'speculations on generic form' break down on two points. Firstly, he fails to adequately account for traditional tragedy because he rejects the relation between the

morality of the hero and the historic conditions that give rise to that morality. He is therefore unable to critically distinguish between Sophoclean and Shakespearean tragedy and his interpretation of individual plays is accordingly limited because it excludes the historical determinations that are central to the development of dramatic forms. Secondly, Heilman's readings of post-Elizabethan drama prove to be totally inadequate because, lacking a theory of the genesis of dramatic form, he is unable to realize that the theory of tragedy as morality is itself historically determined and cannot be applied to drama, even in a limited sense, which is created in radically different historical epochs.

The difficulties that Heilman displays in penetrating the essence of tragedy find their complement in New Critical theories of the novel of which the best known is Mark Shorer's essay, "Technique as Discovery". In both cases these difficulties arise from the attempt to neutralize the social and historic content within forms that depend on that content for their aesthetic essence. Shorer begins by arguing that criticism of fiction can benefit from the formalistic criticism which showed that

to speak of content as such is not to speak of art at all, but of experience; and that it is only when we speak of the achieved content, the form, the work of art as a work of art, that we speak as critics. The difference between content, or experience, and achieved content, or art, is technique.<sup>12</sup>

Technique becomes therefore the essence of art and the point of departure for all criticism. Shorer argues that previous criticism of fiction has either made content a value in itself without

recourse to its function within the total fictional structure or criticism has avoided content altogether and focussed on arbitrary devices (e.g. plot, the means of portraying character, suspense, climax, etc.). For Shorer technique has a much larger reference; it is the 'means of exploring and defining the values in an area of experience which, for the first time then, are being given.'<sup>13</sup>

But poetry is not fiction and although the method of analysis is similar the substance of fictional analysis will have to account for the particularities of fictional form. Shorer writes:

Technique in fiction is, of course, all those obvious forms of it which are usually taken to be the whole of it, and many others; but for the present purposes, let it be thought of in two respects particularly: the uses to which language, as language, is put to express the quality of the experience in question; and the uses of point of view not only as a mode of dramatic delimitation, but more particularly of thematic convention. Technique is really what T.S. Eliot means by "convention"--any selection, structure, or distortion, any form or rhythm imposed upon the world of action; by means of which--it should be added--our apprehension of the world of action is enriched or renewed. In this sense, everything is technique which is not the lump of experience itself; and one cannot properly say that a writer has no technique, for, being a writer, he cannot do so.<sup>14</sup>

This view of the novel does not grasp its social essence: the form of the novel is a response not only to the complexity of a social structure, that drama and poetry could no longer contain, but also to the content of social experience. The alienation of individual subjectivity from social objectivity can only be aesthetically interpreted by depicting an experiential totality in which the development of fictional character must be demonstrated within the form of the novel. This is obviously not as

true in poetry and drama which demand a higher degree of typicality because experience is given; it does not have to be demonstrated as a totality because it is assumed within the form.

A failure to recognize this distinction leads Shorer into two fallacies. Firstly, it becomes arbitrary for him that writers choose the novel as an artistic form since the technical analysis applies equally well to poetry and drama as Shorer's analyses of Wuthering Heights and Ulysses demonstrate. Secondly, Shorer consistently avoids the social aspects of the novel which not only give it formal substance but also particularize characters and their experiences.

The consequences of these fallacies can be seen in Shorer's analyses of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Sons and Lovers. Shorer prefaces his discussion of Sons and Lovers by referring to Lawrence's aesthetics which emphasize the emotions as the creative source of art. Shorer feels that it is 'acceptable' to believe in emotions with the proviso that such emotions are objectified by technique. But since Lawrence refuses to legitimize these emotions through technical objectification his novels ultimately fail as art. Shorer writes:

His belief in a "poetry of the immediate present", poetry in which nothing is fixed, static, or final, where all is shimmeriness and impermanence and vitalistic essence, arose from...a mistaken notion of technique.<sup>15</sup>

Quite apart from the fact that Lawrence's novels need not be judged by his aesthetics--a fact that Lawrence's own axiom, believe the tale not the teller, justifies--Shorer misrepresents

Lawrence's theory of emotions. Lawrence is not arguing for a haphazard theory of creativity but rather assumes that the emotions, at their deepest level, have a structure that is not only more meaningful than a "conscious" structure but is itself more coherent.

Shorer suggests that in Sons and Lovers there is a fundamental discrepancy between the 'crippling effect of a mother's love on the emotional development of her son' and the dichotomous love relationships that Paul develops with Clara and Miriam because the logical outcome of the novel should be Paul's death. Such a discrepancy, for Shorer, reveals 'certain confusions between intention and performance', represented by the characterizations of Paul's mother and father. Shorer argues that there is a contradiction

between Lawrence's explicit characterizations of the mother and father and this tonal evaluations of them. It is a problem not only of style (of the contradiction between expressed moral epithets and the more general texture of the prose which applies to them) but also of point of view. Morel and Lawrence are never separated, which is a way of saying that Lawrence maintains for himself in this book the confused attitude of his character. The mother is a "proud, honourable soul", but the father has a "small, mean head". This is the sustained contrast; the epithets are characteristic of the whole, and they represent half of Lawrence's feelings. But what is the other half? Which of these characters is given his real sympathy--the hard, self-righteous, aggressive, demanding mother who comes through to us, or the simple, direct, gentle, downright, fumbling, ruined father? There are two attitudes here. Lawrence (and Morel) loves his mother, but he also hates her for compelling his love; and he hates his father with true Freudian jealousy, but he also loves him for what he is in himself, and he sympathizes more deeply with him because his wholeness has been destroyed by

the mother's domination, just as his, Lawrence-Morel's, has been.<sup>16</sup>

Shorer's critique of this 'psychological tension' rests on the assumption that Morel must be taken as the author, the son of a coal miner, and the only justification he provides for this assumption is a recommendation that we "carefully" read the novel and the book, D.H. Lawrence: A Personal Record by E.T., the model for Miriam. But clearly what bothers Shorer is that Lawrence's novels do not end: they raise human problems, such as the conflicts cited above, without fully resolving them within the form of the novel. Shorer feels that had Lawrence distanced himself from the experiences of his fictional characters he could have aesthetically resolved their problems. As a basis for criticizing Lawrence this is unacceptable since it merely assumes that the classicist aesthetic of James, Conrad, and Joyce is the only legitimate aesthetic for the novel. Shorer therefore refuses to recognize that Lawrence not only wants to emotionally engage the reader but he also wants to penetrate the social surfaces of human relationships through intimate characterization. Paul may well be modelled on Lawrence but that hardly limits Sons and Lovers to self-analysis but instead allows Lawrence to depict a historically valid social type with a psychological depth rarely found in classicist fiction.

Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man is presented as a positive alternative to Sons and Lovers because

it analyses its material rigorously, and it defines the value and quality of its experience not by appended comment, or moral epithet, but by the texture of the style.<sup>17</sup>

It is here that Shorer finds the fictional qualities lacking in Lawrence--meticulous style, coherent structure and the unproblematical objectification of emotions. Consider his comments on Joyce's style:

The opening pages are written in something like the stream of consciousness of Ulysses, as the environment impinges directly on the consciousness of the infant and the child, a strange opening world which the mind does not subject to questioning selection, or judgment. But the style changes very soon, as the boy begins to explore his surroundings; and as his sensuous experience of the world is enlarged, it takes on heavier and heavier rhythms and a fuller and fuller body of sensuous detail, until it reaches a crescendo of romantic opulence in the emotional climaxes which mark Stephen's rejection of domestic and religious values. Then gradually the style subsides into the austere intellectuality of the final sections, as he defines to himself the outlines of the artistic task which is to usurp his maturity.<sup>18</sup>

Shorer assumes that 'style and method evaluate the experience' of the novel--the artist's alienation from his environment. But to reduce the novel to Joyce's conscious intent, the stylistic portrait of the development of an artist, cannot in itself account for significance because this analysis is unable to account for the socio-aesthetic mediations between style and character. Specifically, a critical analysis must attend to Stephen's character structure and he is never able to reject these forces. Beneath the meticulously constructed style lies a profound guilt that art is intended to expiate. In fact, art is only able to rationalize that guilt by making it an aesthetic principle. In other words, the style must be analysed from the point of view of Stephen's actual social experience and not, as Shorer argues, vice versa. To take the style as the critical

point of departure is to neutralize the power of sexual and Catholic guilt as if consciousness alone can transcend anxiety. This is Stephen's illusion but Joyce is more honest as the last two entries in his diary make clear:

April 26. Mother is putting my new secondhand clothes in order. She prays now, she says, that I may learn in my own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels. Amen. So be it. Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.

April 27. Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead.

How is it possible to argue for a 'rejection of domestic and religious values' when the encounter with experience is continually frustrated (a million times) or when art ('old artificer') is identified with Catholicism ('old father'). It is therefore not a simple question of an artist's alienation from his environment but of an artist's alienation from himself and his inability to make art a substitute for religion and meaningful social experience.

Shorer's predisposition to technique always leads him to conclude that problems in the novel are problems of style and this applies not only to Lawrence but also to Joyce. He fails to realize that the greatness of fiction lies not in the aesthetic objectification of problems but in the social nature of problems and the degree to which they typify the experience of the age. But Shorer, like Brooks and Heilman, is too committed to the ideological project of New Criticism to consider the larger



issues of literature; he does not question why certain literary works continue to powerfully affect readers who cannot share directly in the historical contexts of literary creations. The answers to these questions necessarily threaten the validity of New Criticism because quite apart from making greater demands on the imagination of individual critics the questions inevitably involve a personal introspection: a recognition of a critic's private feelings negates the "critical distance" that is maintained between the reader and the text and between the critic and immediate social experience.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Perhaps the most central issue of literary criticism that this study has addressed has been the question of method. This issue can be briefly summarized as follows: conformist bourgeois thought always takes as its critical point of departure, consciously or unconsciously, the economic laws of capitalist development whereas historical materialism (or any other "progressive" intellectual system) takes as its point of departure the objectivity of the history of human development and potentiality. These contradictory assumptions of objectivity lead to equally contradictory assumptions of methodology which can be respectively characterized as economic and social. Each system can potentially develop a political superstructure but the teleological content of that superstructure is contingent upon the nature of the base structure.

In the instance of New Criticism I have argued that its economic method determines a productivist dialectic between the commodification of literature (commodified critical activity becomes rationalized labour) and the mystification of subjectivity (the socio-subjective content of literature is either ignored or mystified in critical practice). Further, since this dialectic is structurally identical with the dialectic of monopoly capitalism (the dialectic of organizational conformity and commodified freedom) the successes of New Criticism can be attributed to its function as ideology.

It remains to briefly consider the viability of my methodological critique as opposed to the "liberalist" critiques that

focus on the New Critical rejection of history and society of which the most recent is Richard Ohmann's English in America (1976).<sup>1</sup> What all these critiques share in common is their inability to grasp New Criticism as an ideology, as a critical superstructure based on the economic structure of American capitalism. As a consequence they do not recognize the alienated character of critical activity that is a necessary condition of the "political" hegemony of New Criticism. Ohmann, for example, entraps himself in an insoluble dilemma: he sympathizes with the aesthetic project of New Criticism but objects to its negation of politics as critically irrelevant.<sup>2</sup> Rather than tracing the negation of politics to the particular aesthetics of New Criticism, he assumes that such a negation is implicit in bourgeois society and that only with the negation of that society can politics be fused with aesthetics. Ohmann therefore becomes a determinist comparable, at least structurally, to Bernstein in the "revisionist" debate with Luxemburg. In short, Ohmann fails to realize that politics can be fused with aesthetics but only after aesthetics has been conceived along social lines. The case of Ohmann illustrates the power of New Criticism as an ideology since at no point does he challenge the economic essence of New Criticism. Ohmann is content to look at the critical surface and this is the precise function of the ideology.

Finally, let me emphasize that a critique of the New Criticism is socially necessary not only because the meaning of

literature but also the meaning of intellectual life must be revitalized and removed from the rationalized structures imposed upon them by the New Critics. Such a project can only be seriously undertaken when the rationalized barriers against this project are concretely recognized. A failure to understand our own critical history is, as Adorno has suggested, to participate in the same reification as we are trying to negate. To pose the question differently, how can literature and literary criticism become socially meaningful and not merely politically relevant? The answer must lie not in the abstract objectivity of a given critical system but in the degree to which that system can gratify our imaginative and social aspirations.

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CHAPTER I

<sup>1</sup>G. Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness, trans. R. Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), pp. 83-222.

<sup>2</sup>George Watson has argued that this tradition includes T. S. Eliot whose Sacred Wood essays are as much a personal aesthetics as they are a foundation for the Scrutineers and the New Critics (G. Watson, The Literary Critics (London, 1962) pp. 175-78).

<sup>3</sup>J. Gross, The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters (London, 1969), pp. 167-89.

<sup>4</sup>See W. Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire, trans. H. Zohn (London, 1973), pp. 103-6.

<sup>5</sup>P. Rahv, "Criticism and the Imagination of Alternatives" in The Myth and the Powerhouse (New York, 1966), pp. 69-75.

<sup>6</sup>See P. Baran and P. Sweezy, Monopoly Capital (New York, 1966), pp. 14-51.

<sup>7</sup>J.C. Ransom, The World's Body (Baton Rouge, La., 1938), pp. 336-37.

<sup>8</sup>A. Warren and R. Wellek, Theory of Literature (New York, 1956), p. 156.

<sup>9</sup>W.K. Wimsatt, "Explication as Criticism" in The Verbal Icon (Lexington, Ky., 1954), p. 236.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 242.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 243.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 247.

<sup>14</sup>I should emphasize, however, that since Wimsatt's methodology is not premised on a critically active subject it can only be understood as an ethics: it allows no more freedom in the order of inquiry than it does in the order of presentation.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. I. Meszaros: "[Positivists] start from the presumed objectivity of "completeness", ignoring the arbitrariness of the choice of inquiry itself, whereby the proper relationship between research and researcher is completely overturned. It is not the researcher who looks for data but, on the contrary, the availability of abundant data produces the reified researcher of institutionalized routine. And, of course, the self-justifying ideology of such procedure takes the form of apriori ruling out the need for justification of any research whatsoever, no matter how trivial and irrelevant it may be. Anything goes that can be researched, i.e. nailed to a display board in a form through which the dead "objectivity" of dusty data is linked to an impersonally "objective" pseudo-subject. ("Phases of Sartre's Development", Telos (Fall, 1975), p. 114)

<sup>16</sup>Benjamin, op. cit., p. 105.

## CHAPTER II

<sup>1</sup>See L. Trilling, Matthew Arnold (New York, 1955), p. 174.

<sup>2</sup>Arnold Hauser, "Propaganda, Ideology and Art" in Aspects of History and Class Consciousness, ed. I. Meszaros (London, 1971), p. 134.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 142-143.

<sup>4</sup>Antonio Gramsci, "The Formation of Intellectuals" in The Modern Prince and Other Writings, trans. L. Marks (New York, 1957), p. 118.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>6</sup>Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy, ed. Dover Wilson (Cambridge, 1932), pp. 131-32.

<sup>7</sup>It is in this sense that even the most positive critics of Arnold have proved inadequate when they nostalgically argue for

the 'liberal' intellectual as a modern social type. We need only think of Trilling's introductory remarks to his otherwise authoritative study of Arnold: "In a time when to the duplicity of nations is added a shrewd madness denying that words have any meaning at all, Arnold, with his insistence on objectivity and the powers of human reason, may well prop our minds....He sought to conciliate epochs and that is something that history but no single mind can successfully do. Yet Arnold's eclectic and dialectical method has its vitality because it is the method of history." (Trilling, pp. 12-13) It would be legitimate to ask whether modern intellectuals are any less insistent on the power of reason and objectivity, or for that matter whether Arnold's eclectic method is the 'method of history'. It would seem, on the contrary, that Arnold accepts the world view that the Philistines are the true agents of history. He can no more imagine a political transcendence of capitalism than Trilling can grasp the historical function of liberalism.

<sup>8</sup>Selected Criticism of Matthew Arnold, ed. C. Ricks (New York, 1972), pp. 102-3.

<sup>9</sup>H. Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture" in Negations (Boston, 1968), pp. 88-133.

<sup>10</sup>For an excellent study of Arnold's politics see P. J. McCarthy, Matthew Arnold and the Three Classes (New York, 1964).

<sup>11</sup>Arnold, p. 171.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 172

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>16</sup>T. Nairn, "The Fateful Meridian", New Left Review (60), p. 30.

<sup>17</sup>T. E. Hulme, Speculations, ed. H. Read (London, 1924), p. 116.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>24</sup>See K. Marx, Capital, Vol. I. (London, 1976), pp.131-37.

<sup>25</sup>T. Eagleton, "Ideology and Literary Form", New Left Review (90), pp. 99-100.

<sup>26</sup>T. S. Eliot, The Sacred Wood (London, 1920), p.viii.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. x.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., pp. xv-xvi.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>32</sup>Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot, ed. F. Kermode (New York, 1975), p. 61.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 62

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 62-3.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>36</sup>W. Lever, The Tragedy of State (London, 1971), p. vii.

<sup>37</sup>Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot, p. 65.

<sup>38</sup>The Sacred Wood, p. 58.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 49

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 75.



## CHAPTER III

<sup>1</sup>George Watson, The Literary Critics (Middlesex, 1962), p. 186.

<sup>2</sup>J.C. Ransom, The New Criticism (Norfolk, 1941), p. 138.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 145

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 200

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>10</sup>Max Horkheimer, Eclipse of Reason (New York, 1947), p. 76.

<sup>11</sup>J.C. Ransom, The World's Body (Baton Rouge, 1938), p. 150.

<sup>12</sup>Watson, p. 186.

<sup>13</sup>Stephen Pepper, The Basis of Criticism in the Arts (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), pp. 96-113.

<sup>14</sup>The New Criticism, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 43-4.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 25-6.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 5-6.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 45

<sup>19</sup>I.A. Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism (New York, 1925), p. 240.

<sup>20</sup>Ransom, p. 85.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>22</sup>Richards, p. 250.

<sup>23</sup>Ransom, p. 100.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 100-01.

#### CHAPTER IV

<sup>1</sup>J.L.Stewart, The Burden of Time (Princeton, 1965).

<sup>2</sup>J. Fekete, "The New Criticism: Ideological Evolution of the Right Opposition", Telos 20 (Summer 1974), pp. 2-51.

<sup>3</sup>J.C. Ransom, Beating the Bushes (New York, 1972), pp. 2-3.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 18-19.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>9</sup>Allen Tate, "Tension in Poetry" in The Modern Critical Spectrum, ed. G.J. Goldberg and N.M. Goldberg (New Jersey, 1962), p. 83.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>12</sup>R.P. Warren, Selected Essays (New York, 1966), p.16.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 26-27.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>17</sup>Philip Rahv, The Myth and the Powerhouse (New York, 1966), p. 64.

<sup>18</sup>Cleanth Brooks, "The Formalist Critic" in The Modern Critical Spectrum, ed. G. J. Goldberg and N.M. Goldberg (New Jersey, 1962), p. 1.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

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<sup>21</sup>W.K. Wimsatt, Jr., The Verbal Icon (Lexington, Ky., 1954), p. 21.

<sup>22</sup>Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks trans. and ed. Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York, 1971), pp. 425-26.

<sup>23</sup>Wimsatt, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 255.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 232.

## CHAPTER V

<sup>1</sup>Cleanth Brooks, The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry (New York, 1947), pp. 179-80.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 181-2.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 189-90.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>8</sup>R.B. Heilman, "Tragedy and Melodrama: Speculations on Generic Form", Texas Quarterly, 3 (1960), p. 37.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>12</sup>Mark Shorer, "Technique as Discovery" in The Modern Critical Spectrum, ed. G.J. Goldberg, and N.M. Goldberg (New Jersey, 1962), p. 70.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 77.

## CHAPTER VI

<sup>1</sup>R. Ohmann, English in America (New York, 1976). See also A. Kazin, On Native Grounds (New York, 1956); and L. Trilling, Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning (New York, 1968).

<sup>2</sup>Ohmann, pp. 65-91.

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