

Tropes in Distention: Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of “Paradox” in Postwar America

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In this article Burgers addresses the rather curious institutionalization of the American literary critical movement the New Criticism. The curiosity being that the New Critics developed the meat and bones of their critical doctrine before the Second World War, but only received wide-spread attention after the war. Of course, taking into account other factors, what he argues here is that the New Criticism gained such currency because its context of reception changed. The key terms of their critical doctrine, paradox, irony, etc., seemed too narrow and exclusive terms for poetry before the war, but were seen as a general description of life after the war. Thus it is because the New Criticisms critical language shared what Burgers calls a tropological propinquity (really just a fancy way of saying a family resemblance between different key terms or phrases) with the larger discursive patterns in the US after the war that it gained such currency.

Introduction

In this article I will address the institutionalization of the New Criticism in relation to the broader cultural context of post-World War II America¹. I will argue that the New Criticism's successful ascension

1 The New Criticism and its ascension have been fairly well documented, it then makes little sense to rehash every said and done. The following analysis is based on the following accounts: Chris Baldick *Criticism and Literary Theory 1890 to the Present* (1996), which is a great history of criticism and theory in England and America in general; Hans Bertens's lucid and comprehensive *Literary Theory: The Basics* (2001); Vincent Leitch's *American Literary Criticism from the Thirties to the Eighties* (1988), and to a lesser extent Walter Sutton's more dated but still interesting *Modern American Criticism* (1963). In terms of more advanced works on the New Criticism Gerald Graff's institutional history *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (1987) is a key work, and even more so the account by Mark Jancovich: *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* (1993). Mark Winchell's critical biography *Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism* (1996) has also proved extremely useful, because it contextualizes critical maneuvers into the humdrum of daily life. Last but not least is Alphonse Vinh's, *Cleanth Brooks and Allen Tate: Collected Letters, 1933-1976* (1998), which has been an invaluable asset. Not so much in terms of theory but in terms of contextualizing the New Criticism through biographical information.

into the Academy can, in part, be explained by the fact that its critical vocabulary – which stressed the tropes paradox and irony and which was established before the war – would align with the lexicon of the general intellectual discourse after the war. In doing so, I am going specifically against those accounts that purport that the New Criticism introduced paradox and irony into the mainstream discourse as a means of enforcing political quietude. Instead, what seems to have happened is that as the general intellectual discourse changed, it found a literary-critical movement compatible with its vocabulary. Accordingly, the New Criticism was institutionalized, that is, it became an accepted method of textual analysis for academic publications such as books and journal articles. The critical payoff of my account is that it both adds to the existing accounts that illuminate different facets of the New Criticism's success, while at the same time it emphasizes the historical contingency of that success. It was exactly because of changes in the intellectual discourse after the war that the New Criticism gained such currency in English studies. So while it was certainly of great influence inside the field of literary studies, I would argue that it did not introduce its vocabulary – e.g. paradox, irony, tension – into the general intellectual discourse. Rather, the New Criticism became popular through its tropological propinquity to the general intellectual discourse. This family resemblance also caused the New Criticism's critical language to be retrofitted into the parameters of that general intellectual discourse, thereby causing these terms to lose their original culture critical significance. Ironically then, the New Criticism's success came with the loss of its cultural critical platform, and in the end it simply became a dry method of text explication.

I will support this argument in four parts. First, I will provide a short history explaining what the New Criticism was and why it was important. The second part is a short overview of the circulation of terms such as paradox, irony, and similar terms of contradiction in the general intellectual discourse. The third part consists of a brief account of the development of the New Critical vocabulary of Cleanth Brooks and his specific usage of paradox, irony, and similar terms that describe the contradictions within poetry. I will also show how his literary critical platform was culture critical. The fourth part is a comparative reception study between reactions to Brooks' use of paradox during the war and the much different responses after the war. We can summarily say that during the war critics objected to Brooks' use of paradox because it was too specific a term to be generalized to all

of poetry, while after the war the reverse was true: paradox became too general a term to apply to poetry specifically. This shift is indicative of the prevalence of terms like paradox, irony, and similar tropes in postwar discourse, and the effect it had on the reception of the New Criticism.

We must of course be careful not to fall into mindless categorizations; certainly people criticized and lauded Brooks for various other reasons as well. I must also stress that this is merely one aspect of a much larger and complicated process of institutionalization. Furthermore, the institutionalization I am dealing with is specific to the New Criticism as a critical practice and not as a teaching practice. As I argued in my thesis², these two areas were certainly related, but the historical processes involved were distinct.

What Was the New Criticism and Why Did It Matter?

The traditional history of Anglo-American literary criticism holds that the New Criticism was the beginning of professional literary analysis in the US and Britain. While this is a bit of a generalization, it nevertheless emphasizes the importance of the New Criticism's role in the development of literary theory. Although there were other forms of literary analysis before the New Criticism, mostly philological, biographical, and historical, and some rudimentary forms of Marxist and psychoanalytic, the emergence of the New Criticism in the thirties in forties saw the first turn towards a method of textual analysis that focused on the close reading of 'the text itself'. It was this turn towards close reading, which would open up the way for other literary analytical movements that would follow and usurp the New Criticism, most notably New Criticism's stepchild and sometimes nemesis: deconstruction. Although the term "New Criticism" was not coined until 1941, its theoretical foundations had been laid all throughout the twenties and thirties by a group of poets/critics. This group, consisting of John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and later Cleanth Brooks, had rallied to T.S. Eliot's call for a return to sensibility on a cultural level, and a return to analyzing the poem itself at a literary critical level. The basic tenets of the New Criticism were enu-

2 My thesis investigated the purported relationship between the New Criticism's ascension and McCarthyism. There I made clear that there was a significant difference between New Criticism as a teaching practice and a critical practice. The former showed a larger concern for the students' cultural heritage and unity, while the latter was more concerned with the text

merated by John Crowe Ransom in 1937 in a famous essay entitled "Criticism Inc.,". Ransom defined their practice through what they were not supposed to be concerned with: 1) Personal registrations³; 2) Synopsis and paraphrase⁴; 3) Historical studies⁵; 4) Linguistic studies⁶ 5); Moral studies⁷; 6) Any other special studies⁸. (Ransom 1984: 104-05). Instead, the group promoted the close textual analysis of poetry, which they saw as an autonomous aesthetic discourse. Furthermore, the New Critics were also post-Kantians who believed that reality was always mediated, and therefore that not one particular discourse is the proper version of reality. As such, they were adamant anti-bourgeois culture critics who held that the modern discourses of scientific positivism and utilitarianism through commodification dominated the view of reality and marginalized other non-scientific and non-utilitarian discourses such as poetry.

Despite their critical acuity throughout the thirties most of their critical writings were published in what are now called the "little journals", the literary journals outside the academic institution, and remained quite marginal. Indeed, teaching at schools in the south of the southern US, the New Critics did not start to gain prominence until they were essentially bought up by richer universities in the north and north east between 1939-1941. This buying up of the New Critics by prominent, usually Ivy League, schools can be seen as the first step of institutionalization: the institutionalization of the New Critics as individuals. It was during this period that they would start to put their critical language developed over the thirties into practice as a teaching and critical practice. Initially, their ascension into the more powerful universities created a smattering of similar criticism elsewhere. Still, their movement would not gain prominence until after the war. It is during the postwar years that the New Criticism went

3 "...which are declarations of the effect of the art-work upon the critic as reader."

4 "I do not mean that the critic never uses them in his analysis of fiction and poetry, but he does not consider plot or story as identical with the real content."

5 "Nothing can be more stimulating to critical analysis than comparative literature. But it may be conducted only superficially, if the comparisons are perfunctory and mechanical, or if the scholar is content with merely making the parallel citations."

6 "The total benefit of linguistics for criticism would be the assurance that the latter was based on perfect logical understanding of the content, or 'interpretation.'"

7 "The moral standard applied is the one appropriate to the review; it may be the Christian ethic, or the Aristotelian one, or the new proletarian gospel. But the moral content is not the whole content, which should never be relinquished."

8 "...which deal with some abstract or prose content taken out of the work. Nearly all departments of knowledge may conceivably find their own materials in literature, and take them out."

head to head with the established literary institution in the university that promoted literary biography and philology. This should be seen as the institutionalization of the New Criticism as a movement, as it is the New Criticism that gets enough of a following to be perceived as a threat by the literary institution in the university. Yet, their rise would be one of many changes in the postwar years.

The Postwar Years and Paradox

It is telling that two radically different historians on the left and the right mark the postwar years as paradoxical or contradictory. In his more left wing account Howard Zinn argues that the main problem in postwar America is that its “rhetorical creed” contradicts the fundamental inequalities and problems caused by its “working creed.” Contrarily, the right oriented Robert Samuelson argues that it is not that postwar America had real problems, it is just that too much was expected from the American Dream. Therefore most self-criticism had developed into the “complaining and whining variety.” (Samuelson 1995: 12) Both make a similar point from radically different political perspectives: the postwar years are marked by a noticeable friction between the way things are and the way things are supposed to be. This seemed so much the case that by 1960 Daniel Bell noted that, “irony, paradox, complexity, and ambiguity” come to dominate the intellectual discourse in the 50s. (Bell 1960: 287)

By looking at the historical conditions of the postwar years, it is possible to see why these tropes would become so dominant. The US came out of the war the undisputed victor, having ostensibly rid the world of evil by defeating Nazism. Ironically, with the ticker tape practically still in the streets, the US was getting embroiled in another seemingly apocalyptic battle between “good” and “evil” that would dominate the latter half of the century: the Cold War. Moreover, it had fought the war reputedly for freedom and equality, yet it had done so with racially separate and clearly unequal troops abroad, and half of the country officially segregated by race at home. The war had brought wealth, but no real redistribution of that wealth. (Zinn 1973: 89) So the rich got richer and the poor stayed poor. The only people who really benefited were the middle class, yet even they did not necessarily find happiness with their newfound wealth. More generally, the postwar economic, technological, and population boom had brought about a rapid changes in the American cultural landscape. The old American Dream of rugged individualism was quickly being

usurped by a new one that promoted suburbs and security. These postwar changes paradoxically left people feeling a sense of accomplishment, while at the same time experiencing a sense of loss. We can see the effects of these conditions across a wide range of discourses.

The most prominent area affected was the political sphere, perhaps best defined by Arthur Schlesinger's *The Vital Center* (1949). This work heralded in an end to ideological politics in favor of pragmatic compromise by heterogeneous groups. He called for "a non-fascist right to work with the non-Communist left in the expansion of free society." (1949: 174) Also taking an ambiguous non-ideological position was Reinold Neibuhr, who in *The Irony of American History* (1952) suggested that "our immediate prefatory concern must be the double character of our ironic experience." (1952: 11) As they abandoned the teleology of ideological politics, historian Richard Pells points out that they "took refuge in ironic observations, ambivalent commentary, and occasional dissent." (Pells 1989: 121) Paradox and irony also ran through the discourse of sociology. This is visible in the titles of the two major works of the decade: *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and *The Organization Man* (1956) by David Riesman and William Whyte respectively. In Riesman's famous analysis the postwar's new "other-directed" man in the "age of consumption," no longer gathered his values from adult authority like his prewar "inner-directed" predecessor, but is instilled with authority and conformity through his peers and is left "paradoxically [...] a lonely member of the crowd because he never comes really close to the others or to himself" (1950:v). Similarly, Whyte's *The Organization Man* also stressed alienation and dehumanization, and argued that a new form of worker had emerged not just one that works for "The Organization" but also belongs to it (1956: 3). Their research stressed the contradiction that while middle class Americans may have had more materially, they felt less spiritually.

These contradictions were also noticed by some of the major authors of that time. Counterfeit is the theme of *The Recognitions* (1955) by William Gaddis. In Norman Mailer's *Barbary Shore* (1951) the protagonist, Mike Lovett, living in the microcosm of an apartment building, is constantly confronted with the way the other tenants appear to be and they way they are. The theme of duplicity and fragmentary nature of the American experience also runs deeply through Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). Lastly, although it was published in 1961, Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* was probably a 50s nov-

el par excellence, stressing the decade of ironies, paradoxes, contradictions, and government double-speak that marked the years of its creation.

Even with this rather summarized treatment, it does seem that concepts like paradox, irony, and similar terms describing contradictions and duplicity resonate throughout the postwar years. Nevertheless, I would shy away from generalizations like that of Fredrick Karl, who states: "Everywhere we turn in the decade, we find paradox." (1983: 177) Such a statement is skewed because it was above all an intellectual minority that chose to see their own period in time as particularly paradoxical, ironic, ambiguous, and complex. Most Americans experienced it as an era of "general good will and affluence" and few "doubted the essential goodness of their society." (Halberstam 1993: x) Those reservations being made, we can nevertheless see that in a time when intellectuals saw their own position as ironic and paradoxical, a literary critical movement would emerge that emphasized, among other things, paradox and irony.

Brooks' Critical Agenda

Many critics have commented on the coincidence between the New Criticism's ascension and its historical proximity to the virulent anti-communism of McCarthyism and the general trend towards conformity during the postwar years. William Cain argued that "the intensities of the Cold War might make the close reading of texts – a method that did not require commerce with politics and history – seem to be a desirable mission to pursue." (Cain 1984: 4) More explicitly, Terry Eagleton has argued that the "New Criticism's view of the poem as a delicate equipoise of contending attitudes, a disinterested reconciliation of opposing impulses, proved deeply attractive to skeptical liberal intellectuals disoriented by the clashing dogmas of the Cold War." (Eagleton 1983: 50) Perhaps the best account is that of Mark Walhout, who in my mind rightly argues:

"Within their interdiscursive context, New Critical statements were capable of serving a variety of cultural, theological, and political uses. Statements about ambiguity, irony, and paradox...had a double reference: an immediate intended reference determined by the discourse of aesthetics or literary criticism, and a secondary, interdiscursive reference determined by the historical configuration of discourses in which they were embedded." (Walhout 1987: 864-65)

This is certainly nothing shocking. It is safe to assume that the technical meaning of certain tropes like irony and paradox, which were never specifically literary terms, would flow over into conceptions of their more general usage at a time when these terms were widespread. I also agree with Walhout when he argues against Cain and Eagleton who propose that the New Criticism and its critical lexicon gained currency because it enforced political quietude (ibid. 868). Even if this were true it is specious to make such a link directly. It also does not explain why other “formalist” movements like R.S. Crane’s Chicago Neo-Aristotelians did not share the success of the New Criticism. Walhout’s own explanation that the New Criticism’s rapid ascension was because it performed the vital cultural function of educating the “liberal consciousness regarding ambiguity and irony” is certainly interesting, but not historically accurate.

The problem with the three different arguments above is that they seem to focus on a later conception of the New Criticism, one already sullied, so to speak, by the postwar intellectual discourse. Of course, the New Criticism was always affected by different discourses, but the terms of its language, specifically paradox and irony, became especially overdetermined through the shift in culture. To show this I have chosen Cleanth Brooks’ critical doctrine as exemplary of the New Criticism in the postwar years. The reasons for choosing him as New Criticism’s representative are several. First of all, Brooks has always been the specific target of the New Critical detractors’ ire. Even though Brooks and Robert Penn Warren worked closely together, Warren usually went unscathed while the vituperation was left for Brooks. Secondly, it was specifically Brooks’ terms that gained such currency, Allen Tate’s ‘tension’ never quite caught on, nor did John Crowe Ransom’s ‘dualism’. Furthermore, besides Allen Tate, Brooks was the only prominent southern New Critic still active after the war: Ransom had stagnated, and Warren had moved onto other things like social activism and fiction. Although Brooks only arrived at the tail-end of the Agrarian movement⁹, he still shared their critical stance against modernity. We can see this cultural critique in an apparently timid piece of literary analysis like “Keats’ Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes” in *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947). The piece is a critique of the positivism, utilitarianism, and materialism, which

9 The Southern political group that the New Critics were part of for some time during the later twenties and early thirties. This group saw the encroaching modernization of the South by the North destroy the old, agrarian way of life in the south

Brooks and other New Critics rallied against in their Agrarian days. To them the values of positivism – what does it mean? –, utilitarianism – how can it be used? –, and materialism – what is it worth? – dominated the modern experience of reality. Since Brooks and other New Critics were post-Kantians they assumed that reality was always mediated, and questioned the firm grip these values seemed to have on reality. As Tate pointed out in typical bucolic fashion, scientific positivism had reduced the horse to ‘horse-power’ and no longer saw the whole horse. (Jancovich 1993: 24) The poem stood in direct contrast to this logic by providing a multifarious view of reality that denies any singular “meaning,” or classification. Poetry could make us see the horse anew, and realize all the potential of its horseness, so to speak. This is a point best expressed by Frank Lentricchia:

“The poem thus seen is not an escape from experience into the purities of aesthetic form, but an illumination of a rich and complex world that we normally deny ourselves the pleasure of contemplating because of the blinding classificatory drive of the propositional discourse that mediates the world for us day in day out.” (Lentricchia 1970: 245)

What made a poem a poem was not that it was, as Eagleton put it, “a disinterested reconciliation of opposing impulses,” but rather that it was a text “so dense with linguistic cross-pressures and cross-thrusts that the poet actually comes dangerously close to denying himself the unity (however complex) that any art object must have.” (Lentricchia 1970: 245) Thus Brooks’ criticism located the heterogeneity of reality within the complex structure of the poem itself. This heterogeneity of meaning was produced by the contradictions, the paradoxes, ironies, and tensions within the poem. Yet this does not mean we are supposed to view reality as paradoxical or ironic. Rather, if I understand Brooks correctly, he wants us to understand through paradox and irony that our reality is mediated, and therefore gain insight into the world around us. This was then Brooks’ way of defamiliarizing (to borrow an old term) us from our preconceptions and loosening the grip the discourses of modernity held over reality. This is why he concludes that Keats’ Grecian urn, his sylvan historian, is better than a formal historian because it does not propose a reality through facts, but shows us the very construction of a reality:

“[...] It takes a few details and so orders them that we have not only beauty but insight into essential truth. Its ‘history’, in short, is a history without footnotes. It has the validity of myth – not myth as a pretty but irrelevant make-belief, an idle fancy, but myth as a valid perception into reality.” (Brooks 1947: 164)

Thus Brooks uses Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn” to act against notions of history that rely exclusively on facts, because as he tells us, “we shall never get all the facts anyway” (164). This does not only strike at the heart of literary historian’s conception of truth and meaning, but is also a more general swipe at modernity’s conception of knowledge about the world. Since reality is always mediated, there is no one way to know the world. Therefore Brooks’, strongly Coleridgean, conception of imaginative insight is of just as much, if not more, value as positivistic reductionism. What should have become apparent from the discussion above is that the terms that Brooks uses, paradox, irony, and their forgotten sibling wit, are not the ends of poetry, but only a means to understanding those ends. This is what aforementioned critics like Eagleton, Cain, and Walhout miss. More importantly, paradox and irony were not used to elide other discourses out of the poem. Rather, by allowing a multiplicity of meanings it allowed the validity of each. The danger lay in focusing exclusively on one of them. This is why he warns of the heresy of paraphrase:

if we allow ourselves to be misled by it, we distort the relation of the poem to its “truth,” we raise the problem of belief in a vicious and crippling form, we split the poem between its “form” and its “content” – we bring the statement to be conveyed into an unreal competition with science or philosophy or theology. In short, we put our questions about the poem in a form calculated to produce the battles of the last twenty-five years over the ‘use of poetry.’ (Brooks 1947: 201-02)

Thus the New Critics never purged moral and social significance from literature, but showed how those aspects became part of the formal texture of the work itself. (Graff 1987: 148) To pick one element as its truth would be to undermine the complexity of that texture. In summary, the words paradox, irony, and the lesser used wit, were utilized by Brooks as indicator terms to signify the Horatian concordia discors in the text. They were to be used as tools to gain insight into our mediated experience of reality. So when Brooks stressed in *The Well Wrought Urn* that the language of poetry is the language of para-

dox he admits that this is an “overstatement.” (Brooks 1947: 3) Nevertheless at the time it seemed a sufficient trope that “may light up some elements in the nature of poetry which tend to be overlooked.

From the Language of Paradox to the Culture of Paradox

That the usage of the word paradox in the New Critical sense gained a life of its own is visible in Brooks’ annoyed preface to the 1968 edition of *The Well Wrought Urn* twenty years later. He assures us that “a number of misunderstandings might have been prevented if my readers had attended a little more carefully to the Preface or even the very first page of the first chapter” (Brooks 1968: ix). He even admits that if he had to write the Preface again he would have “been inclined to use somewhat different terms[...]”. We can clearly track this act of semantic perfidy on behalf of paradox and irony as they engage in relation to concepts outside of Brooks’ *New Critical Parameters*. We can do so because the critical piece in which he sets out these terms, “The Language of Paradox”, was introduced twice, so to speak. In the first instance it was published in a compilation of lectures by various critics called *The Language of Poetry*. (1942). Brooks later made it the opening chapter of *The Well Wrought Urn* in 1947 with some emendations. Since Brooks was still catering to a relatively select group in 1942, the concept of the language of poetry being the language of paradox was still new to some reviewers in 1947. The two different reactions to the thesis show a marked change over the small period of five years. Though it must be said that there were other critiques that did not change over time. The most common of these critiques is the very traditional one that the New Critics removed history from the poem. Other critics emphasized that their choice of authors was too limited. A sort of corollary to this is that they were too absolutist in their valuation of poetry. While still others argued that poetry could no longer have a didactic purpose. Of course there are also later critiques, for example, Paul de Man’s attack on the metaphor of internal and external to the text in “Semiology and Rhetoric.” (Man, de 1979: 132) In the 1942 responses to the language of paradox there was a tendency to see the use of the word paradox as too specific to be applicable to the subject matter. The argument at this point remains quite technical. For example, in his review Helmuth Kuhn questions whether what Brooks is pointing out is actually paradox. He writes: “In most of the illustrations we either fail to discover any

paradox at all or we find it difficult to see the relation between the paradox and the specifically poetic character of the words.” (Kuhn 1942: 233) He questions the very specificity of Brooks’ definition and argues that poetic language may exhibit certain special characteristics like “the analogical use of words and ideas”, but only under special conditions could that be seen as paradoxical. To Kuhn then it is not at all clear that paradox is so defining of the language of poetry. Arguing along similar lines B.E.C Davis comments that: “The particular instances cited would appear to corroborate the notion of poetry as ‘the language of paradox’; but unless the term ‘paradox’ is used in a very free sense its general application is conducive to over-subtlety.” (Davis 1943: 432) Davis also questions whether such a specific trope as paradox could have such a general application. It would require significantly broadening the definition of paradox, which would result in the word being so general that it would lose all of its critical value. A last example is the argument by reviewer Jeffery Smith, who states that Brooks’ definition of paradox is actually one-sided. Brooks focuses on paradox as an emotional, profound, and divinely irrational activity rather than an intellectual, clever, and rational one. Smith argues that paradox “[...] reveals itself as all of these, though the specific compound will result in effects as various as irony and wonder.” (Smith 1943: 302) This is of a slightly different order than the previous two examples, but it follows the same pattern. Once again paradox is seen as a very specific concept that produces certain effects. The difference between Smith and the others is that he emphasizes that this also means that paradox is not exclusive to poetry, but rather an exclusive activity in itself. It is a specific instance not general to any discourse, whether it be poetry or science. The general tendency during this period then seems to be that paradox is too specific a term to use to generalize all of poetry. In the reviews to *The Well Wrought Urn* in 1947 we see a shift in the perception of paradox. Paradox is no longer too specific; it is, in fact, too general. Since paradox was assumed to be everywhere then it could no longer be applied specifically to poetry. The most blatant statement of this viewpoint is the review of Josephine Miles. She comments:

“Life and death are bound to be paradoxical, especially in the dialectic our time, when conflict is the way we live and drama is the way we learn; and they are just as paradoxical on battle fields or baseball fields or balance sheets as in poems. Poetry is but one of the forms of paradox.” (Miles 1947: 185)

Thus Miles tries to undermine the argument of Brooks' special notion of paradox by showing that this is not something true of poetry, but simply true of their postwar world. It would have been one thing had she simply mentioned that there is paradox on battle fields, as this seems plausible, but the fact that she also mentions baseball fields and balance sheets is telling. Neither one seems to have any documented history of being particularly paradoxical: fly balls to center field seem as straight forward as net income equations. The postwar intellectual discourse had become so inflected with paradox that when Brooks publishes this thesis five years later it had an entirely different resonance.

We can find more support for this shift in Henry Wells's review in *Saturday Review of Literature*, which argued that Brooks' theory was nothing more than a bunch of "innocent truisms", "generally acknowledged everywhere." (As quoted in: Heilman 1983: 333) Although it is doubtful that the New Criticism was "generally acknowledged everywhere," it is interesting that Wells would use this as an argument to invalidate the New Criticism. The idea of poetry being paradoxical no longer seems new.

With the third review of Arthur Mizener we see a further development of the above theme. Not only are paradox and irony general conditions in a poem, they are indicative of our very critical pose. What Mizener emphasizes more than the other reviewers is the uncertainty that Brooks' analysis brings about. By showing how the structures of attitudes actually make it impossible to derive at the "meaning" of a poem, Brooks shows that the meaning is relative. Mizener argues that the "man on the street" is resistant to this. (Mizener 1947: 464) Conversely, at the same time the "man in the street" also had a hard time accepting the absolutism that universal concepts underlie these different poems. Mizener explains this problem quite well: "it is as dangerous to insist that poetry is the pattern, the structure of attitudes, as it is to insist that it is the materials, the attitudes themselves." (ibid. 466) This was the problem that Brooks was trying to work out: how to arrive at an analysis that properly does justice to both the content (attitudes) and the form (structure of attitudes) of a poem. Brooks solves the problem by not separating the poem into form and content, but by arguing that it is an organic unity that can only be approached through paradox, irony, and wit. It is then very telling how Mizener offers to solve the problem of critical valuation: "Perhaps the safest way, in the long run, is to deal with the critical sit-

uation as Mr. Brooks says poetry deals with situations, that is, dramatically, ironically, by paradox.” (ibid. 466) Thus for Mizener, Brooks’ critical pose not only becomes a way to look at poetry, but also a way of looking at criticism. That is to say we should see our own relation to the text as paradoxical and ironic.

Conclusion

In Mizener’s analysis we could most markedly see the earlier described shift. Paradox and irony, which Brooks himself, intended as terms within the realm of poetry become attitudes in relation to a world view. Yet Mizener is wrong in suggesting this. If I understand Brooks properly, he does not mean we should actually be ironic or paradoxical. These terms are actually a means to an end, and not an end in themselves. What Brooks and the New Critics professed was a post-Kantian doctrine that argued that reality was always mediated. They wanted to expose this mediation through irony and paradox. It was not so much that we should see the world as paradoxical or ironic – as other critics seem to think the New Critics argued – but that we should use paradox and irony to expose the mediating discourses of modernity: positivism, utilitarianism, and materialism. In doing so, we inhibit our classificatory drive and come to a fuller, more complete understanding of reality. If we return to the aforementioned argument against the new criticism that seemed to draw a relation between its ascension and postwar McCarthyism and conformity, we can see that such a relation is problematic if not plain wrong. Indeed it does not stand to reason that a doctrine that promotes, essentially, a more open-minded few of reality would be in any way fundamentally related to the totalizing views of McCarthyism. Since it never denied that a poetic text contained all sorts of discourses – e.g. history, politics, religion, etc – it promoted a heterogeneous view of reality. Although their types of readings did not promote any type of overt political reading, it was not a recipe for “political inertia” as Eagleton argues. (Eagleton 1983: 50) Eagleton seems to rely on the fact that a textual politics would directly correlate to a personal politics. This seems simplistic. After all, there are many people working in fields that are not political, say physicists, who are still political. Indeed the New Critics may not have been politically active in their textual analysis, but they certainly were active in their personal politics. If Eagleton had taken the time to look into the lives of these men, he should

have noted that they were never politically passive. Brooks intervened, when under the auspices of McCarthyism his friend William Carlos Williams was accused of being a Communist and kept from a job. (Leick Winter 2001-2002: 36) Allen Tate, critical of pretty much everything, spoke out against both the dogma of Communism and Capitalism, and questioned the motivations behind the Marshall Plan during his speeches at the Congress for Cultural Freedom. (Tate *The Man of Letters in the Modern World* 1968: 15) Robert Penn Warren became an activist in the desegregation movement and wrote a book on its behalf: *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South* (1957). So even if the New Critics seemed to preach political acquiescence, they certainly did not practice it. Perhaps the best argument against Eagleton is one made by Tate in 1951, who writes: "Because poetry may influence politics, we conclude that poetry is merely politics, or a kind of addlepatated politics, and thus not good for anything." (Tate *To Whom Is the Poet Responsible?* 1968: 19) That is to say that just because poetry and literary theory have a political dimension does not mean they are exclusively political. After all, there is more to literature than politics, and there is certainly more to politics than literature.

The problem of political quietude then is not so much with the New Criticism, but with the way their language gets appropriated to fit the needs of postwar culture. In an era which generally preached conformity, New Critical language was ready prey for the influence of larger discursive configurations, especially considering that their two main tropes, paradox and irony fitted well into this discourse. Hence, while Brooks intended his use of paradox to be used specifically for poetry, poetry became just one of the many sites where paradox could be found. Indeed, we can clearly see the distention of "paradox" as a trope. At first it seemed like a term that was far too specific for poetry, while later it became a term that was far too general to apply to just poetry. It is then fascinating to see the historical contingency of the New Criticism's success. This contingency ended up being a mixed blessing. The tax levied for their popularity was the attenuation of their cultural critical platform.

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