Introduction

Cluster on the Poetic: From Euripides to Rich

IN 1952, A GROUP of literary critics belonging to the “Chicago school” contributed to an anthology entitled *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern*, edited by R. S. Crane. The first section of the anthology had a polemical thrust. It included essays addressing the theoretical shortcomings of two of the then new New Critics: Crane wrote on Cleanth Brooks’s *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947) and Elder Olson on an interpretation of Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Robert Penn Warren (1946).

Crane and Olson (as well as Norman Maclean, essays by whom appeared elsewhere in the volume) were my undergraduate teachers at Chicago in the 1940s. My studies with them instilled in me certain tenets regarding poetry and the criticism of poetry that, through forty years of further training and scholarly and critical activity, I have continued to rely on. In brief, poems exist in the realm of making (mimesis) rather than of knowing or doing: they are representations of human experience created by poets, not speeches uttered by, or speech acts performed by, individuals who happen to be poets. The medium of poetic representation is language made distinctive by such purely formal features as rhythms, patterns of sound, and layout on the printed page. The experiences represented are charged, like real experiences, with emotional and moral meanings. In writing about a poem, the critic starts with its perceived effects and powers and attempts to trace them to internal contributory causes. The selection of causes for discussion depends partly on the critic’s interests and partly on the characteristics of the poem. Two questions about the poem figure as primary: what kind of thing is it, and how does it work?

I have found this method to have the virtue, among others, of allowing for an unpredictable variety of kinds of poems and poetic excellences not limited in advance by theoretically defined desiderata. It does not

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privilege thought over emotion, or complexity over simplicity, or the restrained or implicit over the overt or obvious. It thus differentiates itself sharply from methods characterized by some form of what Crane called “monism” and found in the New Criticism generally: Brooks’s critical writings, for example, were based on “no principle save that denoted by the words ‘irony’ or ‘paradox’ from which significant propositions concerning poems can be derived,” and similar “monistic reduction” was manifest in “Allen Tate’s doctrine of ‘tension,’ in John Crowe Ransom’s principle of ‘texture,’ in Robert Penn Warren’s obsession with symbols” (“Critical Monism” 84). So, too, Olson faulted Warren for thinking that a poem was “meaningless” unless it had a moral that could be taken seriously (140). For the Chicago school, the poem, as Wallace Stevens says of the sun, “must bear no name . . . but be, / In the difficulty of what it is to be” (208). It exists as an artifact representing experience in prosodically signalized language and takes form partly from human meanings linking it to the domains of the psychological, the moral, and, by extension, the political.

But the difficulties of “what it is to be” have ramified and intensified, in ways and to a degree that no one in the 1940s and 1950s could have predicted. The aesthetic, the psychological, the moral, and the political have been redefined during the last thirty years in theoretical processes that show no signs of abating. In the aesthetic sphere, attention has shifted from the poem defined by the Chicago critics as an achieved, effective, and singular artifact and from the poem defined by the New Critics as a self-contained system of meanings (specified as tensions, or ironies, or paradoxes, or symbols) to the relation between what is “manifest” and what is “latent” in a poem or any other literary text. As a result, the ambivalences and thwartings besetting all human self-expression, and the effect on the creative product of the artist’s underlying preoccupation with the task itself, have been thrown into relief.

Contemporary models of the structure and development of the psyche, including the psyche of the literary artist, go beyond Freud’s now canonical account to include not only the contributions of his immediate successors but also the radical revisions presented in feminist theoretical writings. These last, in turn, belong to one branch of a larger enterprise that has drawn the attention of women and men alike to the signs of centuries of patriarchal domination and definition stamping every aspect of inherited culture. Revelations of the evils National Socialism and Communism visited on their victims have been supplemented by the publicizing of injustices within Western democracies, while continuing conflicts among nations, populations of differing ethnic heritage, and groups defined by sexuality, social class, and doctrine have brought about an uneasy awareness of the difficulties involved in defining, let alone fulfilling, one’s moral and political responsibilities.

These redefinitions—aesthetic, psychological, moral, and political—have given form to the cluster of essays that follows. I see the studies by Roger W. Herzel and Judith Ryan as primarily aesthetic in emphasis;
those by Jahan Ramazani, Susan E. Gustafson, and Anne Williams as primarily psychological; those by Lyell Asher, Mark Jones, James L. Kastely, and Adrienne Rich as primarily moral and political. But this division oversimplifies. Aesthetic questions figure in many of the psychologically, morally, and politically oriented essays. Ramazani pays tribute to his poet's creative transcending of genre restrictions; Gustafson subjects traditional concepts of beauty and unity in the verbal and visual arts to her own feminist critique; Williams analyzes plot, character, and imagery. As an aid in the explication of moral ambiguities, Asher identifies a latent "subplot" whose meaning runs counter to that of the "manifest text" he analyzes, and he avails himself of a useful concept in Freud; Jones, in addition to placing his poem in a context of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century "material economics," applies an updated conception of parody to solve the problem of genre the poem raises.

Eight of the essays subject the works of major poets and dramatists (including one treatise on aesthetics) to historical, analytical, and theoretical scrutiny. Predictably, they invoke a wide range of precursors. Venerable authorities appear, along with newly prominent figures: Freud (Asher, Ramazani, Williams); Burckhardt, Cassirer, and Curtius (Asher); Gombrich (Gustafson); Jakobson (Jones); Arendt and Weil (Kastely); Benjamin (Ryan)—but also Derrida (Asher), Kristeva (Gustafson, Ramazani, Williams), Lacan (Gustafson), Barthes and Bakhtin (Jones), Nussbaum (Kastely), de Man (Ramazani), Gilbert and Gubar (Ramazani), and Cixous (Williams). Needless to say, these eight essays, for all their diversity, cannot fully represent what is being written about poetry and poetics. Issues of canonicity are nowhere raised in them. No gay or lesbian poets appear, nor, indeed, is any of the authors discussed in any way marginal. The ninth essay, an excerpt from Adrienne Rich's forthcoming What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics, corrects these limitations. Rich looks at the final decades of this century, seeing them as a time of intensifying brutality and injustice on a global scale. She constructs a contemporary defense of poetry, seeing it as a means of binding together with "ties of love and ... attention," of lyricism and activism, those whose bitterness and fury would otherwise be condemned to silence.

Of the eight scholarly pieces, Kastely's has the earliest subject. The essay explores a set of interrelated concepts, including justice, reason, power, and law, as they figure in the public world of Euripides's time and in his tragedy Hecuba and argues that it is not possible to write off the final actions of the heroine as brutal and meaningless. Asher, in his analysis of Petrarch's "The Ascent of Mont Ventoux," plumbs the dichotomy between self-effacement and self-exhibition in medieval conversion narrative. Herzel shows that Racine's stage settings, instead of conforming to a single abstract design as they have been thought to do, varied strikingly in ways that deliberately emphasized key themes in the plays. Gustafson discusses the views Lessing sets forth in Laokoon as
everywhere reflecting the disgusted repudiation or "abjection" of the
female by male authors, who seek to stabilize the cultural and symbolic
order by imposing on it the "law of the father." Jones finds in the
opposition between the spiritual and material values, alike irreducible,
of Wordsworth's double economics a "compelling image mirroring the
reader's own dilemma." Williams sees Coleridge's *The Rime of the
Ancient Mariner* as narrating a "spectral flight from unspeakable hor-
rors," itself horror-ridden, that reenacts a Kristevan journey from the
maternal and material toward the paternal realm of the symbolic. Ryan
finds in exemplary poems by Baudelaire and Rilke an interrelated set of
subtexts referring to successive movements in the history of French art
and literature. Ramazani, taking both psychoanalytic and literary-criti-
cal approaches to a series of poems by Plath in which she invokes the
figure of her dead father, reads them as elegies powerfully shattering
gender and genre codes. In Rich's essay, moral and political values
become virtually indistinguishable from aesthetic ones; the activists
Barbara Deming and Alva Myrdal are in effect poets, "seeking connec-
tion with unseen others," while a poem such as Audre Lorde's "Power"
is the defiant gesture of an activist "driven against the wall" by white
male authority.

Borrowing words again from Stevens, I would describe the critics
represented in the cluster as a task force engaged in the general project
of making "the visible a little hard / To see" (251), supplementing,
correcting, and complicating received ideas and thus making poetry
more resistant to the intelligence, with its love of familiar and accessible
truths. I am amused to note that in Williams's essay, Warren's analysis
of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which Elder Olson condemned over
forty years ago as a display of "uncontrolled analogy" (144), is first
invoked as "canonical" and then dismissed as a specimen of "musty
critical metaphysics." The plum survives its poems, Stevens says (70);
the poem in turn survives its critics, and criticism, one may hope, survives
its moment. What in the world will a *PMLA* cluster on poetry and poetics
look like forty years from now?

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**Works Cited**

Olson, Elder. "A Symbolic Reading of the *Ancient Mariner.*" *Crane*, *Critics* 138–44.