(1) John Crowe Ransom, from The New Criticism

IV

Wanted:

AN ONTOLOGICAL CRITIC

A POEM differentiates itself for us, very quickly and convincingly, from a prose discourse. We have examined some important new critics who sense this fact but do not offer a decisive version of what the differentia is.

It is not moralism, for moralism conducts itself very well in prose, and conducts itself all the better in pure or perfect prose. And the good critics who try to regard the poem as a m^2 1 discourse do not persuade themselves, and discuss the poem really on quite other grounds.

It is not emotionalism, sensibility, or "expression." Poetry becomes slightly disreputable when regarded as not having any special or definable content, and as identified only by its capacity for teasing some dormant affective states into some unusual activity. And it is

impossible to talk definitively about the affections which are involved, so that affective criticism is highly indistinct.

Much more promising as a differentia is the kind of structure exemplified by a poem. The good critics come round to this in the end. But it is hard to say what poetry intends by its odd structure. What is the value of a structure which (a) is not so tight and precise on its logical side as a scientific or technical prose structure generally is; and (b) imports and carries along a great deal of irrelevant or foreign matter which is clearly not structural but even obstructive? This *a*- and *b*-formulation is what we inevitably come to if we take the analysis our best critics offer. We sum it up by saying that the poem is a loose logical structure with an irrelevant local texture.

It is my feeling that we have in poetry a revolutionary departure from the convention of logical discourse, and that we should provide it with a bold and proportionate designation. I believe it has proved easy to work out its structural differentiation from prose. But what is the significance of this when we have got it? The structure proper is the prose of the poem, being a logical discourse of almost any kind, and dealing with almost any content suited to a logical discourse. The texture, likewise, seems to be of any real content that may be come upon, provided it is so free, unrestricted, and large that it cannot properly get into the structure. One guesses that it is an order of content, rather than a kind of content,

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that distinguishes texture from structure, and poetry from prose. At any rate, a moral content is a kind of content which has been suggested as the peculiar content of poetry, and it does not work; it is not really peculiar to poetry but perfectly available for prose; besides, it is not the content of a great deal of poetry. 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.

This should not prove unintelligible. We live in a world which must be distinguished from the world, or the worlds, for there are many of them, which we treat in our scientific discourses. They are its reduced, emasculated, and docile versions. Poetry_intends to recover the denser and more refractory original world which we know loosely through our perceptions and memories. By this supposition it is a kind of knowledge which is radically or ontologically distinct.

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I have failed to find a new critic with an ontological account of poetry. But I almost thought I had found a new philosopher, or aesthetician, with one. It would have been Mr. Charles W. Morris, of the University of Chicago and the *Encyclopedia of Unified Science*. I had his name at first in the title at the top of this chapter. But I could not study his aesthetical achievement very long without sceing that, though he got to the point

where one further step would have taken him into an ontological conception of poetry, he held back and did not take that step; either as if he lacked the speculative curiosity to go further, or as if the prospect ahead of him impressed him vaguely as dangerous, probably threatening some disparagement of the paramount prestige of science.

The writings of Mr. Morris which bear on our discussion are, first, the presentation of his now-famous semantic system, Foundations of the Theory of Signs, in Vol. I, No. 2, of the Encyclopedia; and, applying his new semantics to art, the two essays, "Science, Art and Technology," in The Kenyon Review of Autumn, 1939, and "Aesthetics and the Theory of Signs," in The Journal of Unified Science, Vol. VIII.

Mr. Morris as a semanticist finds that all discourse consists in signs, and that any sign functions in three dimensions. There is the syntactical dimension, involving all of what we should call its logic; there is the semantical dimension proper, involving the reference of the sign to an object; and finally the pragmatical dimension, involving whatever reference there may be in the sign, implicit or explicit, to its psychological, biological, and sociological uses. I cannot here enlarge upon this outline. There is no short-cut to Mr. Morris' knowledge; his own account will need to be read, and then re-read. I think it will appear to the reader that he has a genius for fixing sound distinctions, and imposes remarkable order on a field that has hitherto been filled with confusion.

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I have but one source of hesitation. I do not quite sense the coördinate equality, as a component in the signfunctioning, of the pragmatical dimension with the other two. It is like according a moral dimension to poetry because there are some poems which not only present their own content but in addition moralize about this content. We may reflect that they need not do so, and that many other poems do not do so, and that the moral value we may find for the poem seems somewhat external to the poem itself. But at any rate Mr. Morris makes the pragmatical dimension quite distinct from the others, if not subsidiary, and that is something. Science, in Mr. Morris' view, need not be very conscious of any pragmatics; and so it may be, in our view, with art; really it is technology, or applied science, that is decidedly pragmatical.

For Mr. Morris not only distinguishes three irreducible dimensions of meaning, but finds as well three irreducible forms of discourse: science, art, and technology. These seem to him to emphasize respectively the semantical, the syntactical, and the pragmatical dimensions. To us, as I have just remarked, art will seem specially affiliated with science, and further away from technology, in not having any necessary concern with pragmatics or usefulness. But in another sense it is closer to technology and further from science. We recall our old impression, or perhaps we recall our knowledge of the Greek Philosophers, to the effect that art, like technology, is concerned with making something, as

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well as knowing something; while pure science seems concerned only with knowing something. And what poetry makes—and the word means a making—is the poem, which at least in respect to its meter is a discourse with a peculiarly novel and manufactured form, and obviously a rather special unit of discourse.

With regard to the credibility of aesthetic discourse, Mr. Morris pronounces handsomely enough: like scientific discourse, it is objective, and knowledge-giving. He says:

It is true, I believe, that the aesthetic sign, in common with all signs, has all three dimensions of sign functioning; such a position seems a wise corrective to the common but too simple view that the artist simply "emotes" or "expresses himself" without any concern for actuality.

But if art as knowledge seems to Mr. Morris capable of the same sort of validity that science has, and at times to be indistinguishable from science in this respect, it has a remarkable differentia, and is forever unlike science, in the following respect. 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

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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.

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The significance of this distinction that immediately flashes upon us, though it does not seem to be noticed by Mr. Morris, is that the object symbolized by a scientific sign would seem to be abstract, as, for example, a single property or aspect of objects, whereas the object symbolized by an iconic or aesthetic sign must be a whole object. And even if both seem to refer to the whole object, and the same object, there is a difference; the scientific sign is of "man," and the iconic sign is of "this particular man." By general convention the man of scientific discourse is the definable and "essential" man, whose definition involves a single set of values which are constant and negotiable for logical discourse. The man of the iconic sign is evidently imitable, or imaginable, but not definable. In brief, under the iconic sign the abstract item is restored to the body from which it was taken.

The iconic character of aesthetic signs is given by Mr. Morris in a rather matter-of-fact sort of testimony; yet it is almost the more impressive just because he does not draw the exciting implications. It amounts to a late restoration of the old commonsense doctrine of art as "imitation," to which Plato and Aristotle adhered, but which most modern aestheticians have abandoned as something absurdly simple. "Imitation" is a commonplace locution, thought unworthy of the aesthetic occa-

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sion; yet I can imagine our aestheticians solemnly accepting the doctrine of "icons" because it sounds technical; actually of course it is one of the two ordinary terms in which the Greeks rendered the idea of imitation. And since Mr. Morris is affiliated in the project of the *Encyclopedia* with naturalist, positivist, and pragmatist philosophers, I think of this enlightened testimony as another evidence of what I have hoped for: the capacity of radical modernist philosophy to apprehend and testify to kinds of truth that do not necessarily suit its own preoccupations, which are scientific ones.

It is sometimes difficult to say what is being "represented" by an aesthetic icon; in music, for example; or in a poem which makes discourse without referring specifically to concrete material objects. We think of "reflective" poetry which is truly poetry, and is imaginative, and yet without brilliant isolated object-images. Mr. Morris makes no question but that any variety of poetry employs iconic signs. And he offers at one point an analysis of "abstract" painting for the purpose of showing that it denotes ultimately the structure of the natural world.

It is less difficult, and I believe Mr. Morris does not remark this problem, to see how the poem, which is a discourse in words, may offer icons as easily as a painting does. The icons here are in the mind, they are the mental images evoked. The technical use of language by the poet is one that lifts words out of their symbolic

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or definitive uses into imaginative or image-provoking uses.

And that is almost as far as Mr. Morris goes. He claims that art is especially interested in the syntactical dimension of discourse, but offers almost no study of how art makes a syntax out of its peculiar mixture of pure symbols and iconic signs. That would become a study of almost monumental significance. Is its syntactical validity comparable with that of science? Is its syntactical validity comparable with its own semantical validity, which Mr. Morris is good enough to accept as beyond question?

Science deals exclusively in pure symbols, but art deals essentially, though not exclusively, in iconic signs. This makes at once a sharp formal or technical distinction between the two forms of discourse; but one would think it must become at once a philosophical distinction also. Mr. Morris elicits chiefly the consequence that no treatment of the arts can be included within the *Encyclopedia of Unified Science*. Only semiotic, the theory of signs, which makes its own entry as prefatory to the body of the work, may remark for the sake of formal exclusion upon the contrasted arts. But one might think that semiotic required a closer and therefore surer study of the arts than that; for example, a study of the question why science did not choose, or had not the constitutional

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capacity, to employ iconic signs also; and, of course, of the ontological question itself, respecting the grades of content that the two discourses handled through their different sorts of signs, and the elemental or categorical nature of scientific knowledge as determined through the comparison with acsthetic knowledge.

In the independent essays outside the Encyclopedia Mr. Morris does offer some results of his own study. They seem to me inadequate. For example:

The view proposed is that the aesthetic sign designates the value properties of actual or possible situations and that it is an iconic sign (an "image") in that it embodies these values in some medium where they may be directly inspected (in short, the aesthetic sign is an iconic sign whose designatum is a value). To give content to this statement it would be necessary to analyze in detail the notion of value and the characteristics of iconic signs, but this is neither practical nor advisable in the present context. For whatever theory of value be maintained, it must be recognized that objects have value properties among their total set of properties (an object can be insipid, sublime, menacing, oppressive, or gay in some contexts just as it may have a certain mass or length or velocity in other contexts) and that aesthetic media, since they themselves are objects, can embody certain value properties (a

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small piece of cork could hardly be sublime, but it could be insipid or even gay).

Here it seems to me that Mr. Morris in effect is about to recant from his doctrine of the icons. The icon here is only a medium denoting, by embodying, a value; but a symbol is that much; he should say that the icon is a body imitating some actual embodiment of the value. And what value? I do not think he makes it clear either, even with the help of his illustrations, how an icon embodies a value-property, or what sorts of values aesthetic discourse ordinarily is interested in. Certainly it sounds as if the aesthetic value-properties were quite different from the scientific ones; gaiety and sublimity, among others, for aesthetic value-properties, mass and velocity for scientific ones. It is rather suspicious that several of the aesthetic value-properties mentioned might be said to be affective ones, whereas the scientific value-properties mentioned are objective physical ones; so that Mr. Morris' aesthetic theory looks at this point like another version of affective or psychologistic theory. But we require much more detail from him about all this.

Briefly, we may say that the observations of Mr. Morris are promising, and even exciting: aesthetic discourse is objective knowledge, and its constituent signs have the remarkable character of being icons. But the sequel is disappointing. An icon merely embodies some certain value-property or other. That is all we are told about its

operation. And as to the human significance, the usefulness or pragmatical function, of the operation, Mr. Morris' imagination is again very timid. For example:

... the scientist may be helped in the scientific study of values by the vivid portrayal of the value whose conditions he endeavors to trace.

And similarly:

The technologist in turn can only be grateful for the vivid presentation of the values whose status in nature he attempts to control.

The artist is pictured here as furnishing the icons which embody the precise and single scientific values, not the values causing the massive affective states referred to in the previous quotation. But his virtue seems to lie solely in the technical assistance, or else the moral encouragement, which his icons lend to the scientist and technologist in their need.

The aesthetic project has turned out very small and ignominious after its fine beginnings in Mr. Morris' hands.

We might sketch here, though tentatively and rudely, a really ontological argument, such as Mr. Morris' preliminaries seemed to invite.

The validity of a scientific discourse depends in part, we should say, on its semantical purity. That is, each symbol should refer to an object specifically defined, or having a specific value-aspect, for the discourse; and

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throughout the discourse it should have exactly that reference and no other. The reference of a single symbol is limited, and uniform.

In aesthetic discourse, however, we replace symbols with icons; and the peculiarity of an icon is that it refers to the whole or concrete object and cannot be limited. As Mr. Morris says, an icon "embodies" the value-property that is the object of discourse. But "embodies" is a great word, and Mr. Morris ought to accept its consequences. Certainly he offers no rule as to how the valueproperty may be isolated in the body of the containing icon, or placed in the center, or otherwise made to stand out so that we shall be sure to attend to it rather than to the containing body.*

The icon is a particular. A particular is indefinable; that is, it exceeds definition. In the play, the icon is our image of Prince Hamlet, and it is never twice the same, so that the rule of consistent definitive reference is abrogated with each reappearance. A particular has too many properties, and too many values. If a kind of discourse is accredited (and given a semantical bill of

• It is true that in one context he talks about the icon as representing a "consummatory" or final value, as if constituting the image of a body so obviously meant for consumption, so ripe for immediate consumption, that nobody could resist knowing the value it meant to put forward. But even so I do not know what the body is for. The body is an impediment, and has to be waived, in order to attend to the value that interests the consumer, or even the strict discourser. But it is much easier to suppose that the body is there to be attended to as much as the value; and that attention to the body may not be characteristic of scientific discourse, but is the distinguishing characteristic of aesthetic discourse.

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health) which proposes to deal in particulars, as one must propose to do which deals in icons, then it is removed far indeed from scientific discourse; it decidedly invites philosophical attention, and one must be prepared to make dispositions which are heroic, because in the present state of theory they will be altogether novel.

The syntactical dimension is imperiled, upon the introduction of icons into discourse, along with the semantical. It will apparently be impossible for discourse to compel its icons to function in the strict logic which we have learned to expect from the symbols. The logic of art will probably be variable in the degree of its validity, but always in degree lower than that of science. At the same time we shall probably incline to assert that it will have no validity at all unless it holds itself together at least in part by true symbols. So the aesthetic discourse will be discovered, one expects, making digressions from its logic with its icons at local points; or perhaps maintaining itself on the whole in terms of valid symbols, but occasionally and suddenly building a routine symbol out into the icon denoting the full body of the object of which the symbol denotes only a single value-property. But the semantics and the syntactics of art together invite the most exacting study if we care to identify them really.

In scientific discourse we deal with a single valuesystem at a time. In art only the paraphrase, of which Mr. Morris gives an adequate account, and which is the "moral," the theme, or the argument of the discourse, offers the single-value system; the work itself goes beyond its paraphrase into the realm of the natural objects or situations themselves, which are many-valued.

Art as a discourse, indeed, is anomalous, and all but incredible; a discourse which looks legitimate so long as it looks merely scientific, but every moment or so turns up its icons, in which it hardly seems that discourse could take place.

Science, as Mr. Morris says, is statemental, and its statements have predictive value. But art employs icons, which being particulars are contingent and unpredictable. Art seems to permit us to predict only some order of unpredictability.

But principles of this sort are ontological. The world of predictability, for example, is the restricted world of scientific discourse. Its restrictive rule is: one value at a time. The world of art is the actual world which does not bear restriction; or at least is sufficiently defiant of the restrictiveness of science, and offers enough fullness of content, to give us the sense of the actual objects. A qualitative density, or value-density, such as is unknown to scientific understanding, marks the world of the actual objects. The discourse which tries systematically to record this world is art.

As to the pragmatics of the poetic act, or its "psychological, biological, and social" motivation, I have almost nothing to suggest. It seems very idle to assume, as Mr. Morris does in effect, that the pragmatical intention of art is the same as that of science; we would ask him why

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scientists should not commit themselves then to aesthetic as well as scientific discourse. But the psychologists have not furnished us with decisive motivations for this as for many other acts. It is an act of knowledge. The scientific and aesthetic ways of knowledge should illuminate each other; perhaps they are alternative knowledges, and a preference for one knowledge over the other might indicate an elementai or primary bias in temperament. But even if the pragmatical sanction behind the act has to be improvised, and psychologically is less than regular, nevertheless it seems certain that the act is imperative.

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At this point I shall venture to abandon the framework of Mr. Morris' speculations. They have provided considerable moral reinforcement for the inquiry. I wish • to start a little further back in the ontological analysis of the poem.

The critic of a poem knows that the labor of composing it was, at the least, a verbal exercise in search of a language which on the one hand would "make the meter" and on the other hand would "make the sense." He knows it so well that perhaps he is past being curious about the fact, or having any critical use for it. He would say that it pertains to the practical branch of poetics but not to the critical.

But it is still strange to us, who are not agreed on any standard version of the natural history of the form, that poetry should ever have coveted a language that would

try to do not one hard thing but two hard things at once. Extravagant exercises with language are not the rule by which logical men have arrived at their perfections of thought. The composition of a poem is an operation inwhich the argument fights to displace the meter, and the meter fights to displace the argument. It would seem that the sacrifices made on both sides would be legible forever in the terms of peace, which are the dispositions found in the finished poem, where the critic may analyze them if he thinks it furthers the understanding of poetry. Most critics seem to think it does not, for they do not try the analysis, nor the philosophical speculations it might suggest. On the contrary, it is common for critics to assume that a good poet is in complete control of his argument, and that the meter has had no effect on it, or if anything points its logic all the better, and that the form of the argument is perfect.

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 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 meter-and-meaning process is the organic act of poetry, and involves all its important characters.

Let us suppose a lady who wishes to display a bowl of fruits upon her sideboard and says to her intelligent houseboy: "Go to the box of apples in the pantry and

select and bring me a dozen of the biggest and reddest ones." The box contains a hundred apples, which vary both in bigness and in redness. And we will suppose, as it is easy to suppose, that there is no definable correlation between the bigness and the redness; a big apple is not necessarily a red one, and vice versa. The boy interests himself in the curious problem, and devises the following solution.

He ranges the apples first in order of their bigness, and denotes the biggest as B1, the next as B2, and so on down to B100. Then he ranges the apples in order of their redness, and denotes the reddest as R1, the next reddest as R2, and so on down to R100. Then for each apple he adds the numerical coefficient of its bigness and the numerical coefficient of its redness; for example, the apple which is tagged B1 is also tagged R36, so that its combined coefficient is 37. He finds the twelve apples with lowest combined coefficients and takes them to his mistress.

She will have to concede, as he has conceded, that cojects systematically valued for two unrelated properties at once are likely not to be superlative in either property. She will not secure the perfection of her object in one aspect if she is also trying to secure its perfection in another aspect. She has committed herself to a twoground basis of selection, and her selections on the one ground have to accommodate themselves to her selections on the other ground. It is a situation in which some compromises are necessary.

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But she may find an unexpected compensation. In regretting the loss of certain nearly solid-red apples, which are denied to her because they are little, she may observe that the selected apples exhibit color-patterns much more various, unpredictable, and interesting. She finds pleasure in studying their markings, whereas she would have obtained the color-value of her solid-red apples at a glance.

I am sorry to think that no such compensation appears for her putting up with second-best apples in the respect of size; which is a stupid category. But here the analogy of the bigness-redness relation in apples does not represent properly the meter-meaning relation which we are to examine in poetry.

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Much more difficult than the selection of apples that shall be both big and red is the composition of a poem on the two ground basis of (1) an intended meaning and (2) an intended meter. In theory the feat seems impossible, unless we are allowed to introduce some qualifications into the terms. It is true that language possesses two properties, the semantic and the phonetic; that is, respectively, the property of referring under fairly fixed conventions to objects beyond itself, which constitute its meaning, and the property of being in itself a sequence of objective physical sounds.

I assume that there is hardly necessity for an extended argument to the effect that a perfect metrical construc-

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tion, of which the components were words selected from the range of all actual words, and exclusively for phonetic effects, would not be likely to make sense. It would be nonsense. Nor for another argument to show that a pure logical construction would not be likely to make meter. The latter case we have with us always, in our science, in the prose of our newspapers and business correspondence, in our talk. Even so, there might be some instruction in considering for a moment such a little piece of mathematical discourse as this:

$(a + b)^2 = a^2 + s ab + b^3$.

Here the mathematician is saying exactly what he means, and his language is not metrical, and we can discover if we try that he does not want any poet to meter it, on the matter-of-fact ground that the poet would have to take liberties with his logical values. At once a question or two should present themselves very vexingly to the nebulous aesthetician: What sort of liberties does the poet take with a discourse when he sets it to meter? And what sort of discourse is prepared to permit those liberties?

An argument which admits of alteration in order that it may receive a meter must be partly indeterminate. The argument cannot be maintained exactly as determined by its own laws, for it is going to be un-determined by the meter.

Conversely, a metrical form must be partly indeterminate if it proposes to embody an argument. It is use-

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less to try to determine it closely in advance, for the argument will un-determine it.

The second principle, of the two just stated, may seem the less ominous. To most poets, and most readers, the meaning is more important than the meter.

I offer a graph, which will be of course an oversimplification, to show the parts which meaning and meter play in the act of composition.



D M stands for determinate meaning, or such of the intended meaning as succeeds in being adhered to; it may be fairly represented by the logical paraphrase of the poem. I M stands for indeterminate meaning, or that part of the final meaning which took shape not according to its own logical necessity but under metrical compulsion; it may be represented by the poem's residue of meaning which does not go into the logical paraphrase. D S stands for the determinate sound-structure, or the meter; and LS stands for whatever phonetic character the sounds have assumed which is in no relation to the meter.

In theory, the poem is the resultant of two processes

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which come from opposite directions. Starting from the left of the graph, the poet is especially intent upon his meter, D S, which may be blocked out as a succession of unaccented and accented syllables arranged in lines, perhaps with rhyme-endings; but there is D M, a prose discourse, which must be reduced into the phonetic pattern of the meter; his inclination is to replace its words with others from the general field of words which suit the meter, and without much regard for their logical propriety. But he is checked by the converse process, in which the poet starts from the right of the graph with firm possession of D M, a prose meaning, but has to assimilate to it D S, the metrical pattern that he has chosen; his inclination is to replace the required metrical sounds with others that suit his logic and are not quite so good for the meter.

Actually, a skillful piece of composition will have many stages of development, with strokes too subtle and rapid to record, and operations in some sort of alternation from the one direction and the other. The poet makes adaptations both of meter to meaning (introducing I S) and of meaning to meter (introducing I M). For the sake of the pictorial image, I assume the final poem to be the body of language lying between the intersecting arcs at the center; the one arc (on the left) representing the extreme liberties which meaning has taken with meter, and the other arc (on the right) representing the extreme liberties which meter has taken with meaning. Both arcs are required for the bounding of the poem.

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The most interesting observation for the critic, perhaps, is that the poem is an object comprising not two elements but four; not merely a meaning M, but D M, that part of a meaning which forms a logical structure, and I M, a part which does not belong to the structure and may be definitely illogical, though more probably it is only additive and a-logical; and not merely D S, a meter, but I S, a part of the total sound-effect which may be in exception to the law of the meter but at any rate does not belong to it. These elements are familiar enough to the poet himself, who has manipulated them. Frequently they are evident to the critic too. They should be, very substantially; they are capable of being distinguished to the extent that he is capable of distinguishing them. Logically they are distinct elements, now, in the finished poem, though it may not be possible to trace back the precise history of their development under the tension of composition.

I cannot but think that the distinction of these elements, and especially of D M and I M, is the vocation par excellence of criticism. It is more technical than some other exercises which go as criticism, but more informed. It brings the criticism of poetry to somewhat the same level of professional competence as that of the

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discussions which painters sometimes accord to paintings, and that which musicians sometimes accord to music; and that means, I think, an elevation of our normal critical standard.

If a poet is a philosopher, explicitly or implicitly, treating matters of ethical or at least human importance -and it is likely that he is that-the discussion of his "ideology" may be critical in every sense in which one may be said to criticize systematic ideas; but the ideas of the poet, struggling but not quite managing to receive their really determinate expression, are only his D M, and a better version is almost certain to be found elsewhere in prose, so that their discussion under the poem is likely to be a tame affair. Few poets serve, as Wordsworth and Shelley may be thought to do, as texts for the really authoritative study of ideas; mostly they serve amateur ideologists for that purpose, or serve distinguished critics who fall back upon this sort of thing because nothing is quite prescriptive in their vocation. The more interesting thing to study is the coexistence and connection of D M and I M-the ideas and the indeterminate material in which they are enveloped. This kind of study is much severer, but its interest is profounder and more elemental than the merely ethical; it is an ontological interest.

Possibly an examination of poetry along these lines might finally disclose the secret of its strange yet stubborn existence as a kind of discourse unlike any other. It is a discourse which does not bother too much about

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the perfection of its logic; and does bother a great deal, as if it were life and death, about the positive quality of that indeterminate thing which creeps in by the back door of metrical necessity. I suggest the closest possible study of I M, the indeterminate meaning.

But there are two kinds of indeterminacy in I M, and I wish to show how the poet in metering his argument yields reluctantly to the first, as to an indeterminacy that means only inaccuracy and confusion, and then gladly to the second, as to an indeterminacy that opens to him a new world of discourse.

1 / First, he tries to shift the language within the range of a rough verbal equivalence, and to alter D M no more substantively than necessary. A given word will probably have synonyms. The order of words in a phrase may be varied. A transitive predication may be changed to a passive; a relative clause to a participial phrase. In the little words denoting logical connections and transitions a good deal of liberty may be taken without being fatal; they may be expanded into something almost excessively explicit, or they may be even omitted, with the idea that the reader can supply the correct relations. A single noun may become a series of nouns, or nearly any other element may be compounded, without introducing much real novelty. Epithetical adjectives and adverbs may be interpolated, if they will qualify their nouns and verbs very obviously. Archaic locutions may be introduced for contemporary ones. A poet is necessarily an accomplished verbalist, and capable of an al-

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most endless succession of periphrases that come nearer and nearer to metered language until finally he achieves what he wants; a language that is metrical enough, and close enough to his intended meaning.

Mr. C. D. Abbott at the library of the University of Buffalo is collecting a very large number of work-sheets from living poets, with the idea of securing an objective exhibit of the actual process of perfecting poems by revision. The most immediate use of these manuscripts that will suggest itself will surely be the critical study of the way poets tinker with given phrases in order to adapt them to the metrical pattern. Presently there should be a voluminous bulk of evidence on this point. But anybody who has tried versification can predict the sort of evidence that will turn up. Meanwhile we may see what evidences there are in the final poems themselves.

Wordsworth would probably be cited by the historian as one who metered his language with more method than inspiration, especially in his longer work. Here is a passage from the *Prelude*, where he is talking about the power of poetry, and its habitation in a place called "the mystery of words":

... there,

As in a mansion like their proper home, Even forms and substances are circumfused By that transparent veil with light divine, And through the turnings intricate of verse Present themselves as objects recognized In flashes, and with glory not their own.

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It is easy to find specific disagreeable lapses of logic here. There are the painful inversions of order, clearly in the interest of metric: light divine and turnings intricate. The line As in a mansion like their proper home is certainly a curious involution for As in a mansion which is their proper home. The third and fourth lines are not transparent for us like the veil talked about: does the veil possess and give off the divine light; and if not, how does it circumfuse the forms and substances with it? The brevity of statement is either pure laziness on Wordsworth's part, or it is a recourse to elliptical expression invited by metrical exigencies. But at this point all our little objections pass into a big and overwhelming one: there is really in this passage scarcely any specific discourse of respectable logical grade. We do not know what any of these pretty things is, or does. No prose would be cynical enough to offer so elusive a content. The mansion, the forms and substances, the magic veil, the divine light, the movement of the turnings, the flashes and the borrowed glory,-these look like responsible and promising objects, but none of them establishes a sufficient identity when they all assemble together. The poet became a little paralyzed, we may imagine, when he took pen in hand to write a poem; or got that way after going a certain distance in the writing of a long one. I go beyond the direct evidence here, but I assume that making distinguished metrical discourse was such a job, and consisted in his own mind with so much corruption of

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the sense at best, that he fell into the habit of choosing the most resounding words, and stringing them together as the meter dictated. This is not unusual in Romantic poetry. The point to make about Romantic poetry now is not the one about its noble words, but a negative and nasty one: the noble words are almost absurdly incoherent.

But Pope was not a Romantic, and I suppose the language has known no poet more nice in his expression. I quote:

> Close by those meads, forever crowned with flowers, Where Thames with pride surveys his rising towers,

There stands a structure of majestic frame,. Which from the neighboring Hampton takes its name.

Here Britain's statesmen oft the fall foredoom Of foreign tyrants and of nymphs at home; Here thou, great Annal whom three realms obey, Dost sometimes counsel take—and sometimes tea.

With so great a master of language, it is a little dangerous to insist on the exact place where the meter coming in drove some of the logic out. But the superiority of his logic over Wordsworth's is not so overwhelming as it seems; for the most part it is merely that his improvisations are made to look nearly natural, as if he thoroughly intended them all the time, and meter had nothing to do

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with them. The flowers is arrived at gracefully, but the chief source of any "inevitability" claimed for it is the fact that it rhymes with towers, which is more important to the discourse. In four lines we come to Hampton Court, where will presently appear Belinda, whom we have left traveling in her boat on the Thames. Hampton Court has a location with respect to the Thames which we need to know, under the principles of a logical narrative argument; and at Hampton Court assemble the royalty and the fashionable gentry, which we must know too; these are the necessary facts. Hampton Court is close by those "rising towers" which are London-on-Thames, and that is enough as to its location; it is a matter of course that it will be close by the meads too, since the towers will rise out of the meads by the river rather than rise out of the river. If we should invert the two lines, as follows,

> Near where proud Thames surveys his rising towers, And where are meads forever crowned with flowers,

something would happen not only to the euphony of the language but to the respectability of its logic, for then it would be plain that the meads and flowers line is chiefly useful for filling up a couplet. But the next couplet lacks honest logical economy too. The structure of majestic frame is nothing but a majestic structure, with a rhymetag added, and the account of the naming of Hampton

Court is a metrical but logically a gratuitous expansion of the simple recital of its name. The other two couplets both employ rhyme-words, and contexts to assimilate them, which are so incongruous that they have to be employed in discourse as the occasions of wit. As logicians we need not take much stock in wit as forwarding, argument, even when it is free from suspicion as a device to look after difficult rhyme-pairings; it supposes such a lack of an obvious logical relation between two things that any technical bridge of connection must be accepted; but our approval goes to the architect, not to his work; and as for that, the poet's appearance in his own argument is a major irrelevance. No honest "argument" prefaced to a poem would cover the poet's witticisms. We condemn Romantic poets for injecting their burning sentiments into an objective argument, but other poets are given to wit, which is likewise at the expense of argument and logic." A final remark will sound a little captious. Hampton Court is in mind, but the word "Court" is not used and possibly its absence troubles the poet; at any rate if he does not have a court he supplies

. Mr. Cleanth Brooks reproves the sentimentality of simple poets, but puts himself rather off guard by his blanket counter-endorsement of the wit of university or sophisticated poets. If we had an aesthetician's version of Horace's fable of the town mouse and the country mouse, we should be sure to find the latter uttering countrified sentimental discourse, and scorned by the other; but the discourse of the town mouse not only would be smart, it would presently become over-. smart, and silly; so that in the long run we should smile at her as at the country cousin, and for much the same reason: naïveté, as plain in personal vanity as in simplicity. Elizabethan comedy finds its butt in the smart town character as readily as in the country simpleton.

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the short passage with three royalties. There is the lady of the meads, a figurative queen, with a crown of flowers; Thames, a figurative patriarch, and at least a prince with all his rising towers (though a little while earlier there was a feminine character of the same name upon whose "silver bosom" Belinda rode in her boat); and actual Queen Anne. It scems an excessive profusion of royalties.

There are certainly readers of the Binomial Theorem who are prohibited by conscience from the reading of poetry; we have just been looking at some of the reasons. On these terms meter may be costing more than it is worth. Milton thought of the possibility, and went so far as to renounce its most binding device, the rhyme; it is employed by

some famous modern Poets, carried away by Custom, but much to their own vexation, hindrance, and constraint to express many things otherwise, and for the most part worse, than else they would have expressed them.

But greater purists might apply this logic to all the rest of the metrical devices. We turn to Milton'z own unrhymed verse, and find:

Thus while he spake, each passion dimm'd his face

Thrice chang'd with pale, ire, envy and despair, Which marr'd his borrow'd visage, and betray'd Him counterfeit, if any eye beheld.

The argument of this narrative passage would explain how Uriel, deceived once by Satan in his "stripling cherub's" disguise, perceives now his identity through the satanic passions registered in his appearance, and initiates the next cycle of action by informing the angels guarding Paradise. But the language, as is common enough with Milton, from the point of view of logic is almost like a telegraphic code in its condensation, and omission of connectives; it is expansible to two or three times its length in prose, and readable only with difficulty by unaccustomed readers. Yet it also lapses from strict logic in precisely the opposite direction, by the importation of superfluous detail. The three successive increments of pallor and their respective causes would seem beyond the observation of Uriel, in the sun, and in fact we learn presently that what Uriel actually marked was Satan's "gestures fierce" and "mad demeanor." Milton is aware of this, and gives himself a technical alibi in our passage by being careful to say that the pallor-stages betrayed the fraud not necessarily to Uriel but to any good eye that might be close enough to see them. Still, if Uriel did not see them they do not matter.

It would have been hard to persuade Milton out of this passage, with its deficiencies and superfluities; but suppose we might have proposed an alternative version, which would seem safely eclectic and within the standard traditional proficiencies of poetry; and I shall not mind appearing ridiculous for the sake of the argument:

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Speaking, rank passion swelled within his breast Till all the organism felt its power, And such a pallor in his face was wrought That it belied the angelic visage fair He had assumed. Uriel, unsleeping guard, With supernatural vision saw it plain.

But Milton in his turn would instantly have gibed at it, and on our terms; at the dangling participle and the poetic inversion, as violations of good syntax; and then at the constant tendency, perhaps proceeding from our nervous desire to come with some spirit out of an embarrassing situation, to exceed the proper logical content, as shown in all four first lines by the verbs, *swelled*, *felt*, *was wrought*, and *belied*. They are ambitious, and start our minds upon little actions that would take us out of the plane of the argument.

Returning to rhymed verse, there is this passage from a poem which deserves its great fame, but whose fabulous "perfections" consist with indeterminacies that would be condemned in the prose of scientists, and also of college Freshmen; though I think in the prose of college Seniors they might have a different consideration:

> Had we but world enough, and time, This coyness, lady, were no crime. We would sit down, and think which way To walk, and pass our long love's day. Thou by the Indian Ganges' side Should'st rubies find: I by the tide

Of Humber would complain. I would Love you ten years before the flood, And you should, if you please, refuse Till the conversion of the Jews; My vegetable love should grow Vaster than empires and more slow.

I will use the pedagogical red pencil, though I am loath. World, as distinguished from time, is not space, for the lovers already have all the space in the world, and long tenure would not increase it. It is a violent condensation meaning, I think, "the whole history of the world before us," and combining with the supposal of their having the time to live through it; it supports the historical references which follow. We would, thou should'st, my love should: the use of the auxiliaries is precise, varying according to rule from person to person, and uniformly denoting determination or command; "we would arrange it so." But it is remarkable that in so firm a set of locutions, which attests the poet's logical delicacy, the thou should'st is interchangeable with you should; the meter is responsible for the latter version, since otherwise we should have the line, And thou should'st, if thou pleased'st, refuse, or, taking the same liberty with tenses which we find actually taken (again for metrical reasons), And thou should'st, if thou pleas'st, refuse; but either line clogs the meter. Which way is one phrase, but language is an ambiguous thing, and it has two meanings: in which direction as applied to walk,

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and in what manner as applied to pass our day. The parallel series in lines 5-7 is in three respects not uniform: Ganges has little need of a defining adjective, except the metrical one, but when once it has become Indian Ganges there is every right on the part of its analogue to be styled English Humber; and Ganges' side calls for Humber's side, or for merely Humber's, with side understood, but rhyme produces for Humber a tide; and the possessive case in the first member would call for the same in the second member, but is replaced there actually by an of phrase. Refuse brings out of the rhyming dictionary the Jews, which it will tax the poet's invention to supply with a context; but for our present purposes the poet has too much invention, for it gives him the historical period from the Flood to the conversion of the Jews, which is a useless way of saying ten thousand years, or some other length of time, and which seems disproportionate to the mere ten years of the same context, the only other period mentioned. Vegetable is a grotesque qualification of love, and on the whole decidedly more unsuitable than suitable, though there are features in which it is suitable. Vaster would correlate with slower, not with more slow, but they would not be correlatives at all after grow, for vaster is its factitive complement and slower can only be for more slowly, its adverb. Finally, there is the question of how the vastness of the poet's love can resemble the vastness of empires; the elegance of the terms seems to go along with the logic of a child.

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,7) But the important stage of indeterminacy comes, in the experiment of composition, when the imagination of the poet, and not only his verbal mechanics, is engaged. An "irrelevance" may feel forced at first, and its overplus of meaning unwanted, because it means the importation of a little foreign or extraneous content into what. should be determinate, and limited; but soon the poet comes upon a kind of irrelevance that seems desirable, and he begins to indulge it voluntarily, as a new and positive asset to the meaning. And this is the principle: the importations which the imagination introduces into discourse have the value of developing the "particularity" which lurks in the "body," and under the surface, of apparently determinate situations. When Marvell is persuaded by the rhyme-consideration to invest the Humber with a tide, or to furnish his abstract calendar with specifications about the Flood, and the conversion of the Jews, he does not make these additions reluctantly. On the contrary, he knows that the brilliance of the poetry depends on the shock, accompanied at once by the realism or the naturalness, of its powerful particularity. But the mere syllabic measure, and not only the rhyme, can induce this effect. When the poet investigates the suitability of a rhyme-word for his discourse, he tries the imaginative contexts in which it could figure; but the process is the same when he tries many new phrases, proposed in the interest of the

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rhythm, for their suitability, though his imagination has to do without the sharp stimuli of the rhyme-words. And by suitability I mean the propriety which consists in their denoting the particularity which really belongs to the logical object. In this way what is irrelevant for one kind of discourse becomes the content for another kind, and presently the new kind stands up firmly if we have the courage to stand by it.,

The passages cited above were in support of the negative and corrupt I M, but they illustrate also the positive I M, which is poetic texture, for the critic, and ontological particularity, for the philosopher. Wordsworth has the most abstract argument, but instead of pursuing it closely and producing a distinguished logical structure-it might have come to a really superior version of the argument we are here trying to build up, something about the meaning of poetry-he wavers towards some interesting concrete objects, producing a mansion, a veil, a light, and a set of intricate turnings; but here too he is stopped, as if by some puritan inhibition, from looking steadily at his objects to obtain a clear image; so that his discourse is not distinguished either for its argument or for its texture. Pope unquestionably has the narrative gift, which means that he has access to the actual stream of events covered by the abstract argument; he is one of many poets prefiguring our modern prose fiction, and knows that he may suspend his argument whenever he pleases, provided he may substitute another equally positive content, namely, a sub-narrative

account of the independent character and history of its items. Milton looks principally like a man out of a more heroic age than Pope, in the casualness and roughness of his indeterminacy, but he is bolder also in the positive detail: nothing in Pope's passage compares with his stopping to name the three specific passions in the mind of Satan, and to imagine each one as turning Satan's visage paler than the one before had left it. As for Marvell, we are unwilling to praise or to condemn the peccadilloes of his logic, and here is a case where we take no account of the indeterminacy of the bad sort that results from the metering process, and that distresses so many hard-headed readers. This is all overshadowed, and we are absorbed, by the power of his positive particulars, so unprepared for by his commonplace argument.

Indeterminacy of this positive or valuable sort is introduced when the images make their entry. It looks as if there might be something very wise in the social, anonymous, and universal provision of metrical technique for poetry. The meter seems only to harm the discourse, till presently it works a radical innovation: it induces the provision of icons among the symbols. This launches poetry upon its career.

The development of metrical content parallels that of meaning. As the meter undetermines the meaning

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and introduces I M, so the meaning un-determines the meter and introduces "variations," or I S.

The usual minimum of a meter, in English practice, is a succession of lines having a determinate number of determinatesfeet, and a foot is some syllabic combination having one accented syllable. The most general consequence is that a unit of phonetic structure-a few lines of blank verse, a stanza unit of rhymed verse, a sonnet or whole poem sometimes-is superimposed upon a unit of meaning-structure; within it the foot may not coincide with the word or small logical unit, but the two structures use precisely the same constituent language in the long run, and come out at the end together; and this is a summary feat of remarkable coördination, when we approach it with the prejudice of a person used to working in pure structures, that is, in one structure at a time. In reading the poem we have our ear all the time immediately upon the progress of the meter, just as we have our discursive mind all the time on the course of the argument; so that the two structures advance simultaneously if not by the same steps, and every moment or so two steps finish together, and two new steps start together. And what we call a "phrase" is at once a period in the argument and a definable element in the metrical structure, and "phrasing" means to the poet the act of grouping the words to serve the two purposes simultaneously.

We may suppose that the phonetic effect and the