

CLEANTH BROOKS THE WELL-WROUGHT URN (1947)

"The Heresy Of Paraphrase"

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This is the concluding chapter to Brook's book and, thus, something of a retrospective theoretical afterword to the practical criticism of particular poems (e.g. by Keats) performed in the previous ten chapters. These poems, he argues, all share what he terms a "common goodness . . . not in terms of 'content' or 'subject matter' . . . , but rather in terms of structure" (193). Distinguishing between the "attractiveness or beauty of any particular item taken as such and the 'beauty' of the poem considered as a whole" (194) which is the "effect of a total pattern" (194), he finds the term 'structure' unsatisfactory in many ways. By it, he intends something more than mere "metrical pattern" (194) or the "sequence of images" (194). It is not

'form' in the conventional sense in which we think of form as a kind of envelope which 'contains' the 'content.' The structure obviously is everywhere conditioned by the nature of the material which goes into the poem. The nature of the material sets the problem to be solved, and the solution is the ordering of the material. (194)

For this reason, Brooks defines structure as one of meanings, evaluations, and interpretations; and the principle of unity which informs it seems to be one of balancing and harmonising connotations, attitudes and meanings. . . . [T]he principle is not one which involves the arrangement of the various elements into homogeneous groupings, pairing like with like. It unites the like with the unlike. It does not unite them, however, by the simple process of allowing one connotation to cancel out another nor does it reduce the contradictory attitudes to harmony by a process of subtraction. The unity is not a unity of the sort to be achieved by the reduction and simplification appropriate to an algebraic formula. It is a positive unity, not a negative; it represents not a residue but an achieved harmony. (195)

Brooks stresses his quest to find "adequate terms" (195) that do justice to the special kind of structure which seems to emerge as the common structure of poems so diverse on other counts as are The Rape of the Lock and "Tears, Idle Tears" (195), terms which include "'ambiguity,' 'paradox,' 'complex of attitudes,' and 'irony'" (195).

Brooks rejects the "conventional" (196) view that the poem "constitutes a statement of some sort, the statement being true or false, and expressed more or less clearly or eloquently or beautifully; for it is from this formula that most of the common heresies about poetry derive" (196). This formula introduces a "dualism" (196), leaving the critic "lodged upon one or other horn of a dilemma: the critic is forced to judge the poem by its political or scientific or philosophic truth; or he is forced to judge the poem by its form as conceived externally and detached from human experience" (196). He cites a critic of the New Critics, Alfred Kazin, who "accuses the 'new formalists' of accepting the latter horn of the dilemma" (196): "since they refuse to rank poems by their messages, he assumes that they are compelled to rank them by their formal embellishments" (196). This alleged dilemma, Brooks argues, is a false one not least because of the "resistance which any good poem sets up against all attempts to paraphrase it" (196). Though we can "very properly use paraphrases as pointers and shorthand references" (196), the

paraphrase is “not the real core of meaning which constitutes the essence of the poem” (197) for the “imagery and the rhythm are not merely the instruments by which this fancied core-of-meaning-which-can-be-expressed-in-a-paraphrase is directly rendered” (197). The reason for this is simple, Brooks feels: “whatever statement we seize upon as incorporating the ‘meaning’ of the poem, immediately the imagery and rhythm seem to set up tensions with it, warping and twisting it, qualifying and revising it” (197). This is true, he argues, of Wordsworth’s “Ode,” Donne’s “The Canonisation,” Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock,” and Herrick’s “Corinna’s Going a-Maying,” for example.

The tension informing poems such as these is not resolved in any simplistic way. We “mistake matters grossly” (198), he argues,

if we take the poem to be playing with opposed extremes, only to point the golden mean in a doctrine which, at the end, will correct the falsehood of extremes. The reconciliation of opposites which the poet characteristically makes is not that of a prudent splitting of the difference between antithetical overemphases. (198)

Arguing that all attempts to formulate the “‘statement’ made by” (199) a poem “lead away from the centre of the poem – not toward it” (199), Brooks’ point is that the “‘prose-sense’ of the poem is not a rack on which the stuff of the poem is hung; that it does not represent the ‘inner’ structure or the ‘essential’ structure or the ‘real’ structure of the poem” (199). Such views, he argues, are merely “scaffoldings which we may properly for certain purposes throw about the building; we must not mistake them for the internal and essential structure of the building itself” (199). Indeed, he emphasises that

most of the distempers of criticism come about by yielding to the temptation to take certain remarks which we make *about* the poem – statements about what it says or about what truth it gives or about what formulations it illustrates – for the essential core of the poem itself. (199)

To take such a view is to ignore the fact that “form and content, or content and medium are inseparable. The artist does not first intuit his object and then find the appropriate medium. It is rather in and through his medium that he intuits the object” (199).

Theories of criticism that ignore this truth, Brooks argues, “frankly treat the poem as propaganda” (200): they “beginning with the ‘paraphrasable’ elements of the poem, refer the other elements of the poem finally to some role subordinate to the paraphrasable elements” (200). Such a view ignores the fact that the “relation between all the elements must surely be an organic one” (200).

Such critics are guilty of what Brooks terms the “paraphrastic heresy” (200). They “refer the structure of the poem to what is finally a paraphrase of the poem” (201) which is to “refer it to something outside the poem” (201). Most of our “difficulties in criticism are rooted in the heresy of paraphrase” (201) by which we “distort the relation of the poem to its ‘truth’” (201) and “split the poem between its ‘form’ and its ‘content’” (201) and get dragged into controversies over the “use of poetry” (202). We “run the risk of doing . . . violence to the internal order of the poem itself” (202), we “misconceive the function of metaphor and metre. We demand logical coherence where they are sometimes irrelevant, and we fail frequently to see imaginative coherences on levels where they are highly relevant” (202). Though “to deny the possibility of pinning down what the poem ‘says’ to some ‘statement’ will seem to assert that the poem really says nothing” (202), Brooks insists that “one can never measure a poem against the scientific or philosophical yardstick for the reason that the poem, when laid against the yardstick, is never the ‘full poem’ but an abstraction from the poem” (202).

Having asserted what a poem is not, Brooks then attempts to offer a “positive account of what a poem is and does” (203). The

essential structure of a poem (as distinguished from the rational or logical structure of the 'statement' which we abstract from it) resembles that of architecture or painting: it is a pattern of resolved stresses. . . . [T]he structure of a poem resembles that of a ballet or musical composition. It is a pattern of resolutions and balances and harmonisations, developed through a temporal scheme. . . . [T]he structure of a poem resembles that of a play . . . for the very nature of drama is that of something acted out – something which arrives at its conclusion through conflict – something which builds conflict into its very being. The dynamic nature of drama . . . allows us to regard it as *an action* rather than as a formula for action or as a statement about action. . . . The general point . . . is not that either poetry or drama makes no use of ideas, . . . or that there is not the closest and most important relationship between the intellectual materials which they absorb into their structure and other elements in the structure. The relationship between the intellectual and non-intellectual elements in a poem is actually far more intimate than the conventional accounts would represent it to be: the relationship is not that of . . . 'prose-sense decorated by sensuous imagery.' (203-204)

To be sure, ideas can always be abstracted from poems, but the "idea which we abstract . . . will always be *abstracted*" (205). Any "proposition asserted" (205) in a poem is "justified in terms of the poem . . . not by virtue of its scientific or historical or philosophical truth, but . . . in terms of a principle analogous to dramatic propriety" (205). Such enigmatic phrases as Keats' "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" is "given its precise meaning and significance by its relation to the total context of the poem" (205). Brooks considers the possibility that a reader may ask whether it is "possible to frame a proposition, a statement, which will adequately represent the total meaning of the poem" (205), a "summarising proposition which will 'say' . . . what the poem 'says' as a poem" (205). Brooks' answer: the "poet himself obviously did not – else he would not have had to write his poem" (206). Such an undertaking "may well help toward an understanding" (206) but we should not "*mistake them for the inner core of the poem*" (206). If "we take them to represent the essential poem, we have to disregard the qualifications exerted by the total context as of no account" (206).

Brooks argues that "to deny that the coherence of a poem is reflected in a logical paraphrase of its 'real meaning' is not . . . to deny coherence to poetry" (206) but "to assert that its coherence is to be sought elsewhere" (206). This is because the characteristic unity of a poem . . . lies in the unification of attitudes into a hierarchy subordinated to a total and governing attitude. In the unified poem, the poet has 'come to terms' with his experience. The poem does not merely eventuate in a logical conclusion. The conclusion of the poem is a working out of the various tensions . . . by propositions, metaphors, symbols. The unity is achieved by a dramatic process, not a logical; it represents an equilibrium of forces, not a formula. It is 'proved' as a dramatic conclusion is proved: by its ability to resolve the conflicts which have been accepted as the *données* of the drama. (207)

This is why the

relation of each item to the whole context is crucial, and why the . . . essential structure of the poem has to do with the complex of attitudes achieved. A scientific proposition can stand alone. If it is true, it is true. But the expression of an attitude, apart from the occasion which generates it and the situation which encompasses it, is meaningless. (207)

The poet may appear to be “continually engaged in blurring our distinctions, effecting compromises, or at the best, coming to his conclusions only after provoking and unnecessary delays” (208). But this too is merely a variant of the paraphrastic heresy: “to assume it is to misconceive the end of poetry – to take its meanderings as negative, or to excuse them . . . because we can conceive the purpose of a poem to be only the production, in the end, of a proposition – of a statement” (208). The “meanderings of a good poem . . . are not negative, and they do not have to be excused” (208). They perform a “positive function” (209): the “apparent irrelevancies which metrical pattern and metaphor introduce become relevant when we realise that they function in a good poem to modify, qualify, and develop the total attitude which we are to take in coming to terms with the total situation” (209).

Brooks stresses that he is not positing “some new and special role” (209) for poetry. He is merely, he believes, describing the “essential structure” (209) common to all good poems: one of “‘gestures’ or attitudes” (209). This is why terms like ‘irony’ and ‘paradox’ are essential to his project. By the former, associated as it often is with satire, etc., he does not mean to suggest that the poem is “arch and self-conscious” (209), but rather to denote the “kind of qualification which the various elements in a context receive from the context” (209). It is our “general term for indicating that recognition of incongruities which . . . pervades all poetry” (209-210). It captures the way in which the “thrusts and pressures exerted by the various symbols in this poem are not avoided by the poet: they are taken into account and played, one against the other” (210). This is what differentiates poetry from science: because scientific terms are “abstract symbols which do not change under the pressure of the context. They are pure (or aspire to be pure) denotations” (210) that “are not to be warped into new meanings” (210). By contrast, “where is the dictionary which contains the terms of a poem? It is a truism that the poet is continually forced to remake language. As Eliot has put it, his task is to ‘dislocate language into meaning’” (210). The word, “as the poet uses it, has to be conceived of, not as a discrete particle of meaning, but as a potential of meaning, a nexus or cluster of meanings” (210).

“What is true of the poet’s language in detail is true of the larger wholes of poetry” (211), Brooks contends. “When we consider the statement immersed in the poem, it presents itself to us, like the stick immersed in the pool of water, warped and bent. Indeed, whatever the statement, it will always show itself as deflected away from a positive, straightforward formulation” (211). Alluding to Eliot’s essay “The Metaphysical Poets,” Brooks stresses that Donne, though reputed to be the “great master of metaphor who imposes a clean logic on his images” (211) by contrast to the images of other poets such as Shakespeare deemed “fumbling and loose” (211), himself most often “uses ‘logic’ . . . to justify illogical positions. He employs it to overthrow a conventional position or to ‘prove’ an essentially illogical one” (211). He nearly always uses an “ironic logic to state the claims of an idea or attitude which we have agreed, with out everyday logic, is false” (211). This is true, for example, of “The Canonisation” where the final paradoxical outcome of the poem is that two lovers deserved to be canonised as saints: this is shocking because one is not accustomed, Brooks argues, to thinking of erotic love as akin to agape or spiritual love. This is why Brooks suggests that the “same principle that inspires the presence of irony in so many of our great poems also accounts for the fact that so many of them seem to be built around paradoxes” (212). It is not a matter of “rhetorical vain-glory” (212) that “poet after poet” (212) chose “ambiguity and paradox rather than plain discursive simplicity” (212). This is because it is

not enough for the poet to analyse his experience as the scientist does,
breaking it up into parts, distinguishing part from part, classifying the

various parts. His task is finally to unify experience. He may return to us the unity of the experience itself as man knows it in his own experience. The poem, if it be a true poem is a simulacrum of reality – in this sense, at least, it is an ‘imitation’ – by *being* an experience rather than a mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction from experience. (213).

A poem is a “dramatisation” (213) of being which “demands that the antithetical aspects of memory be coalesced into one entity which – if we take it on the level of statement is a paradox, the assertion of the union of opposites” (213). “If the poet . . . must perforce dramatise the oneness of the experience, even though paying tribute to its diversity, then his use of paradox and ambiguity is seen as necessary” (213). He is “giving us an insight which preserves the unity of experience and which, at its higher and more serious levels, triumphs over the apparently contradictory and conflicting elements of experience by unifying them into a new pattern” (214).