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Blindness and Insight

Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism

Second Edition, Revised

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Introduction by Wlad Godzich

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XI

The Dead-End
of Formalist Criticism

As a new generation enters the scene, a certain unease manifests itself in French literary criticism. This uncertainty prevails at once in the concern over fundamental methodological issues, and in the experimental, or polemical, character of several recent works. Roland Barthes's book-length essay, *Writing Degree Zero*, for example, asserts its own terrorism; and Jean-Pierre Richard's two books, *Littérature et Sensation* and *Poésie et Profondeur*, have recourse to a method whose systematic and exclusive use takes on the dimensions of a manifesto, an impression further reinforced by the author's own preface and that provided by Georges Poulet, both of which stress their opposition to other critical idioms. Explicitly, Poulet and Richard are opposed to Blanchot in the name of a criticism whose initiators would have been Marcel Raymond and Albert Beguin, and whose philosophical

Translator's note: This article was written for the express purpose of introducing the New Criticism to French readers at the moment that there were some stirrings in French Criticism, but before the advent of Structuralism on the literary scene.

underpinnings would be found in Bachelard, Jean Wahl, and Sartre—a grouping that, in the case of every one of these, requires reservations and qualifications. Implicitly, they are also opposed to the historical and philological scholarship of the universities, from traditional explicatio de texte to the writings of Etiemble, as well as to other current trends: Jean Paulhan’s work, Marxist criticism, history of ideas, etc. All of these trends—and there are others—are mutually incompatible.

In the United States, the state of criticism appears more stable. It is well known that since roughly 1935, alongside traditional approaches to criticism such as the historical and the sociological or the biographical and psychological, there has arisen a trend that without constituting a school or even a homogeneous group, nevertheless shares certain premises. These are the authors generally known under the term “New Critics” (even though, once again, this term does not designate a well-defined group) and they can generally be subsumed under the denomination of “formalist” criticism—a term we will seek to make more explicit later on. This movement has come to wield considerable influence, in journals and in books, and especially in university teaching; to such an extent that one could legitimately speak of a certain formalist orthodoxy. In some cases, an entire generation has been trained in this approach to literature without awareness of any other.

It is true, though, that at the very moment when it comes into its own, this generation is apt to turn against the training of which it is the product. Recently there have been attacks upon the methods of the prevalent criticism and calls for a clean sweeping away, a new start. It is hard to tell if these are portents of a more general reaction or merely individual and isolated occurrences. But even if it were on the point of being overtaken, formalist criticism would still have made a considerable contribution: on the positive side, by fostering the refinement of analytical and didactic techniques that have often led to remarkable exegeses; on the negative side, by highlighting the inadequacies of the historical approach as it was practiced in the United States. But it is also interesting from the perspective of theory: its internal evolution leads it to put into question the conception of the literary work upon which it was implicitly founded. Its development may well have a premonitory value for the new French criticism just as the latter, especially in the case of Roland Barthes, appears to be moving in the direction of a formalism not that different from New Critics' particular clear fashion for demonstrative value for a particularly clear fashion for den or unconscious philosophy, it brings them out to ontological questions.

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4. I. A. Richards, Principles of Literature and Co., 1926), p. 32. Richards’s reason of what he calls “experiences” are of a moral order consists for him in a corre these needs can be evaluated through
in the direction of a formalism that, appearances notwithstanding, is not that different from New Criticism. In addition, it also has a certain demonstrative value for ontological criticism, for it proceeds in particularly clear fashion from a theory based upon more or less hidden or unconscious philosophical presuppositions. In its own inadequacy, it brings them out to the surface, and thus leads to authentic ontological questions.

It has been said that all of American formalist criticism originates in the works of the English linguist and psychologist I. A. Richards. As a historical statement such an assertion is questionable, for the mutual relations of American and English criticism are rendered more complex by the existence of purely native strands on both sides; but it is certainly true that Richards's theories have found fertile terrain in the United States, and that all American works of formalist criticism accord him a special status.

For Richards, the task of criticism consists in correctly apprehending the signifying value, or meaning, of the work; an exact correspondence between the author's originary experience and its communicated expression. For the author, the labor of formal elaboration consists in constructing a linguistic structure that will correspond as closely as possible to the initial experience. Once it is granted that such a correspondence is established by the author, it will exist for the reader as well, and what is called communication can then occur. The initial experience may be anything at all and need not have anything specifically "aesthetic" about it. Art is justified as the preservation of moments in "the lives of exceptional people, when their control and command of experience is at its highest degree..." The critic's task consists in retracing the author's journey backward: he will proceed from a careful and precise study of the signifying form toward the experience that produced this form. Correct critical understanding is achieved when it reaches the cluster of experiences elicited through reading, insofar as they remain sufficiently close to

4. I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1926), p. 32. Richards's reasons for attaching such an importance to the knowledge of what he calls "experiences" are of a moral order. As a disciple of Bentham's utilitarianism, moral order consists for him in a correctly hierarchised organization of human needs, and these needs can be evaluated through the study of the "experiences" of consciousness.
the experience or experiences the author started out with. It becomes possible then to define a poem, for example, as the series of experiences comprised within such a cluster. Since there are numerous possibilities of error in the carrying out of these analytical tasks, it is Richards's intention to elaborate techniques for avoiding them; but there never is the slightest doubt that in every case a correct procedure can be arrived at.

This theory, which appears to be governed by common sense, implies, in fact, some highly questionable ontological presuppositions, the most basic of which is, no doubt, the notion that language, poetic or otherwise, can say any experience, of whatever kind, even a simple perception. Neither the statement "I see a cat" nor, for that matter, Baudelaire's poem "Le Chat" contains wholly the experience of this perception. It can be said that there is a perceptual consciousness of the object and an experience of this consciousness, but the working out of a logos of this experience or, in the case of art, of a form of this experience, encounters considerable difficulties. Almost immediately the existential status of the experience seems to be in question, and we conclude by considering as constructed that which at first appeared to be given; instead of containing or reflecting experience, language constitutes it. And a theory of constituting form is altogether different from a theory of signifying form. Language is no longer a mediation between two subjectivities but between a being and a non-being. And the problem of criticism is no longer to discover to what experience the form refers, but how it can constitute a world, a totality of beings without which there would be no experience. It is no longer a question of imitation but one of creation; no longer communication but participation. And when this form becomes the object of consideration of a third person who seeks to state the experience of his perception, the least that can be said is that this latest venture into language will be quite distant from the original experience. Between the originary cat and a critic's commentary on Baudelaire's poem, quite a few things have occurred.

Nonetheless, Richards postulates a perfect continuity between the sign and the thing signified. Through repeated association, the sign comes to take the place of the thing signified; and consciousness is consciousness of "the missing part of the sign, or, more strictly, 'of'

5. This theory is outlined in Principles of Literary Criticism, pp. 127ff.

6. Ibid., p. 127.
7. In reference to this problem, one can and that of the phenomenologist and art
Kunstwerk (Halle, 1931; 3rd ed., Tübingen
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ruled by common sense, intuitional presuppositions, notion that language, poetic whatever kind, even a simple act of a cat nor, for that matter, wholly the experience of this perceptual consciousness of consciousness, but the working the case of art, of a form of difficulties. Almost immediately it seems to be in question, and that which at first appeared perceiving experience, language form is altogether different there is no longer a mediation of being and a non-being. And discover to what experience this world, a totality of beings is. It is no longer a question for communication but parallax the object of consideration of his perception, an adventure into language will have place. Between the originary object of his poem, quite a few things project continuity between the created association, the sign referred; and consciousness is the sign, or, more strictly, 'of' consciousness.

anything which would complete the sign as cause.' The cat is the cause of the consciousness that perceives the cat; when we read the word "cat," we are conscious of the sign "cat" inasmuch as it refers back to the cause of this sign. Richards adds immediately that, for such a consciousness to be specific as experience perforce is, language must achieve a spatial and temporal determination, implying, for example, "this cat here and now." But what do the words "here" and "now" refer to—not to mention the words "to be" that are always implied—if not to a general space and time that permit this here and this now? Thus the "cause" of the perception of the sign becomes, at the least, the object plus time and space, with, in addition, a specific causal relation between the object and space and time. When we read the word "cat," we are forced to construct an entire universe in order to understand it, whereas direct experience makes no such requirements. We are driven back to the problem of constitution, which does not appear to have arisen for Richards.

Richards insists continually on the fact that criticism does not deal with any given material object but with a consciousness of experience of this object, and he quotes Hume to this effect: "Beauty is no quality in things themselves; it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them." Form, as the object of the critic's reflection, is not a thing then but stands as the equivalent of the experience. An object described or painted or sculpted is the object initially given; it is the sign of the experience of a consciousness of that object. However, since form is the imitation of a mental experience in a substance (language, pigment, or marble), it is legitimate for an observer to treat it as a signifying object that refers to a prior mental experience. In this sense, one can speak of a form-object in Richards. And one can also understand his insistent claim that poetic language is purely affective and, therefore, can never lead to cognition, since it has no verifiable referential value in reference to an external object. But for the critic who seeks to apprehend correctly the experience that is con-

6. Ibid., p. 127.
veyed to him, the work itself is an object of cognition insofar as he respects its affective tenor exclusively.

The route may be different, but the starting point is the same for Roland Barthes. He, too, defines writing, or form, as the faithful reflection of the writer's free and signifying experience. It is true, though, that for him this form is not necessarily an object; when human actions are historically free, form is transparent. It is an object but not an object of reflection. But the moment this freedom is curtailed, the artist's endeavor and his choice of form become problematic; any restriction in the free choice of experience requires a justification of the form selected, an operation whose net effect is the genuine objectification of form. Richards's form-object resulted from the postulate of a perfect continuity of consciousness with its linguistic correlates; Barthes, on the other hand, proceeds from a historical situation. But, from the point of view of criticism, the result is the same, since, in both instances, criticism begins and ends with the study of form. There is, to be sure, a parting of the ways ultimately: for Richards, the next stage would be the working out of a utilitarian morality, while for Barthes it would more likely be revolutionary action. But, for the time being, we are concerned with issues of critical methodology; and it turns out that in the examples that he provides (the uses of the past tense in the novel, of the third person pronoun in Balzac, or of the "realistic" style of Garaudy—I am leaving aside his Michelet) Barthes's analyses are quite close to Richards's and those of his disciples. He could well profit, in fact, from the storehouse of techniques contained in their works in the preparation of his announced History of Writing.

As befits its origins in the pedagogical research Richards conducted at Cambridge University, his method derives much of its influence from its undeniable didactic power. His conception of form permits, at once, the development of a critical vocabulary of an almost scientific power and the elaboration of easily taught analytic techniques possessing the virtues of explication de texte, yet not thwarting the freedom of formal imagination. In its suggestion of a balanced and stable moral climate, it is also reassuring criticism. By bringing down poetic language to the level of the language of communication, and in its steadfast refusal to grant aesthetic experience any difference from other human experiences, it is, in poetry an excessively exalted freshness and originality of insight.

But what happens when one of these instructions? A surprising William Empson, a brilliant in his own right, and, moreover, a principles faithfully to a set of clearly, from Shakespeare and the 16th century. From the very first exigency, the results are troubling sonnets. To evoke old age, the a forest in winter, which, he

Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet music held
The thought is stated in a metaphor. But if it is asked what is the forest and the ruined choir an indefinite number. Empson is others; it would be impossible to mind or at which we should sit the opposite end of the experiences, and thereby fixing the equation, it deploys the initial experiences that spring from it in infinitude from its center, to situate the experience at the

It provides the ground rather that permits the limiting of a sphere and leads instead to a direct back to an object that would involve an imaging activity that "meaning" of the metaphor is

10. I will deal with two of William Empson's poems: Chatto and Windus, 1930; and Chatto and Windus, 1935. A third scope of our study.

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results are troubling. It is a line from one of Shakespeare's

Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.11

The thought is stated in a metaphor whose perfection is immediately

felt. But if it is asked what is the common experience awakened by

the forest and the ruined choir, one does not discover just one but an

indefinite number. Empson lists a dozen of them and there are many

others; it would be impossible to tell which was dominant in the poet's

mind or at which we should stop. What the metaphor does is actually

the opposite: instead of setting up an adequation between two experi-

ences, and thereby fixing the mind on the repose of an established

equation, it deploys the initial experience into an infinity of associated

experiences that spring from it. In the manner of a vibration spreading

in infinitude from its center, metaphor is endowed with the capacity

to situate the experience at the heart of a universe that it generates.

10. I will deal with two of William Empson's works: Seven Types of Ambiguity (London: Chatto and Windus, 1930; 2nd revised edition, 1947) and Some Versions of Pastoral (London: Chatto and Windus, 1935). A third, and somewhat more technical, work is outside the scope of our study.

11. William Shakespeare, Sonnets #73.
This is obviously problematic. For if a simple metaphor suffices to suggest an infinity of initial experiences and, therefore, an infinity of valid readings, how can we live up to Richards’s injunction to bring the reader’s experience in line with the typical experience ascribed to the author? Can we still speak of communication here, when the text’s effect is to transform a perfectly well-defined unity into a multiplicity whose actual number must remain undetermined? Empson’s argument, as it proceeds from simple to increasingly complex examples, becomes apparent: a fundamental ambiguity is constitutive of all poetry. The correspondence between the initial experience and the reader’s own remains forever problematic because poetry sets particular beings in a world yet to be constituted, as a task to fulfill.

Not all ambiguities are of this basic type. Some are pure signifying forms, condensed means of evoking real adequation, of stating rapidly a perfectly determined mental structure. In such cases, and whatever the degree of complexity of the text, exegesis is primarily a matter of concentration and intelligence, and it is in search of a precise signification. It ends up either with a single reading concealed in the apparent multiplicity, or in a controlled, even when antithetical, superposition of significations to be uncovered. The latter type of ambiguity would be like the proffered “explication” of Mallarmé’s hermetic sonnets as purely erotic or scatological poems—a perfectly legitimate and possible reading in many instances, provided one adds immediately that they are something else and that Mallarmé was striving to achieve precisely this layered presence of different significations. This type of form occurs most frequently in Elizabethan and metaphysical poetry, as indeed in any precious or baroque poetry, and lends itself particularly well to a deciphering along I. A. Richards’s line. Some of the more notable achievements of formalist criticism are to be found in this area.

Although Empson does not draw this basic distinction himself, it is clear that five of his seven types of ambiguity fall within this category of controlled pseudo-ambiguity, and that only the first and the last relate to a more fundamental property of poetic language. Any poetic sentence, even one devoid of artifice or baroque subtlety, must, by virtue of being poetic, constitute an infinite plurality of significations all melded into a single linguistic unit: that is the first type. But as Empson’s inquiry proceeds, there occurs a visible increase in what he calls the logical disorder of his examples until, in the seventh and last type of ambiguity, the form blows up under our very eyes not merely distinct significations, but the will of their author, the mind is not content with this, for the reconciliation can be laid very heavy, not without some simplification of art as the reconciliation. Empson writes: “It may be said that a larger unity if the final effect of the cross, and he ends his poem entitled “The Sacrifice of the cross, whose refrains are (1, 12). “Is it nothing to you, there be any sorrow like un wherewith the Lord hath afflicted this conflict can be resolved is no stronger way of stating the truth. The ambiguity poetry prevails between the world and substance: to ground itself, the latter is k being. The spirit cannot coin is infinitely sorrowful. Empson sheds light upon t

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plies not merely distinct significations but significations that, against
the will of their author, are mutually exclusive. And here Empson's
advance beyond the teachings of his master becomes apparent. For
under the outward appearance of a simple list classifying random ex-
amples, chapter seven develops a thought Richards never wanted to
consider: true poetic ambiguity proceeds from the deep division of Being
itself, and poetry does no more than state and repeat this division.
Richards did recognize the existence of conflicts, but he invoked Cole-
ridge, not without some simplification, to appeal to the reassuring no-
tion of art as the reconciliation of opposites. Empson's less serene
mind is not content with this formula. In a note added to the text, he
writes: "It may be said that the contradiction must somehow form a
larger unity if the final effect is to be satisfying. But the onus of recon-
diliation can be laid very heavily on the receiving end," that is, on
the reader, for the reconciliation does not occur in the text. The text
does not resolve the conflict, it names it. And there is no doubt as to
the nature of the conflict. Empson has already prepared us by saying
that it is "at once an indecision and a structure, like the symbol of
the Cross," and he ends his book on George Herbert's extraordinary
poem entitled "The Sacrifice," a monologue uttered by Christ upon
the cross, whose refrain is drawn from the "Laments of Jeremiah"
(1, 12). "Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? Behold, and see if
there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me,
wherewith the Lord hath afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger."

This conflict can be resolved only by the supreme sacrifice: there
is no stronger way of stating the impossibility of an incarnate and happy
truth. The ambiguity poetry speaks of is the fundamental one that
prevails between the world of the spirit and the world of sentient
substance: to ground itself, the spirit must turn itself into sentient
substance, but the latter is knowable only in its dissolution into non-
being. The spirit cannot coincide with its object and this separation
is infinitely sorrowful.

Empson sheds light upon this dialectic, which is that of the unhap-
py consciousness, through some very well-chosen examples. He begins

with Keats's "Ode to Melancholy," a very good selection, for Keats lived this tension especially acutely and lived it in its very substance. The growth of his consciousness results most often in a reversal that takes him from a happy and immediate sense impression to a painful knowledge. His sorrow is that of the man who can know substance only as he loses it; for whom any love immediately brings about the death of what is being loved. Empson illustrates this problematic by adding mystical texts of the seventeenth century which show that spiritual happiness is conceivable only in terms of sensations, of the very substantial joys whose tragic fragility Keats knew so well. Man stands in utter distress before a God whom he risks destroying by wanting to know Him; he feels envy for the natural creature that is the direct emanation of Being. A sonnet by the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins states the torture of this indecision. To be sure, George Herbert's serene tone does seem to convey a kind of peaceableness, for he managed in his poem to bring these contradictions and paradoxes side-by-side without occulting their outrageousness; but we must hear in mind that the protagonist here is not man but the Son of God, and that the display of error and human misery has been relegated to the background. We have traveled far from Richards's universe where there never is any error, only misunderstanding. Empson's inquiry, drawn by the very weight of his cogitations to problems that can no longer be ignored, has led him to broader questions. Instead of concentrating on details of poetic form, he will have to reflect henceforth upon the poetic phenomenon as such; a phenomenon that does seem to deserve this kind of attention since it leads, willy-nilly, to unsuspected perspectives upon human complexity.

These broader questions are not addressed in the rather pedestrian last chapter of Seven Types of Ambiguity, but they are raised in the book Empson published a few years later. The tone of the exposition, as well as the selection of works commented upon in Some Versions of Pastoral, could lead to the supposition that he had undertaken the study of one literary form among others, and that this study could be followed by others in a similar vein, upon the epic tradition, let us say, or the tragic. Nothing could be further from the truth, as a consideration of the central theme of the book, to be found in the commentary of Andrew Marvell's famous "The Garden" (Chapter IV), makes abundantly clear. The central strophe of the poem happens to name the very problem upon which Empson's inquiry is directed: the most peculiar aspects of the pastoral convention. It is an armature of the dialectical structure, the pastoral convention, and the opposite to it, the essentially negative act of thought in particular: "Annihilating thought that can evoke the pastoral world has been annihilated. It is, in fact, the only poetic thought that can evoke it destroys on its way."15 And it is indeed hard pressed to state it any other way than of the titular "green" to qua the pastoral convention is defined. It introduces the pastoral world as undeveloped nature which must return. The essentially negative act of thought in particular: "Annihilating thought that can evoke it destroys on its way."15 And it is indeed hard pressed to state it any other way than of the titular "green" to qua the pastoral convention is defined. It introduces the pastoral world as undeveloped nature which must return. The essentially negative act of thought in particular: "Annihilating thought that can evoke it destroys on its way."15 And it is indeed hard pressed to state it any other way than of the titular "green" to qua the pastoral convention is defined. It introduces the pastoral world as undeveloped nature which must return.

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15. Some Versions of Pastoral, p. 123
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What is the pastoral convention, then, if not the eternal separation between the mind that distinguishes, negates, legislates, and the originary simplicity of the natural? A separation that may be lived, as in Homer’s epic poetry (evoked by Empson as an example of the universality of its definition), or it may be thought in full consciousness of itself as in Marvell’s poem. There is no doubt that the pastoral theme is, in fact, the only poetic theme, that it is poetry itself. Under the deceitful title of a genre study, Empson has actually written an ontology of the poetic, but wrapped it, as is his wont, in some extraneous matter that may well conceal the essential.

In light of this, what is the link between these considerations and

very problem upon which Empson’s previous work ended: the contradictory relations between natural being and the being of consciousness:

The Mind, that Ocean where each kind
Does straight its own resemblance find;
Yet it creates, transcending these,
Far other worlds, and other Seas,
Annihilating all that’s made
To a green thought in a green shade.

The dialectical armature of this strophe defines what Empson calls the pastoral convention. It is the movement of consciousness as it contemplates the natural entity and finds itself integrally reflected down to the most peculiar aspects of phusis. But a reflection is not an identification, and the simple correspondence of the mind with the natural, far from being appeasing, turns troublesome. The mind recovers its balance only in domination over that which is its complete other. Thus the essentially negative activity of all thought takes place, and poetic thought in particular: “Annihilating all that’s made.” One would be hard pressed to state it any more strongly. However, the recourse to the modifier “green” to qualify what is then created by thought, reintroduces the pastoral world of innocence, of “humble, permanent, undeveloped nature which sustains everything, and to which everything must return.” And it is reintroduced at the very moment that this world has been annihilated. It is the freshness, the greenness of budding thought that can evoke itself only through the memory of what it destroys on its way.

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In light of this, what is the link between these considerations and

15. Some Versions of Pastoral, p. 128.
the first chapter of the book, entitled "Proletarian Literature," which concludes, paradoxically enough, that Marxist thought is pastoral thought disguised. Marxism draws its attractiveness from the reconciliation it promises, in all sincerity to be sure, but with a naive prematurity. "I do not mean to say," writes Empson, "that the [Marxist] philosophy is wrong; for that matter pastoral is worked from the same philosophical ideas as proletarian literature—the difference is that it brings in the absolute less prematurely." The pastoral problematic, which turns out to be the problematic of Being itself, is lived in our day by Marxist thought, as by any genuine thought. In motivation, if not in its claims, Marxism is, ultimately, a poetic thought that lacks the patience to pursue its own conclusions to their end; this explains why Empson's book, which is all about separation and alienation, places itself at the outset under the aegis of Marxism; a convergence confirmed by the apparent contradiction of the attraction exerted upon our generation by the problematic of poetry and the solution of Marxism.

Having started from the premises of the strictest aesthetical formalism, Empson winds up facing the ontological question. And it is by virtue of this question that he stands as a warning against certain Marxist illusions. The problem of separation inheres in Being, which means that social forms of separation derive from ontological and metasocial attitudes. For poetry, the divide exists forever. "To produce pure proletarian art the artist must be at one with the worker; this is impossible, not for political reasons, but because the artist never is at one with any public." This conclusion is grounded in a very thorough study and it is especially difficult to take issue with since it originated in the opposite conviction. It stands as an irrefutable critique by anticipation of Roland Barthes's position, for whom the separation is a phenomenon that admits of reconciliation in society that is oriented, institutes a torn context and he has tried, in his Michel proposed abyss that confines the world. Such a writer exists in a sort of Barthes sets by inventing the Classicism—but an Empsonian of this illusion—and the future language would no longer be falling all at once into all the formalism, false historicism, and poetic conrowful, and tragic conscious grenades, attempts to transcend some choices upon critical rettainty that one gathers from these hesitations. We distinguish three possible aeronautical poetics, and naive poetic.

Historical poetics can be

16. Ibid., p. 23.
17. A remark by Heidegger confirms and sheds light on this encounter: "The fate of the world announces itself in poetry, without already appearing nonetheless as a history of Being. . . . Alienation has become fatal on a world-scale. Which is why this destiny must be thought at the outset of the history of Being. What Marx recognized, basing himself upon Hegel, as essentially and significantly the alienation of man, takes root in the fundamentally exiled character of modern man. . . . It is because he had a real experience of this alienation that Marx has attained a profound dimension of history. That is why the Marxist conception of history by far surpasses all of the forms of contemporary historicism." Platon's Lehre von der Wahrheit: mit einem Brief über den 'Humanismus' (Bern: A. Francke, 1947), p. 87.
18. Pastoral, p. 15.
phenomenon that admits of precise dating. "It is because there is no reconciliation in society that language, at once necessary and necessarily oriented, institutes a torn condition for the writer," writes Barthes, and he has tried, in his *Michelet* and elsewhere, to show the socially imposed abyss that confines the modern writer to an interiority he hates. Such a writer exists in a sort of historical transition, whose boundaries Barthes sets by inventing the myth of a genuinely univocal form in Classicism—but an Empsonian study of Racine would quickly dispose of this illusion—and the future myth of a "new Adamic world where language would no longer be alienated." This is a good instance of falling all at once into all the traps of impatient "pastoral" thought: formalism, false historicism, and utopianism.

The promise held out in Richards's work, of a convergence between logical positivism and literary criticism, has failed to materialize. After the writings of an Empson, little is left of the scientific claims of formalist criticism. All basic assumptions have been put into question: the notions of communication, form, signifying experience, and objective precision. And Empson is but an example among others. Their routes may at times have differed, but numerous critics have come to recognize within poetic language the same pluralism and the disorders signaling ontological complexities. Terms such as paradox, tension, and ambiguity abound in American criticism to the point of nearly losing all meaning.

A conception of poetic consciousness as an essentially divided, sorrowful, and tragic consciousness (or as representing, in stoical or ironical guises, attempts to transcend this pain without eliminating it) forces some choices upon critical reflection. The impression of crisis and uncertainty that one gathers from reading contemporary criticism derives from these hesitations. Without simplifying excessively, we may distinguish three possible avenues for reflection: historical poetics, salvational poetics, and naive poetics.

20. Ibid., p. 126; in English, p. 88.
21. The French reader unfamiliar with Empson's work should be warned that this has been an interpretation and not an exposition, and that it is, therefore, subject to discussion. I suppose that the author especially, who has always proclaimed his agreement with Richards, would have some difficulty endorsing it.
exists but in scattered form. Strictly speaking, Marxist criticism is not historical for it is bound to the necessity of a reconciliation scheduled to occur at the end of a linear temporal development, and its dialectical movement does not include time itself as one of its terms. A truly historical poetics would attempt to think the divide in truly temporal dimensions instead of imposing upon it cyclical or eternalist schemata of a spatial nature. Poetic consciousness, which emerges from the separation, constitutes a certain time as the noematic correlate of its action. Such a poetics promises nothing except the fact that poetic thought will keep on becoming, will continue to ground itself in a space beyond its failure. Although it is true that a poetics of this kind has not found expression in an established critical language, it has, nevertheless, presided over certain great poetic works, at times even consciously.

Salvational criticism, on the other hand, has taken on considerable proportions in the United States. "The ground-base of poetic truth is the truth, contextual but real, of man's possible redemption through the fullest imaginative response."23 This sentence from a recent and representative work is typical of a trend in which formalist techniques are overlaid with intentions of a mythical and religious order. Since the sorrow of separation is most acutely felt at the level of historical reality in the emptiness and impoverishment of the times, salvational thought turns eagerly to primordial origins, hence its mythico-poetic concerns: "The true nature of mythic perspective reveals itself in its concern for origins; the Holy, in mythic perspective, finds its ulterior reference in an original act of creation."24

... Originary beginnings take on the appearance of privileged moments beyond time, and their remembrance serves as the promise of a new fruitfulness. This is a way of conquering history: redemption is conceived of as an event residing in potentia in and reality, and whose prior occurrences are guarantees of permanent presence. Although it remains caught in time when it is practiced as a discipline of thought, the return to origins is, nonetheless, an attempt to reconquer the timeless. It aspires to an ultimate reconciliation on a new dawning, cut off from the memory of new dawns. But the intellect unifies a barely veiled nostalgia conscious expressivity, which and the prudence of media work of T. S. Eliot sums to find Wheelwright make.

Only through this and for whom divine incarnate muffled by the reservations itself, but constituting, non eternal:

The hint half-g

The same hesitancy at the salvation is to be found in V of poetry as a presage of the scientific claims of little to add to what had been introduced in the mythology... of poetry... of dwelling-place of the gods."25 But these declarations of embracing statements, summer... of the mind seeking to with the irony of its own finitude thought as: "Some such vitiating of oneness with an otherness."26 For Empson of the poetic, insofar as they to be reconciled with a belief of deciding these dilemmas...

23. Ernst Cassirer, Die Philosophie der symbolischen Formen, cited by Wheelwright, p. 164. These approaches have found a rich source of information in the works of the anthropologists and British classicists known as the Cambridge school: Gilbert Murray, James Frazer, and their students, I. E. Harrison, F. M. Cornford, Jessie Weston, etc.
24. Wheelwright, p. 7.
Marxist criticism is not reconciliation scheduled development, and its dialectic is one of its terms. A truth the divide in truly temporal, it cyclical or eternalist process, which emerges from the noematic correlate except the fact that poetic has taken on considerable ground-base of poetic truth ruthless redemption through sentence from a recent and which formalist techniques and religious order. Since at the level of historical of the times, salvational and hence its mythico-poetic perspective reveals itself in its respective, finds its exterior originary beginnings take and time, and their remembrance. This is a way of end of as an event residing recurrences are guarantees caught in time when it the return to origins is, timeless. It aspires to an

The same hesitancy at the prospect of surrendering to the faith of salvation is to be found in Wheelwright, together with a presentation of poetry as a presage of redemption. Under the guise of a critique of the scientific claims of I. A. Richards's positivism, where he has little to add to what had been established by Empson, Wheelwright's book introduces an eternalist and religious conception of poetry: “the language ... of poetry ... speake[s] in a way that truly 'mounts to the dwelling-place of the gods,' and testifies to the reality of that dwelling.”

But these declarations of faith alternate with more prudent and less embracing statements, such as: “The dual role, the in-and-out movement of the mind seeking to penetrate its object, frames every experience with the irony of its own finitude;” or even a definition of expressive thought as: “Some such vitalizing tension between the beholder's intuition of oneness with an object and his intuition of the object's otherness.” For Empson such paradoxes constituted the very essence of the poetic, insofar as they had to remain unresolved. How are they to be reconciled with a belief in the poetic as a salvational act capable of deciding these dilemmas?

24. Wheelwright, p. 7.
In its own way, this type of criticism attempts also to reconcile the need for a substantial incarnation with the need for knowledge; it is the tension from which springs all thought, poetic as well as philosophical. But, if it is to have validity, it must have such an intense experience of both of these necessities that it can never name the one without having the other integrally present. Therein lies the difference between genuine ontological ambiguity and contradiction; in the latter, the two mutually exclusive poles are simply overlaid or successively present instead of establishing themselves, as in Marvell’s poem, in an unsoluble co-presence. Instead of saying that Wheelwright’s thought, or, for that matter, T. S. Eliot’s to whom it is so close, sacrifices consciousness to faith, it is better to say that it alternates moments of faith without consciousness with moments of consciousness without faith. This is possible only if negation and affirmation are both wielded carelessly.

It remains for us to define the attitude we call naive, which rests on the belief that poetry is capable of effecting reconciliation because it provides an immediate contact with substance through its own sensible form. In a famous letter, Keats had already cried out: “O for a life of sensation not of thought,” but he had sense enough to speak of sensation as something one desires but cannot have. A contemporary American poet is far less prudent when he writes: “[the poet] searches for meanings in terms of the senses. The intelligence of art is a sensory intelligence, the meaning of art is a sensory meaning. ... There is no such thing as a good work of art which is not immediately apprehensible in the senses.”27 There is no doubt that there is a sensory dimension, as intention, in all poetry, but to assert its exclusive and immediate presence is to ignore the origin of all creative and imaging consciousness. The distinction, so often formulated, that the experience of the object is not the experience of the consciousness of the object, remains basic and valid. In a way, it were not for the fact that substance is problematic and absent, there would not be art.

It is apparent, then, that the criticism of sensation reappropriates and extends the illusion that had already occurred in a different form in I. A. Richards and according to which there is a continuity between experience and language. To go further, the practitioners of this criticism seem to believe in an adequation of the object itself with the language that names it. They assert that some texts establish such an adequation and they are willing literature [constitutes] ... the writes Jean-Pierre Richard; a books, Georges Poulet opposes of consciousness by writing: “which the mind, coming to be joined with the object in one little fast going to assign to a point where no work in the world can install itself. To justify small consciousness is conscious that for Husserl this state transzendental idealism most sensualism? And without war topic, one can also add that by this criticism, is more likely the authors who claim him for the

Whether it be in France characteristic of contemporary reconciliation from poetry, that cleaves Being. It is a hétérocratic critical approaches: theoretical, and the criticism of aesthet removed in the ability closest to the naming of the impossibility of which it is thought: “to communicate things.”28 One is far from the one describes Baudelaire as filling the depth by substituting warm plenitude of substance the sense that for Baudelaire supreme wager; however, in itself that is the abyss. As long but the sorrowful time of post

tempts also to reconcile the need for knowledge; it is thought, poetic as well as it must have such an insight that it can never name present. Therein lies the ambiguity and contradiction; selves are simply overlaid or themselves, as in Marvell's saying that Wheelwright's som it is so close, sacrifices that it alternates moments of consciousness without confirmation are both wielded cation because already cried out: "To have any sense enough to speak not have. A contemporary writes: "[the poet] searches intelligence of art is a sensory meaning.... There is not immediately apparent that there is a sensory to assert its exclusive and all creative and imaging imputed, that the experience consciousness of the object, were not for the fact that it would not be art.

sensation reappropriates occurred in a different form there is a continuity between the practitioners of this of the object itself with the same texts establish such an adequation and they are willing to erect it into a critical norm: "Great literature [constitutes] ... the preferred domain of the happy relation," writes Jean-Pierre Richard; and, in his introduction to Richards's two books, Georges Poulet opposes the criticism of sensation to the criticism of consciousness by writing: "[Criticism] must reach the act through which the mind, coming to terms with its own body and that of others, joined with the object in order to invent itself as subject." It is a little fast going to assign to criticism the task of installing itself at a point where no work in the world, however inspired, has ever been able to install itself. To justify such a claim, Husserl is eagerly invoked: all consciousness is consciousness of something. Must it be recalled that for Husserl this statement is the point of departure for a transcendental idealism most decidedly at a far remove from any naive sensualism? And without wanting to enter into the intricacies of the topic, one can also add that Bachelard, who is also eagerly invoked by this criticism, is more likely closer to Husserl than to any of the authors who claim him for their own.

Whether it be in France or in the United States, the foremost characteristic of contemporary criticism is the tendency to expect a reconciliation from poetry: to see it in a possibility of filling the gap that cleaves Being. It is a hope shared, in very different forms, by different critical approaches: the positivist formalist, the Marxist, the salvational, and the criticism of substance. But if the latter appears furthest removed in the ability to faithfully account for the texts, it is closest to the naming of the center of the problem. For it reveals, in the impatience of which it is the symptom, the desire that haunts modern thought: "to communicate substantially with what is substantial in things." One is far from the truth when, with Jean-Pierre Richard, one describes Baudelaire as a happy poet whose word is capable of "filling the depth by substituting for the emptiness of the abyss the warm plenitude of substance." But one is also quite close to it, in the sense that for Baudelaire it is this possibility that constitutes the supreme wager; however, since it must remain wager, it is substance itself that is the abyss. As long as that remains the case, there is left but the sorrowful time of patience, i.e., history.

29. I omit mention of Maurice Blanchot, whose work does not fall in the trends mentioned here.