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**“Pattern of Meaning”:  
Symbolic Dynamism as a Formal Structure in *The Waste Land* and *The Well Wrought Urn***

Jane Forsyth

Cleanth Brooks' *The Well Wrought Urn* is his most famous work, and for good reason. His principles of paradox, drama, and organic unity became pillars of the New Critical movement, and his co-authored texts, *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction*, forever changed the way literature is taught. Even in decades which reacted against the New Critical school, the practice of close-reading which Brooks and his colleagues championed continued to be an essential component of poetic reading. Brooks' 1937 reading of *The Waste Land* suggests ways in which that poem shaped his poetics and helps us to better understand the ramifications of those principles. Thus, my focus will remain on Brooks' interpretation of *The Waste Land*, rather than on the poem itself. Ultimately, by considering the shared interests of modern art and poetry, Brooks' poetic theory can be seen as distinctively modernist in its expanded notion of form.

I would like to begin by briefly considering the shared interests of modern art and poetry to better understand Brooks' idea of poetic form. Brooks' poetic theory is distinctively modernist in its expanded notion of form, which emphasizes the structural physicality of the poem. Finally, the paper considers the relevance of Brooks' poetics to contemporary poetry.

Brooks' analysis of *The Waste Land* seeks to extoll the formal unity of the poem. The poem, he says, has been “almost consistently misinterpreted since its first publication” because people fail to understand “Eliot's technique” (“Analysis” 206). While the poem appears formless, like a collection “of material apparently accidentally thrown together” (“Analysis”

208), Brooks argues that the poem is the product of a clear, albeit unusual, “method of organization” (185) and composition (206). The purpose of his essay is to “better understand why *the form of the poem* is right and inevitable” (209, emphasis added). Brooks’ emphasis on the formal unity of the work pitted him against many of his contemporary critics and therefore demonstrates the novelty of his evolving notion of poetic form.

John Crowe Ransom was a major critic of *The Waste Land*. His scathing review of the poem, “Waste Lands,” published in 1923 in the *New York Evening Post Literary Review*, criticized Eliot’s poetic immaturity for producing such a “disconnected” work whose many parts, meters, tongues, and genres create a “bewildering wilderness” rather than the “fusing [of] its elements” essential to a poem (167-8). Ransom ends by declaring the poem “one of the most insubordinate poems in the language” and one unlikely to stand the test of time (170). Over a decade later, Ransom persisted in declaring *The Waste Land* formally “insubordinate,” this time putting the poem in conversation with *Lycidas*. Ransom says that in *Lycidas* the young Milton took “liberties” with “the historic metrical pattern already before them” (Ransom 6) and thereby the poem “tends habitually towards the formlessness which is modern” (Ransom 7). Importantly, Ransom here identifies modern poetry generally (and *The Waste Land* in particular) as “formless.” For Ransom, then, poetic form is fundamentally a matter of rhythm, meter, rhyme, imagery, and genre, the mediating structures and rituals to which the poet’s initial driving emotion or experience is subverted. A poem that evades these poetic norms is not, in fact, a poem -- or at least not a good one. If Milton’s *Lycidas* does not quite devolve into total formlessness, according to Ransom, Eliot’s *The Waste Land* certainly does.

Brooks probably would not disagree with Ransom's emphasis on poetic form, repeatedly asserting "the primacy of the pattern" (Urn 194) in the writing and therefore the interpretation of poetry. But he would disagree about the nature of poetic form: rhyme, meter, and the like are--for Brooks--only elements of form. Poetic form itself is something other: it is "a structure of meanings, evaluations, and interpretations" (Urn 195). These meanings are conveyed primarily through the images or symbols which the poet employs. Brooks calls the symbol the "the sole linguistic vehicle which conveys the things communicated accurately" (Urn 4). And for Brooks, this structure of symbolic meanings is "the principle of unity" which makes the disparate elements of a poem truly one by "balancing and harmonizing connotations, attitudes, and meanings" (Urn 195). An example is his reading of Herrick's "Corinna's going a-Maying." He traces the poet's use of "dew" and "dew drops" throughout the poem, concluding that "in the context of the poem they become a symbol heavily charged with meaning which no dictionary can be expected to give" (Urn 73). While the poem is open to a more traditional formal reading, Brooks argues that what truly orders and unifies it, and the most important means by which the poem communicates, is the way the image of the "dew" acquires meaning, becoming a symbol which stands for what the poem "means."

This idea that symbolic accretion of meaning is the unifying poetic principle is something Brooks seems to have learned from *The Waste Land*. In his reading of the poem, Brooks repeatedly notes how symbols, like characters, "mel[t] into each other" ("Analysis" 208). Brooks' useful term for the process by which Eliot revisits particular words or images or phrases throughout the poem is "recapitulation of symbols" ("Analysis" 197). And here is the origin of two other pillars of Brooks' poetics: poetry as dramatic action, and poetry as something *sub*

*specie aeternitatis*. In the poem, Brooks notes, each symbol does not have “one, unequivocal meaning” which would produce a “didactic allegory” – and a two-dimensional, static one at that. Rather, symbols are things in motion – “dramatized instances of the theme” (“Analysis” 209).

Brooks’ idea of poetry-as-drama stems from an attention to poetry’s temporality. In *The Well Wrought Urn*, Brooks compares poetry to music insofar as each is “a pattern of resolutions and balances and harmonizations, developed through a temporal scheme” (203). But he moves away from this analogy because music is not intellectual the way poetry is – it does not “mak[e] use of words” (Urn 204). He seizes upon drama as the best comparison partly to address the heresy of paraphrase which so often corrupts the integrity of a poem. Despite its use of words, drama is more easily regarded “as *an action* rather than as a formula for action or as a statement about action” (Urn 204, emphasis original) which combats the tendency to paraphrase it in terms of the “ideas” it contains. But the similarity between the two genres runs deeper than that: for Brooks they share the same fundamental elements or, as he says, “structure:” each is “something which arrives at its conclusion through conflict” (Urn 204). Formally, both are things-acted-out in and through time.

What is particularly interesting about Brooks’ idea of poetic drama or dynamism is that it happens on the micro-level. Naturally, poems move through time as some sort of narration; even lyric poetry turns the emotion of a moment into something extended in time. But Brooks sees a smaller or more local dynamism within the dramatic structure in the way that symbols accrue significance over the course of the poem. These internal dynamics are, for Brooks, the fundamental structural elements of poetic form and poetic unity.

Brooks' discussion of symbolic dynamism resonates with William Empson's extended discussions of the ways in which denotations and connotations of a word act upon one another and the reader to create the nexus of meaning which is the poem. One of Empson's most clarifying examples comes in his discussion of the second type of ambiguity, where ambiguities function to produce meaning "as two forces almost in the same line may have a small resultant in quite another direction" (Empson 95). Implicit in this comparison is a claim that ambiguities work like force vectors: just as forces pulling in different directions propel an object in its actual path of motion, so ambiguities push a line, poem, or image towards the total meaning which is the resultant of those individual tensions and cooperations. The second type of ambiguity has this strange opposite-direction-resultant: sometimes forces which seem to be tending in one direction can also have an effect in the opposite direction. This sounds like what Brooks would call the "principle of poetic paradox."

This term recurs throughout *The Well Wrought Urn*, and Brooks' sensitivity to its importance springs from how he reads *The Waste Land*. Brooks sees contrast or paradox as Eliot's distinctive device and the foundation on which *The Waste Land* is built: "The basic method used in *The Waste Land* may be described as the application of the principle of complexity. The poet works in terms of surface parallelisms which in reality make ironical contrasts, and in terms of surface contrasts which in reality constitute parallelisms" ("Analysis" 206-207). Brooks takes as an example Madame Sosostris and the "surface irony" between "the original use of the Tarot cards and the use made here" as "each of the details...assumes a new" – and we might add, a true – meaning in the general context of the poem: "the 'fortune-telling' which is taken ironically by a twentieth-century audience becomes *true* as the poem develops –

true in a sense in which Madame Sosostris herself does not think it true" (207, emphasis original).

Brooks praises this method because it is "honest" ("Analysis" 209). Paradox and symbolic dynamism are, for Brooks, essential components of poetry because they are components of life: "This complication of parallelisms and contrasts makes, of course, for ambiguity; but the ambiguity, in part, resides in the poet's fidelity to the complexity of experience" ("Analysis" 208). Brooks says that, in the Madame Sosostris scene, "all the central symbols of the poem head up here, but here, in the only section in which they are explicitly bound together, the binding is slight and accidental. The deeper lines of association only emerge in terms of the total context as the poem develops" ("Analysis" 207). Experience supports this as being "true to life:" the true significance of an event is seen only after the fact, as it begins to develop relationships to other events over time. So too in the poem. The symbol only acquires meaning in virtue of the many positions it occupies – or the roles it plays – and in each role there are resonances of prior and future roles, prior and future tensions which may or may not conflict with those of the present. "In this way," says Brooks, "the statement of beliefs emerges through confusion and cynicism – not in spite of them" ("Analysis" 210).

It is important to Brooks that the gradual accretion and manifestation of meaning is something chosen, a matter of poetic craft: "this is, of course, exactly the effect which the poet intends" ("Analysis" 207). In *Understanding Poetry*, Brooks and Warren say that "the poetic effect depends not on the things themselves but on the kind of use the poet makes of them" (xlix). This idea is, of course, not in itself new or distinctive. But Brooks' particular articulation of it is distinctive, and suggests the influence of Eliot and *The Waste Land*. The above comment

closes Brooks' and Warren's rebuttal to one of the three misconceptions about what poetry is. They are responding to the idea of poetry as a "beautiful statement of some high truth" which treats poetry as a "sugar-coated pill," as truth masked by various kinds of beauty. In their rebuttal, Brooks and Warren offer an excerpt of a speech from *Hamlet*: "none of the things used in this passage would be thought of as being pleasing in itself in actual life" (xlxxx). What makes the passage beautiful or poetic is the arrangement of these things, the ordering of the disparate parts, by the poet-maker. Brooks and Warren argue that this extreme case exemplifies what is really going on in all poetic making: poetry depends on "the kind of use the poet makes" of the things at his disposal. In this way, the poet is a collage artist: he places pre-existing things together in a new way. This idea resonates with Eliot's description of his own poem as "a heap of broken images" and as "fragments shored up against my ruin." In *The Well Wrought Urn*, Brooks claims that the poet, unlike the scientist, "has to make up his language as he goes" (9) and Brooks further invokes Eliot: "T.S. Eliot has commented upon 'that perpetual slight alteration of language, words perpetually juxtaposed in new and sudden combinations' which occurs in poetry" (9). This Modernist idea of collage is not really a new conception of poetry so much as it is a refocusing on a particular, sometimes overlooked, quality of poetry and poetic making. The poet takes things – words, images, rhythms – and places them side by side. They are things in their own right, but when an artist places them together, words and images and rhythms exert their forces with, off, and against each other; a little drama of meaning unfolds. And this drama is the sign of a new integral life: the fragmented constituent parts become an organic whole.



One of the major themes of *The Waste Land* is vitality, both in terms of sexuality and symbolic meaning. It is closely bound up with what Brooks calls the central paradox of the poem, that “life devoid of meaning is death; sacrifice, even the sacrificial death, may be life-giving, an awakening to life” (“Analysis” 186). The link between these ideas (sexuality, life-and-death, and symbolic meaning) is the myth of the Fisher King which Brooks notes is about physical and spiritual sterility: first, “the crops do not grow, and the animals cannot reproduce” because “the Fisher King...has been rendered impotent”; second, “the curse can only be removed by the appearance of a knight who will ask the meanings of the various symbols which are displayed to him in the castle” (“Analysis” 186). The implication is that the meaning of these symbols is somehow locked up, inaccessible. “Asking the meaning” is a way of activating or liberating these symbols, of releasing their internal forces to interact among one another. There is also a suggestion that these symbols have something to do with the history of the land, since these are the kinds of images usually found inside castles. For Eliot, the modern world has one major problem – isolation – which is manifested in two particular ways: first, sexual isolation, impotence, and unfruitfulness; and second, temporal isolation in the “now” which destroys the power of symbols to mean. Examining how Brooks reads the interrelation of these two forms of isolation in *The Waste Land* provides understanding for how his poetic theory is rooted in this poem.

Brooks reads the opening sentences of the poem as Eliot colliding those two concerns in one image. “The Burial of the Dead” begins by offering a paradoxical image of life-in-death and of death-in-life: the plants are growing from the ground in which the dead have been buried, but that growing is ugly, deathlike, cruel, cold. This complex image involves the question of

symbolic meaning because the growth of plants entails “memory:” the roots reach down to the graves of the ancestors and spring melts away the “warm” “forgetfulness” of winter snow. Loss of symbolic meaning, it is suggested, has to do with humans being cut off from the past, and is tied up both with isolation and sexuality. Plants cannot bear fruit unless their roots run deep. Sexuality involves the surrender of the self; life only comes through a kind of death. The interplay between symbols is sexual insofar as it is (or should be) generative of new beings, new meanings (see “Analysis” 187-192). Brooks reads the poem as a kind of metapoetics: it is about the process of making poetry and about its potential power to enable human participation in eternity through the resurrection and revitalization of symbols. For the hero to “ask the meaning of the symbols” is to engender new meanings, to engage in something sexually fruitful. Brooks traces how the poem’s symbols work out this problem. The “corpse” planted in the garden becomes an ancient fertility god and the Phoenician sailor drowned at sea. The images coalesce in Section V:

The awful daring of a moment’s surrender  
Which an age of prudence can never retract  
By this, and this only, we have existed  
Which is not to be found in our obituaries  
Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider  
Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor  
In our empty rooms.

The moment of sexual intimacy collides with “obituaries,” which makes the reader anticipate “tombs” instead of “rooms.” And yet, for Brooks, the poem suggests that this burial through the life-in-death of sexuality will bring the rain (“Analysis” 204).

The poet is, in the end, implicated as the hero who can return understanding and vitality to the symbols (“I sat upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plain behind me / Shall I at least

set my lands in order?") because for Eliot, the process of making poetry is "a continual surrender of himself as he [the poet] is at the moment to something which is more valuable" (*Wood* 30). The hero can save the land through a paradoxical submission to life-in-death, death-in-life through sexual surrender. The poet saves the possibility of poetic symbolism by paradoxically killing the possibility of poetic meaning so as to revivify the "heap of broken images" so they can be unified and take on a life of their own: "That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout?" Brooks sees *The Waste Land* as an exemplary image of the reviving process that is poetry: the poet repurposes signs not to subvert their original meaning, but to allow them to mean their same meaning in a new way.

This mode by which poets speak is what Brooks calls in a much later work "indirect speech" (*God* 71). For Brooks, poetry is essentially sacramental because it is a way of conveying to the uninitiated the "visions" or experiences of the poet, the seer, the see-er of higher things: "Eliot's poetry, from the very beginning, is conceived in terms of the following problem: how is revealed truth to be mediated to the Gentiles? How is that which is by definition ineffable to be translated into words, no direct transmission of the vision being possible?" (*God* 71). This is what Brooks had in mind when, in the Preface to *The Well-Wrought Urn*, he describes poetry not so much as "an expression of its age" but rather as "*sub specie aeternitatis*" (x). While he sees this in Eliot, Brooks is making a claim about poetry itself. For all its use of words, poetry in some way is not about words. This is yet another reason paraphrase is impossible. Poetry is about conveying the "ineffable" – the unsayable, that which the poet has seen and which by its nature is beyond articulation in language. The problem of poetry is to convey this vision

through, as Stevens puts it, “ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds” (“The Idea of Order at Key West”).

Poetic language, then, is a different kind of thing than scientific language – so different as to be untranslatable or unparaphrasable. Brooks reads “A Game of Chess” as a commentary on modern abstraction. In his analysis, he quotes a lengthy passage from Allen Tate’s commentary on this section, in which Tate focuses on the disjunction between the lush descriptions which open the scene and the stale, detached conversation of the second part: “The rich experience of the great tradition depicted in the room receives a violent shock in contrast with a game that symbolizes the inhuman abstraction of the modern mind” (qtd in Brooks, “Analysis” 192). This scene, says Brooks, presents a life that is meaningless in itself; meaning is derived only from “the abstract game which they are to play, a game in which the meaning is assigned and arbitrary, meaning by convention only – in short, a game of chess” (192). This idea of “assigned” and “arbitrary” meaning is important both as a commentary on the modern age, which it clearly is, but also as a reaction against certain ideas of poetry. If meanings are “assigned” and “arbitrary,” poems are easy enough to understand and to paraphrase: one needs only the right key to unlock the encoded meanings. Eliot’s poem challenges the reader to attempt such an approach (the footnotes are particularly misleading in this regard) and then deliberately thwarts all attempts to do so. Poems understood this way lack the organic force which allows language to develop and evolve to fit the changing experiences of humans; poetry is forever “dead” because it possesses no integral unity, no organic power.

But poetry, for Brooks as for Eliot, is not dead – or at least is not permanently dead.

These ideas are crystalized in the image of poetry-as-urn which recurs throughout *The Well Wrought Urn*. The first passage devoted to this image bears quoting in its entirety:

The urn to which we are summoned, the urn which holds the ashes of the phoenix, is like the well-wrought urn of Donne's "Canonization" which holds the phoenix-lovers' ashes: it is the poem itself... But there is a sense in which all such well-wrought urns contain the ashes of a Phoenix. The urns are not meant for memorial purposes only, though that often seems to be their chief significance to the professors of literature. The phoenix rises from its ashes; or it ought to rise; but it will not arise for all our mere sifting and measuring the ashes, or testing them for their chemical content. We must be prepared to accept the paradox of the imagination itself; else 'Beautie, Truth, and Raritie' remain enclosed in their cinders and we shall end with essential cinders, for all our pains (20-21).

In many ways, Brooks' use of the urn as the symbol for poetry is strange and unexpected. He dwells at such length on the intellectual and imaginative components of poetry as he discusses poetic symbolism and the heresy of paraphrase and the centrality of paradox that this kind of tactile, material image catches us by surprise. But it should not.

Urns, of course, have two purposes: they hold things (Brooks highlights the ashes of the dead), and they are (usually) aesthetically ornate. Urns, then, are things we view rather than read. Brooks has described poetic form as a "structure" and a "pattern," comparing it to architecture and painting (*Urn* 203) even before comparing it to music or drama. Thus, Brooks is expanding the idea of poetic form to incorporate the physicality of the poem. This interest in the visual component of poetic form is in fact of wider interest in the modern period. In her introduction to *The Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, Helen Vendler writes that while we more frequently think of poetry as an oral art, thinking of its origins, with the rise of modern poetry, "against the ear, the eye makes its case" (1). She is speaking about later poets

than Eliot – Berryman, Ammons, Lowell, all contemporaries of Brooks, in fact – but her comments identify a strain of continuity between Eliot, Brooks, and these later poets. She continues, “the eye makes its case – for the jagged edges of a Berryman dream song, for the minimalist shapeliness of an Ammons stanza, for the weighty block of a Lowell sonnet. These signs of writing construct poetry, too; and the play of light and shadow in the text – now a haunting voice, now a calligraphic curve – awakens part of the nameless happiness of reading” (Vendler 1). These moves by poets were meant as innovations certainly, but they were also attempts at continuity. William Carlos Williams articulated their paradoxical position in *Spring and All*: “Today where everything is being brought into sight the realism of art has bewildered us, confused us and forced us to re-invent in order to retain that which the older generations had without that effort (*Collected* 198). The innovations of modern poetry angle both at novelty and tradition. Recalling that poetry is a written sign, it is not so surprising that poets and critics would be interested in how its shape, the physical space it occupies, is part of its aesthetic form – that is, as a formal structural element by which it means. Modernist poetry asks us to attend to the eye rather than the ear – or rather, to attend to the ear through the eye.

Attending then, to the eye, unpacks the significance of Brooks’ chosen image of the urn as a symbol for poetry. An urn is visually pleasing and expressive if it is painted, but even its silhouette, the line it makes against its context, is aesthetic and serves as an important symbol of poetry. It moves through space, designating a “this and not that,” demarking a space contained and a space excluded: creating, in fact, a place. This idea of poem-as-place within which things happen (or are poised to happen) is another valence of Brooks’ urn symbol. The

poem is the structure within which the drama of symbolic resurrection occurs, but only when rightly read. To Brooks, “wrong” reading attends to the “chemical content” (the constituent parts of a poem: rhyme, meter, rhythm) by “sifting...measuring...testing” – by scientific processes. The problem with this approach is that it treats poetry as translation, as discussed above. This approach makes the reader look for “logical coherences where they are sometimes irrelevant” and fail “to see imaginative coherences on levels where they are highly relevant” (*Urn* 202). For right reading ultimately requires accepting “the paradox of the imagination” (*Urn* 21).

In order to understand what Brooks means by this phrase, it is helpful to look at Coleridge, whose ideas about the imagination influenced him as they did his colleague Robert Penn Warren. In a famously obscure passage in *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge describes the imagination as a creative power, closely related to the power of “human perception,” and either a “repetition” or an “echo” of “the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (244). Its activity is to “re-create” the world by a process of “dissolv[ing], diffus[ing], dissipat[ing]”, ever “struggl[ing] to idealize and to unify” (244). It is a “vital” process; the objects it employs are themselves “essentially fixed and dead,” but through the activity of the imagination are re-created or, to use Brooks’ word, resurrected.

The imagination is paradoxical, then, because of its relationship with the real. Poetry, says Coleridge, imbues the “common view” of the world with “ideal” qualities (240). This allows poetry to perform a kind of phoenix-esque resurrection: “the most admitted truths” are so widely accepted “that they lose all the life and efficiency of truth, and lie bed-ridden in the dormitory of the soul,” and the poetic imagination “rescues” them “from the impotence

caused by the very circumstances of their universal admission” (Coleridge 241). In other words, the poetic imagination reveals the real by reframing truth in such a way that it is no longer passively accepted: there is now an element of struggle involved. From this concept, Robert Penn Warren pulls his idea of poetic tension. Poetry, for Warren, ought to be impure by including within itself conflicting elements: poetic structure must involve “resistances” (Warren, “Pure” 24). Warren argues that, for Coleridge, the poem instantiates “the necessary tension between the ideal [poetry] and the real [the poem], the abstract [poetry] and the relative [the poem]” which in fact, as Charlotte Beck so accurately puts it, lies at the heart of Warren’s own “poetics of (im)purity” (Beck 328).

Brooks argues for something similar in his concluding chapter in *The Well Wrought Urn*: “whatever statement we may seize upon as incorporating the ‘meaning’ of the poem, immediately the imagery and the rhythm seem to set up tensions with it, warping and twisting it, qualifying and revising it” (197). In other words, the traditional aspects of form always are a force in tension with the “meaning” of the poem. This, for Brooks, is not distinctive of Modernism, though it is a quality of Modernist poetry in a new way. According to Brooks, poets like Eliot are “difficult” (*Urn* 76-77) precisely because of their awareness of the perennial tensions between form and content, and because of the ways they demand the reader’s attention to this aspect of poetry: “the modern poet has, for better or worse, thrown the weight of the responsibility on the reader” (*Urn* 76).

Brooks, like Eliot, maintains a distinction between reality and the poet’s creative activity. Brooks’ concern with the differences between scientific and poetic language rest on this distinction. The paradox – or part of it at least – is that poetry says something true about



the real, but something which cannot be expressed in the language of the real (that is, the language of science, by which Brooks seems to mean a classical understanding of science as the language of philosophy, theology, metaphysics, as well as the hard sciences). Poetry is impossible to paraphrase because the way it means is through the structure of meanings or symbols which form the body of the poem. Form and content are indistinguishable: it is impossible to abstract the theme or idea of the poem. This is not because poems lack ideas, that is, correlation to the real world (*Urn* 204-205). For Brooks, as for Warren, “the truth is implicit in the poetic act as such” (Warren, “A Poem of Pure Imagination” 382). Rather, abstraction is impossible because, as Eliot would put it, in making a poem the poet successfully creates an objective correlative for his experience.

The term “objective” here is key and must be distinguished from “subjective.” A “subject” is a thing as it stands in relation to itself; an “object” is that thing as it stands in relation to others. Aesthetic qualities belong to objects in so far as they are objects; art is always something “seen” by another. Brooks argues for something similar when he says that “to know the poem as an object” is to “share in the experience” which was the catalyst for the poem (*Urn* 75). To unpack this idea of poetic objectivity, it is helpful to reference John Crowe Ransom’s triadic notion of artist-object-form, modeled after the cultural ritual triangle of man-woman-code. In that ritual triangle, when man is forced to follow the code of his people to pursue the woman he desires: “the woman, contemplated in this manner under restraint, becomes a person *and an aesthetic object*” (Ransom 33). This idea of contemplation “under restraint” is at the heart of Ransom’s theory of poetic formalism. For Brooks too, if his more expansive understanding of form is allowed to bear on this idea, formal restraint turns a

subject, a thing in its own right, into an object, a thing perceived by another and therefore as aesthetic.

Before closing, I would like to consider the extent to which Brooks' poetics, so heavily shaped by modernism generally and by Eliot in particular, are relevant to understanding the poets of his day. His goal in *The Well Wrought Urn* is to demonstrate the "common structural properties" which make poems of all periods accessible to the critical eye (ix). Because poems share such properties, he says, they exist and can be viewed *sub specie aeternitatis* (x) and have intrinsic significance, beyond the interests of "cultural anthropology" and "political, or religious, or moral" utility (xi). Given that this is his goal, it is particularly important to consider whether his poetics are useful in understanding the poets of the second half of the twentieth century.

James Breslin characterizes the history of American poetry as "a series of discontinuities, eruptions of creative energy that suddenly alienate poetry from what had come to seem its essential and permanent nature" (xiii-xiv). He calls the shift in the late 1950s an "antiformalist revolt" against the symbolic formalism which was the first reaction to Modernism. What Breslin describes seems to be an ongoing dialectic in American twentieth century poetry, a persistent tension between the poetic qualities of immediacy and formalism. Brooks' account of poetry as paradox and as a dynamic-dramatic working out of conflict over time seems to agree with the ways which poets reacted to one another's work: what happens within the poem also happens among the poems of the century. They push with and against one another, creating a pulsing, organic life. This dynamic pressure between poets and their poems is what Harold Bloom describes in *The Anxiety of Influence*. It is helpful to remember his claim that "strong poets make ... history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative

space for themselves" (5). In other words, the reader must take anything which later poets say about earlier ones with a grain of salt. They must, according to Bloom, see themselves as distinct from their predecessors, and so may miss the important ways in which they are in continuity with them.

Breslin further argues that the poets of the 1950s felt the need to be disruptive, and "by way of repudiating orthodox modernism, American poetry once again became modern, 'of the present'" (xv). Their innovations were attempts to "breakthrough back into life" (Robert Lowell qtd in Breslin xiv) by making poetry once again full of "temporal immediacy." On the surface, this account of 1950s poetry seems to contradict Brooks' idea of poetry as *sub specie aeternitatis*, but that is too simplistic a reading of both Brooks and Breslin. Brooks does not say that poetry is without "temporal immediacy;" rather, he says that this is not its only significance. Formal structures function to elevate experience to the objective level, but the first requirement is that immediacy of subjective experience which underlies a poem.

Lynn Keller points to a further difference between modern and contemporary poets in her introduction to *Re-making it New*:

contemporary poets differ [from modernist poets] in tending not to battle against limits but rather to play with them, not to abhor chaos or lament the arbitrariness of order but to accept each as intriguing possibility....Contemporary poets' revisions of modernist approaches thus represent a conscious critique of modernist aims and assumptions, reflecting an altered sense of what it means for art to be close to life. (9)

Contemporary poets are interested in the "process of attention" (Keller 11) rather than on the products of the mind which order experience: "they portray the mind engaging itself in the

world and attending to events, without imposing fixed interpretations on that experience” (Keller 12). In certain ways, this account also seems to be in contradiction with Brooks, for whom the form or “structures of meaning” are product rather than process. At the same time, his principles of paradox and tension are still relevant: contemporary poets still seek to put some kind of order on their experience. While they abandon traditional figures of rhyme and meter even more completely than the Modernists did, contemporary poets nevertheless employ words and space to convey meaning. And in using words, they must regulate or structure the ways in which they want those words to connote in the reader’s mind; a choice *not* to regulate them is still a choice. Poetry still, then, is a working out of some action over time through arranged symbols.

It is less clear, however, whether Brooks’ idea of “symbolic recapitulation” and of poems as “structures of meaning” or structures of symbols is relevant to contemporary poetry; it only works if something slightly different is meant by “meaning.” Because contemporary poets are so much more comfortable with post-Cartesian epistemology, with the separation between mind and world and therefore between mind and mind, it is hard to pin down what “meaning” actually means for them. But Vendler points to the idea of poetic resistance, which Stevens expresses as the need to “resist the intelligence almost successfully,” as a through-line (Vendler 6). For this reason, among others, Vendler characterizes the twentieth century as “the history of rewriting of the Modernists by their successors,” (4) a playing out on the macro-level of the drama of poetic signification.

From this exploration of Brooks’ poetics, it is clear that his poetic theory was largely formed by Modernism, and by Eliot and *The Waste Land* in particular. His ideas of paradox,

drama, and organic unity are instantiated in the recapitulating symbolism of *The Waste Land*. Brooks' fundamental idea that poetry is "a pattern of resolved stresses" (*Urn* 203) is universal enough to be relevant even to contemporary poets who do away with almost every traditional notion of poetic form. This definition of poetic form is abstract enough to permit different kinds of "patterns" to be involved in poetic making, particularly embracing the spatial, physical component of poetry which its oral roots often obscure. This physicality of poetry becomes the focus of modern poets as well as the critics and poets they shape. Essentially, Brooks follows in the Modernist tradition by expanding the possibilities for poetry while holding fast to its transcendence: poetry can be produced in any age, so long as it is intelligible by any age.

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