Cleanth Brooks is known primarily as one of the foremost representatives of the New Criticism, although he often disagreed with other New Critics and sometimes advocated rejecting the label entirely. By Brooks's own account, the New Critics believed that the work of literature should be viewed as an organic whole, the value of which lies in its structure and the structure of which is best appreciated by close reading, that is, by a careful analysis of the ways in which a work's verbal parts contribute to the literary whole. The New Critics were united in insisting that the proper object of literary criticism is the literary text and not the author's intentions, the readers' various responses, or the social conditions which helped shape and influence the text's composition. We should evaluate literature, the New Critics insisted, on the basis of how well or poorly it is written and not in response to whether we agree with the ideas that it expresses or sympathize with the characters it presents. Not surprisingly, this claim has made the New Critics the target of frequent criticism from Marxist critics and from others who are committed to analyzing literature in its social contexts.

Throughout his long career, Brooks was an influential spokesman for New Critical principles, and by the mid-twentieth-century, New Criticism had become the dominant form of literary criticism in America. In 1935, he and Robert Penn Warren established The Southern Review, a journal that published many of Brooks's fellow New Critics and which reflected the views of the Southern Agrarians, a conservative group who wished to protect traditional cultures such as those found in the South from what they saw as the negative effects of industrialization and modernization. In 1938, Brooks and Warren published Understanding Poetry, a very influential anthology, which was designed to facilitate the use of New Critical principles in teaching literature.

The following year, Brooks published Modern Poetry and Tradition, his first book of essays. Here he follows T. S. Eliot in suggesting that the best poetry employs dramatic and complex figures of speech, which Eliot and others termed "metaphysical wit." Like Eliot and Matthew Arnold before him, Brooks thinks that the history of
English literature reflects the fragmentation of society. He was particularly critical of
the subjectivism of Romantic poetry and feels that the emphasis on poetic form
which is found in Modernist poetry provides a necessary corrective to the emotional
excesses of romanticism. The Well Wrought Urn, Brooks's most influential work of
criticism, provides a succinct summary of his critical principles and, as is usual in
Brooks's criticism, an application of these principles in numerous exemplary close
readings of poems. Brooks argues that poetic structure is predicated upon the
dynamic balance of opposing ideas, attitudes, and feelings. As one example, he cites
the opening lines of a sonnet by Wordsworth:

   It is a beauteous evening, calm, and free,
   The holy time is quiet as a Nun
   Breathless with adoration . . .

Brooks then notes the tension between Wordsworth’s adjectives: beauteous, calm,
tremendous excitement; and yet the evening is not only quiet but calm”. Brooks
labels this verbal tension “paradox” and argues that it is the indispensable founda-
tion of all good poetry. Because of the emphasis that he places on poetic form, Brooks
has been accused of reducing poetic language to a fixed or static structure, but this
accusation overlooks the dramatic conflict that Brooks sees as the source of paradox.
Poetry is more successful than scientific description in capturing the drama of human
thought, he argues, precisely because it is able to balance multiple and conflicting
points of view. Yet, a question remains as to how Brooks would have us understand
the relationship between poetic dramas of thought and those which we experience
in everyday life. Can we appreciate the form of a poet’s dramatization of a moral con-
flict, for instance, without judging the contents of her or his arguments? To some
extent, we can, Brooks insists, although this claim has been often challenged.

Suggested reading


The Language of Paradox

Few of us are prepared to accept the statement that the language of poetry is
the language of paradox. Paradox is the language of sophistry, hard, bright,

witty; it is hardly the language of the soul. We are willing to allow that paradox is a permissible weapon which a Chesterton may on occasion exploit. We may permit it in epigram, a special subvariety of poetry; and in satire, which though useful, we are hardly willing to allow to be poetry at all. Our prejudices force us to regard paradox as intellectual rather than emotional, clever rather than profound, rational rather than divinely irrational.

Yet there is a sense in which paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry. It is the scientist whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox; apparently the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox. I overstate the case, to be sure; it is possible that the title of this chapter is itself to be treated as merely a paradox. But there are reasons for thinking that the overstatement which I propose may light up some elements in the nature of poetry which tend to be overlooked.

The case of William Wordsworth, for instance, is instructive on this point. His poetry would not appear to promise many examples of the language of paradox. He usually prefers the direct attack. He insists on simplicity; he distrusts whatever seems sophistical. And yet the typical Wordsworth poem is based upon a paradoxical situation. Consider his celebrated

It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
The holy time is quiet as a Nun
Breathless with adoration . . .

The poet is filled with worship, but the girl who walks beside him is not worshiping. The implication is that she should respond to the holy time, and become like the evening itself, nunlike; but she seems less worshipful than inanimate nature itself. Yet

If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,
Thy nature is not therefore less divine:
Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;
And worship'st at the Temple's inner shrine,
God being with thee when we know it not.

The underlying paradox (of which the enthusiastic reader may well be unconscious) is nevertheless thoroughly necessary, even for that reader. Why does the innocent girl worship more deeply than the self-conscious poet who walks beside her? Because she is filled with an unconscious sympathy for all of nature, not merely the grandiose and solemn. One remembers the lines from Wordsworth's friend, Coleridge:
He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small.

Her unconscious sympathy is the unconscious worship. She is in communion with nature “all the year,” and her devotion is continual whereas that of the poet is sporadic and momentary. But we have not done with the paradox yet. It not only underlies the poem, but something of the paradox informs the poem, though, since this is Wordsworth, rather timidly. The comparison of the evening to the nun actually has more than one dimension. The calm of the evening obviously means “worship,” even to the dull-witted and insensitive. It corresponds to the trappings of the nun, visible to everyone. Thus, it suggests not merely holiness, but, in the total poem, even a hint of Pharisaical holiness, with which the girl’s careless innocence, itself a symbol of her continual secret worship, stands in contrast.

In his preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth stated that his general purpose was “to choose incidents and situations from common life” but so to treat them that “ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect.” Coleridge was to state the purpose for him later, in terms which make even more evident Wordsworth’s exploitation of the paradoxical: “Mr. Wordsworth . . . was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us . . .” Wordsworth, in short, was consciously attempting to show his audience that the common was really uncommon, the prosaic was really poetic.

Coleridge’s terms, “the charm of novelty to things of every day,” “awakening the mind,” suggest the Romantic preoccupation with wonder—the surprise, the revelation which puts the tarnished familiar world in a new light. This may well be the *raison d’être* of most Romantic paradoxes; and yet the *neo-classic* poets use paradox for much the same reason. Consider Pope’s lines from “The Essay on Man”:

In doubt his Mind or Body to prefer;
Born but to die, and *reas’ning* but to err;
Alike in ignorance, his Reason such,
Whether he thinks too little, or too much . . .

Created half to rise, and half to fall;
Great Lord of all things, yet a Prey to all;
Sole Judge of Truth, in endless Error hurl’d;
The Glory, Jest, and Riddle of the world!
Here, it is true, the paradoxes insist on the irony, rather than the wonder. But Pope too might have claimed that he was treating the things of everyday, man himself, and awakening his mind so that he would view himself in a new and blinding light. Thus, there is a certain awed wonder in Pope just as there is a certain trace of irony implicit in the Wordsworth sonnets. There is, of course, no reason why they should not occur together, and they do. Wonder and irony merge in many of the lyrics of Blake; they merge in Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner. The variations in emphasis are numerous. Gray’s “Elegy” uses a typical Wordsworth “situation” with the rural scene and with peasants contemplated in the light of their “betters.” But in the “Elegy” the balance is heavily tilted in the direction of irony, the revelation an ironic rather than a startling one:

Can storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
Can Honour’s voice provoke the silent dust?
Or Flatt’ry sooth the dull cold ear of Death?

But I am not here interested in enumerating the possible variations; I am interested rather in our seeing that the paradoxes spring from the very nature of the poet’s language: it is a language in which the connotations play as great a part as the denotations. And I do not mean that the connotations are important as supplying some sort of frill or trimming, something external to the real matter in hand. I mean that the poet does not use a notation at all — as the scientist may properly he said to do so. The poet, within limits, has to make up his language as he goes.

T. S. Eliot has commented upon “that perpetual slight alteration of language, words perpetually juxtaposed in new and sudden combinations,” which occurs in poetry. It is perpetual; it cannot be kept out of the poem; it can only be directed and controlled. The tendency of science is necessarily to stabilize terms, to freeze them into strict denotations; the poet’s tendency is by contrast disruptive. The terms are continually modifying each other, and thus violating their dictionary meanings. To take a very simple example, consider the adjectives in the first lines of Wordsworth’s evening sonnet: beauteous, calm, free, holy, quiet, breathless. The juxtapositions are hardly startling; and yet notice this: the evening is like a nun breathless with adoration. The adjective “breathless” suggests tremendous excitement; and yet the evening is not only quiet but calm. There is no final contradiction, to be sure: it is that kind of calm and that kind of excitement, and the two states may well occur together. But the
poet has no one term. Even if he had a polysyllabic technical term, the term would not provide the solution for his problem. He must work by contradiction and qualification.

We may approach the problem in this way: the poet has to work by analogies. All of the subtler states of emotion, as I. A. Richards has pointed out, necessarily demand metaphor for their expression. The poet must work by analogies, but the metaphors do not lie in the same plane or fit neatly edge to edge. There is a continual tilting of the planes; necessary overlappings, discrepancies, contradictions. Even the most direct and simple poet is forced into paradoxes far more often than we think, if we are sufficiently alive to what he is doing.