against party members those brutal methods which a true Leninist should reserve for enemies outside the party. Khrushchev said the same, but with less detail and no desire at all to explain why Stalinism occurred. Medvedev's explanation of Stalin's rise and the establishment of Stalinist despotism is extremely complex. He frequently presents the standard Soviet interpretation of events, only to contradict or modify it later in the book, and quotes the most penetrating passages of authors whom he professes to reject. Such literary devices allow Medvedev to present both sides of highly controversial issues. Indeed, Medvedev advances so many unorthodox views that one wonders if he is really the faithful Marxist-Leninist that he claims to be.

Medvedev draws heavily on a body of ideas comprising the concept of Oriental despotism. Joravsky describes this concept as having been "common among earlier generations of Western observers." He fails to add that those observers included Marx, Engels, Plekhanov (founder of the first Russian Marxist party), and Lenin. (For the fullest discussion of this concept, see Karl A. Wittfogel's Oriental Despotism.) Medvedev himself quotes one of Plekhanov's most thoughtful applications of this concept to Russia:

If the people, Plekhanov declared, approach power when social conditions are not yet ripe, then "the revolution may result in a political monstrosity, such as the ancient Chinese or Peruvian empires, i.e., in a tsarist despotism renovated with a Communist lining."

Medvedev implies that the restoration of despotism was inevitable in Albania and China, but he asserts that this disaster could have been avoided in Russia. To regard Stalinist despotism as inevitable "would be a historical justification of Stalin, not a condemnation."

History must judge Stalin, and, as happens so frequently in Communist courts, political considerations determine Medvedev's verdict. If Medvedev were to absolve Stalin even in part, then Lenin would stand condemned. Medvedev proposes several ways to end Stalinism: using only "moral" methods of building socialism, establishing constitutional "guarantees" against the rise of despots, and tolerating different points of view within the one-party state. He does not, however, inform the reader of Lenin's own "guarantees" against the rise of a postrevolutionary despot. One of Lenin's "guarantees" included the creation of a radical "democracy," without those coercive institutions of social control on which all despots rely. Lenin, of course, violated his own "guarantees" shortly after seizing power by reestablishing the secret police, a standing army, and a state bureaucracy. Medvedev never compares Lenin's prerevolutionary theories with his postrevolutionary practice, perhaps because he knows that such a comparison might find Lenin partly responsible for the rise of Stalinism.

Let History Judge reveals that dissident Soviet intellectuals are thinking seriously about the problem of Communist despotism, although the harrassment of the Medvedev brothers and the suppression of this book suggest that Stalinism is still alive and flourishing.

Reviewed by C. Paul Holman, Jr.

Ransom's Ars Poetica


Set against the world of affairs, to which this journal is properly dedicated, what claim can poetry have on our adult attentions? The question and its partial answers begin, for English literature, with an attack on poetry by a Puritan named Gosson, and a spirited but gentlemanly reply by Sir Philip Sidney, in the sixteenth century: the problem is as old as our modern age.
Sidney conducted his defense of poetry chiefly on ethical grounds, as did the poets of the eighteenth century. The Victorian Matthew Arnold made the largest possible claim for poetry: it would assume the function of religion. Its best defenders in our own century, poetry's most embattled period, have retreated from that indefensibly wide perimeter; what they have retreated to is the poem itself, and within those confines, only apparently narrow, they have conducted the most brilliant defense to date.

In addressing the closest possible attention to the poem, rather than being gratefully distracted—like most of our English professors still—to subject matters outside it, these critics have found a basis for defending poetry as a unique mode of discourse. Poetry is not ethics, it is not religion; it is not documentary evidence of something else. "Poetry" consists of individual poems, and the individual poem is "a way of knowing something," says Allen Tate, that cannot be known outside the terms of the poem.

Besides Tate's, some other names to invoke are those of T. E. Hulme (1883-1917) in England; R. P. Blackmur (1904-1965); Cleanth Brooks; Robert Penn Warren. And preeminently John Crowe Ransom. Ransom taught Tate, Warren, and Brooks at Vanderbilt in the 1920's. He founded The Kenyon Review, one of the principal forums for literary theorists during a quarter of a century. And, in addition to his own poetry, he has published two of our most important books of poetical theory: The World's Body (1938, recently reissued); and The New Criticism (1941), which gave English and American formalism its name.

Beating the Bushes is his first collection of essays since 1955. Every now and then one critic or another reports a shift in Ransom's critical position, usually in the direction of the critic's own. The eleven essays Ransom has chosen to collect here do not bear the reports out. Arranged chronologically, they exhibit in the way of change only a growing modesty. (But then Ransom's prose style has always been that of the "polite conversationalist.") The modesty has two causes: disappointment that the new criticism of the practical kind has "bogged down" in "half-finished" verbal analyses ("Poets and Flatworms"); and the theoretical critic's "explosion of laughter, as [he] realizes that he cannot support his great ambitions" ("Why Critics Don't Go Mad").

However short of his ambitions, Ransom, of all the new critics, is the most technically detailed in defining the differentia of poetry as a mode of discourse. His most detailed work is in the long essay "Wanted: An Ontological Critic," reprinted from The New Criticism as the first piece of the new volume. (We would still, however, be grateful to New Directions for a fresh printing of The New Criticism, which has long been hard to come by.) In this essay he begins his ontological analysis all the way back at the point of poetic composition,

an operation in which an argument fights to displace a meter, and the meter fights to displace the argument... If the unsatisfactoriness of poetic theory... is due to the absence from it of radical philosophical generalities, the fault must begin really with its failure to account for the most elementary and immediate aspect that formal poetry wears: its metrical form... I suggest that the meter-and-meaning process is the organic act of poetry, and involves all its important characters.

The ensuing analysis, thus quietly introduced, if not the whole story, is still the most plausible account we have of the relation of meter to meaning.

The essay with which the reader might better begin, however, is the second, "An Address to Kenneth Burke." As a capsule history of philosophy and science, religion and aesthetics, it will serve as a general introduction to Ransom's poetics. Ransom's philosopher is Kant:

In art we bridge the feud between
sense and reason. We set up an object in which imagination finds a complete heterogeneous image, and reason finds a definitive rational form, so that both can take their exercise in the same object. ... I do not think [Kant’s] understanding of art can be much bettered for introductory purposes.

The heterogeneous image is “the substance against which science breaks its head,” the dense world of percept, as opposed to concept; it is the “world’s body.”

These distinctions can be found neatly dramatized, I suggest, in one of Henry James’ short stories, “The Real Thing.” A London artist, at the crux of his career, is offered the services, as models, of the “real thing”: an actual English gentleman and his lady, who happen to be impoverished. But as models they prove worthless to him: they persist in coming from his pen as types, the perfect English lady and gentleman. “I adored variety and range,” says the artist, “I cherished human accidents; ... I wanted to characterize closely, and the thing in the world I most hated was the danger of being ridden by a type.” (The type is the province of science: the scientist’s Homo sapiens, the social scientist’s statistical average.) “When [friends] claimed that the obsessional form could easily be character I retorted, ... ‘Whose?’ It couldn’t be everybody’s—it might end in being nobody’s.” So for models of ladies and gentlemen, the artist finds himself relying, a little embarrassed, on a Cockney girl and his Italian servant: they have the talent for “imitation” (James chooses the Aristotelian term). The English couple have one appeal left, the ethical; they need the money. “‘Oh my dear Major,’” the artist says finally, “‘I can’t be ruined for you!’” He adds, for the reader: “It was a horrid speech”; but the artist, as artist, is not his brother’s keeper.

By now I shall seem to have Ransom fighting in the *Art pour Art* camp (although, says Tate, “there is probably nothing wrong with art for art’s sake if we take the phrase seriously”—if we mean to refer to something that can be respected apart from its use). Ransom’s dualism—whatever you may think of dualism—saves his poetics from that cul-de-sac: “If Form is empty, Matter is blind: ‘A percept without a concept is blind,’ as Kant, again, had said. ... It is clear that imagination and reason ought to learn from the failures of each other’s tours de force.” And he observes that apologists do their art no service in seeking to exempt it of moral and scientific responsibility, and to have it out of the category of useful human behavior. Art, if it takes them at their word, falls into forms that seem to be all but void of human interest, as well as forms that are strange and all but unintelligible.

Ransom’s best treatment of the relation between art and the rest of human life is in his neglected book of cultural criticism, *God Without Thunder* (1930). In the present volume the most interesting passage in that vein is a footnote to a discussion of two kinds of art and two kinds of world-outlook:

If there had been time I think I would have proposed ... two exciting terms taken from politics: *Leftist,* for the logico-mathematical or Platonic or idealist philosophy, involving the ontology and the religion and the ethics as well as the politics which that term connotes; and *Rightest,* for the substantival or aesthetic ontology, religion, ethics, and politics. ... I believe firmly in the method of philosophical correlations.

I wish that there had been time. But we can pursue the line of connections for ourselves, and note, for one thing, that a political philosophy without a theory of art, or with a contradictory notion of art—as is more common—is an incomplete political philosophy. The modern Leftists know better: they have been as thorough as Plato in their disposition of art.

Reviewed by ROBERT BUFFINGTON...