R.P. Blackmur, Honest Critic

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To Blackmur, criticism is an important job, one not to be taken lightly and one not to be undertaken unless the criticism is to be done thoroughly. For him, criticism is to work with the whole, for to work with a piece is to distort the end product of the criticism.

To illustrate Blackmur's approach, I would like to consider segments of his essay, "Examples of Wallace Stevens." Early in the essay, he cites vocabulary as the unusual feature of Stevens' poetry:

The important thing about Mr. Stevens' vocabulary is not the apparent oddity of certain words, but the uses to which he puts those words with others.

In other words, Blackmur goes to the poetry and, on the basis of his findings, he assigns a key term to the poetry—one which will facilitate his approach. For Stevens, he works through the medium of vocabulary; for Yeats, with magic; for Eliot, with his later framework of Christianity; for Pound, with his craftsmanship; for Hardy, with his sensibility within a restricted pattern—to name a few.

And then Mr. Blackmur goes on to say why the ambiguity of Stevens' vocabulary is an asset, bringing in a comment on Cummings for contrast:

... Mr. Stevens' ambiguity is that of a substance so dense with being, that it resists paraphrase and can be truly perceived only in the form of words in which it was given. It is the difference between poetry which depends on the poet and
poetry which depends on itself. Reading Cummings you either guess or supply the substance yourself. Reading Mr. Stevens you have only to know the meanings of the words and to submit to the conditions of the poem. There is a precision in such ambiguity all the more precise because it clings so closely to the stuff of the poem that separated it means nothing.

To demonstrate Blackmur's thorough approach, I would like to quote a fairly lengthy passage in which he neatly supports his statement that word meaning makes the poem penetrable. He concerns himself in this instance with one word, the word "funest" used in Stevens' "Of the Manner of Addressing Clouds." First, he defines it (so that he and his criticism will be intelligible to the reader) as a word meaning "sad or calamitous or mournful" and then gives the derivation as a "French word meaning fatal, melancholy, baneful" and as having "to do with death and funerals." Carefully, then, he quotes the word in its precise context:

Gloomy grammarians in golden gowns,
Meekly you keep the mortal rendezvous,
Eliciting the still sustaining pomps
Of speech which are like music so profound
They seem an exaltation without sound.
Funest philosophers and ponderers,
Their evocations are the speech of clouds.
So speech of your processionals returns
To the casual evocations of your tread
Across the stale, mysterious seasons.

And then, Blackmur justifies Stevens' use of "funest" as the only word exactly suited to the poem:

The sentence in which funest occurs is almost a parenthesis. It seems the statement of something thought of by the way, suggested by the clouds, which had better be said at once before it is forgotten. In such a casual, disarming way, resembling the way of understatement, Mr. Stevens often introduces the most important elements in his poems. The oddity of the word having led us to look it up we find that, once used, funest is better than any of its synonyms. It is the essence of the funeral in its sadness, not its sadness alone, that makes it the right word: the clouds are going to their death, as not only philosophers but less indoctrinated ponderers know; so what they say, what they evoke, in pondering, has that much in common with the clouds. Suddenly we realize that the effect of funest philosophers is due to the larger context of the lines preceding, and at the same time we become aware that the statement about the evocations is central to the poem and illuminates it. The word pomps, above, means
ceremony and comes from a Greek word meaning procession, often, by association, a funeral, as in the phrase funeral pomp. So the pomp of the clouds suggest the funeral in funest.

From the vantage point, Blackmur then goes into another statement concerning the ambiguity of Stevens' vocabulary:

The whole thing increases in ambiguity the more it is analyzed, but if the poem is read over after analysis, it will be seen that in the poem the language is perfectly precise. In its own words it is clear, and becomes vague in analysis only because the analysis is not the poem. We use analysis properly in order to discard it and return that much better equipped to the poem.

Using the same procedure, Blackmur points out other uses of words and ambiguities in Stevens' poetry, including words important simultaneously for both their sound and sense; and words important for the nonsense which they convey.

Lest he become unduly carried away with Stevens alone, Blackmur introduces a brief comparative study into his essay. He chooses as points of reference (and perhaps, for the reason that they furnish a stark black-and-white comparison) T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. He comments that condensation in poetry is vital to both of them: to Pound, who deals with "sensual experience primarily" and who deals with this experience through imagery; and to Eliot, who deals with beliefs through the medium of dramatic poetry.

Mr. Stevens' tropes, in his best work and where he is most characteristic, are neither visual like Pound nor dramatic like Eliot. The scope and reach of his verse are no less but are different. His visual images never condense the matter of his poems; they either accent or elaborate it. His dramatic statements, likewise, tend rather to give another, perhaps more final, form to what has already been put in different language.

Finally, after more of the same type of analysis and criticism, Blackmur characteristically leaves the reader on an evaluative note. In Stevens' case, it is this:

... The contrast between his subjects—the apprehension of all the sensual aspects of nature as instances of fate,—and the form in which the subjects are expressed is what makes his poetry valuable. Nature becomes nothing but words and to a poet words are everything.

This, then, is generally Blackmur's method of criticism. His approach keeps him pretty much within the poetry itself, going outside it for his criticism only when the average reader would, as in the case of looking up vocabulary.
As he writes in "The Critic's Job of Work," he is careful to find "the way demonstrably to get at, in pretty conscious terms which others may use, the substance of (his) chosen case."

I believe that Blackmur is sincerely attempting to criticize in such a way as to improve poetry, if the poets themselves listen to his voice. He maintains what he himself would probably term an "objective authority," for he criticizes a poem in the way he honestly and objectively thinks it should be criticized. For instance, Eliot's *The Waste Land* is generally regarded quite highly. Blackmur calls it an "ambitious" poem, but does not praise it, for he contends that it "fails in composition, in independent existence, and in intelligibility of language." In other words, it is not an entity unto itself; it cannot be wholly understood without the use of crutches. It...

... requires of the reader that he supply from outside the poem, and with the help of clues only, the important, controlling part of what we may loosely call, the meaning. And (it) deliberately presents passages, lines, phrases, and single words which no amount of outside work can illumine. The fact is striking because, aside from other considerations of magnitude, relevance, and scope, these are not the faults we lay up typically against the great dead. The typical great poet is profoundly rational, integrating, and, excepting minor accidents of incapacity, a master of ultimate verbal clarity. Light, radiance, and wholeness remain the attributes of serious art. And the fact is disheartening because no time could have greater need than our own for rational art. No time certainly could surrender more than ours does daily, with drums beating, to fanatic politics and despotically construed emotions.

In this passage, Blackmur seems to imply that *The Waste Land* will not live on as a great poem and decries the paucity of rational art in our time.

Here, I believe that Robert Penn Warren would be inclined to agree with Blackmur, for he contends that the reader must be able to participate in the poem and that the total structure of the poem is important—not any one of the pieces standing alone. And probably Yvor Winters would nod in assent too, for he wants poetry to be a statement in words about human experience. He wants a rationally apprehensible content and emotion appropriate to rational apprehension.

Blackmur, for all his criticism of modern critics, does not stand alone. I would say that he is a new critic, for to him, the poem (and not outside factors) is of prime importance—or perhaps, it would be more accurate to say, that the poem is of sole importance. Blackmur—it seems to me—is, above all, an honest critic.