“THE CANONIZATION”—THE LANGUAGE OF PARADOX RECONSIDERED

BY WILLIAM J. ROONEY

At the end of *The Well Wrought Urn*¹ Cleanth Brooks tells us that the generalizations which he makes depend for their validity upon the adequacy of his reading of particular poems.

The reader will by this time have made up his mind as to whether the readings are adequate. (I use the word, advisedly, for the readings do not pretend to be exhaustive, and certainly it is highly unlikely that they are not in error in one detail or another). If the reader feels that they are seriously inadequate, then the case has been judged; for the generalizations that follow will be thoroughly vitiated by the inept handling of the particular cases. (p. 177)

I propose, therefore, to examine the adequacy of Brooks’ reading of “The Canonization,” which he has offered as a kind of archetypal illustration of his now famous thesis (almost a commonplace of American criticism) that “there is a sense in which paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry” (p. 3). I choose “The Canonization” because if Brooks’ thesis is not verifiable there, it is probably verifiable nowhere. “Donne’s ‘Canonization,’ he tells us, ought to provide a sufficiently extreme instance.”

The basic metaphor which underlies the poem (and which is reflected in the title) involves a sort of paradox. For the poet daringly treats profane love as if it were divine love. The canonization is not that of a pair of holy anchorites who have renounced the world and the flesh. The hermitage of each is the other’s body; but they do renounce the world, and so their title to sainthood is cunningly argued. The poem then is a parody of Christian sainthood; but it is an intensely serious parody of a sort that modern man, habituated as he is to an easy yes or no, can hardly understand. He refuses to accept the paradox as a serious rhetorical device; and

¹ New York, 1947.
² He remarks that the poems examined in *The Well Wrought Urn*, other than those by Donne and the moderns, are, as a methodical principle, “to be read as one has learned to read Donne and the moderns.” (p. 117).

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since he is able to accept it only as a cheap trick, he is forced into this dilemma. Either: Donne does not take love seriously; here he is merely sharpening his wit as a sort of mechanical exercise. Or: Donne does not take sainthood seriously; here he is merely indulging in a cynical and bawdy parody.

Neither account is true; a reading of the poem will show that Donne takes both love and religion seriously; it will show, further, that the paradox is here his inevitable instrument. But to see this plainly will require a closer reading than most of us give to poetry. (p. 10-12)

“To see this plainly,” Brooks gives “The Canonization” “a closer reading” which consists principally in an analysis of some of the semantical implications (1) of address (“The person” addressed “represents the practical world which regards love as a silly affection”); (2) of the “metaphor” of canonization “on which the poem is built” (Donne begins to suggest this metaphor in the first stanza by the contemptuous alternatives which he suggests to the friend”); (3) of the “conflict between the ‘real’ world and the lover absorbed in the world of love” (It “runs through the poem; it dominates the second stanza . . . is touched on in the fourth . . . appears again in the last only to be resolved when the unworldly lovers, love’s saints who have given up the world, paradoxically achieve a more intense world”); (4) of the love metaphors which begin in a “vein of irony” and shift “from ironic banter into a defiant but controlled tenderness” (“The effect of the poet’s implied awareness of the lover’s apparent madness is to cleanse and revivify metaphor; to indicate the sense in which the poet accepts it, and thus to prepare us for accepting seriously the fine and seriously intended metaphors which dominate the last two stanzas of the poem”); (5) of tone (“The poem opens dramatically on a note of exasperation. . . . The tone with which the poem closes is one of triumphant achievement, but the tone is a development contributed to by various earlier elements”). Throughout the analysis is of meaning and resonance of meaning, of what “we can imagine,” of what “runs through the poem,” of the “suggestions” developed by words in “contrast” with other words, of the support of “paradox” by the “dominant metaphor,” of the “development of theme,” its “complication,” the “powerful dramatization” of its paradox, etc. (pp. 10-14).
The most immediately striking thing about this analysis is that it begins from, and never questions, the assumption that the poem is natural speech. Petrarchan conventions are admitted, but no other conventions are recognized as operating conventionally in the speech (From the analysis it might appear that Brooks considers conventions to be conventional only when they are threadbare). And nowhere is there even a hint of the real possibility of a distinction between a serious statement by a writer and manipulation of verbal conventions, whether serious or otherwise, that is in itself pure artifice.

Actually, the more closely one reads the poem, the more astonishingly conventionalized as speech it appears to be. Conventional symbols referring to human love (the Petrarchan conceits, the phoenix figure etc.), overlaid by reference to consciousness that these are conventional, and themselves in contrast to conventional symbols referring to worldly success, are merged with conventional symbols referring to divine love and heavenly success, the point of identity being the conscious fallacy of a univocal interpretation of renunciation of the world. The lovers are used as the focal point for both sets of symbols, especially the lover who is speaking, and the whole is set finally in the framework of a Renaissance interpretation of the Horatian convention of roughness of address characteristic of the sermo of satire. The fusion is, to use a phrase of Horace’s in a sense broader than he intended, a callida juctura. It is unexpected. It is splendid metaphor, and largely because it is good riddle.8

This quality of conventionalization penetrates even the details of the experience as they are presented in the poem. The reference is to affective states of the speaker, but the presentation is in no sense psychologistic. The figures and images are drawn from (a) common artifacts, unspecified by particularizing detail (wealth, ships, hermitage, tombs, hearse, urn, glasses, mirrors, spies, town, courts, Tapers); (b) the world of literary art and learning (Arts, wit, riddle, legend, verse, Chronicle, sonnets, hymnes, world’s soul, neutral thing, and fly, eagle, dove, phoenix, as standardized literary symbols); (c) profes-

8 "And generally speaking, clever enigmas furnish good metaphors, for metaphor is a kind of enigma, so that it is clear that the transference is clever." Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1405b.

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sions cited generically (soldiers, lawyers, merchants); (d) generically presented diseases (palsie, gout, colds, heats). The number of these categories (most of them function as categories), together with the way the speaker jumps from one to another, like the recitation of a catalogue, and the generalized level at which the process of love itself is referred to—all push the poem more and more in the direction of intricately conventionalized verbal art rather than any real communication, so that when the reader comes to the truncated "collect" with which the poem closes he knows that this prayer is no prayer precisely because it is so perfectly manipulated as prayer.

Brooks' interpretation of "The Canonization," on the contrary supposes that the statements in the poem are universally evaluatory—that the poem speaks seriously about the superiority of choosing human love rather than secular success. He thinks the poem functions to present a conflict between the "practical world" of the addressee, "which regards love as a silly affectation," and the lover absorbed in the world of love." That opposition of this sort is presented is beyond doubt ("For God's sake hold your tongue and let me love"). But is this opposition a matter of verbal art or is it real? What is affirmed in the poem? After a series of commands and rhetorical questions to his addressee, the speaker says: Call us what you will, we are made such by love; and if our story is unfit for chronicles, it is fit for verse; and by these hymns all shall approve us canonized for love. "We are made such by love" is a conjunction of terms. But how is the conjunction affirmed? What we have here is a statement of a matter of fact without any real assertion of value. It is significant that nowhere in the poem is there any request for the addressee's approval of this conjunction on, let us say, ethical or broadly political grounds. There is no positive statement about the absurdity or wisdom of either of the contrasting elements or their juncture. For example, the speaker in the poem nowhere rejects the addressee or the addressee's world. He affects impatience with him, it is true; the reason, if any, that is offered, however, is that his interference is impeding the rush of passion, and not that there is a radical breach of values. It is significant, in terms of the "argument" within the poem, that there is a good deal of "ethical" reference, references to the speaker's own "state of soul," but none of what the rhetoricians speak of as "pathetic argument"—
there is no play upon the addressee's feelings, no effort to win him over to the speaker's state of mind. Even the last stanza, which might be construed in this way, is not a "peroration," but the verbal fanfare of one striking a posture with dissuading friends.

This lack of real contrast between the speaker's world of love and the addressee's world of success is confirmed by the sameness in the quality of reference throughout the poem. For denotatively the words have the same clarity from first to last. The double meaning which Brooks finds in the word "die," if it is there, does not really constitute an ambiguity that affects any qualitative changes in the meanings. A like qualitative consistency is to be found in the connotations of the words of the poem. The world of "countries, towns, courts" is the world of "gout" and "grey hairs," of the "king's real and his stamped face"; the sonnets of the fourth stanza are the familiar territory of the conceits of the second stanza. The "well wrought urn" versus the "half acre tomb" of the fourth stanza; even in its more generalized framework of semi-soliloquy, is a clear reflection of the meaning of the first stanza; while the exaggerated conceits of the second stanza come from the same tradition of rhetorical ornament as the stylized metaphors of the third stanza. The fresh "turn" given the images in the fourth stanza is possible only because they are of the same general lineage as those in the preceding stanzas. A rhetorician like Geoffrey de Vinsauf would be at home with the technique of this poem. He would recognize in Donne a craftsman in the tradition of those for whom the practice of their art was the varying of given material, who believed that novelty, to be new, must be a change in what is old, and that freshness is always as here, merely readjustment in the weight of convention.

Brooks notes a shift in tone from the second stanza into the third and through the rest of the poem, a shift "from ironic banter into a defiant but controlled tenderness." Postulating such a shift is consistent on Brooks' part. For the poem to say what he construes it to say, there must be such a shift. But this avoids one problem only to raise another and more serious problem. For is not the effect of such a change the destruction of the poem's integrity as a poem? Would not a shift in tone so radical be an aesthetic flaw rather than an excellence? It is a shift after all not just in degree but in kind of meaning and

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direction of address. It supposes not only a shift from irony to tenderness but the much more violent change of the addressee from “the friend, who is objecting to the speaker’s love affair” in the first stanza to “us” in the last stanza. At the beginning of the analysis Brooks points out that “the ‘You’ whom the speaker addresses is not identified. We can imagine that it is a person, perhaps a friend, who is objecting to the speaker’s love affair. At any rate, the person represents the practical world which regards love as a silly affectation.” Towards the end of his analysis Brooks says “The effect of the poet’s implied awareness of the lovers’ apparent madness is to cleanse and revivify the metaphor; to indicate the sense in which the poet accepts it, and thus to prepare us for accepting seriously the fine and seriously intended metaphors which dominate the last two stanzas of the poem.” (Italics mine.)

Actually there is no shift either in address or in tone. There is, it is true, a kind of modulation from the first stanza (developed through figures of balance) and the second (amplified through standard conceits) into the third, fourth and fifth stanzas (prevailingly metaphorical)—the third stanza sharing with the second a hyperbolic quality in the figures. But the change is not “from ironic banter into a defiant and controlled tenderness.” It is not a modulation from a “note of irritation” to a “tone . . . of triumphant achievement.” The modulation which occurs is not in terms of the reality to which the signs refer, but in terms of the signs which are used; a modulation from signs (for erotic love expressed in the Petrarchan conceits) whose merely nominal function is perceived, to signs (for sanctity—the love of agape) which might be equally nominalistic in another context but which as signs are freshened by use in what has become a conventional love poem. The proof, if nowhere else, is in the theme, which, it should be noted, is the same, and conventionally so, as any hack sonnet of the period. Throughout the love is the romantic love of eros. The reference to the saints, the use of these signs, does not change the love to that of agape. Rather the reverse is true. The symbols for agape are controlled by the symbols for eros. To attain an effect of verbal art there is introduced the conscious fallacy of a univocal interpretation of renunciation of the world. That is why the speaker, as he introduces the symbols for sanctity, shifts neither address nor tone but the immediacy of

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address. For if the tone and the poem are to be saved the speaker's posture must be kept clear. And so he moves from the direct "I-You" relationship of stanzas one and two, into the "We-You" relationship of stanza three, and finally into the semi-soliloquy of stanzas four and five. The addressee is left standing there, with the speaker becoming absorbed in fantasy. In short, the speaker in the poem maintains a general consistency of address, shifting only its immediacy and introducing modulation not in that which is talked about but in the signs used in discussing this thematic material.4

All of this seems borne out, too, by grammatical and rhetorical details of the poem. For if the values which Brooks finds set forth with such "dignity," "precision," and "supernaturalism," were really there, the meanings would have to be combined with much more complication than the paractactically presented meanings of "The Canonization." Its most conspicuous relational words are "and," "or"—especially in the first three stanzas. In these stanzas the structure of elements is coordinate. In stanza four there is more subordination of elements and there are more relational words, at least within the sentences, but from sentence to sentence the relationship is still that of coordination. Stanza five is one non-predicative exhortation with a piling up of parallel elements. This paratactical quality is helped along by the predominance of phrases of instrumentality over those of qualification or modification. And the relative paucity of adjectives confirms the non-analytic, non-hypostatic nature of the speech. The sentence structure is non-intricate, built up principally by compounding and repetition of elements like imperative clauses.

The structure of the rhetoric corresponds to this grammatical structure. There is very little conceptual complication and little logical order. The opening and closing stanzas are volitional—commands in stanza one, and invocation in stanza five. Stanzas two, three and four, dealing with the past, present and future respectively, are affective in reference and develop inductively through exemplifying details. From stanza to stanza the relation is not syntactical. Rather each stanza is a separate unit

4 There is a corresponding phenomenon in the pattern of sound. The metrical cadence grows smoother in the fourth and fifth stanzas, but the groupings are still those of rough and colloquial speech. "We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms," is modulated from but not strange to the cadence of "Or chide my palsy or my gout."
connected aggregatively with the others. From a rhetorical point of view, the total effect is loosely syndetic.

Such agglomerative development is quite properly consistent; Donne makes out of this material the structure of a fine poem. The point to be made here, however, is that such a structure, successful for Donne's artistic purposes, is inconsistent with the meanings which Brooks purports to find in the poem. What Brooks does in his reading is supply syntactic articulation for meanings which in the poem are actually juxtaposed in a relationship fundamentally paratactic. He thus does not really face the text but uses it to suggest what for him is an important set of meanings.

Brooks concludes his "close reading" with an important summation of his thesis:

I submit that the only way by which the poet could say what

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6 It should also be noted that to present the meaning Brooks "discovers" the rhetoric of the poem would have to be sympoietic whereas it is pure epideixis.

6 The kind of reading which Brooks has given to "The Canonization" he faithfully carries out with the other poems in The Well Wrought Urn so that there emerges a kind of method which might be described as the rumination of poems to discover whatever is paradoxical either in the material to which they refer or in the situation out of which they grow. The result is an emphasis not on the poet's craft but on his point of view. Examples can be multiplied from every page of The Well Wrought Urn. The analysis of Wordsworth's sonnet "Composed on Westminster Bridge," for instance, ignores that its structure is developed through something very much like what the logicians and rhetoricians of another age would call the argument of verbal fallacy (See Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1401a), where the form of wording causes the illusion of genuine reasoning—a series of statements, compactly put, each appearing to be the result of a previous line of reasoning, when they are merely collocated, create the impression of establishing a fresh conclusion. This spuriousness of enthymeme is a flaw not in the poetry (fallacies and good verse are not incompatible) but in the revelation which Brooks finds and offers as reason for the goodness of the poem. "The city, in the poet's insight of the morning," Brooks says, "has earned its right to be considered organic, not merely mechanical. That is why the staid metaphor of the sleeping houses is strangely renewed. The most exciting thing the poet can say about the houses is that they are asleep. He has been in the habit of counting them dead—as just mechanical and inanimate; to say that they are "asleep" is to say that they are alive, that they participate in the life of nature. In the same way, the tired old metaphor which sees a great city as a pulsating heart of empire becomes revivixed. It is only when the poet sees the city under the semblance of death that he can see it as actually alive—and quick with the only life which he can accept, the organic life of 'nature.'" (p. 6) Wordsworth's distinction between "poetry and matter of fact or science" seems wholly to have absorbed Brooks, making him oblivious to what structurally is the most interesting fact about the sonnet—the verbal craft which contrasts a strong background of academically conventional neo-classic rhetoric with a somewhat fainter foreground of realistically detailed sociology.

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‘The Canonization’ says is by paradox. More direct methods may be tempting, but all of them enfeeble and distort what is to be said. This statement may seem the less surprising when we reflect on how many of the important things which the poet has to say have to be said by means of paradox: most of the language of lovers is such—‘The Canonization’ is a good example; so is most of the language of religion—‘He who would save his life, must lose it’; ‘The last shall be first.’ Indeed, almost any insight important enough to warrant a great poem apparently has to be stated in such terms. Deprived of the character of paradox with its twin concomitants of irony and wonder, the matter of Donne’s poem unravels into ‘facts,’ biological, sociological, and economic. What happens to Donne’s lovers if we consider them ‘scientifically,’ without benefit of the supernaturalism which the poet confers upon them? Well, what happens to Shakespeare’s lovers, for Shakespeare uses the basic metaphor of ‘The Canonization’ in his Romeo and Juliet? In their first conversation, the lovers play with the analogy between the lover and the pilgrim to the Holy Land. Juliet says:

For saints have hands that pilgrims’ hands do touch
And palm to palm is holy palmers’ kiss.

Considered scientifically, the lovers become Mr. Aldous Huxley’s animals, ‘quietly sweating, palm to palm.’ (pp. 16-17)

Brooks thinks that “The Canonization” does not unravel into scientific “facts” because the poet has conferred a “supernaturalism” on the lovers by means of an insight that must be stated in paradox with its accompaniment of irony and wonder. To bolster his argument he introduces the parallel of the language of religion and the language of lovers as examples of the same kind of need and use for paradox. But the languages of lovers and of the New Testament do not really support Brooks’ assertion about the language of poetry. Rather they betray his argument and reveal a fundamental contradiction at the basis of his analysis. To support Brooks’ argument, the passage which he quotes from the Bible would have to resist unraveling into facts. But it is of the essence of the Biblical language to unravel into facts, not biological or sociological or economic facts, it is true, but theological facts. The New Testament language is primarily a statement about something. “The first shall be last” points to a reality for which it asks approval and acceptance. It is aimed at turning its hearer’s mind to an order of thought and his will to a program of action. By its nature it does not maintain wholeness as speech, but surrenders
itself in a context of instruction and persuasion. As speech it is not autotelic but per se useful, with its end outside itself. In short, as speech it secures its end by unraveling.

Brooks has insisted that “deprived of the character of paradox with its twin concomitants of irony and wonder, the matter of Donne’s poem unravels into ‘facts,’ biological, sociological and economic.” But has he precluded the possibility that in his interpretation the poem unravels into facts of another kind—humanistic facts, statements about an ultimate unity which can only be expressed with “dignity” and “precision” through paradox? I think he has not. As “The Canonization” has been read by Brooks what emerges as important is the poet’s meaning and not what the poet has made out of this meaning. The integrity at stake for Brooks in his actual reading of the poem, is not the integrity of a linguistic construction but the integrity of a vision that “apparently violates science and common-sense” and “welds together the discordant and contradictory.” 7 But in communicating this vision is not the poem serving an end outside itself? Is it not, in short, “unravelling”? 

7 Brooks has a good many fine things to say about structure and about the fact that literary studies should take a direction that emphasizes structural analysis. He says, for example, that “the assumption” he has made in studying the poems discussed in The Well Wrought Urn is “that there is such a thing as poetry . . . and that there are general criteria against which the poems may be measured,” and that he is against locating “the ‘poetry’ in a special doctrine or a special subject matter or a special kind of imagery . . . .” The alternative, which he feels that he himself takes is to emphasize “the way in which the poem is built, or—to change the metaphor—the form which it has taken as it grew in the poet’s mind.” If we do this, he thinks, “we shall necessarily raise questions of formal structure and rhetorical organization; we shall be forced to talk about levels of meaning, symbolizations, clashes of connotations, paradoxes, ironies, etc.” (p. 199) But in practice, as we have seen above, the analysis which Brooks presents is semantical rather than structural. And his theory, whatever thesis he proposes, in statements like those quoted above, seems reductively to support his practice. “The structure meant,” he observes at one point, “is a structure of meanings, evaluations and interpretations; and the principle of unity which informs it seems to be one of balancing and harmonizing connotations, attitudes and meanings.” (p. 178) At another point he says: “. . . The poet can make his poem one by reducing to order the confusions and disorder and irrelevancies of ordinary experience in terms of one unifying insight . . . .” (p. 203) And at still another place: “It is not enough for the poet to analyze his experience as the scientist does, breaking it up into parts, distinguishing part from part, classifying the various parts. His task is finally to unify experience. He must return to us the unity of the experience itself as man knows it in his own experience. The poem, if it is to be a true poem, is a simulacrum of reality—in this sense, at least, it is as ‘imitation’—by being an experience rather than any mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction from experience . . . .” (p. 194) The emphasis made in these quotations

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To read "The Canonization" as such a vehicle of paradoxical insight is, however, not the only way to read the poem, as I have tried to show above. In fact, "The Canonization" can be read as such a vehicle only by ignoring the actual philological details of the poem, details which point not to the identity of the speech of "The Canonization" with that of lovers or of Biblical parables, but to its essential diversity from such speech. Attention to such details reveals that "The Canonization" stands detached as an integral aesthetic whole in a way that Biblical speech, functioning as an instrument, never could be detached. The function of "The Canonization" is primarily non-instrumental. No matter what its meaning is, its end is obviously that it be read with delight and for delight. There is paradox in the poem. The meaning of the poem could not be what it is without the paradox. The paradox functions, however, primarily for the sake of the total verbal structure of which it is a part and which has its own end in being a poem—a beautiful speech.

It is one thing to say that a poem is made of paradoxical meanings and quite another thing to conclude that the poem functions to convey a paradox, serious or otherwise. Effective reading of "The Canonization" cannot start from the assumption that paradox has a single effect. Effective reading must recognize that paradox can be fitted indifferently to different effects. The use of paradox varies as the context varies from the scientific to the logical to the poetical. The use in the instance of "The Canonization" is a distinctly poeti-

certainly does not push toward analysis of objective structure made out of the material of speech; it moves rather toward a consideration of the structure of the poet's consciousness as that may be exposed by an enquiry into the words of a poem to find the extra sememes which the poet's usage has put into them and which are not there lexically. "I question," Brooks says, "whether the parts of any poem ever attain any tighter connections than the 'psychological' or that the coherence, even of the metaphysical poets, is not ultimately a coherence of attitude." (p. 221) It is true that the mode of connections in a poem may reflect the poet's psychological state; but is it not equally true, and infinitely more important to analysis of literary structure, that the actual connections in a poem are not psychological but philological—grammatical, rhetorical and poetical connections, the ligature of syntax, of narrative sequence, topical relations, etc.? And coherence of attitude, it must be objected, is not coherence of meaning; for attitudes are not meanings but one group of things about which meanings can be. To think of the search for structure of meaning as a search for balance of attitudes (heterogeneous or otherwise) fails to confront the fact that a poem, which refers to experience and attitudes, is not made out of experience and attitudes, but out of words.

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cal one, and from such use nothing can be concluded about whether "Donne takes both love and religion seriously." In apprehending this poem, the reader, modern or otherwise, is not faced with the philosophical dilemma, "Either: Donne does not take love seriously . . . Or: Donne does not take saint-hood seriously," as Brooks asserts. But he is quite clearly faced with the philological problem of being sensitive to the functional variation of traditional components of speech.

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