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Gang, Joshua

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BEHAVIORISM AND THE BEGINNINGS OF CLOSE READING

BY JOSHUA GANG

There is a lot at stake in close reading. In the eighty years since its initial theorization, close reading has been subjected to a number of historical and ideological critiques.¹ We know the long (and often troubling) list of political forces, institutional pressures, and personal biases that had some role in close reading's development. Yet another type of historical work, however, is possible—one that identifies a different set of stakes and that traces how a certain set of cognitive dispositions came to be embedded in close reading's theoretical assumptions, techniques, and rhetoric. That type of work is my goal here: to show what these cognitive dispositions are, how they became part of literary study, and how they continue to shape the possibilities of contemporary criticism.

My argument is that some of close reading's most enduring techniques and assumptions have their origins in psychological behaviorism, the deterministic doctrine made famous by John Watson and B. F. Skinner, among others. This program of reading began in I. A. Richards's insistence in the 1920s that literary criticism reflect behaviorist advances in psychology and neurology. Building on these ideas, Richards theorized a model of literary criticism that would do two things. First, it would treat literary texts as behaviors, as defined by the behaviorists—it would treat them as external phenomena without reference to internal mental states. Second, it would record how the stimuli of poems affected readers physiologically and use these results to ground analyses of meaning and form. Richards's theories met strong resistance from New Critics such as Cleanth Brooks and William K. Wimsatt, who explicitly rejected the premises of Richards's work but whose own theories came to perpetuate Richards's transposition of behaviorist doctrine. Mediated and translated by seventy years of subsequent literary theory, elements of these ideas remain with us today. When we defer to the authority of the text, or insist on the irrelevance of authorial intent, these actions can be traced back to Brooks, Wimsatt, and Richards. Furthermore, they can be traced to

a still controversial set of empiricist interventions made by psychologists a century ago.

In 1911, when psychology was still a largely experimental (rather than clinical) discipline, Edward Lee Thorndike published *Animal Intelligence*, which explored how animal minds forge associations between experiences. Thorndike's findings contradicted the prevailing structuralist psychology of Edward Titchener, who had argued that mental states were accessible through introspection and also that animals possessed the rudiments of both consciousness and rationality. The capacities Titchener ascribed to humans and animals, Thorndike argued, could be explained without making recourse to unobservable phenomena (like consciousness) or other "magical agencies."² Instead, what Thorndike hypothesized were the Laws of Exercise and Effect, which articulated the relationship between reinforcement and the probability of a behavior's occurrence in the future.³

Thorndike's Laws found an ally in John Broadus Watson, whose 1913 lecture "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It" incorporated Thorndike's work into a theory of experimental psychology that Watson called "behaviorism." A former student of John Dewey and Jacques Loeb at the University of Chicago, Watson argued for the redefinition of psychology as the study of observable behaviors rather than that of unobservable mental states. "Psychology as the behaviorist views it," Watson said, "is a purely objective experimental branch of natural science. Its theoretical goal is the prediction of behavior. Introspection forms no essential part of its methods, nor is the scientific value of its data dependent upon the readiness with which they lend themselves to interpretation in terms of consciousness."⁴ Drawing on Pavlov's stimulus-response neuroscience, Thorndike's laws, and Loeb's botanical tropisms, Watson reconceived psychology as an empirical discipline focused on the objective observation (and prediction) of behavior.⁵ This new psychology had four main tenets: the unreliability of introspection; the need to analyze overt behaviors rather than covert mental states; the irrelevance of consciousness to psychological study (if consciousness was thought to exist at all); and the reduction of all behaviors (including mental states) to neurological actions and conditioning.

This article shows how these ideas became incorporated into the loose and often inconsistent set of techniques we call close reading.⁶ It traces how an empiricist intervention in psychology was translated into a formalist intervention in literary study. To that end, the rest of this article is divided into three parts. In the first part, I examine I. A. Richards's early criticism with an attention to how Richards mod-

eled his “practical criticism” on the main tenets of Watson’s behaviorism. Despite Richards’s protests about what he called behaviorism’s “ontological” component, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) and *Practical Criticism* (1929) present us with a translation of Watson’s behaviorism into a protocol for reading literature.⁷ In the second section I discuss behaviorism’s covert presence in the close reading techniques of the American New Critics. Despite their overt rejections of Richards’s methods, these New Critics largely perpetuated Richards’s methodology and behaviorist assumptions about the nature of literary experience. In discussing the New Criticism, I focus on theoretical concepts that continue to have a place in much contemporary criticism: the organic and non-propositional nature of poetic language and the abnegation of authorial intention. Embedded in the formalist rhetoric of Brooks’s “heresy of paraphrase” and Wimsatt and Beardsley’s “intentional fallacy” are mediated reassertions of Watson’s behaviorist intervention.⁸ In the third and final section, I discuss how close reading’s assimilation of behaviorism is relevant to contemporary concerns about formalism, the professional study of literature, and the promises of cognitive science. As a profession, we remain unaware of our own history of reading and, in that way, have come to inadvertently limit our agency as readers and critics.

I. A BEHAVIORIST POETICS

What I will show in this section is how much Richards’s concept of close reading depended on Watsonian behaviorism. But to argue for the centrality of behaviorism in Richards’s work is to diverge from most accounts of Richards’s contributions to literary study. For the past fifty years, Richards has been understood as an innovative critic who reinvigorated literary study with ideas from psychology, philosophy, and the sciences. Behaviorism, however, is not usually mentioned; Richards’s contributions are attributed to other discourses and disciplines.⁹ The critical consensus seems summed up by Richards’s biographer, Richard Russo. At best, Russo explains, Richards was “lured not by the premise but by the promise of behaviorism.”¹⁰ This article will argue the opposite of Russo’s claim and demonstrate how profoundly behaviorism shaped the methodology Richards developed in *Principles of Literary Criticism* and *Practical Criticism*. In these texts, the explicit goal is nothing short of a behaviorist poetics—a recentering of classic literary concepts such as genre, form, structure, and meaning around Watsonian behaviorism.

In these ways, Richards's work was not at all typical of the reception of behaviorism at Cambridge in the 1920s. More emblematic of this reception was Bertrand Russell's *The Analysis of Mind* (1921). Having enlisted Watson's help in the drafting of *The Analysis of Mind*, Russell was generally enthusiastic about behaviorism but wary of its categorical rejection of consciousness. It was absurd, Russell argued, to define consciousness only as the perceived unity of a mosaic of sensations, habits, behaviors, and reflexes. This definition of consciousness, he continued, forced behaviorists into a methodological double-bind: in order to practice behavioristic psychology, psychologists had to possess mental states that theoretically did not exist. "Images without beliefs," Russell wrote, "are insufficient to constitute memory; and habits are still more insufficient. The behaviourist, who attempts to make psychology a record of behavior, has to trust his memory to make the record."¹¹

Richards mirrored this critique in a review of Watson's *Behaviorism* (1925), which was published in *The New Criterion* in March 1926.¹² Written two years after *Principles of Literary Criticism*, the review distanced itself from Watson's more radical claims. Building on earlier theoretical work, *Behaviorism* sharpened the attack against introspection and the study of consciousness and hypothesized practical applications for behavioristic psychology.¹³ It was this attack on consciousness that Richards seized upon in his review; Watson's abnegation of consciousness was the monograph's most obvious and troubling "crudity." The definition of consciousness provided by Watson, Richards wrote, is

neither a definable nor a usable concept; that it is merely another word for soul . . . that it is pure assumption. All this does not follow from [consciousness's] unobservable nature. We may not observe consciousness, but we have it or are it . . . and in fact many of our observations of other things require it. In this respect the point of view of the behaviorist is hardly so much a point of view as a mistake.¹⁴

For these reasons, Richards claimed, "behaviorism contains a valuable part, and a part—the philosophical, more precisely ontological part—which will have to be discarded."¹⁵ What *Principles of Literary Criticism* did, the review suggested, was precisely discard behaviorism's "ontological" elements while retaining its "valuable" experimental and methodological protocols. The review of Watson was a prime opportunity for Richards to demonstrate that, unlike Watson, his was not the viewpoint of a behaviorist.

Richards's review of *Behaviorism*, however, fundamentally misrepresented Richards's own work. If we look at *Principles of Literary*

Criticism and the later *Practical Criticism*, we find that these texts display none of the caution found in the *New Criterion* review. If anything, they display an almost uncritical enthusiasm for Watson's theories. "Damage is very likely already being done," Richards wrote in *Practical Criticism*, "by elementary courses in Behaviourism and stimulus-response psychology. Yet it is not the inquiry which is harmful, but the stopping short of the inquiry."¹⁶ Indeed, *Principles* and *Practical Criticism* are fully invested in the abnegation of consciousness that Richards's review had been so eager to dismiss. As we read in *Principles of Literary Criticism*, published two years before the *New Criterion* review, "Whatever psycho-analysts may aver, the mental processes of the poet are not a very profitable field for investigation. They offer far too happy a hunting ground for uncontrollable conjecture."¹⁷ In this comment about the "mental processes" of the poet, the extent of Richards's behaviorism becomes clearer. Not only is Richards rejecting the possibility of knowing an author's mind but he is doing so because of the speculation and introspection such knowledge would require. The contents of the poet's mind, *Principles* suggests, are only accessible through either the poet's self-reported introspection or through speculative inferences made about the poet's creative work. Either way, the critic's knowledge of the poet's mind is necessarily unreliable, as even the poet's own introspection lacks insight into the unconscious processes of poetic production. Any attempt to ascertain the mind of the author would compromise the critic's objectivity.

In the later *Practical Criticism* we see the abnegation of authorial consciousness become even broader and more sophisticated. Here, Richards draws not only on Watson's arguments against introspection but also on what Richards imagines as the cognitive mechanisms by which humans infer semantic meaning. Presupposing successful introspection, these arguments fail to hold up logically within the greater scheme of Richards's behaviorism. "Whenever we hear or read any not too nonsensical opinion," Richards writes in *Practical Criticism*, "a tendency so strong and so automatic that it must have been formed along with our earliest speech-habits, leads us to consider *what seems to be said* rather than the *mental operations* of the person who said it" (*P*, 6). According to Richards, listeners induce meaning from the particularities of an utterance rather than trying to infer the mental state of the utterance's speaker. Listeners and readers "overlook the mind" behind the utterance unless "some very special circumstance calls us back" (*P*, 6-7). The behaviorist rejection of consciousness is presented here as a phenomenon natural to language use. Our natu-

ral instinct, we are told, is to parse utterances only in terms of “what seems to be said” in the utterance itself. Attempts to infer the “mental operations” are uncommon exceptions to the rule and are unverifiable speculations at best.

Practical Criticism tries to develop a type of literary criticism based on this model: the imagined listener who gleans meaning from overt language use rather than covert (and imagined) mental states. To accomplish this, Richards transformed his classroom at Cambridge into an ersatz laboratory; in the spring of 1926, just when his review of Watson was published in the *New Criterion*, Richards led a seminar at Cambridge called “Practical Criticism.” In this seminar, he provided his students with radically decontextualized poems—poems with no titles, identifying marks, or clues about origin. Such decontextualization, Richards hoped, would force his students to restrict their analyses to the poetic text exclusively—and to make psychological speculation impossible. Students provided Richards with written responses to each poem which then became the central evidence cited in the monograph *Practical Criticism*. And while *Practical Criticism* is prefaced in anthropological terms (“this book is the record of a piece of fieldwork in comparative ideology”), the presence of behavioristic methodology is fairly clear (*P*, xvii). Much as Watson insisted on the analysis of overt behaviors rather than covert mental states, Richards forced his students to analyze the poems as “behaviors”—as overt phenomena to be considered independently of the poet’s consciousness. Richards’s analyses themselves were similarly framed: *Practical Criticism* not only analyzed his students’ essays as literary criticism but also as behaviors so defined.

Looking to the discussion of “Poem 3” in *Practical Criticism*, we see Richards adopt this posture; responses to each poem are analyzed both as literary interpretations and as behavioral phenomena. But before turning to his analyses of his students’ work, we need to examine what exactly Richards’s students were responding to. Below are the first four lines of “Poem 3,” as copied from Appendix D in *Practical Criticism*:

At the round earth’s imagined corners blow
Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise
From death, you numberless infinities
Of souls, and to your scattered bodies go.
(*P*, 352)

This is the well-known opening of John Donne's "Holy Sonnet VII." But as Richards acknowledges, this is not the poem as he found it. Instead, it is a redacted version of "Holy Sonnet VII" tailored to the demands of the experiment. The anti-historical bias often ascribed to the New Criticism looms overhead here. And yet Richards's redaction of "Holy Sonnet VII" suggests that this perceived anti-historical bias is actually a bias against the inference of authorial mental states. In Appendix C of *Practical Criticism*, we find the following entry: "Poem 3. JOHN DONNE (1573). *Holy Sonnets VII*. Probably composed in 1618. The modernized spelling was adopted in the interests of the experiment" (P, 350). To prevent his students from speculating about the poem's psychological origins, Richards not only removed all of the poem's identifying marks but also scoured the text typographically. Looking to a seventeenth-century edition of Donne's poem, we see that "imagin'd" has become "imagined," "Angells" has become "angels," and "numberlesse" has become "numberless."¹⁸ Variables were removed "in the interests of the experiment"; as Richards was interested only in a certain class of behavioral responses, anything that might induce psychological speculation about the author was purged from the text. In the discussion of "Poem 6," which is a decontextualized version of G. M. Hopkins's "Spring and Fall, to a young girl," we see similar reasoning and an analogous deletion of the text's formal inflections. Explaining why he removed the accent from the line "And yet you *will* weep and know why," Richards writes, "this mark I omitted, partly to see what would happen, partly to avoid a likely temptation to irrelevant discussions" (P, 79, emphasis added).

Rather than so-called "irrelevant discussions" of consciousness and history, what we see Richards describing are his students' immediate, automatic responses to each poem. As one student wrote of "Poem 3," "Mouthfuls of words. Has no appeal whatsoever. Make a good hymn—in fact, that's the way the meter goes" (P, 43). Richard's analysis of this student is not religious but psychological, focusing on the student's "stock response." "That a stock response," Richards writes, "elicited merely by the religious subject-matter, should be able to make a sonnet sound like a hymn is a fact that surely stretches our notions of the mind's power over matter" (P, 43). According to Richards, the student's automatic reaction to religious content dominates his response and distorts the poem's objective features. Such "stock responses," we are told, define the experimental results culled in *Practical Criticism*. To Richards, the responses he received were not critical reactions to poetry so much as they were unthinking clichés and

reflexes that mimicked genuine interpretive insight. Stock responses, Richards writes, “involve views and emotions already fully prepared in the reader’s mind. . . . The button is pressed, and then the author’s work is done, for immediately the record starts playing in quasi- (or total) independence of the poem which is supposed to be its origin or instrument (*P*, 14).¹⁹ The consciousness of readers here is reduced almost entirely to reflexes and automatic behaviors. When we press play on the proverbial phonograph, we do not suppose that the machine in front of us has any conceptual understanding of music or sound. For Richards, his students are analogous to such a machine: the responses they produce are products less of consciousness than they are reflexes stimulated by the poetic “button” being pressed. (Logically, the same criticism might be extended to Richards, of course.) And if this is the case, consciousness is uninvolved and therefore irrelevant. Mired in the language of stock responses and automatic behaviors is what we might perceive as a prototype of close reading.

In showing how that prototype was constructed in *Practical Criticism*, my hope is that the cognitive dispositions embedded in close reading are clearer. But in order to fully understand the relationship between behaviorism and the techniques of close reading, we need to go one step further and examine that prototype’s theoretical foundation. This foundation is not to be found in *Practical Criticism*; instead, we find it in the earlier *Principles of Literary Criticism*, which was published in 1924. Drawing on Pavlov, Watson, and the neurologist Charles Sherrington, *Principles* located literature squarely in a network of behaviorist ideas and also within the human body’s neurological circuitry.²⁰ “All mental events”—including literature—“occur in the course of processes of adaptation somewhere between stimulus and response” (*L*, 85). Indeed, what enables *Practical Criticism*’s prototype of close reading is the behavioristic translation of poetic language, aesthetic experience, and mind-body dualism we find attempted in *Principles*. In tracing how behaviorism entered into literary history, these behaviorist-inflected concepts are just as important as the “practical criticism” they preceded. As I will show later, the American New Critics attacked these behavioristic concepts while adopting (perhaps uncritically) the methods that Richards built upon their foundation.

For Richards the behaviorist redefinition of literature was central to the modernization of literary criticism. Only by contending with scientific advancement, Richards explained in *Science and Poetry* (1926), could literary criticism itself advance.²¹ Such advancement was crucial even if it was difficult or seemingly impossible to achieve. One

seeming impossibility was presented by Pavlov's stimulus-response neurology, which insisted on the infinite number of responses a stimulus could induce. As even the simplest stimuli could trigger a variety of responses, Richards wrote in *Principles*, so "it may seem no illegitimate step to conclude that highly complex objects, such as pictures, will arouse a still greater variety of responses, a conclusion very awkward for any theory of criticism" (L, 9). It was criticism's job to contend with behaviorism and Pavlovian neurology just the same. But what were the advantages of criticism mirroring scientific progress? What could behaviorism and neurology bring to literary criticism?

According to Richards, behaviorism and neurology could reveal the physiological processes by which literature is perceived and the objective conditions of literary knowledge. In so doing, they could correct some of the misconceptions that had become commonplace in literary study. One of those misconceptions, we read, was the mistaken separation of "aesthetic" or "poetic" experience from other types of experience. "All modern aesthetics," Richards writes in *Principles*, "rests upon an assumption . . . that there is a distinct *kind* of mental activity present in what are called aesthetic experiences. . . . Thus arises the phantom problem of the aesthetic mode or aesthetic state, a legacy from the days of abstract investigation into the Good, the Beautiful and the True" (L, 11–12). Stimulus-response neurology here is a postulated cure for old-fashioned belletrism. If all perceptions are produced by the same neurological mechanisms (stimulus and response), then no one set of perceptions can be unique in kind. The difference between a houseplant and a painting of that plant lies in their incumbent associations rather than the way either object is perceived neurologically. What separates aesthetic experience from non-aesthetic experiences, Richards suggests, are the way that aesthetic experiences are organized and mediated consciously. Poetry, we read in *Principles*,

has in no sense any different reality from the rest of the world and it has no special laws and no other-worldly peculiarities. It is made up of experiences of exactly the same kinds as those that come to us in other ways. Every poem however is a strictly limited piece of experience. . . . It is more highly and more delicately organized than ordinary experiences of the street or of the hillside; it is fragile. Further, it is communicable. (L, 78)²²

In this way, Richards understands stimulus-response neurology as revealing the structural unity of aesthetic experience and experience. But just as the concepts of stimulus and response show this unity of

experience, they also show poetry's irreducible separation from other types of knowledge and language-use. In contrast to the logical "undistorted references" of statements, poetic language makes no promise of factual accuracy or reducibility to logical relationships.²³ And so if science, logic, and mathematics make propositional statements about knowledge and the world, Richards concludes, then what poetry makes are non-logical pseudo-statements—"distorted references, or more plainly, *fictions*" (*L*, 266). However, as we learn in *Science and Poetry*, what makes the pseudo-statement special is not just its logical distinction from scientific language. Instead, it is the pseudo-statement's physiological character that separates it ontologically from scientific knowledge. As Richards suggests in *Science and Poetry*, poetry is

the reverse of science. Very definite thoughts do occur, but not because the words are so chosen as logically to bar out all possibilities but one. They are not; but the manner, the tone of voice, the cadence and the rhythm play upon our interests and make *them* pick out from among an indefinite number of possibilities the precise particular thoughts which they need. . . . The poet is not writing as a scientist.²⁴

What the pseudo-statement comprises is the addition of physiological and neurological data to poetic interpretation. To Richards, poetry cannot be represented as a series of propositional statements about the world because poetic form transmits data that cannot be logically abstracted. Poetry comprises a range of physiological (and therefore non-logical) stimuli: the rhythm of the words, the deployment of phonological devices, the visual shape of the poem's form, and so on. Poetic knowledge is not only mental knowledge of a poem's content but also bodily knowledge of the way that content was transmitted. And rather than treating this bodily knowledge as ancillary to poetic language, Richards sees such knowledge as absolutely crucial to the production and perception of poetic meaning. The pseudo-statement solves the dilemma posed earlier, wherein a given word could have an infinite number of associations. A poem's physiological stimuli, Richards argues, are precisely what limit these associations. The function of a device such as alliteration is to appeal to specific cognitive capacities ("our interests") that then automatically select ("make *them* pick out") the correct valence of a given object. Looking forward to the criticism of Brooks, Wimsatt, and Beardsley, we need to understand the pseudo-statement as straddling the worlds of neurology and literary criticism. At this moment, psychological behaviorism is reaching towards poetic formalism. As Richards writes in *Practical Criticism*,

“It is never what a poem *says* which matters but what it *is*” (*P*, 30). Later on, he discusses the case of a student whose manner of reading physiologically precluded any thorough understanding of Donne’s “Holy Sonnet VII.” “Technical presuppositions, by destroying the movement of the verse and so precluding the emotional links from developing, certainly co-operated in produced miscomprehension. . . . The sharp and jerky way in which he read these lines probably prevented him from taking in their sense” (*P*, 44–5).

In the larger scheme of Richards’s project, however, the pseudo-statement is not just proof of poetry’s ontological distinction from science. What the pseudo-statement reveals, we read, is a lack of separation between mind and body. It dispenses with mind-body dualism and instead presents mind and body as components within a unified system of sensation and cognition. “The Mind-Body problem,” Richards writes in *Principles*, “is strictly no problem; it is an *imbroglio* due to failure to settle a real problem, namely, as to when we are making a statement or merely inciting an attitude” (*L*, 84). For Richards, the imbroglio of mind-body dualism is one that has plagued literature for centuries and is therefore yet another way behavioristic psychology could make literary criticism more objective. The conceptual separation of mind and body, he explains, frequently distorts the “psychological mechanism” of perception and forces readers to mistake cause for effect (*L*, 87). But with knowledge of stimulus-response neurology it would be far harder to confuse the causes of an aesthetic experience with that experience’s effects.²⁵ Taking Aristotelian catharsis as an example, Richards writes that said imbroglio is the reason “Tragedy, for example, is so often misapproached. It is no less absurd to suppose that a competent reader sits down to read for the sake of pleasure, than to suppose that a mathematician sets out to solve an equation with a view to the pleasure its solution will afford him” (*L*, 97). People experience catharsis because of plays—but that is not the reason they necessarily attend or enjoy plays. Such causal confusions would dissipate, Richards insists, were critics better educated about how the nervous system actually processes aesthetic objects.

To illustrate the way that the nervous system might process aesthetic stimuli, Richards provides a “diagram, or hieroglyph” of the body’s encounter with literature (see figure). Invoking the final line of Robert Browning’s poem “Pan and Luna,” the diagram imagines how poetic language becomes cognitive data and how such data is translated into aesthetic experience (*L*, 116). At the top of the figure, Browning’s words enter into the eye as a unified line of poetry; this line, however,

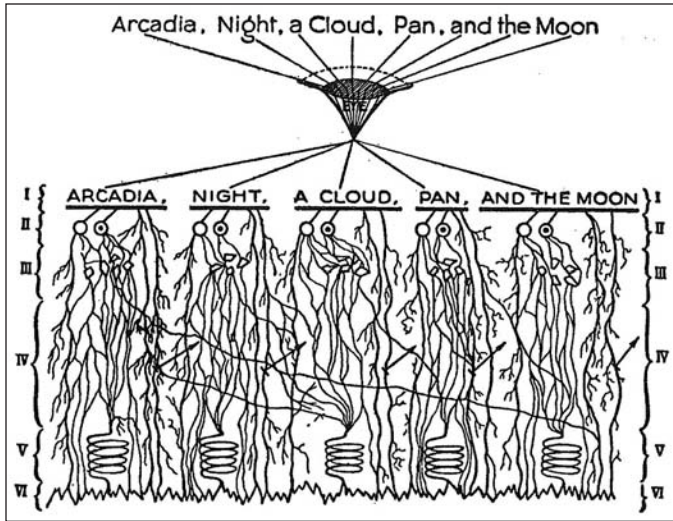


Figure 1. Pan and Luna, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 116.

is then broken into discrete fragments of language by the eye itself. Each word is processed individually while also retaining its syntactical relationship to the other words (the horizontal lines moving across the ganglia). As indicated by the roman numerals and the branching of the nerve pathways, each fragment goes through several stages of processing. Stage I comprises the “visual sensation” of the word itself—here, “Arcadia.” Stage II is the formation of images “tied” to “Arcadia,” which coincides with “auditory” and “articulatory” imaginings of language (represented by an empty circle next to a circle with a dot inside). Stage III, represented by small rhomboids in the middle of each pathway, is the experience of “free imagery” while Stage IV is the experience of poetic reference. Near the bottom of the diagram is Stage V, which indicates poetically induced “emotion” (represented by the coil). And below Stage V is Stage VI, the “attitude” the poem induces in the reader (figured visually as an EKG-style wave). During each stage of processing, the stimulus of each fragment induces a number of responses—eidetic, aural, logical, emotional—which then form the reader’s aggregate response. In short, Richards’s diagram in *Principles of Literary Criticism* is not only a imagining of how poetic knowledge is engaged by the nervous system but a visual representation of the “close reading” that would be theorized a few years later. It is a picture of the neurology of literary criticism.

By the 1930s, however, Richards's neurological picture of literary criticism had been rejected—even as Richards's behaviorist methods grew in popularity. Indeed, Richards's harshest critics were, in a different context, often his most devoted acolytes. The reviewers who savaged his neurological discussions of literature became the champions of “practical criticism” (which they called “close reading”). Referring to the diagram discussed above, Allen Tate wrote in “The Present Function of Criticism” (1940) that Richards's work was replete with the “hocus pocus” of Pavlovian neurology. It bore “the elaborate charts of nerves and nerve-systems that purport to show how the ‘stimuli’ of poems elicit ‘responses’ . . . How many innocent young men—myself among them—thought, in 1924, that laboratory jargon meant laboratory demonstration!”²⁶ Even William Empson, Richards's former student and protégé, concluded in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) that literary criticism should remain separate from science and psychology.²⁷ A diverse generation of critics agreed that Richards's behaviorist concerns had no place in literary study.²⁸

What I will demonstrate in this section is that, despite what these critiques tell us, Richards's behaviorism maintained a foundational presence in the American New Criticism. Looking to the work of Cleanth Brooks, William Wimsatt, and Monroe Beardsley, we can see behaviorism embedded into the New Criticism's major theoretical statements: Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947) and Wimsatt and Beardsley's 1946 essay “The Intentional Fallacy.”²⁹ Brooks, Wimsatt, and Beardsley decry Richards's appeals to psychology but largely perpetuate Richards's methods just the same. What separates Brooks, Wimsatt, and Beardsley from Richards is how these methods are justified: where Richards attributed literature's cognitive effects to the neuro-physiological composition of the human body, these later New Critics attributed these same effects to poetic language and form. They translate behaviorism into poetic formalism. While Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn* offers a subjective and experiential model of reading poetry in opposition to Richards's, the only significant difference between these critics are the different origins they stipulate for such poetic experience. Similarly, Wimsatt and Beardsley's *Verbal Icon* attributes the “intentional fallacy” to the nature of poetic language—because a poem is the externalized result of an author's intention, we cannot confuse that result with the intention itself. But if we examine Wimsatt and Beardsley's reasoning, we see that this is not so much an argument about intention so much as it is a behavioristic argument about mental states and consciousness more generally.

To trace I. A. Richards's behaviorism through Brooks, Wimsatt, and Beardsley, however, is not at all a straightforward task. Over the course of their careers, these critics (Wimsatt in particular) distanced themselves from Richards repeatedly; each presented his own work as a break from Richards's scientific aspirations. In "The Affective Fallacy," Wimsatt and Beardsley accused Richards's physio-affective poetics of perpetuating an affective or genetic fallacy—"a confusion between the poem and its *results*" (V, 21). Richards's attempt to make literary criticism more objective, they concluded, had actually made the path to objectivity more difficult. "If the affective critic," they wrote, "ventures to state with any precision what a line of poetry *does* . . . either the statement will be patently abnormal or false, or it will be a description of what that the meaning of the line *is*" (V, 33). In contrast to both Richards and Wimsatt and Beardsley, however, Brooks argued that literary criticism could never be objective; in *The Well Wrought Urn*, he cordially described Richards as not "a returned prodigal . . . but a pioneer who started from a different set of assumptions" (W, 266). Unlike *Principles of Literary Criticism*, he claimed, *The Well Wrought Urn* would make no claims toward objective knowledge. Instead, it would present "hopelessly subjective" and impressionistic analyses (W, 217). Not surprisingly, Brooks's "hopelessly subjective" and seemingly anti-scientific theory of poetry has been of great interest to subsequent critics.³⁰

When we first look at *The Well Wrought Urn*, Brooks does indeed seem to rely on a "different set of assumptions" from Richards. In the discussion of paradox that prefaces the rest of the volume, Brooks employs poetic (rather than physiological) language and presents a broad distrust of objective knowledge. T. S. Eliot, Brooks writes,

has commented upon 'that perpetual slight alteration of language, words perpetually juxtaposed in new and sudden combinations,' which occurs in poetry. . . . 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. (W, 9)

While Brooks's opposition between science and poetry might remind us of the pseudo-statement (which I will return to shortly), we find no concern with extra-semantic, affective data here. In contrast to Richards's description of Browning's "Pan and Luna," where specific words could be traced along specific nerve pathways, poetic meaning here is wholly abstracted. Paradox is disembodied: terms "modify"

each other in an undefined space that is seemingly removed from readers or writers. And so “if the language of poetry is the language of paradox” (3), Brooks’s theory of poetic language seems to be one that is exclusively semantic, non-affective and wholly removed from Richards’s behaviorism. It is poetry not of feeling but of meaning.

This discussion of paradox, however, is not removed from Richards’s behaviorist poetics so much as it is a translation of that poetics into a new set of terms. Brooks’s notion of the paradox is less communicative than it is psychologically affective: rather than parse the contradictory meanings at the core of the paradox, Brooks suggests that we experience the phenomenon of the paradox as a whole. The “poem gets its power,” he explains, not from semantic communication but from the experience of language and “the paradoxical situation out of which the poem arises” (W, 5). We do not understand the paradox semantically so much as we experience it as a feature of the text. If the language of poetry is the language of paradox, then what poetic language mediates is not only semantic meaning but experience itself. “The old description of the poet,” Brooks explains, “was better and less dangerous: the poet is a maker, not a communicator. He explores, consolidates, and ‘forms’ the total experience that is the poem. . . . If we are willing to use imaginative understanding, we can come to view now the poem as an object—we can share in the experience” (W, 74–5). For Brooks, John Donne’s “The Canonization” both thematizes and performs this experiential capacity of poetic form. Analyzing the lines “We’ll build in sonnets pretty rooms; / As well a well wrought urne becomes / The greatest ashes, as halfe-acre tombes,” Brooks writes that

the poem is an instance of the doctrine which it asserts; it is both the assertion and the realization of the assertion. The poet has actually before our eyes built within the song the “pretty room” with which he says the lovers can be content. The poem itself is the well-wrought urn which can hold the lovers’ ashes and which will not suffer in comparison with the prince’s “halfe-acre tomb.” (W, 17)

Just as the “well wrought urn” will gather together the ashes of the lovers, the form of the poem contains and transmits experiential knowledge. The poem’s form not only contains memories, sensations, attitudes, emotions, and ideas, but actualizes them as well.³¹ As we read later in *The Well Wrought Urn*, “a true poem is a simulacrum of reality . . . by *being* an experience rather than any mere statement about experience or mere abstraction from experience” (W, 213).

To show that Brooks's theory of poetic language is experiential and affective, however, hardly proves the persistence of Richards's behaviorism in *The Well Wrought Urn*. At best, it proves a familial resemblance—two critics working through similar sets of problems, irrespective of influence. But my hope is that in looking at Brooks's "heresy of paraphrase" we can see Richards's embedded behaviorism rise to the surface. Brooks's underlying assumptions about poetry, science, and literary criticism are fundamentally different from Richards—and yet Brooks's "heresy of paraphrase" is structurally identical to Richards's pseudo-statement. Both Brooks and Richards argue that poetry resists logical abstraction because poetry inherently transmits information that cannot be represented as propositional statements. To reduce the poem in that way is to either distort the poem's effects on the whole nervous system (according to Richards) or limit the organic experience that the poem offers readers (according to Brooks). However they justify this argument against the logical or semantic abstraction of poetic language, appealing either to physiology or to literary form, both Brooks and Richards are aiming to preserve the same phenomenon: the cognitive effectivity of poetry. Much as Brooks rendered paradox as transmitting experiences rather than meanings, the heresy of paraphrase subsumes content to the poem's overall "context" and cognitive effects: "We have argued that any proposition asserted in a poem is not to be taken in abstraction but is justified, in terms of the poem, if it is justified at all, not by virtue of its scientific or historical or philosophical truth, but is justified by its relation to the total context of the poem" (W, 204). For both Brooks and Richards, "the total context of the poem"—whether that context is physiological or ontological—is why poetry cannot be paraphrased or abstracted logically. So despite his criticisms of Richards, we can see that Brooks developed a theory of poetic language parallel to Richards's behaviorist poetics—one that translated Richards's principles into poetic terms and then arrived at a set of logically identical conclusions. Crucially, however, this does not mean that *The Well Wrought Urn* is just "Ricardian psychologism in new trappings," as Gerald Graff has suggested.³² For while, yes, Brooks's analyses reassert Richards's behaviorism, they also manage to redefine the relationship between cognition and poetry and assert that poetic phenomena are less products of cognition than they are of poetic form itself.

To W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, however, these differences between Brooks and Wimsatt would have been beside the point. To talk at all of experience and effect was fundamentally to distort the nature

of poetic language. True, as Wimsatt and Beardsley explained in “The Affective Fallacy,” poetry induced emotions in its readers—but it did so exclusively through the transmission of semantic meaning. Poetic content, they continued, is “communicated to the reader like an infection or disease, not inflicted mechanically like a bullet or a knife wound, not administered like a poison, not simply expressed as by expletives or grimaces or rhythms, but presented in their objects as a pattern of knowledge” (V, 38). Wimsatt and Beardsley’s litany of physical and bodily similes emphasizes their methodological distance from Richards and Brooks. Poetic knowledge is not affective, like an infection or an expletive or a bullet; poetry does not induce physiological responses or share experiences through its formal composition. Instead, poetry is a “pattern of knowledge”: a wholly mental and semantic phenomenon. What affective and experiential theories of reading do, they explain, is encourage readers to confuse a poem’s effects with the poetic text itself. This “affective fallacy” is a necessary consequence of any interpretive strategy that concerns itself with a poem’s non-semantic features.³³ In this way, affective readings of poetry obscure rather than illuminate poetic structure. Instead of interpreting a line of poetry, affective models of reading either project experiential data onto the poetic text or merely paraphrase the text’s meaning. “If the affective critic (avoiding both the physiological and abstractly psychological forms of report),” Wimsatt and Beardsley write, “ventures to state with any precision what a line of poetry *does* . . . either the statement will be patently abnormal or false, or it will be a description of what the meaning of the line *is*” (V, 33). Throughout their “fallacy” essays, Wimsatt and Beardsley position themselves as the rejoinder to affective literary criticism—particularly that of Richards. Where Richards argued that poetry stimulated physiological responses, they counter that poetry is a “pattern of knowledge” exclusively. Where Richards proclaimed Cartesian dualism an *imbroglio*, Wimsatt and Beardsley announce that there is a “cognitively untranslatable” gap between mental states and physiological sensation (V, 34).

But if we look to the “intentional fallacy,” which remains one of the central tenets of literary study, *The Verbal Icon* no longer seems a rejoinder to Richards’s behaviorist concerns. If anything, the assertion that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for the work of literary art” (V, 3) mirrors Richards’s assertion in *Principles of Literary Criticism*: “Whatever psycho-analysts may aver, the mental processes of the poet are not a very profitable field for investigation. They offer far too happy a hunting ground for uncontrollable conjecture” (L, 29). Moreover, the

reasoning behind Wimsatt and Beardsley's fallacy is almost entirely behavioristic, despite its anti-affective understanding of poetic language and Cartesian separation of mind and body. The intentional fallacy is rooted in the problem of poetry as analyzable behavior; and so much as Richards's abnegation of authorial consciousness can be traced to Watsonian behaviorism, the intentional fallacy can be too.³⁴

As one of the central theories of the New Criticism, Wimsatt and Beardsley's theory has long been the focus of criticism. Historically, such criticism has focused on the problem of authorial intent specifically. It has been assumed that the fallacious material responsible for the fallacy is found in the specific problem of intention—rather than, say, the imputation of consciousness or psychology more generally.³⁵ But if we look to the ways Wimsatt and Beardsley define intention in "The Intentional Fallacy," we see that the fallacy is grounded not in structural or textual concerns but in fact psychological ones. Theirs is less a definition of intention than it is a catalogue of synonyms and associated phenomena:

"Intention," as we shall use the term, corresponds to *what he intended* in a formula which more or less explicitly has had wide acceptance. "In order to judge the poet's performance, we must know *what he intended.*" Intention is design or plan in the author's mind. Intention has obvious affinities for the author's attitude toward his work, the way he felt, what made him write. (V, 4)

This definition of intention is at best nebulous (and at times tautological). Before offering synonyms for "intention," Wimsatt and Beardsley state that "intention" simply corresponds to "what he intended." The synonyms of intention they provide, however, give no information as to what intention actually comprises. In the way they describe the relationship of an author's mental state to a given text, "plan" and "design" are as ambiguous as "intention." Furthermore, the relationship between "the author's attitude toward his work, the way he felt, what made him write" and "intention" is left undefined. Intention is described as having an "affinity" for these mental states but with no causal relationship indicated. Any of those "obvious affinities" could be defined as part of intention or not depending on the circumstance and context. Rather than define intention as a specific and executable idea, Wimsatt and Beardsley seem to define intention as a category of ideas. Instead of speaking to an author's intent to write a play or to provoke an allegorical interpretation, "intention" describes the class of mental states an author can have about his or her literary output.

In these ways, we can begin to see the intentional fallacy as being less about authorial intention than it is about authorial consciousness more generally. Indeed, when we look at Wimsatt's theoretical justifications of the fallacy, the concern is not about intention at all. Instead, the concept of authorial intention is a placeholder for authorial consciousness. The "intentional fallacy" is not an argument about intention but an argument how well we can know covert mental states as compared to overt behaviors. As Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks would write in *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (1957), "The poem is before us and is susceptible to analysis, but the psychological goings-on turn out to be below the surface and out of sight."³⁶ Much as Watson distinguished between consciousness and behavior, and Richards distinguished between mind and text, Wimsatt and Brooks draw a behaviorist distinction between poetry and "psychological goings-on." The poem is overt (it "is before us") and is therefore "susceptible to analysis." The author's mental states, however, are covert and are therefore not available to critics. Like Richards's behavioristic "practical criticism," Wimsatt and Beardsley's intentional fallacy conceives of poems as behaviors (as compared to mental states):

There is a gross body of life, of sensory and mental experience, which lies behind and in some sense causes every poem, but can never be and need not be known in the verbal and hence intellectual composition which is the poem. For all the objects of our manifold experience, for every unity, there is an action of the mind which cuts off roots, melts away context—or indeed we should never have objects or ideas or anything to talk about. (V, 12)

To Wimsatt and Beardsley the cutting of psychological "roots" and the melting of "context" are what allow us to analyze objects and to place ideas into speech. And so what they suggest is that the obscuring of mental states is a necessary product of writing poetry. In the act of poetic expression, internal mental events assume an external form; it is through poetry's externalization of consciousness that consciousness itself becomes inaccessible. The "gross body of life, of sensory and mental experience" are dissolved and replaced by the structure and form of the poem. Behaviorism is translated into formalism yet again as the difficulties of close reading are attributed to the nature of poetry rather than the nature of cognition.

III. COGNITION AND CRITICISM

In tracing behaviorism through Richards, Brooks, and Wimsatt and Beardsley, my goal has not been to valorize behaviorism or devalue close reading. Close reading remains a useful way of looking at texts. Of the literary theoretical positions that have been advanced over the past fifty years, few have had the tenacity of the New Critical ideas discussed above. For despite our theoretical knowledge and historical training, despite all our ideological misgivings about the New Criticism, fragments of Richards, Brooks, and Wimsatt and Beardsley's arguments remain almost second nature to us. Certain techniques of close reading have become our default critical position.

And this is why it is so important to know behaviorism's place in our profession's history. We know the aesthetic histories of our methods and we know the political histories, too. But our methods have a cognitive history that is relatively unknown. When we choose to close read a poem, we make not only aesthetic and political assumptions but psychological assumptions as well. By virtue of behaviorism's place in the history of formalism, we make unwitting choices about consciousness and behavior when we close read. In "Cognitive Science and the History of Reading," Andrew Elfenbein makes a parallel point: "For literary critics, much of the value of work done by psychologists lies in making these strategies visible and thereby clarifying the kind of cognitive work that literary criticism demands."³⁷ Over time, our methods and assumptions have become so mediated and translated that we no longer know "the kind of cognitive work" our methods involve. For example: if we know the behavioristic reasoning behind the intentional fallacy—reasoning which most critics, philosophers, and scientists would reject—then we should reevaluate the fallacy's continued usefulness. As a profession, we have erased our cognitive history—and as a result of this erasure, with the promises of cognitive science on the horizon, our agency as critics is very much at stake.³⁸

I do not mean to suggest those critics looking forward to cognitive science's contribution have misplaced their enthusiasm. This is an enthusiasm I share and I am excited to see the ways that advances in science will once again affect the protocols of literary criticism.³⁹ But in anticipating that future, we must remember that this coming engagement with cognitive science is not without precedent—and not without problems. Looking to how behaviorism shaped our practices as readers and critics, the stakes of this future engagement are quite clear.

Rutgers University

NOTES

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¹Two recent and noteworthy studies of close reading are Jane Gallop's "The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading," *Profession* (2007): 181–86, and Franco Moretti's "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 73–81. Both discuss close reading as a concept as well as a sociological phenomenon. According to Gallop, close reading "transformed us from cultured gentlemen into a profession" (183). This transformation, however, came at a cost: as we learned to read "ahistorical[ly]" (182), seemingly extra-textual concerns such as ideology were pushed to the margins. For Moretti, close reading's formalism not only marginalized political content but entire literary traditions. Close reading, he argues, cannot look beyond the confines of established national canons because "it's not designed to do it, it's designed to do the opposite. At bottom, it's a theological exercise—very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously" (57).

²Thorndike, 141.

³Thorndike's Laws of Exercise and Effect are often confused with Ivan Pavlov's stimulus-response neurology. While both Thorndike and Pavlov were trying to explain how the brain established associations between independent phenomena, Pavlov's work was explicitly neurological and concerned with the physiology of these associations. In contrast, Thorndike's work focused on behavior exclusively. For more on Pavlov's stimulus-response neurology, see his *Conditioned Reflexes* (London: Dover, 2003), chapters 1–3, 22, and 23. For more on Thorndike's Laws of Exercise and Effect, see *Animal Intelligence* (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 244–267.

⁴John Broadus Watson, "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It," *Psychological Review* 20 (1913): 158.

⁵For a deeper explanation of stimulus-response neurology, see Pavlov, chapters 1 and 2; see also W. Horsley Gantt's "Reminiscences of Pavlov," *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior* 20 (1973): 131–136. For more information about Loeb's botanical tropisms, see Philip Pauly, *Controlling Life: Jacques Loeb and the Engineering Ideal in Biology* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), 3–8 and 164–200.

⁶We often refer to close reading as if it were a unified set of techniques and assumptions about literary interpretation. This isn't true, however. Each of the New Critics emphasized his own set of concerns and priorities, from literature's relationship to science (I. A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, W. K. Wimsatt) to questions of canonicity (T. S. Eliot, Richards, John Crowe Ransom) to questions of morality and theology (Allen Tate, Ransom, Eliot, Yvor Winters). And yet, even at the New Criticism's height, the New Criticism was wrongly perceived as unified and consistent in its approaches. According to Mark Jankovich's *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry* was often considered to be the representative of a unified formalism (10). But in his essay, "In Search of the New Criticism" (*American Scholar* 53 [1984]: 41–53), Brooks expressed frustration at being the unwilling figurehead of the New Criticism and denied there was much conceptual unity among the New Critics. "As quasi-representative," Brooks wrote, "one has not only to answer for his own sins, but also to assume responsibility for the collective sins of a vague, undefined group" (41).

⁷Richards, review of Watson's *Behaviorism*, *New Criterion* 4.2 (1926): 372.

⁸Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," in *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harvest Books, 1956), (all references to *The Well Wrought*

Urn hereafter abbreviated *W* and cited parenthetically by page number); Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," in Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Louisville: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1954), 21. (All references to *The Verbal Icon* hereafter abbreviated *V* and cited parenthetically by page number).

⁹ For more on Richards's legacy, see Nicholas Dames, *Physiology of the Novel: Neural Science and the Form of Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 247–55; Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1850* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1983), 245–54; and W. T. N. Hotopf, *Language, Thought, and Comprehension: A Case Study of the Writings of I. A. Richards* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1965), chapters 1 and 2.

¹⁰ Richard Paul Russo, *I. A. Richards: His Life and Work* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1989), 175.

¹¹ Bertrand Russell, *The Analysis of Mind* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 160.

¹² Russell's critique was also suggested in Richards and Ogden's 1923 *The Meaning of Meaning* (New York: Mariner, 1989). It is wrong, Richards and Ogden wrote, to "deny the existence of images and other 'mental' occurrences . . . with the extreme Behaviorists" (22).

¹³ It was in *Behaviorism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1924) where Watson claimed that, through psychological conditioning, he could take any infant "at random and train him to become any kind of specialist I might select" (104).

¹⁴ Richards, review of *Behaviorism*, 374.

¹⁵ Richards, review of *Behaviorism*, 372.

¹⁶ Richards, *Practical Criticism* (1929; New York: Harvest Books, 1966), 303. Hereafter abbreviated *P* and cited parenthetically by page number.

¹⁷ Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1924), 29. Hereafter abbreviated *L* and cited parenthetically by page number.

¹⁸ In a 1659 edition, published by James Flesher of London, the first four lines of Donne's sonnet read as follows:

At the round earths imagin'd corners, blow
Your trumpets, Angels, and arise, arise
From death, you numberlesse infinities
Of soules, and to your scattered bodies goe.

¹⁹ In citing the "views and emotions already prepared in the reader's mind," Richards seems to be invoking a properly anti-behaviorist definition of consciousness. But for Richards, such mental content was less an example of the primacy of consciousness than it was an illusion of language use. As Richards wrote in *Practical Criticism*, prefiguring Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, language-use is frequently mistaken for introspective self-knowledge: "We do somehow manage to discuss our feelings, sometimes with remarkable facility and success. We say things that seem to be subtle and recondite, and yet true. We do this in spite of our feebleness in introspection and our ignorance of the general nature of feelings. How do we come to be so knowledgeable and clever? . . . Put shortly, the answer seems to be that this knowledge is lying dormant in the dictionary. Language has become its repository, a record, a reflection, as it were, human nature" (*P*, 208). See Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Toronto: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), ¶1.307–1.308.

²⁰ In 1906, Dr. Charles Sherrington published *The Integrative Action of the Nervous System* (New York: Scribner, 1906), which drew heavily on the theories of "reflex-arcs" developed by William James and John Dewey. What Sherrington argued was that the nervous system coordinated the body's organ systems through such reflex arcs.

In contrast to Pavlov, James, and later on the behaviorists, Sherrington insisted on mind-body dualism—despite the monistic implications of his own research. For more information about Sherrington, see *Integrative Action* as well as chapter one of W. C. Gibson's *Twentieth Century Neurology: The British Contribution* (London: Imperial College Press, 2001). For more material on the concept of the reflex-arc, see Dewey's 1896 article "The Reflex Arc in Psychology," *Psychological Review* 3 (1896): 57–70.

²¹ Richards, *Science and Poetry* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1926), 48.

²² In *Practical Criticism*, Richards expressed this idea again, though perhaps more eloquently: "There is no such gulf between poetry and life as over-literary persons sometimes suppose. There is no gap between our everyday emotional life and the material of poetry. The verbal expression of this life, at its finest, is forced to use the technique of poetry; that is the only essential difference" (P, 300).

²³ The importance of propositional logic to early-twentieth-century analytic philosophy (particularly at Cambridge) cannot be emphasized enough. In the context of Gottlob Frege's 1892 "On Sense and Reference" and Bertrand Russell's 1903 *Principles of Mathematics*, we can see Richards's theory of the pseudo-statement attempting to create a category of knowledge outside the domain of symbolic logic.

²⁴ Richards, *Science and Poetry*, 29–31.

²⁵ What Richards is identifying here is an example of a "genetic fallacy." In their essay "The Affective Fallacy," which is a type of genetic fallacy, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley accuse Richards of being a critic who consistently confuses cause with effect (V, 21–40).

²⁶ Tate, "The Present Function of Criticism," in *The Limits of Poetry: Selected Essays, 1928–1948* (New York: Swallow Press, 1948), 9.

²⁷ One of the central flaws of Richards's project, Empson explained, was that it understood itself as illuminating psychology through the analysis of literature. Logically, poetry could not be studied as behavior. "It would be tempting," Empson wrote in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions, 1966), "to say I was concerned with science rather than with beauty; to treat poetry as a branch of applied psychology. But, so far as poetry can be regarded altogether dispassionately, so far as it is an external object for examination, it is dead poetry and not worth examining; further, so far as a critic has made himself dispassionate about it, so far as he has repressed sympathy in favour of curiosity, he has made himself incapable of examining it" (248).

²⁸ The distaste for Richards's criticism that we see in Tate was shared by other New Critics as well as members of both the Chicago Neo-Aristotelians and the Prague Linguistic Circle. See Ransom, *The New Criticism* (New York: New Directions, 1941), 15; and R. S. Crane, *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1952), 38. See also René Wellek, *History of Modern Criticism 1750–1950: The First Half of the Twentieth Century: English and American* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1986).

²⁹ Brooks's theory of poetry and Wimsatt's and Beardsley's fallacies have become almost synecdochal for the rest of New Critical theory. *The Well Wrought Urn* and the essays in *The Verbal Icon* are often understood as representative New Critical works and as the foremost theorizations of close reading. As Frank Lentricchia writes, "The imposing history of W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks—its historical acumen aside—has been taken since the time of its publication and even more so now as a final statement of the New-Critical poetic" (*After the New Criticism* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980], 3).

³⁰ In the long critical history detailing Brooks's relationship to Richards, the former's supposed stance against objectivity has been of particular interest. In *The New Apologists for Poetry* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1956), Murray Krieger suggested that both Brooks and Empson were straddling the divide between science and humanism. Brooks and Empson, Krieger wrote, fused "the opposed metaphysics of [T. S.] Eliot and Richards into a methodology which, strangely, is at once heterogeneous and effective" (125). More recently, John Guillory has suggested that Brooks was attempting to place poetry outside the reaches of science and Positivism (much as Richards tried to remove literature from the purview of analytic philosophy in the 1920s). "Brooks's theory," Guillory writes in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995), "concedes a very great deal to the epistemological tyranny of science (really, to the positivist 'philosophy of science' regnant between the wars), but only because that concession is strategic, because scientific truth has already been stigmatized as the origin of our dissociated modernity" (159).

³¹ In "The New Critics and the Text-Object" (*ELH* 63 [1996]: 227-254) Doug Mao discusses the New Critical disposition to treat poems as "things"—to treat a poem as a "well wrought urn" containing experiential knowledge. Despite its derision and misinterpretation by later generations of critics, this disposition remains central to what we do. "An assumption that the text has a thingly quality," Mao explains, "continues to be essential to literary study, in spite of the fact that the apparent absurdity of regarding the text as a thing like any other has been used to evade the uncanny problem of perceived historical continuity, to oppose particular installations within the canon, and above all to render us certain that if we have transcended nothing else for good and all, we have at least left the New Criticism behind" (229).

³² Gerald Graff, *Poetic Statement and Critical Dogma* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1970), 111.

³³ In the essay "One Relation of Rhyme to Reason," also in *The Verbal Icon*, Wimsatt attempts to formulate a universal semantic function for poetic sound effects. "Verse in general, and more particularly rhyme," they write, "make their special contribution to poetic structure in virtue of a studiously and accurately semantic character. They impose upon the logical pattern of expressed argument a kind of fixative counterpattern of allogical implication" (153). In contrast to Richards's pseudo-statement, wherein sound effects delimit the number of semantic meanings a poem can induce, Wimsatt and Beardsley position sound effects as necessarily opposed to the "expressed argument" of a poem.

³⁴ Indeed, the intentional fallacy can be traced to behaviorism, but Monroe Beardsley's other analyses of intention cannot. In contrast to *The Verbal Icon*, Beardsley's *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1958) discussed intention from a decidedly non-behavioristic stance. In *Aesthetics*, Beardsley's objections to what he identified as "intentionalism" were largely methodological and evidentiary. "What we learn about the nature of the object itself," he wrote, "is indirect evidence of what the artist intended it to be, and what we learn about intention is indirect evidence of what the object became" (20). See also Beardsley, "Intentions and Interpretations" in *The Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays*, ed. Michael J. Wreen and Donald M. Callen (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982).

³⁵ To Paul de Man, Wimsatt and Beardsley fundamentally misread the nature of poetic intention, which according to de Man was "neither physical nor psychological" but textual. In seeing textual intention "by analogy with a physical model," de Man

explains in *Blindness and Insight*, Wimsatt ignores the phenomenon's structural origins ([Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983], 25.) In their essay "Against Theory" (*Critical Inquiry* 8 [1982]: 723–742), Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp also accuse Wimsatt of fundamentally misunderstanding the textual nature of intention and its inseparability from the poetic text. "The mistake made by theorists," they write, "has been to imagine the possibility or desirability of moving from one term (the author's intended meaning) to a second term (the text's meaning), when actually the two terms are the same" (724). See also Graff's *Poetic Statement and Critical Dogma*, where Graff misconstrues the imputation of a dramatic speaker as the cause of the intentional fallacy rather than an effect. "Since poetry asserts no statements and has no formulable 'content,' it is improper to speak of a meaning or content 'intended' or 'meant' by the poet. In effect, according to this view, the poet *must have no intention*, in the sense of a predetermined idea or emotion; the poem should generate itself out of its own internal laws. Authorial intention implies separable content and statement imposed upon the poem from the 'outside'" (138–9n).

³⁶ Brooks and Wimsatt, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York: Knopf, 1957), 620.

³⁷ Andrew Elfenbein, "Cognitive Science and the History of Reading," *PMLA* 121 (2006): 498.

³⁸ Two recent studies of the relationship between literature and cognition demonstrate how crucial it is for us to be aware of the psychological dispositions embedded in our methods. In *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999), Elaine Scarry uses findings from cognitive science to draw comparisons between how literature and visual art are processed by the mind. But "unlike painting, music, sculpture, theater, and film," Scarry writes, "[the verbal arts] are almost wholly devoid of *actual* sensory content" (5). My immediate concern here is not whether this assertion is true or not. Instead, my concern is the following: if it is true that literature possesses no "actual sensory content," then does it make sense to employ the techniques of close reading? These techniques are built on the assumption that literary objects comprise physiological stimuli. Scarry's argument and her close readings are pulling in opposite directions, indebted to non-compatible ways of looking at literature's relationship to consciousness. Writing on how cognitive science could change literary study, Oren Izenberg runs into a similar problem in "Poems Out of Our Heads" (*PMLA* 123 [2008]: 216–222). "It makes good sense," he argues, to "bring literary study into closer proximity with the disciplines that give accounts of how the mind works. . . . This vision of a new lyric studies would rest on philosophical foundations different from those that undergird the history of literary study" (217). The implication here is that the "new lyric studies," supported by fields more empirical than literary study, would do what the old lyric studies could not. But the reason literary critics are bad at talking about problems of mind is not that cognitive science has yet to arrive. No, the reason we have trouble talking about those problems is that, following the model of I. A. Richards, we stopped talking about them. Izenberg attributes what are in fact our unused critical abilities to the promises of "disciplines that give accounts of how the mind works."

³⁹ To see how cognitive science has already changed the ways we understand reading practices, see Stanislaus Dehaene, *Reading in the Brain: The Science and Evolution of a Human Invention* (New York: Viking, 2009).

