

Selected Essays of R.P. Blackmur, edited and with an introduction by Denis Donoghue

Review by Benjamin Taylor

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Richard Palmer Blackmur (1904-1965) is among that group of poet-critics, including T. S. Eliot, John Crowe Ransom, Yvor Winters, Allen Tate, I. A. Richards and William Empson, who in their time significantly transformed our Anglo-American habits of reading. If the so-called New Criticism of these men now seems old-style to some, it is worth recalling how much was gained a half century ago by their formalist insistence on the poem as a self-sufficient, indeed sacrosanct and specially privileged, register of meanings.

Admittedly, R. P. Blackmur was sometimes the captive of his New Critical assumptions, but never of anything that could be called a methodology. The poetic process has nothing to do with methods, and Blackmur in his criticism thinks poetically, most at home in that domain of meditative nuance he liked to call "the country of the blue." Denis Donoghue, editor of this new assemblage of Blackmur's best, has written: "He valued thinking rather than thought, because thinking never forgets that it is a process rather than a doctrine." For Blackmur, as for his intellectual hero Montaigne, ideas were provisional or else they were betrayals. His sense of the role of intellect was unfailingly dramatic; only as drama, he said, can our ideas "keep us on the stretch"; only insofar as they remain experimental will they be sound.

Accepting implicitly Eliot's dictum that the sole method is to be very intelligent, Blackmur eschews all fixed formulas for the appreciation of poems and novels. He thereby exemplifies, for criticism, a recognizably American breed of intelligence that is restless, excursionary, self-revising. "Every end," Emerson said, "is prospective of some other end, which is also temporary; a round and final success nowhere." The burden of the American mind is to remain makeshift, crying out anew on what it has newly found. "For as knowledge is a fall from the paradise of undifferentiated sensation," writes Blackmur, "so equally every formula of knowledge must fail the moment too much weight is laid upon it-the moment it becomes omnivorous and pretends to be omnipotent-the moment, in short, it is taken literally. Literal knowledge is dead knowledge; and the worst bewilderment-which is always only comparative-is better than death. . . ." When the mind is doing its work well, it moves away from ignorance to insight and back again.

Blackmur detested the merely personal in literature. Language, not personality, was for him the adequate source of a poetic emotion, language which is public and negotiable and not the utterance of a private egoism. His withering (and definitive) dismissal of E. E. Cummings lays bare the self-expressive fallacy: "It is indubitable that the words are alive; they jostle, even overturn, the reader in the assurance of their vitality; but the notion of what their true vitality is remains Cummings' very own. The words remain emotive. They

have a gusty air of being something, but they defeat themselves in the effort to say what, and come at last to a bad end, all fallen in a heap." A poem goes wrong by being sentimental, we all agree; and this happens whenever profound feelings are indicated, but we are given insufficient warrant for sharing in them.

A poem goes right by being not the report but the incarnation, an unforeseen sacramental shape which belies for a moment our muddle. Blackmur writes of Wallace Stevens that "his great labor has been to allow the reality of what he felt personally to pass into the superior impersonal reality of words. Such a transformation amounts to an access of knowledge, as it raises to a condition where it may be rehearsed and understood in permanent form that body of emotional and sensational experience which in its natural condition makes life a torment and confusion."

A "sublimist," as Donoghue aptly names him, Blackmur is intent above all on the sudden and inexplicable jolts of experience that literature makes possible. He is out for ecstasy, his enabling occasions are poems. Included in Donoghue's selection are essays of dream-line attentiveness on Marianne Moore, W. B. Yeats, Hart Crane, Eliot and others. (The only great modern poet in English whom Blackmur failed to recognize was Robert Frost.) And Blackmur is scarcely less imposing when he turns to fiction. He remains perhaps our most interesting reader of Henry James, and of the later Thomas Mann. In addition to essays on these two, the present collection contains studies of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Stendhal, and a long reflection on Henry Adams.

At a time when American criticism has all but lost any distinguishing character amid the wash of Continental influences, it is good to have back in print the civilized companionable essays of Blackmur. He remains, I think, the best of our descriptive critics-particularly in his work 'Selected Essays of R. P. Blackmur' Continued from First Page of the '30s and '40s, to which this new volume is chiefly given over. Most of these earlier pieces have already been influential. But still largely unassimilated are the difficult insights of Blackmur's later, more speculative essays, collected posthumously as "A Primer of Ignorance" and now out of print. One hopes the Ecco Press will in due course also make these available again, as their theoretic suggestiveness is greater by far than that of the academic criticisms now fashionable and post-fashionable. Blackmur's work exhibits a beautifully self-tasking skepticism. He is the champion not of garden-variety ignorance, but of the Montaignian kind that is "a humbled form of knowledge." As he writes: "It is the radical defect of thought that it leaves us discontented with what we actually feel-with what we know and do not know-as we know sunlight and surfeit and terror, all at once perhaps, and yet know nothing of them. Thought requires of us that we make a form of our knowledge which is personal, declarative, and abstract at the same time that we construe it as impersonal, expressive, and concrete. It is this knowledge that leads to the conviction of ignorance-to the positive ignorance which is the final form of contradictory knowledge; but it is the triumph of failure that in the process it snares all that can be snared of what we know."