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**Reason's Burden: The Aesthetic Project  
of John Crowe Ransom.**

**By David Stenhouse.**

**Phd.  
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The career of the American Critic and poet John Crowe Ransom seems marked by discontinuity. An acclaimed poet, he disowned his first collection of verse and virtually abandoned poetry at the end of the 1920s. A political activist during the 1930s who was devoted to a vision of complete and complex human life he went on to dedicate himself to the apparently formalist and exclusive New Criticism.

Though critical attempts have been made to explore the connections between the various phases of his career, the overall shape and importance of Ransom's critical project has to date been unclear.

This thesis draws upon unpublished correspondence, and the manuscript for Ransom's Agrarian book Land! which was assumed to have been destroyed by Ransom himself in 1932. It indicates that Ransom was involved with a systematic attempt to shape his own career by the revisions of his poems, destruction of his correspondence and recantation of the critical positions he had previously held to. It contextualises many of the central decisions of Ransom's career, and discusses his often alienated position within the movements with which he is associated, the Fugitive group of poets, the Agrarians and the New Critics. It problematises many of the conclusions about Ransom which have been accepted since his death in 1974 and provides a revisionist view of Ransom's poetry and critical writings.

I certify that this thesis has been composed by me, and that work contained in this thesis is my own.

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“Have you known the fall of the year when it fell,  
Or the wind’s rant when the season was fell?  
The health of the garden is Reason’s burden.”

“Master’s in the Garden Again”  
John Crowe Ransom

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## *Introduction*

When John Crowe Ransom died in 1974 in Gambier Ohio, many tributes praised him as one of the most respected American poets and critics of the century. The last years of his life, though unproductive in terms of the generation of new work, had seen him receive numerous awards in recognition of his services to criticism and poetry. At the time of his death Ransom was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the recipient of the Emerson-Thoreau Medal and of many other prizes and endowments.<sup>1</sup> Obituaries noted his membership of the Fugitive group of poets, his centrality to the "Southern Renaissance", his founding of the "New Criticism" and his authorship of a small number of highly regarded lyric poems.<sup>2</sup> Amongst the generous obituaries and tributes however, many of his closest colleagues registered a decided perplexity over the ultimate significance of Ransom's career, and pondered the puzzle of his reserved personal manner. His former pupil Robert Lowell noted:

He liked to be a poet, but not to be seen as one; he preferred the manner of a provincial minister or classics professor-someone of his father's generation...The poetic in the old sense was all to Ransom. He told me his poems came out of brief, unevoked daydreams, a wisp of imagery, or better-a new fable.<sup>3</sup>

Ransom's friend and former pupil Allen Tate, who had known him for fifty-three years wrote:

I hope the reader will understand it when I say that I didn't like him while I was his student...I thought him cold, calculating, and highly competitive...My dislike of John was my fear of him. He had perfect self-control; I could see him flush with anger, but his language was always moderate and urbane...[he] carried on his back...an intolerable burden of conflict that only occasionally, and even then indirectly, came to the surface.

The "perfect self control" which Ransom maintained registered to other observers as a particularly courteous form of manipulation. In a barbed article in a collection of

critical essays on Ransom's poetry and criticism, produced while he was still alive, George Lanning, who had worked with Ransom on the Kenyon Review characterised his personal manner as withdrawn and evasive:

He is a man of dignity and reserve, and not many of us, as deeply as we like and admire him, feel that we know him well... We all had a curious problem of communication with him. His conversations were engrossing; they were sometimes spirited; one groped for any topic that would prolong them, and the pleasure of his presence. But later one thought: what decisions were reached? what judgements were pronounced?... he has retreated behind a particularly beguiling form of double-talk that leaves everyone happy and everything unsettled- or, rather, perfectly settled as Mr. Ransom meant it to be from the first.<sup>5</sup>

In the same vein, in 1937 Sherwood Anderson, newly returned from a writer's conference in Colorado had registered his profound dislike of Ransom's formal and reserved manner, writing to a friend :

Between ourselves, I think the real sour bird out there was Ransom. That one has that thing so aggravating about many Southerners, a wholly unjustified feeling of superiority. He [is] so damned softly and gently superior that he makes me want to shout, "Balls."<sup>6</sup>

If Ransom's former pupils and colleagues displayed perplexity and ambivalence about the essential nature of his character and career then for at least the last twenty years of his life Ransom's enemies had been all too certain about the values he embodied; the former Agrarian was a throwback to a conservative literary world of settled and outmoded values. In 1955 Kenneth Rexroth wrote a Poundian letter to Denise Levertov invoking her to embrace the future of poetry, not the past:

"I honestly think that you have been so conditioned by the good ole fort under the Stars and Bars run by Marse Allen [Tate] & Con'l Ransom and been taken in by impostors like Cal Lowell - who would never have been printed if his name warnt spelled el oh doubleyou ee el el- that you are inaccessible to poetry by young people.[sic]<sup>7</sup>

Since Ransom's death, criticism of his poetry, political activism and literary analysis has registered some of the uncertainties, qualifications and difficulties displayed

above. Whilst Ransom's centrality to the "Southern Renaissance" is seldom challenged, surviving most of the various definitions and reformulations of that term,<sup>8</sup> the precise value of Ransom's contribution as poet, critic and literary theorist often seems uncertain. Since the mid 1970s Ransom has been the subject of a series of major scholarly publications. A Biography, Gentleman in a Dustcoat was published in 1976, his Selected Essays and Selected Letters were published in 1984 and 1985, in 1989 he was the subject of a book length study which examined his philosophy in greater detail than ever before, and many essays and articles assessing his poetry and criticism have been published in scholarly journals and collections.<sup>9</sup> However, this flourishing critical enterprise has raised as many questions about Ransom's career as it has resolved. Why twenty years after Ransom's death, and almost seventy years since most of his poetry was written should many critics still display uncertainties about the significance and overall shape of Ransom's career?

The public facts of Ransom's life are clear. Born in 1888 in Pulaski Tennessee, the son of a prominent Methodist minister who had spent time as a missionary in Brazil, he was educated in many schools in Tennessee as his father moved around the state serving different communities. At the age of 15 he entered Vanderbilt University's Freshman class. He left for two years at the end of his Sophomore Year to teach in High Schools in Mississippi and Lewisberg, Tennessee but returned to graduate from Vanderbilt on June 16<sup>th</sup> 1909, first in his class in Classics. After a year spent teaching Latin and Greek in High School he attended Christ Church College Oxford as one of the first American Rhodes Scholars. He narrowly missed a first from Oxford and returned to accept a post teaching English at Vanderbilt in 1914.

In the Autumn of 1914 Ransom began to attend meetings of an informal discussion group which addressed issues of a literary and philosophical nature. This group, later to be known as "the Fugitives" met until the end of 1925, with a break as many of its members went off to fight in the First World War. Ransom's first volume of poetry Poems About God was published in 1919, his second Chills and Fever was published in 1924, and Two Gentlemen in Bonds in 1927. Many of these later poems were first published in the Fugitive magazine which the group began to publish in April 1922 and which ceased publication in December 1925.

During the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s Ransom was actively involved in the Agrarian political movement, and published his first prose book God Without Thunder in 1930, the same year that he contributed the introduction and the essay "Reconstructed but Unregenerate" to the Agrarian symposium I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition. In 1930-31 Ransom participated in a series of public debates with the journalist Stringfellow Barr on the issues surrounding Industrialism and Agrarianism in the South.

In September 1937 Ransom left Vanderbilt to take up the post of Professor of Poetry at Kenyon College in Ohio. In Winter 1938 a collection of literary essays The World's Body was published and the first issue of The Kenyon Review, which Ransom edited, appeared in January 1939. 1941 saw the publication of Ransom's critical volume The New Criticism and in 1948 Ransom was instrumental in setting up the Kenyon School of English, an annual summer school which brought together the most distinguished literary critics of its day. A book Poems and Essays was published in 1955 and Beating the Bushes, a collection of articles from the Kenyon Review was published in 1972.

Between 1951 and 1974 Ransom was active in the affairs of the Review, and the Kenyon School of English. His Selected Poems were published in three different editions in 1945, 1963 and, revised and enlarged, in 1969. He married Robb Reavill in 1920 and had three children.

This short, and intentionally uncontroversial condensation of the public aspects of Ransom's career nonetheless reveals a series of marked discontinuities and disruptions. Ransom's career can be seen to be divided between poetry (the Fugitive phase c1915-c1927), politics (Agrarianism c1927-c1937) and criticism (The Kenyon Review and the "New Criticism" c1937 onwards). Much recent criticism of Ransom has been devoted to analysing the precise relationship between the various, apparently discrete, phases of his career.

This thesis examines the relationship between the various stages of Ransom's career by tracing the development of his aesthetic philosophy and analysing its effect first upon Ransom's own poetry, then upon his views of the nature of poetics and

criticism. The specific usage of the term "aesthetic" in the title of this thesis is drawn from Ransom's own critical work. Ransom used the term "aesthetic" in two distinct ways; one was intellectually conventional and the other utterly idiosyncratic. In the conventional sense, Ransom used the term to refer to the branch of philosophy which analysed the characteristics, and essential nature of artistic creations. From the beginning of the 1920s onward Ransom devoted considerable time and energy to an attempt to develop a coherent and systematic aesthetic argument, and under this first usage of the term the development and refinement of Ransom's views on poetics and criticism are discussed. Ransom's more idiosyncratic use of the term stems directly from his dualistic conception of the world. In Ransom's thought there are two broadly competing and incompatible ways in which the world may be comprehended. Science is one of the powerful ways which man apprehends the body of sensory data which Ransom conceived the world to be made of. Ransom argued that Science, though powerful, offered only a partial, abstracted record of experience. The other method of intellectual perception was achieved, Ransom believed, through religion and art. Whereas science represents man's attempted cognitive domination of the world, religion and art represents his recognition of the appropriate balance which lies in the natural world. Accordingly, and developing from this analysis, there are two distinct ways of life available to man, and each offers different rewards. The scientific method of existence offers the virtue of efficiency, but a life based on science sacrifices pleasure and proportion in the pursuit of efficiency. Alternatively, a life based on an organic relationship with the physical world may sacrifice efficiency, as it is defined by the scientist, but offers an intrinsic aesthetic pleasure to the individual.<sup>10</sup> This second, and very particular definition of "aesthetic" relates directly to the socially and politically engaged aspect of Ransom's criticism. Ransom aspired to both a coherent aesthetic philosophy which would allow him to create his own poetry and analyse others', and a way of life which offered aesthetic rewards. This thesis traces the application of these two distinct meanings of the term, in order to offer an analysis of a career which often seems to be discontinuous.

There is a third essential aspect to the method pursued in this thesis. The historical analysis of Ransom's career has been complicated by the fact that Ransom was remarkably protective of personal information about himself. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s many critics discovered that Ransom's keen sense of personal privacy would often extend to a courteous yet unyielding refusal to divulge information about the various activities which had preoccupied him during the 1920s and 1930s. Louise Cowan, the critic who would go on in 1959 to publish an authoritative and detailed history of the Fugitive Group<sup>11</sup> was a post-graduate student of the former Fugitive and Agrarian Donald Davidson, and thus might well have been considered to be broadly sympathetic to the Fugitive Group's aims and activities. Even so, Ransom was extremely reluctant to allow her to read his correspondence and when after many months he finally consented, he wrote that the thought of Cowan reading his personal letters "makes me wriggle."<sup>12</sup> Ransom was even more resistant to the idea of the publication of a biography. When his reserve was broken down Ransom agreed to a biography being written by Thomas Daniel Young, a Professor at the English Department of Vanderbilt University who had written appreciatively about Ransom's poetry and criticism.<sup>13</sup> Young notes in the preface to his biography, eventually published as Gentleman in a Dustcoat: a Biography of John Crowe Ransom:

John Crowe Ransom was a modest man who was never convinced that anyone could possibly be interested in the details of his personal life. This deeply imbedded humility...led him to insist often that he wanted no biography and that he would prefer to let his published work speak for him.<sup>14</sup>

Young's detailed 500 page biography authoritatively codifies a certain view of the **shape** of Ransom's life. The book was feted and awarded on its publication as an authoritative statement on Ransom's career, with one reviewer judging that it would be the standard biographical work "at least for this century"<sup>15</sup> Yet Ransom's insistence that he wanted to "let his published work speak for him" poses specific problems for the literary critic, especially since Young's biography records that Ransom made a series of strong interventions into the shaping of his own published record. Ransom insisted, for example, that his first volume of poetry should not be republished, made substantial amendments to his other poetry throughout his career

and was assumed at the time that Young's biography was written to have burned at least two full length prose manuscripts, one of which was intended to offer an authoritative codification of his aesthetic views. Later in his career he resisted the republication of his three prose texts God Without Thunder, The World's Body, and The New Criticism,<sup>16</sup> and devoted himself in the last years of his life to the systematic re-writing of many of his best known poems. To this extensive catalogue of editing, suppressing and reshaping of his written work, should be added Ransom's lifelong habit of burning all his incoming correspondence, and many of his other private papers. Ransom's insistence that he wished his published work "to speak for him" is therefore highly problematic. If Ransom wished his career to be analysed according to the evidence of his written work, then these interventions all represent attempts by Ransom to affect and control the interpretation of his career.

This thesis responds to these problematic interventions in a number of ways. Firstly it acknowledges that Ransom was engaged in a systematic attempt to reshape his public record, and accordingly it applies, where appropriate, a sceptical pressure to many of the amendments which Ransom made to his written work. Secondly, it attempts throughout to cite the evidence of unpublished manuscript material. By citing unpublished correspondence it is possible to contextualise many of Ransom's actions. The most significant unpublished material which this thesis analyses is the manuscript for Ransom's book Land! which was assumed by critics to have been burned in 1932. Land! can be seen as a highly significant missing link in the development of Ransom's Agrarian analysis.

This thesis then attempts to analyse John Crowe Ransom's career through the perspective offered by Ransom's own dualistic notion of "aesthetic." It traces the development of Ransom's aesthetic through his poetry, criticism and political activism, and presents a "revisionist" view of Ransom's career. In this context however, the term "revisionist" is placed under an ironic pressure, for it was Ransom who, by his systematic revisions, elisions and erasures attempted to shape and control the nature of the "public record" as it related to many of his activities. In short, Ransom was a revisionist throughout his career. One of the intentions of this thesis is to attempt, by the use of archive material and judgement to understand and

analyse the meaning of Ransom's career, and the habitual revisions made by Ransom on the shape of his own writing life.

## Chapter One: Pre-Fugitive Poetry: Poems About God

### Introduction

The version of John Crowe Ransom's career which the writer himself sanctioned begins with a stutter. Ransom's first volume of poetry, Poems About God<sup>1</sup> is a collection of thirty- three poems which was published in a limited print-run by the New York publisher Henry Holt in 1919. The collection includes "Sunset", the poem which Ransom, then an instructor in English at Vanderbilt University in Nashville had shown to his colleague Donald Davidson in 1915 at "a shady spot on the campus near the streetcar stop called 'Vanderbilt Stile'" and described to him as the first poem he had ever written.<sup>2</sup> The collection is framed by an introduction, which, as Ransom had volunteered for the American Army in 1917, was signed by J.C.Ransom, Artillery Officer and First Lieutenant of the American Expeditionary Force in France. The collection's significance within Ransom's oeuvre has been problematised by Ransom's own response to the volume, and the ensuing uncertainty as to how the collection should be read is compounded by the unwillingness of many of Ransom's critics to actively relate the poems which it contains to the rest of his work. Ransom's response to Poems About God represents an early and decisive attempt to alter the shape of his own published record.

Many of the most negative statements about the volume are made by those critics who seek to diminish the poetry it contains in order to praise Ransom's later verse: Robert Penn Warren diagnosed "a...provincialism of theme".<sup>3</sup> Randall Jarrell noted "Most of the time one is bumping over the furrows of a crude, broad, direct Southern pastoral, full of reapers and sermons and blackberry pie, quite as country as anything in the early Frost" and asked "who would suppose them Ransom's?"<sup>4</sup> Vivienne Koch spoke for many critics when she noted that Ransom had "wisely suppressed"<sup>5</sup> the volume. Robert Graves, who rated the collection more highly, suggested that the title of the volume explained the sparse critical response it had generated on publication: "the literary editors had handed their review copies to the theological reviewers and the theological reviewers, perhaps slightly scandalised, at any rate found it a book impossible to praise in their columns".<sup>6</sup>

Ransom's own response to his first book seems to bear out the view that the collection was an embarrassment: he refused to reprint any of the poems in his various Selected Poems, and in 1969 he described the collection as being marked by a "blatant and inconsistent theologising".<sup>7</sup> Accordingly Poems About God, which was published only once in 1919, is largely inaccessible and almost entirely unread; those critics who do seek it out are often unconvinced that it has any rightful place in the Ransom canon. In fact the themes, stylistic practice and characteristic tonal effects of Poems About God make its detailed study essential in any analysis of the development of Ransom's poetic aesthetic. This chapter examines the importance of what one critic has described as Ransom's "Disowned Progeny".<sup>8</sup>

### **Rhetorical Restraints in Poems About God**

In the very introduction to the collection, Ransom displays a rhetorical strategy which ultimately aims at the suppression of Poems About God. His introduction is a formalised attempt to disassociate himself from the poems. He strikes a distancing rhetorical pose towards his own work; he is the editor of what follows, rather than the author:

...my experience has led me so wide that I can actually look back upon those antebellum accomplishments with the eye of the impartial spectator, or at most with a fatherly tenderness, no more. In this reviewing act I find myself thinking sometimes that the case about God may not be quite so desperate as the young poet chooses to believe. But it is not for that reason that I shall ever think of suppressing a single one of his poems. For I am deeply engaged by the downright evident honesty of the young man, though I may wonder at the source of his excitement; esteeming honesty more highly than those amiable Southern accents into which he seems determined not to lapse, and indeed more highly than anything else in the world. So that it is altogether as his apologist that I undertake this introduction.

"God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform," says the poet in an effort to render our hearts properly humble before him. and we remember the story of how a certain Samaritan woman was rebuked once for thinking that god was to be worshipped only in that mountain where her fathers had always worshipped him; the point of the story being that he can be found just as readily on one mountain as another.

The first three or four poems that I ever wrote (that was two years ago) were done in three or four different moods and with no systematic design. I was therefore duly surprised to notice that each of them made considerable use of the term God. I studied the matter a little and came to the conclusion that this

was the most poetic of all terms possible; was a term always being called into requisition during the great moments of the soul, now in tones of love, and now indignantly; and was the very last word that a man might say when standing in the presence of that ultimate mystery to which all our great experiences reduce...

I anticipate the objection that the name of God is frequently taken here in ways that are not the ways of the fathers. I reply in advance, There are many mountains; and probably every one of them is worthy of being charted on the true Chart of God's world.<sup>9</sup>

A strategy of disassociation is apparent here: Ransom adopts the formal and measured tones of an editor, introducing the poetry, contextualising it but also distancing himself from some of its more "desperate" strategies and affecting a soldier's sanguine view of the version of the world presented by the youthful honesty of the poet. The passage rests upon a simple assertion, that the poems which follow were finished long before the introduction was written, and that the author now views his pre-war poetry dispassionately. However, to an extent which has never been noted before, the external documentary evidence refutes many of the assertions on which the introduction's rhetorical strategy rests. The text of the introduction, dated May 13th 1918, was sent in a letter of the same date to Christopher Morley an American friend of Ransom's who had attended Oxford with him between 1910 and 1913. Morley, who by this time was a columnist on the Philadelphia Public Ledger was a keen supporter of Ransom's early poetry, and had acted as an agent to the volume, attempting to sell it to several New York publishers. By May it seemed certain that, on the strong recommendation of its poetry reader Robert Frost, Henry Holt would publish the collection. In his letter to Morley, Ransom enclosed "an introduction, a new poem and some substitutions" and writes "I hope you like the introduction and the new poetry."<sup>10</sup> On the very date that Ransom had signed an introduction which implied that all the poems in his collection had been completed long before, he sent a new poem and alterations to the volume in a letter to his friend. The unpublished remainder of the correspondence between Morley, Ransom and the publishing house Henry Holt complicates the narrative of the book's publication, and the relationship between the introduction and the poems, still further. The Henry Holt Archive, held in the Firestone Library at Princeton contains correspondence from Morley dating back to the beginning of 1918, although the first

letter in the file clearly indicates that Morley had discussed Ransom's book with the publishers before then.

Feb 13, 1918

I hear from Lieut. Ransom that he is soon to send me some more pieces, and I hope then to insist on your reconsidering that little book POEMS ABOUT GOD.

On August 1st 1918 Henry Holt's Poetry Editor Alfred Harcourt wrote to Morley acknowledging the receipt of two new poems from Ransom, "The School" and "The Four Roses" and declaring:

I think we shall want to do the book, though don't tell him so yet.

A more detailed letter followed on August 9th which listed the poems that the company wished to publish and also those that they were "dead against including". From this latter list two poems "Geometry" and "The Power of God" overcame the publisher's objections and were included in the final collection. In the same letter Alfred Harcourt stated his doubts about Ransom's introduction, doubts which many subsequent critics have shared:

I am rather afraid that the preface takes the sting out of the best of these, but on this point I haven't much private opinion.

These letters are concerned merely with the administration associated with getting a new book to the presses. As the date of publication approaches however Morley's letters begin to paint a picture of Ransom's feelings towards the collection which is

radically at odds with the tone of the introduction. On 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1919 Morley wrote:

I send you herewith a revised version of NOONDAY GRACE, just sent me by Lieut. John C. Ransom for his book POEMS ABOUT GOD. He is very eager to have the poem published as it appears in this new version.

Four days later, on the 27<sup>th</sup>, Morley returned the galley proofs.

Under separate cover I send you the corrected galleys. The excuse for the number of changes is that Ransom, like all young poets, has been brooding over his stuff in the past months, and sent me not long ago a list of changes that he was very urgent for. Some, not all of them I have marked as you will see. He is very anxious that The Power of God, in its revised form should be included. I enclose it here for your judgement. I don't think he has yet hit what he is aiming at; but as he is so eager to have it in, perhaps it would be worth while to humour him?

This view of the writer, "anxious" about the fate of a favourite poem, "eager" that it should be included, and behaving like "all young poets" is strikingly different from the tone of languid self criticism which Ransom himself adopts in his introduction of 18th May 1918. Accordingly that introduction can now be seen as a disingenuous strategy, a fiction. If Ransom was still committed to the volume and so excited by the prospect of its publication that he continued to submit substantial changes to its contents eight months after the date on which he composed the introduction, the introduction can be seen as an elaborate mask which aims at the preservation of the first-time poet's honour. The poet is making a declaration of cool disinterest in his own work in order to protect himself from hostile reactions to it.

If Ransom feared a negative reaction to his first published work, then the mostly unfavourable tone of the early reviews proved his fears to be well founded.

Christopher Morley had promised Alfred Harcourt:

The more I have thought about the book, the more I am convinced it is a very real thing. Its readers will not be very many, perhaps; but those who like it will like it extremely.<sup>11</sup>

But the reviews indicate that few critics found the collection satisfactory. The unsigned review of Poems About God from The San Francisco Chronicle of June 7 1919 was typical.

Ransom is undoubtedly a very distinctive type of poet; his simplicity is all his own, and he has a decidedly original view of life, but one thinks that his ideas of God are the results of too much thinking beyond his depth. He is always stopping short at half-truths, especially if they are capable of being expressed in an unusual way.

To Ransom's strategic distancing from his first collection must be added the facts of his treatment of the early poetry. In 1924, the year in which Chills and Fever was published in the United States, the Hogarth Press printed a collection of Ransom's poetry entitled Grace After Meat in Britain. This volume, compiled and introduced by Robert Graves, consisted of nine poems from Poems About God, most with minor alterations, and new poems which would be included in the American publication of Chills and Fever. Ransom's correspondence reveals his reluctance about including the earlier poems, in particular the poem "Grace", in the British volume but Graves prevailed.<sup>12</sup> Despite a generous introduction by Graves, who compared Ransom to Robert Frost, the poems created even less impact in Britain than they had in America: although it was championed by Harold Monroe's *avant-garde* Poetry Bookshop, it is the only hand-printed book to be published by the Hogarth Press which is not referred to by Virginia or Leonard Woolf in their correspondence.<sup>13</sup> As Ransom's reputation grew in the United States throughout the 1920s and 1930s he resisted attempts by editors and anthologists to have any of the Poems About God reprinted, and he chose to exclude all the poems in Poems About God from his various Selected Poems, bar the single poem "Overtures" which is included a section called "Sixteen Poems in Eight Pairings, with original and final versions studied comparatively" in the Selected Poems of 1969. Even here, fifty years after the

original publication, the author has not softened towards the contents of his first book. Ransom noted:

The poem was published in Poems About God, Henry Holt, 1919. I had promised myself never to republish any of its contents by reason of the general poverty of its style, and its blatant and inconsistent theologizing. But I recently gave it a final reading, and was impressed by the charming moment when the speaker stops his narrative and calls upon his friend to "hazard how this thing befell."...But the poem is deformed by many stylistic and technical errors.<sup>14</sup>

The later systematic suppression of the volume is qualitatively different from Ransom's strategic diffidence towards it at the time of publication. If that earlier coolness was a species of self-protection, a defence against a possible unfavourable reaction, the later suppression was based on a strong aesthetic rejection of the tones and strategies of the earlier poems.

#### Themes and Poetic Strategies in Poems About God

How should Ransom's early poetry be read? Taking the title of the volume for guidance one might reasonably assume that the book is a collection of religious verse, yet many of Ransom's critics have strongly resisted the suggestion that these poems may be religious at all. Vivienne Koch argued that "the poems are hardly devotional" and suggested that the religious content was 'tacked on' to the poetry in order to keep the poems within the terms of a rigidly deterministic title: "When 'God' does not appear in a poem, the word 'Christian' does - to keep the frame of reference straight."<sup>15</sup> John L. Stewart noted pointedly: "Its title, Poems About God was misleading. Few were about Him; some were scarcely poems."<sup>16</sup> Keiran Quinlan, who devoted his book John Crowe Ransom's Secular Faith to an analysis of what he sees as Ransom's Religious crisis, similarly qualified the religious content of Ransom's first poetic collection by titling his chapter on the book "Poems about 'God.'"<sup>17</sup> Yet Ransom's own introduction indicated that his poems were not

concerned with faith in any simple sense;

The first three or four poems that I ever wrote (that was two years ago) were done in three or four different moods and with no systematic design. I was therefore duly surprised to notice that each of them made considerable use of the term God. I studied the matter a little, and came to the conclusion that this was the most poetic of all terms possible; was a term always being called into requisition during the great moments of the soul, now in terms of love, and now indignantly; and was the very last word that a man might say when standing in the presence of that ultimate mystery to which all our great expectations reduce.

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This qualification would suggest a very particular form of poetry about God, one in which the poet, rather than exploring faith as such, explores the social scenes or situations in which God or Godliness may be brought to mind, "now in terms of love, and now indignantly". In fact, with certain exceptions, this form of social-religious poetry, with an emphasis on the depiction of scenes which cause extreme emotion, is exactly what the reader will find in the volume. The expressed desire to represent the co-mingling of social and religious impulses is realised in many of these poems through the presentation of what seem to be portraits of particular social settings: in "Sunset" for example the reader is shown what seems to be a distinct Southern scene:

We are a mile from home,  
And soon it will be getting dark,  
And the big farm-bell will be ringing out for supper.  
We had better start for the house.  
Rover!  
O here he is, waiting.  
He has chased the rabbits and run after the birds  
A thousand miles or so,  
And now he is hungry and tired.  
But he is a southern gentleman  
And will not whimper once  
Though you kept him waiting forever.<sup>19</sup>

And many other images from the South will appear in the volume.

Ransom's introduction had suggested that "routine...is death to the aesthetic and religious emotions"<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, some of the Poems About God dramatise the manner in which the Christian message is confused or confounded by everyday social practice; in "Noonday Grace", a simplistic childlike rhythm characterises a poem which shows its narrator in the grip of a conceptual dilemma. The speaker is enjoying the Southern bounty at his parent's table:

And father, thanks for a generous yam,  
and a helping of home cured country ham,  
(He knows how fond of it I am.)  
For none can cure them as can he,  
And he won't tell his recipe,  
But God was behind it, it seems to me.

Thank God who made this garden grow,  
Who took upon himself to know  
That we loved vegetables so.

As the boy gives thanks for the food on the table it becomes clear that he entertains the delusion that God provides for him personally and directly. This theme is given a more explicit twist in a social direction as he remembers the sermon that the preacher had delivered on Sunday.

Sunday the preacher droned a lot  
About a certain whether of not:  
Is God the universal friend  
And if men pray can he attend  
To each man's individual end.

The boy is shown to be in the grip of a simple, indeed rather banal confusion; does God offer his love to all uniformly or to each individual particularly? He attempts to critique the view that the preacher had presented by asking him what "creeping man" is to the majesty that God has created, and terming the preacher, who responds that

God's will is to help man, a "valiant democrat". The minister is reported as saying that it is God's kindness and sympathy which cause him to reach down to assist "humble man". The boy sees the pie that his mother has made, and continuing to apply a literal interpretation to theological statements, imagines that God has directly had a hand in its production:

There's no telling what that secret pair  
Have cooked me in the kitchen there.

...As long as I keep topside the sod,  
I'll love you always, mother and God.<sup>21</sup>

Although the argument of the poem seems to suggest that the boy disagrees with the preacher's view of how the bounty of God is distributed, the insistent rhyme scheme and the boy's effusion at the food he is offered seem to indicate that the child displays the same deluded attitude as the preacher. This poem, situated early in the collection points to one of the persistent formal difficulties with the Poems About God: Ransom's control of emphasis is hampered by overly insistent rhymes. Accordingly his mastery of tone is extremely uncertain. Often the rhythms of a poem will be so strong and emphatic that the poem will sound as if it is parodying the sentiments which it states, whereas the argument of the poem indicates that the poet intends the reader to accept it straightforwardly. In this poem the strong rhyme scheme suggests the banality of the child's straightforward binary view of God's powers.

Despite Ransom's early interest in debating theological issues with his Methodist minister father, debates which, Ransom's biographer notes, became so heated that Ransom's mother was concerned that they would be misconstrued as personal arguments,<sup>22</sup> the theology of the collection, such as it is, is often far from contemporary, and occasionally seems far from Christian. Some of the poems demonstrate an almost medieval view of the connections between life and death. In "Under the Locusts" the old men of the community sit and view the life of the

community going by, but physical decay, never more than a breath away, serves as a continual reminder of mortality;

Dick's a sturdy little lad  
Yonder throwing stones;  
Agues and rheumatic pains  
Will fiddle on his bones.

Grinny Bob is out again  
Begging for a dime:  
Niggers haven't any souls  
Grinning all the time

Jenny and Will go arm in arm  
He's a lucky fellow;  
Jenny's cheeks are pink as rose,  
Her mothers cheeks are yellow.

The Christian message has failed to supplant the old men's fatalistic view of existence:

Parson's coming up the hill,  
Meaning pretty well;  
Thinks he's preached the doubters down,  
And old men never tell.

23

The nearness of death is also an insistent theme of "The Resurrection" where the

fact of mortality is used by the narrator as an reason to rail against God:

Long before men die I sometimes read  
Their stoic backs as plain as graveyard stones,  
An epitaph of poor dead men indeed.  
I never pass those old and crooked bones,  
Ridden far down with burden and with age...  
...But I am sick that heaven has been  
So clumsy with the inelastic clay! <sup>24</sup>

A more humorous presentation of the same idea occurs in "Dumbbells" which combines an emphasis on the distinction between soul and body with another example of the confusion between faithful worship and non-religious social activity. Here the exercise of "thirty fat men of the town" is compared to orthodox worship in a church:

DUMB-BELLS left, dumb-bells right,  
Swing them hard, grip them tight!  
Thirty fat men of the town  
Must sweat their filthy paunches down.  
Dripping sweat and pumping blood  
They try to make themselves like God.

...put by dumb bells for to-day,  
Wash the stinking sweat away  
And go out clean. But come again:  
Worship's every night at ten.

In this poem the working away of the flesh is humorously portrayed as a way for the men to reach closer to their own personal notion of divine perfection.

The men imagine their God as a personification of their own aspirations to immense physical strength:

Thirty's God has just the girth  
To pull the levers of the earth,  
They made him sinewy and lean  
And washed him glittering white and clean <sup>25</sup>

The final lines may invoke the washing away of sin which occurs in baptism, and "Dumbells", the title of the poem may indicate the poet's opinion of the men whose exercises are presented in such a broadly comic manner.

The unconventional and far from orthodox religious tone of these poems may provide one plausible reason for Ransom's attempt to defuse the volume. As the son of a prominent Methodist minister and the grandson of another, Ransom may have feared the response of his family, his father's congregation, or the wider religious community to a volume of verse which may have been entitled Poems About God but was hardly devotional in its tone or theological content. If this matter was preying on his mind perhaps this may explain why in the letter of May 13th 1918 to Morley, Ransom includes two highly untypical references. In suggesting that any further changes to the volume can be made on the proof sheet Ransom adds "if God prospers us to that point" and in noting how "lonely and conscience stricken" he feels living in comfort while others endure the privations of war, he adds "though the Lord knows it's not my fault I'm here".<sup>26</sup> At no other point in his correspondence with Morley does Ransom ever refer to God. In one sense Ransom was right to fear the local response to his volume. For a short time after publication the book caused a small scandal around Vanderbilt University, as might be evidenced by a reviewer's reference at the time of the publication of The Fugitive that the Ransom's *nom de plume* "Roger Prim" should not be allowed to disguise the author of the "rabid" Poems About God.<sup>27</sup> Ransom's Methodist minister father however was not at all shocked by what some described as the blasphemous quality of his son's verses. The Princeton University archive contains a letter from John J. Ransom D.D. Brentwood, Tennessee, dated April 7th 1919 and addressed to Henry Holt after the publication of

his son's book. In it Ransom's father praises the publishers for the "faultless typography" and "handsome get up" of the volume, although he allows "that my relation to the writer makes me incompetent as a witness" to the "charm" of the poems themselves. The letter also includes Ransom Senior's alterations to the end of the poem "Sunset", the first poem which his son had ever written. John Crowe Ransom's poem presents another philosophical conflict, this time in the guise of a romantic failure; the protagonist's would-be beloved sees all natural beauties as manifestation of God, whereas the man sees the natural world as being purely beautiful in itself. The woman's love for God is philosophically offensive to the protagonist, and blocks the success of the romantic relationship. Crowe Ransom's poem begins:

I know you are not cruel,  
And you would not willingly hurt anything in the world.  
There is kindness in your eyes,  
There could not very well be more of it in eyes  
Already brimful of the sky.  
I thought you would one day begin to love me,  
But now I doubt it badly;  
It is no man rival I am afraid of,  
It is God.

"Sunset" ends with the two making their way home, and the protagonist stoically declaring that he will wait:

Till this lady we love  
And her strange eyes  
Come home from God." <sup>28</sup>

In his letter to his son's publisher John James Ransom says;

Permit me to say that in my own copy I have made on p16 an appendix to "Sunset" quite changing the ending of that possibly autobiographical incident to conform to my notions in the case.

The alteration changes the whole meaning of the poem. John James Ransom writes:

And thus passed stiffly the hours,  
The lady's eyes on that far objective,--  
Till slowly there welled a flood,  
A crystalline flood, whose globules  
Blurred all the landscape.  
Convulsive the tender lips  
Stirred softly, as moved by a breath  
from the land of dreams,  
Elusive and faint the movement and whisper,  
But roving vision and my ear  
felt heaven and earth were stirred  
By the message from out the vast skies:  
"I shall die," said her lips, "except you  
love me  
In God's good way,  
With tenderness and passion;  
And you are to me  
The interpreter of God." <sup>29</sup>

Accordingly, Ransom's father's poem allows a romantic reconciliation, and a synthesis of the two opposed conceptual views: the woman now becomes open to human love if it is conducted "in God's good way." In altering a poem in print, John James Ransom curiously foreshadows the behaviour of his son who would also alter the words of his poems by writing across the published pages, crossing out words and altering punctuation. Ironically, he also effects a resolution to one of the collection's central dilemmas.

Whilst Ransom's father was able to effect a synthesis between the spiritual and material poles of the poem he read and rewrote, that synthesis eluded his son in this early verse. In John Crowe Ransom's first collection of poetry, the physical and the spiritual are locked in a fraught binary opposition. Thus, while "Sunset" display the protagonist's disappointment with his beloved's refusal to turn from the spiritual world to the physical, other poems in the collection display a frank disgust with flesh and physicality. The poem "Morning" for example is little more than a single image:

..Three hours each day we souls,  
Who might be angels but are fastened down  
With bodies, most infuriating freight,  
Sit fattening these frames and skeletons  
With filthy food, which they must cast away  
Before they feed again.

30

"Morning" states, rather than dramatises, a familiar theological and philosophical tension; that "we...who might be angels...are fastened down/ With bodies". In its discussion of the conflict between spirit and flesh "Morning" displays what is in fact the most persistent theme in Poems About God: not religion as such but a strong sense of sin arising out of the pressing demands of an insistent physical nature. The collection often sites its dichotomous discussion of the claims of the flesh and the claims of the spirit in its female figures. In the collection there are two distinct types of women: one, like the woman in "Sunset" is a woman of spirit who rejects the protagonist because of her love for God. Other women of spirit include the protagonist of "Prayer", a "foolish" woman who causes God to make " a mighty face

so wry" at her "unworthiness",<sup>31</sup> or Kate who is chosen as a mate for the protagonist of "November" and who:

...prays for the sinners of the town,  
And never comes to meeting late,  
Who sings soprano in the choir  
And swallows Christian doctrine straight. <sup>32</sup>

The other characteristic woman on display, sometimes literally, in Poems About God is a creature of the flesh. These women are often described in language which portrays them as literally corporeal. In "The Cloak Model" an older male stranger advises the protagonist that while he used to believe that female beauty implied spiritual virtue, in fact women are mere "meat that shone". The poem concludes:

"I wish the moralists would thresh  
(Indeed the thing is very droll)  
God's oldest joke, forever fresh:  
The fact that in the finest flesh  
There isn't any soul." <sup>33</sup>

In "Grace", described by one critic as A Southern "Death of the Hired Man"<sup>34</sup>, one character is described as; "...a hired man!/Out of a hired woman born!"<sup>35</sup> In "November" the protagonist who has been rejected by the one woman he loved, spurns the spiritual Christian Kate and instead turns to an ageing prostitute. Denied the opportunity of a love which might synthesise the physical and spiritual, the protagonist is destined to oscillate between the purely spiritual and purely carnal worlds. The poem ends with the protagonist hearing the "Hoo, Hoo, Hoo" of the owl as a mocking reminder that the woman he is with is a whore. The poem ends with his declaration "I ponder the ways of God- and rue!"<sup>36</sup>

The most interesting of the poems which seem to deal with disgust at physicality and the dangerous co-mingling of the physical and the sexual is "Street Light" which

seems to resemble the many religious tracts which warned innocent men of the dangers offered by the city:

The shine of many city streets  
Confuses any country man;  
It flickers here and flickers there;  
It goes as soon as it began,  
It beckons many ways at once  
For him to follow if he can.

This image plays with both the bewildering array of attractions that the metropolis may offer and the image of the will o' the wisp which will entice the unwary traveller and make him lose his physical and moral way in the city. The next stanza is explicit in articulating the threat in a specifically sexual form.

Under the lamp a woman stands,  
The lamps are shining equal well,  
But in her eyes are other lights,  
And lights plus other lights will tell:  
He loves the brightness of that street  
Which is the shining street to hell.

..I'm sorry lights are held so cheap,  
I'd rather there were not a spark  
Than chose those shining ways for joy  
And have them lead me into dark. <sup>37</sup>

The rhyme structure of "Street Light" emphasises the tract-like nature of the poem's moral message, though unlike "Noonday Grace" it is not so emphasised as to suggest that the poem is anything approaching a parody of the religious text which it resembles.

Another poem which displays a violent reaction to sexuality is "The Four Roses" which presents a scene of:

Four sisters sitting in one house,  
I said, these roses on a stem  
With bosoms bare. But wayfaring  
I went and ravished one of them.

...

The canker is on roses too!  
I cried and lifted up the rod  
And scourged them bleeding to the ground.  
All, all are sinners unto God. <sup>38</sup>

Developing this theme of apparent misogyny, the poem "The Christian" presents the dangers that marriage poses to active men. Its protagonist is a "sailing man" who "used to swear at all the seven seas,/And rode them dauntless up and down the earth." The protagonist marries "a proper village woman", but it is "only when he went up on the moors":

And felt the sting and censure of the winds,  
And tasted of the salt blown in from the sea,  
Then only would he curse the marriage morning,  
And swear he'd not go skulking back again  
To sit that hearth like any broken bitch  
Whose running time was over. <sup>39</sup>

The sailor, who is literally un-manned ("like any broken bitch") by marriage, and who finds his masculinity in revolt at domesticity is merely another manifestation of the male protagonists in these poems who find themselves locked in an ambivalent relationship with women; on the one hand irritated by women's spirituality if it seems to deny them a romantic relationship, on the other aroused and revolted by their sexuality.

In some poems, the contrast between the flesh and the soul is given the religious dimension which the title of the volume would lead the reader to expect. For example, the poem which introduces the collection, "The Swimmer" is a dramatic meditation on the different demands of the body and the soul. Set in a day of sweltering heat, it begins:

In dog days plowmen quit their toil,  
And frog ponds in the meadow boil,  
And grasses on the upland broil,  
And all the coiling things uncoil,  
And eggs and meats and Christians spoil.<sup>40</sup>

This heated world of physical excess is contrasted with the coolness of a river or pond, where a swimmer lies under the water. The swimmer thinks:

I have no home in the cruel heat  
On alien soul that blisters feet.  
This water is my native seat,  
A more than ever cool and sweet,  
So long by forfeiture escheat.

And considers lying there forever. Since the heat makes the mere fact of corporeality a discomfort, the swimmer is pleased to obliterate his physical nature by submerging himself in the cooling water. The water also seems to offer an escape from the fallen

world with its temptations, which are often visited on man's physical nature.

O my forgiving element!  
I gash you to my heart's content  
And never need be penitent,  
So light you, float me when breath is spent  
And close again where my rude way went.

And now you close above my head,  
And I lie low in a soft green bed  
That dog days never have visited.  
"By the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread:"  
The garden's curse is at last unsaid.

In its compression of physical escape from the heat and spiritual escape from temptation and therefore sin, the poem can be seen to be drawing not just on the fact of the incapacitating heat of the Southern summer but on the tradition of total immersion baptism in Southern rivers and ponds. The poem seems to offer its alternative to physical discomfort and pressing heat as a trope which combines baptism and forgiveness, and possibly hints at suicide. We are told:

The swimmer's body is white and clean,  
It is washed by a water of deepest green....

...But the swimmer's soul is a thing possessed,  
His soul is naked as his breast.

The forgiving waters which have washed the swimmer's body clean have also made his soul bare, thus doing away with the need for penitence. If the swimmer stays below the water he need never return to the physical world again and will be free of

the heat, and by extension the temptations of a fallen world. Yet the poem ends with the lines:

Water-bugs play shimmer shimmer,  
Naked body's just a glimmer,  
Watch ticks every second grimmer:  
Come to the top, O wicked swimmer!

The threat of the swimmer's suicide leads the voice of the poem to invoke him to return to the surface of the water. Though the poem seems to suggest that the only way to avoid sin is to be dead, it also implies that, as suicide is itself a sin, the only appropriate existential response to the existence of sin is to live, perhaps reluctantly, as part of the fallen world.

The apparent intensity of the feelings presented in these poems, the vehemence of the discussions, and the habitual use of the "I" voice have led some critics to suggest that these poems are autobiographical. Vivienne Koch suggested that they were "transparently autobiographical"<sup>41</sup>, and Thomas Daniel Young judges "The speaker is obviously Ransom himself. He is voicing some queries that have shaken the faith of an orthodox middle Tennessee lad who has gone to Oxford for three years."<sup>42</sup> Other critics have attempted to distinguish between the personae displayed in the poems and the personality of Ransom himself. Robert Penn Warren for example maintained that one problem with the collection was that it discussed the dilemma which Young identifies above: Ransom, a University Professor was writing in the persona of a farm boy from rural Tennessee.<sup>43</sup> It is certainly easy to read into some poems the concern of a well educated young man who has returned to the rural life of his childhood to find it unchanged, and who worries about his place in it. In "The

School" the poet presents a scene which seems to address a specific and personal concern:

Equipped with my Grecian thoughts, how could I live  
Among my father's folk? My father's house  
Was narrow and his fields were nauseous.  
I kicked his clods for being common dirt,  
Worthy a world which never could be Greek;  
Cursed the paternity that planted me  
One green leaf in a wilderness of autumn;  
And wept, as fitting such a fruitful spirit  
Sealed in a yellow tomb. <sup>44</sup>

The cry of the precocious intellectual living in a world which does not value intellect was to be echoed in many of Ransom's Fugitive poems, notably "Ego", which declared:

Sages and friends, too often have you seen us  
Deep in the midnight conclave as we used...  
...And if an alien, miserably at feud  
With those my generation, I have reason  
To think to salve the fester of my treason:  
A seven of friends exceeds much multitude.<sup>45</sup>

In Poems About God Ransom has as yet found no intellectual support-group to salve his intellectual alienation. "The School", whilst one of the collection's more satisfactory poems, is exceptional in stating a dilemma which seems to be so clearly Ransom's own. The absence of any other poems of direct statement has led some critics to suggest that the collection eschews autobiography utterly. Robert Buffington flatly noted that the book is remarkable for its anonymity; "...it has little

of the autobiographical quality we have come to expect in a modern writers first volume" <sup>46</sup> More recently William Osborne has argued that the book is autobiographical, but dynamically rather than mimetically so. Osborne suggests that the poems contained in Poems About God are essentially anti-pastoral, demonstrating the writer's determination to critique pastoral conventions. The aim of this anti-pastoral, in which bucolic idylls are habitually disrupted by violence or dissonant thoughts, was, Osborne suggests, to enable Ransom to engage in a debate, the outcome of which was to help him to decide whether to return to Tennessee or pursue an earlier ambition to be a journalist in New York.<sup>47</sup> Although Osborne's suggestion of anti-pastoral form comes close to labelling the idiosyncratic generic convention which Poems About God displays, his suggestion that the collection was an attempt by Ransom to clarify his own thoughts about the varying attractions of country and city can be easily refuted. Since Osborne lays great stress on the role that the volume was to play in settling Ransom's mind, one need only note that Ransom's correspondence after the end of the First World War, and after the publication of the volume, still indicated that he was ambivalent about what career to follow and where to follow it. If Poems About God was indeed a debate which was intended to settle these doubts, it failed.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, it is important to discuss a suggested reading of Poems About God which has not been fully developed before. When Poems About God was published, Louis Untermeyer had reviewed the volume alongside verse by Rupert Brook and Siegfried Sassoon and suggested that all three poets displayed a "return...to brutality."<sup>49</sup> Given the date on which Ransom's first book was published, and that it has been established above that Ransom wrote and rewrote some of the poems it contains whilst stationed in France with the American Army, could Poems About God be in any sense a collection of war poems? Whilst this suggestion would certainly explain the persistence intervention of violent scenes and emotions, there is little to support

such a view. Certainly the narrator of "The School" notes:

I was not drowsy though the scholars droned,  
Hearing the music that they made of Greek,  
Whenever Helen's unforgotten face,  
Sent other young men whisking off to war.<sup>50</sup>

Which may be a reference to the poet's own experience. In the rest of the volume, however, the scenes described are clearly drawn from the poet's own youth in Tennessee. As such they resist a reading which would see them as war poetry in any direct sense. The war did however have one important effect on Ransom's poetry. After the publication of Poems About God, and before being shipped back to the United States, Ransom was able to enrol at Nancy and then Grenoble University. There he was able for the first time to read widely in European literature, and for a short period became interested in the poetic practice of the French Symbolist poets. After his return to Nashville in the late Summer of 1919 this was one of the aesthetic interests which Ransom took to discussions of the Fugitive Group.

Clearly Poems About God appears to resist any fully systematic analysis. That the widely divergent readings discussed above can co-exist is a demonstration of a clear indeterminacy in the volume. This indeterminacy arises out of the lack of formal control on display in the collection. Ransom's introduction had stated that the collection had been written according to a logical method:

Wishing to make my poems as poetic as possible, I simply likened myself to a diligent apprentice and went to work to treat rather systematically a number of the occasions on which this term ["God"] was in use with common American men.<sup>51</sup>

But this systematic method seems to have been the only system applied to the collection. However, although the volume seems to be deficient in one of the areas in which Ransom's mature verse excelled, namely in formal control, the poems it contains are related to the later verse.

John L. Stewart notes:

Ransom has never reprinted these poems, but those who hunt them out will discover traces of the poet to come in the odd words he chose (*escheat* is one of them), in the slant rhymes, the self-deprecatory tone, the satire against romantic idealists, and the pervasive mistrust of fulsome generalisations, especially of the moral order<sup>52</sup>

In fact, there is another connection between the early and late poetry. The strong theme in Poems About God of physicality and the division between spirit and flesh has been noted above. This is also of course a major theme of Ransom's "mature" verse. Poems including "Painted Head" and "Spectral Lovers" are also concerned with this philosophical dichotomy: "The Equilibrists" represents the dilemma as a metaphysical quandary:

For spin your period out, and draw your breath,  
A kinder saeculum begins with Death.  
Would you ascend to Heaven and bodiless dwell?  
Or take your bodies honorless to Hell?<sup>53</sup>

Ransom's mature verse displays as metaphysical conceit what receives a literal, often *physical* manifestation in his early verse. The first collection can be seen in this respect as a testing ground in which the philosophical themes which concerned Ransom during both phases of his poetic life were given a, sometimes crudely formulaic airing in a wholly literal set of poems.

What strikes the reader of Poems About God is that the collection presents a sequence of dramatic scenes in which first person protagonists are presented with existential choices. Where division exists, it exists as a binary opposition demanding from the protagonist a simple either/or choice. The relationship between this view of the world and that of Ransom's later verse is clear. Whereas the protagonists of "The Equilibrists" are locked forever in "their torture of equilibrium"<sup>54</sup> Poems About God shows the poet still searching for the point where that ambivalent duality may be conceptually, and poetically sustained.

## Conclusion.

Despite Ransom's attempts to distance himself from the volume, Poems About God is highly significant in the development of the writer. Although the collection is often considered to display immature verse, it was published during the poet's twenty ninth year, and as such it is a curiously belated publication to be considered as juvenilia, and dismissed on that basis.

Poems About God seems at times to have been constructed with what Thornton Parsons describes as "a complete freedom from aesthetic self-consciousness"<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless what should be clear to any reader who compares Ransom's Poems About God with the verse published in The Fugitive is that whilst the former volume is composed of poetry which is different from the poet's later work, it is also *coherently* different. The early poems may be unlike Ransom's most famous poems, but they do share a style of their own.

The poetic strategy which Ransom displays in the first collection often involves a citing of the poem's conflict within the character of its protagonist. The persona of the protagonist is then made to articulate his divided sensibility, and give voice to his confusion. As has been noted above, this strategy often led to the poems being read as autobiographical. Ransom's mature verse develops its own distancing aesthetic strategy to deal with conflict. Poems About God is also significant because it gives an early and extreme indication of what would become the poet's habitual practice towards his verse: continual editing, and in some cases effective suppression.

Poems About God can be seen to make an important negative statement about the development of Ransom's aesthetic. The lack of formal control on display in these poems indicates that the strength of the poet's unfettered argument and rhyme scheme demanded a rigid formal structure to control it. The next phase of Ransom's poetic development was conducted not just in a spirit of restraint and control, but also in a period of intense aesthetic self-consciousness.

## Chapter 2: The Mature Fugitive.

### Introduction

Ransom's mature poetry was published between 1922 and 1925 in the nineteen issues of the Fugitive magazine and collected in the more permanent form of two volumes, Chills and Fever (1924) and Gentlemen in Bonds (1927). These poems display a markedly different style from those contained in Ransom's Poems About God. Significantly, the writing of the verse on which Ransom's reputation as a poet mainly rests coincided with a period of intense speculation about aesthetic systems which Ransom undertook in order to assimilate a wide range of intellectual influences. His aesthetic interests had developed from a variety of sources; from his philosophical education at Oxford where he had studied Plato, Aristotle and early Greek aesthetics, from his study of the French symbolist poets at Nancy University, and from the discussions of the Fugitive group, which had been meeting in a new dedicated poetic phase since the fall of 1919. Ransom aimed to formalise an aesthetic which would underpin his literary criticism, and provide a working aesthetic system for his own writing. Although this aesthetic was not to be confined to writing<sup>1</sup>, its immediate manifestation was most obvious there: Ransom came to practice a rigorous formal aesthetic in his own poetry, and champion it in his review of others'. Ransom's aesthetic was developed both through detailed prose argument, and through controlled poetic experiment. Some of Ransom's concerns are obvious in one of the Fugitive magazine's prose pieces; in the third issue of the Fugitive Ransom devoted what was ostensibly a review of Robert Graves' On English Poetry to a presentation of his own developing convictions:

..it would seem at least likely that the determinate mathematical regularities of meter which are imposed on the words have as much to do with the total effect of a poem as, in a sister art, the determinate geometrical regularities of outline which are imposed upon the stones have to do with the total effect of a work of architecture.<sup>2</sup>

Whilst the Fugitive formed an appropriate public platform for Ransom to announce his aesthetic views, most of his opinions were hardened in debate, either within the Fugitive group, where philosophical and aesthetic discussions were continuous after 1919<sup>3</sup>, or in private correspondence with Allen Tate. Throughout 1923 and 1924

Tate and Ransom debated formal aesthetics in their letters, Tate defending free verse and Ransom arguing for metre and formal restraint. On May 6<sup>th</sup> 1924, Ransom wrote to Tate:

The traditional poets generally have defined themselves sharply, but under a common conception of form; but it is this form which is broken down now. Philosophies and rhetorical modes may come and go, but the matter of the form is with us now and forever. An art defines itself as an adventure in a given form. <sup>4</sup>

Thus, while Ransom rejects mere historical dogmatism in matters of form, he none the less defends the notion of appropriate formal control in the poem. This debate was not merely a matter of abstract aesthetics; the habitual practice of the Fugitive group was to debate a poem in its close formal detail, paying attention to rhyme, imagery and style, and to use the text as a basis for more theoretical analysis.<sup>5</sup> Thus the first stage of Ransom's aesthetic was developed in close relationship to his own and his colleagues' poetry.

In the summer and fall of 1926, Ransom produced a manuscript which attempted to fully codify the aesthetic views which had been developing since the early 1920's. A "technical philosophy of aesthetics", it was to be called "The Third Moment", and would attempt not just to analyse the distinct cognitive stages in human perception, but would also argue that Art had a privileged place within the perceptual scheme, since Art offered to man nothing less than an opportunity to recover the immediacy and variety of his first experience of the world. A manuscript was finished and submitted to his publishers, Harper and Brothers, in New York by the beginning of December 1926, but their requests for substantial amendments, and Ransom's residual dissatisfactions with the text meant that he kept the manuscript in his desk

for some years. In 1938 Ransom noted in the Preface to The World's Body :

It is my impression that the serious critic should serve a sort of apprenticeship with his general principles. But the studies can scarcely afford to be pursued in any way except in the constant company of the actual poems. About ten years ago, when I did not know this, I wrote and sent to a publisher a general aesthetic of poetry, a kind of Proglomena to Any Future Poetic, thinking that the public needed one, as perhaps it does. The intelligent publisher declined my project politely and returned my manuscript, which the other day I had the pleasure of consigning to the flames.

Even the fact that Ransom seemingly retained the manuscript of "The Third Moment" for more than ten years, taking it with him when he travelled from Tennessee to Kenyon College in Ohio, may indicate its centrality in his thought, and its importance to him<sup>6</sup>. Ironically the manuscript which was completed in 1926 *had* been written "in the constant company of...actual poems" since it was produced at the same time that Ransom was writing his own poems. By 1938 Ransom's incinerations were a familiar activity. Often to the despair of colleagues and family, Ransom habitually burned his letters, private papers and manuscripts. Of Ransom's correspondence, only the letters he sent to colleagues, critics, and friends survive, and it is from one of Ransom's letters to Allen Tate, that it is possible to reconstruct the ambitious theme of the unpublished manuscript. It represents a codification of many of the concerns which Ransom had discussed in correspondence with Tate and in the discussions of the Fugitive group.

### The Third Moment

#### I First Moment.

...The first moment is the original experience - pure of all intellectual content, unreflective, concrete, and singular; there are no distinctions, and the subject is identical with the Whole.

#### II Second Moment.

The moment after. This moment is specific for human experience, as distinguished from the ideally animal experience....In the second moment cognition takes place;...The feature of the second moment is that it is now that the record must be taken of the first moment that has just transpired. This record proceeds inevitably by way of *concepts* discovered in cognition. It is the beginning of science. Its ends are practical; but its means are

*abstractions*; and these, it must be insisted, are subtractions from the whole. Now what becomes of the whole in this operation? A feature, or several features are taken up and spread upon the record...they go into the Ready Memory where items of knowledge are constantly in use, and constantly available. The rest goes somewhere and is preserved, else we could never miss it; it goes, according to Bergson, into Pure Memory; according to the modern school of psychologists, into the Unconscious, where it is far from idle, and whence it somewhere, sometime will come up again. So experience becomes History, conceptualized knowledge, in respect to a part, and Unconscious Knowledge, lost knowledge in respect to the vast residue of the unconceptual. So also is generated the cognitive or scientific habit; which is that which disposes us to shorten the subsequent First Moments of our experience to the minimum, to dwell upon our subsequent fresh experiences only long enough to reduce them as here; and which is so powerful that many of us unquestionably spend most of our working lives in entertaining or arriving at concepts.

### III Third Moment

We become aware of the deficiency of the record. Most of experience is quite missing from it. All our concepts and all our histories put together cannot add up to the wholeness with which we started out...The world of Science and Knowledge which we have laboriously constructed is a world of illusion; not one of its terms can be intuited, we suddenly appear to ourselves as monsters, as unnatural members of humanity...how can we get back to that first moment? There is only one answer: By images. The imagination is the faculty of Pure Memory or unconscious mind; it brings out the original experiences from the dark storeroom, where we dwell upon them with a joy proportionate to our previous despair. And therefore when we make images, we are regressive; we are trying to reconstitute an experience which we once had, only to handle and mutilate.<sup>7</sup>

Ransom goes on to argue that making "images" helps us to recover the world which we once experienced in its concrete immediacy, but "mutilated" by partial cognition. He lists the "five different states or operations" by which man attempts to "reconstitute the fugitive moment"; "dreams, fancies [daydreams] religions, morals or art."<sup>8</sup>

It is important to quote from the letter to Allen Tate at some length, not just because it is the only surviving indication of the arguments contained in Ransom's manuscript, but also to convey the tentative quality of the language, the

characteristically elegant, (and evasive) structure, and to note a particular instability in Ransom's discussion; he struggles to find an appropriate intellectual discourse for his thoughts to occupy. His eclectic argument embraces ideas from perceptual physics, aesthetics, philosophy and psychology, but establishes no clear epistemological relationship between them. The argument is as hesitant and speculative as a personal letter will allow, but a greater differentiation of the language might have aided clarity: one can imagine that a different term for the perception of scientific discourse, and the "perception" of artistic recovery would have further distinguished the two. What is clear is that for Ransom, poetry is essentially restorative, returning perception to an earlier, "whole" stage, re-establishing proportion to a scene which loses it even in the act of cognition. The impulse, consistent with Ransom's wider aesthetic, is anti-Platonic.

Although the book which was to fully explore Ransom's view of the vital role of art was never published, the perceptual process expressed in the condensation of "the Third Moment" published above remains the central critical and conceptual element in his thought. Ransom's vision of reality is one of boundless particularity, which science, and scientific discourse abstracts, thinning the quality of experience and impoverishing the individual's response to the world. Art is given the redeeming role of returning and reconstituting the fabric of the real world. Ransom furnishes this perception with his own terms. He invents a word for the contingent variety of nature, the quality which has to be recovered; he calls it "Dinglichkeit", which he translates as "thinginess". The term for the knowledge of this world of particularities he calls "ontology". As Rene Wellek has pointed out<sup>9</sup>, both these terms are coinages. Ransom's "ontology" is very different from the ontology described by Rudolf Goclenius the Calvinist theologian, who used it, at the end of the 16th Century, to describe concern with general characteristics of reality, with abstractions, not particularities. Since Ransom wishes the term to suggest a boundless series of particular objects, his usage is actually the direct opposite of Goclenius'. The term "Dinglichkeit" seems to have been invented rather than appropriated. The crucial quality of Ransom's thought about the tangible, populous particularity of nature, its

"thinginess" is that with the application of the correct amount of concern, of artistry, it may be returned, newly realised to the observer via art.

Ransom's firm belief in the difference between Art and Science goes far beyond the debate which was current in England between the end of the First World War and the beginning of the 1930s, which proposed that the world could be divided up between the forces of science and poetry. I.A. Richards argued in his book Science and Poetry that poetry should give up its claims of dealing in knowledge and truth, and recognise that it could only deal in pseudo statements or beliefs, leaving the recovery of the essential physical "truth" about reality to science. For Ransom poetry offers more than a place of value in a world of fact, it offers a dynamic response to a world pressurised by the essentially dehumanising force of science, and represents a method of recovering the true essence of human existence. Ransom did not accept that the world could simply be divided up between poetry and science: the forces of scientific discourse posed an existential, as well as a conceptual dilemma to man, and no division of terms could be made between the two opposed forces. The very language of the extract above sometimes reveals the pressure of this conflict: the occurrence of the fearful phrase "we suddenly seem to ourselves as monsters, as unnatural members of humanity", transforms the discussion from one of mere philosophical and perceptual interest suddenly into a vital existential imperative, driven by a terrible anguish. This striking and unexpected moment serves to remind us that the return to the "World's Body" which Ransom argues art is able to enact, is not merely an issue of philosophical interest, but also an important practical one. Art may offer a return to a whole life in the world, and the pressure to achieve that return stems from the realisation that until it is accomplished we live alienated lives: this theme, which will be discussed at length in the next chapter, is the point of contact for Ransom between the alienating *discourse* of science which abstracts information, and the alienating *power* of science as it is exercised in the world. Ransom equates the power of science with technology and industrialisation, both of which remove man from his accustomed, formal relationship with the natural world and force him to live in the "monstrous" rhythm of the machine. For Ransom, art, like the dream, the fancy, religions, and morals is not escapist, in the sense of ornamenting or

enlivening a "real" life, it is serious, and is a means of achieving a happy existence. Above all in Ransom's thought 'happiness' is not a trivial or frivolous notion; happiness, which would be the inevitable outcome of living in an ordered and harmonious relationship with the world, is a significant aim for Ransom's early philosophy and becomes seen as an appropriate end for his later politics.

From the early 1920s onward Ransom was convinced that the art which would return the reader to the "first moment" would be restrained and formal rather than expressive and personal. In a passage, written in 1941 in the book The New Criticism, almost as an aside in a larger discussion of the work of I.A. Richards, whom he dismisses as a psychologist not a literary critic, Ransom delineates the restraining forces which art must deploy to deal with reality:

Probably the most stubborn popular error which aestheticians are agreed upon in fighting is the notion that the work of art deals immediately with the passions, instead of mediately. It deals with them through the veil of an obviously artificial construction; or by the careful provision of a psychic [ie aesthetic] "distance"; or under some such restraining formula as "emotion recollected in tranquillity." The ground of their insistence upon this distinction is, I think, that art feels not hot but cool; that art in its reconstructions, arranges matters so that, however it may have been in actual life, here the passion will not dominate the cognition...And to the extent that art may be said to start with feelings and passions, it proposes to find and explore the appropriate objects and in that sense to objectify and lose them.<sup>10</sup>

This argument is clearly posed against a Romantic aesthetic which sees art as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" and instead it stresses Classical virtues of restraint and control. Ransom neatly registers the congruence between Classicism and true Romantic theory with his reference to "emotion recollected in tranquillity". This emphasis on restraint and coolness has its roots in Ransom's idea of poetry as "knowledge without desire". The poem must be a structure of meaning, which the reader comprehends. In that comprehension the reader may realise an emotional feeling, although that feeling will not be merely a statement of the emotion felt by the writer. Thus, although Ransom allows that a poem may create emotion in its reader or in its writer, and in the notes to his poems "Of Margaret" and "Here Lies a Lady" Ransom records that while writing "tears wetted his cheeks"<sup>11</sup>, he is careful to

explain "But I must add they are fictions": neither reader nor writer should be deluded: any emotion felt stems from the effect of the poem, and not from any emotional event which the poem obliquely relates. The movement from the "warmth" of emotion to the "coolness" of the arrangement of information in the poem, is effected in Ransom's poetry through the imposition of what he calls in The New Criticism "psychic barriers". These barriers, realised as formal restraints between the artist and his work had specific effects when applied to Ransom's mature poetry, which enacts removal in a number of ways. Notably, his poetry's attempt to "lose" strong emotion by moving to an exploration of the "appropriate objects" means that it continually displays strategies of displacement and suppression: the process can be seen in different manifestations, but the impulse towards obliquity and sublimation is always present.

Ransom's prose criticism also stresses the importance of Classical restraint in creating an art which is impersonal. Here Ransom's most important prose statement of impersonality is in an essay ostensibly devoted to John Milton's Lycidas. Published first in May 1933, seven years after Ransom's most productive period as a poet ended, Ransom re-emphasised the importance of "A Poet Nearly Anonymous" by reprinting it as the first chapter in his critical collection The World's Body.

A good poem, even if it is signed with a full and well known name, intends as a work of art to lose the identity of the author: that is, it means to represent him not actualised, like an eye witness testifying in court and held strictly by zealous counsel to the point at issue, but freed from his juridical or prose self and taking an ideal or fictitious personality; otherwise his evidence amounts to less than poetry.<sup>12</sup>

The 'anonymity' of Milton's Lycidas is, for Ransom, its dominant rhetorical feature and the measure of its greatness. That 'anonymity' is the product of the author's willingness to submerge his own experiences within the structural and thematic conventions of the literary form he has chosen. The language which Ransom uses to express this sublimation is noteworthy; he says that the 'man', the active, individual talent, sublimates himself to the 'poet'. The Promethean, impulsive, individual urge submits to the Epimethean, traditional, formal one. He contends that, in Milton, the poetic voice has most authority when it is at its most distant from the experience of

the 'man' Milton.. The poet must accept the literary form and enter it to assume a new 'poetic personality'.<sup>13</sup> Ransom notes that at certain moments the 'man' Milton overcomes the 'poet', moments which are demonstrated by the introduction of ten unrhymed lines into the poem, the intervention of 'Phoebus' and the generic inconsistency between the poem's narrative and lyric elements. At those moments Ransom suggest that Milton "is kinsman"<sup>14</sup> to the modern writer, and that his motivation may have been at best concern for posterity and at worst desire for fame.

The essay also returns to Ransom's distinction between the knowledge of the world afforded by art and the insistent, partial discourse of scientific enquiry.

But the intention of art is one that is peculiarly hard to pursue steadily, because it goes against the grain of our dominant and carefully instructed instincts; it wants us to enjoy life, to taste and reflect as we drink; when we are tending as abstract appetites to gulp it down;<sup>15</sup>

Art then sees a move away from the appetitive towards the erotic. Indeed the terms Ransom uses to discuss the sublimation to tradition reverses the conventional thought; to him submission to tradition is joyous, the superficially fecund alternative is in fact barren;

Poets may go to universities and, if they take to education, increase greatly the stock of ideal selves into which they may pass for the purpose of being poetical. If on the other hand they insist too narrowly on their own identity and their own story, inspired by a simple but mistaken theory of art, they find their little poetic fountains drying up within them.<sup>16</sup>

Ransom's "A Poet Nearly Anonymous" is certainly the most authoritative single statement of Ransom's aesthetic of poetic anonymity. Before exploring the effect which Ransom's doctrine of anonymity had upon his own poetry, it is significant to note that Ransom's essay has also been the subject of an important critique which aimed at stripping away its rhetoric. The critique argues that even whilst arguing the importance of the work of art suppressing the individual character of the (wo)man who creates it, Ransom is, ironically, involved in an act of covert autobiography. Louis Rubin Jr argued in "A Critic Almost Anonymous John Crowe Ransom Goes North" that Ransom's essay is an oblique piece of *self*-criticism. Rubin notes the

points at which Ransom's description of Milton tallies with the biographical details of Ransom's own life:

Like Milton, Ransom was "a man of his times and held strong views upon the contemporary ecclesiastical and political situation, in a period when the church and the political order was undergoing revolution." He too had "a natural inclination to preach, and display his zeal; to preach upon such themes as the reform of the clergy, and the reform of the government," and 'knew of this tendency in himself and opposed it." It can probably be assumed that this son and grandson of Methodist ministers 'went so far as to abandon that career in the church which his father had intended for him and to which he seems at first to have consented'... I am not at all convinced that Ransom's depiction of Milton corresponds to the biographical John Milton, but without a doubt it corresponds to the situation of John Crowe Ransom in the early 1930s.<sup>17</sup>

Rubin makes much play in his essay of the logic which determined much of Ransom's thought, though he glides over what seems to be a logical contradiction in his own argument. Ransom's essay on Lycidas argues that Milton the 'man' is submerged by Milton the 'poet'. Yet Rubin is suggesting that in an essay which wittily demolishes the hubris of those who 'insist too narrowly on their own identity and their own story' Ransom is doing precisely that, by mapping his own biographical story onto that of Milton. Unless we presume that Ransom is unconscious of his critical transference then the logical inconsistency of his practice would surely have pained the man whom Rubin describes as "no-one to leave inconsistencies unresolved, to permit areas of thought within the logical framework to remain unexamined."<sup>18</sup> Rubin is careful however to suggest that Ransom does not see Milton as a simple mirror of his own identity. Rather he states that "in these two essays on John Milton's poetry, Ransom was very actively pondering his own situation."<sup>19</sup> In other words the essay is a way for Ransom to argue through his own experience; it offers a dynamic model for the historical figure Ransom to address his biographical concerns.

Rubin's ingenious analysis offers something of a template for other scholars who have attempted to unlock Ransom's doctrine of anonymity and view key pieces of Ransom's literary criticism as self criticism. In 1989 Keiran Quinlan, discussing

what he sees as Ransom's religious crisis argued that when Ransom described the early intellectual life of Thomas Hardy he was describing himself;

It was in Thomas Hardy, more than any other writer, that Ransom found intellectual and emotional kinship. Hardy, having grown up in an environment not altogether unlike Ransom's expressed religious opinions and doubts that were also similar to his. The last of Ransom's many essays on this poet... depicts him as a modern naturalist wanting to find his God... What ["The Subalterns"] suggests to Ransom is that Hardy represents "the Classical Spirit." From his description of the classical spirit- a description that is couched at several places in phrases that he had earlier applied to himself- one can see that it is also very much his own....etc<sup>20</sup>

Yet a third version of what might be termed a Rubinesque enquiry is provided by William Klein in his article "A Critic Nearly Anomalous"<sup>21</sup> and in his manuscript "The Self as Critic."<sup>22</sup> Klein suggests that it was through a personal engagement with the criticism of T.S.Eliot that Ransom was able to clarify his own critical views and that Ransom's critique of Eliot again offers an oblique self portrait.<sup>23</sup> These various attempts to unlock Ransom's doctrine of classical restraint and anonymity testify both to the ingenuity of Rubin's analysis and to the perplexing power of Ransom's aesthetic.

### **Ransom's Aesthetic of Anonymity**

The doctrine which Ransom developed throughout the 1920s has a clear bearing on his poetry of the same period. If we look at Ransom's career as a poet, from Poems About God, through to the final book of new poems Gentlemen Without Bonds (1927) we can note that whereas the first volume habitually used a first person protagonist and colloquial drama much in the style of Robert Frost with whom Ransom was often compared<sup>24</sup>, it was in the second volume Chills and Fever that Ransom entered the poetic voice which came to be identified with him; cooler, ironic, often using unusual or archaic language and a whole range of distancing effects.

Ransom himself explicitly linked the formal restraint exercised in his poetry with the personal restraint of his strong emotions: Writing about his Fugitive poetry



toward the end of his life he declared:

During the Fugitive days of my fourth decade I was at great pains to suppress my feelings in what I wrote. I was both sensitive and sentimental as a boy; and I did not like that boyishness in my adult poems.<sup>25</sup>

Ransom had felt that his first volume of Poems, Poems About God had been too unguarded and had revealed an embarrassing amount of feeling. Interestingly for our purposes, that volume includes a large number of poems centred on the "I" voice. Since Ransom effectively suppressed the book, never including any of its poems in his various Selected Poems, many of his readers encounter his work first through his second volume Chills and Fever. This volume begins with a poem which firmly announced a new emotional and formal restraint. It was called "Agitato ma non Troppo"; "I am moved but not too much."

The poem begins by rehearsing the manifestations of Romantic agony:

I have a grief

(It was not stolen like a thief)

Albeit I have no bitterness by the lake

To cry it up and down the brake.

None there hath been like Dante's fury

When Beatrice was given him to bury;

Except, when the young heart was hit, you know

How Percy Shelley's reed sang tremolo.

The witty response in the second line, which undercuts the declaration of the first, is an indication that the poet rejects the Romantic manifestations of strong emotion. It also indicated to the reader who knew Ransom's Poems About God, that the poet now knew how to write a line which made its point lightly and with a sardonic elegance.

“Agitato ma non troppo” declared in its final stanza:

I will be brief,  
Assuredly I have a grief  
And I am shaken; but not as a leaf.<sup>26</sup>

And since the poem stood at the beginning of the book, it delineated the volume's terms of emotional and aesthetic control. This form of strong poetic declaration was a style which Ransom had also used in the first issue of the Fugitive which began with the poem “Ego”, serving to give notice of the poet's solidarity with the “seven of friends” who made up the Fugitive group<sup>27</sup>. Here it serves as an appropriate declaration of the poet's new style, since Chills and Fever was the first volume to contain poems written in what Tate termed Ransom's mature style with its formal rhythms, its protagonists who observed rather than displayed conflict, and its occasional archaisms. Many years later in the final edition of his Selected Poems, Ransom introduced a further distancing effect: the poem was no longer introduced by the “I” voice; instead it was framed by a new stanza:

This is what the man said,  
Insisting, standing on his head.<sup>28</sup>

which de-centres the poem from any idea that its central declaration might be a statement of poetic intent; now the “I” voice is a “man” who stands on his head, perversely at odds with the temper of his time.

This version of the poem recalls Robert Graves' statement about Ransom's poetry:

Mr Ransom...leans towards the sentimental tradition of irony. He insists upon the wit of his reader; he makes an appeal which it is impossible the reader shall overlook: if the reader be slow in discovering the poet's clownishness, the poet forces his clownishness in a way that the reader can not mistake.<sup>29</sup>

Ironically the final version of the poem, de-centred from the "I" voice reads now less like a philosophical declaration, and more like a personal one. The new fourth stanza:

They say, "He puts a fix upon his mind,  
And hears at bedside, or in the moaning wind  
The rumor of Death; yet he can't mount one tear  
But stalks with holy calm beside the terrible bier."<sup>30</sup>

implies less a restraint of poetic utterance than a dramatic demonstration of the stoic temper. Oddly too, the effect is to lessen, not heighten the seriousness of the verse; the "clownishness" which Graves identifies problematises any direct statement. In its first version however, the poem clearly relates to the poems which follow, and to the poetic voice which will present them.

Ironically, given Ransom's insistence at the time that "Agitato Ma non Troppo" was concerned with formal restraint in poetry, Ransom's fellow Fugitives quickly concluded that the poem betokened both a restrained poetic and an intense personal control. Ransom complained in a letter to Tate:

Really it's a pretty barren thing of course; nothing at all by itself, and intended almost entirely to get its significance from its context when placed in a volume of dispassionate minors if I may so describe my volume- a statement of literary faith. The boys however agreed in taking it as the gospel truth story of a great sorrow about which I chose not to be communicative.<sup>31</sup>

In one respect however, the Fugitives' confusion was exemplary. Ransom's strong formal control and aesthetic of anonymity sometimes creates a confusion in the minds of critics' between what is a personal and what a poetic declaration. In the American edition of The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry edited by Richard Ellman and Robert O'Clair the introduction to Ransom's verse notes: "His poem

'Philomela' describes how, 'pernocking' once with Oxford students in Bagley Wood, he heard a nightingale's song and was unimpressed.' In fact as the importance of 'Agitato Ma Non Troppo' in Chills and Fever was emphasised by its placement as the first poem in the collection, so the importance of 'Philomela' is emphasised by its placement last in the book. Although the poem has as its protagonist a Ransom-like figure, the poem draws a contrast between the classical heritage of European culture and the democratic quality of American life. The roots of European culture are represented here through the myth of Philomela who was raped by barbarous king Tereseus who cut out her tongue, but was transformed by the Gods into a nightingale. Ironically the myth itself might have served as a warning to the poem's over-literal critics; the nightingale's beautiful song displays a disjunction between appearance and reality, since its beauty does not disclose the private horror which provokes it.

To England came Philomela with her pain,  
Fleeing the hawk her husband; querulous ghost,  
She wanders when he sits heavy on his roost,  
Utters herself in the original again,  
The untranslatable refrain.

Not to these shores she came! this other Thrace,  
Environ Barbarous to the royal Attic;  
How could her delicate dirge run democratic,  
Delivered in a cloudless boundless public place  
To an inordinate race.

I pernocked with the Oxford students once,  
And in the quadrangles, in the cloisters, on the Cher,  
Precociously knocked on antique doors ajar,  
Fatuously touched the hems of the heirophants,  
Sick of my dissonance.<sup>32</sup>

If this poem had been included in Ransom's first collection, the cultural 'dissonance' would have been centred purely within the narrator and would have manifested itself in his own confusion; instead, in common with most of Ransom's later poems, the protagonist is an observer and interpreter of events. Later in the same poem the narrator states:

Up from the darkest wood where Philomela sat,  
Her fairy numbers issued. What then ailed me?  
My ears are called capacious but they failed me,  
Her classics registered a little flat!  
I rose, and venomously spat.<sup>33</sup>

Although again that 'venomously spat' may recall the language of Poems About God these later verses avoid the earlier book's characteristic strategies. Here the protagonist is made to note, rather than embody the cultural conflict. The poem argues that European culture finds an inhospitable environment in the "boundless public place" which is modern America. Whilst in the hands of many modern American writers, like William Carlos Williams perhaps, this perception would be a cause for celebration, in "Philomela" Ransom despairs that "the bantering breed, sophisticated and swarthy" of his countrymen are unworthy of the nightingale's song. Despite the conclusion of the editors of The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry the occasional presence in Chills and Fever of a poem in the "I" voice does not betoken a purely autobiographical poem..

"Philomela" used a protagonist who had shared some of Ransom's own personal experiences but was able to note the cultural schism which was the poem's true theme. Sometimes, in common with Ransom's aim of producing a poetry of emotional restraint his poetry attempts to internally displace its emotion using other devices. This process can be seen in Ransom's "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter". This poem is a lyric devoted to the subject of the death of a child, in which the child's immobility is contrasted with its great vitality when alive: the

vision of the child in death is blotted out by a vivid memory of the child in life. In fact the death is seen somewhat as another game:

There was such speed in her little body,  
And such lightness in her footfall,  
It is no wonder her brown study  
Astonishes us all.<sup>34</sup>

In his poetry Ransom is often concerned with children, partly because his habitual theme of the conflict between the ideal and the real can be effectively displayed through the contrast of childish innocence and worldly experience. Accordingly, the children in Ransom's poems are often shown in transformation, either to knowledge or, often, to death and that sense of transformation is often conveyed by a narrative voice which seems older and wiser and is saddened but not surprised by the change. The image of the girl now lying dead in this poem is contrasted with a dreamlike vision of the child chasing geese in the yard:

The lazy geese, like a snow cloud  
Dripping their snow on the green grass  
Tricking and stopping, sleepy and proud,  
Who cried in goose, Alas,

For the tireless heart within the little  
Lady with rod that made them rise  
From their noon apple-dreams and scuttle  
Goose-fashion under the skies!<sup>35</sup>

This poem is of interest because a de-centring is its major strategy; rather than contemplate the death directly, the image of the lively pursuit arises in the narrator's mind, as if in a daydream or vision, which we remember was one of Ransom's "images" which might recover the real world. That the substitution of the day-dream for the direct scene does not seem forced or trite relies upon the dreamlike quality not only of the memory of the child in life, but of the whole scene of death. The observers are "astonished" and "stopped" by what has happened; their amazement

facilitates the transition: the death also seems unreal, not just the dream. Here the formal effect is explained by the "argument", rather than the other way around; the narrator recalls the girl's liveliness because of the shocking contrast with her current state. Also, the vision is a form of consolation, filling the astonished mind of the narrator with an image which is simultaneously more and less understandable than the one in front of him. It was in response to the strategy of this poem that Yvor Winters wrote:

the little girl is treated whimsically, as if she were merely a charming piece of bric a brac, and the life of the poem resides in a memory of the little girl driving geese. The memory, as a matter of fact, is very fine, but if the little corpse is merely an occasion for it, the little corpse were better omitted, for once in the poem it demands more serious treatment: the dead child becomes a playful joke, and the geese walk off with the poem.<sup>36</sup>

Miller Williams, one of Ransom's critics responded:

I am at a loss for a reply to any reader who fails to see that the power and the pathos of the scene, the awful reality of the child's death, all live in the geese, the silly, white geese, and that this is consistent with the classical eye that Ransom casts on death.<sup>37</sup>

There are a number of things to note about the complaint and its response, firstly Winters' use of an uncomfortable pun which Williams unconsciously adopts; the "life" of the poem does indeed reside in the geese. Crucially Williams' response does not refute the complaint of "displacement", it merely rehabilitates it; for Williams the strategy of the poem may be displacement, but that does not necessarily demonstrate that the poem is callous or thoughtless. He might almost have gone on to echo Ransom that the perceptual displacement is a moving away from the unbearable warmth of passion to the coolness of contemplation. Williams' reference to Ransom's "Classical" eye is also appropriate and suggestive: the children in these poems are sentimental if at all, not in the Romantic sense that their vulnerable innocence is celebrated, but in the fact that in Ransom's poems they never stay innocent for long, mostly because of the intervention of death, either their own, or, as in the case of a poem like "Janet Waking" because of the death of a loved other.<sup>38</sup>

"Janet Waking" is another poem which displays the didactic purpose that death serves in Ransom's poetry. In this case what follows from it is socialisation, and it is

comb marks the girl's transition of the girl from 'innocence' to 'knowledge':

So there was Janet  
Kneeling on the wet grass, crying her brown hen  
(Translated far beyond the daughters of men)  
To rise and walk upon it.

And weeping fast as she had breath  
Janet implored us, "Wake her from her sleep!"  
And would not be instructed how deep  
Was the forgetful kingdom of death.<sup>41</sup>

The child's initiation away from the female world of her self, her mother and the hen, is occasioned by the death of one of the parts of her female world, which in turn occasions the death of her girlhood. In appealing to 'us' for solace at the end she marks the beginning of her socialisation into a wider world. The ironically minded male narrator seems to shake his head at the end of the poem with an air of 'she'll learn'. The narrator here is an anonymous representative of the world of male rationality and the poem suggests that accession to this rational world is 'natural', the result of the inevitable loss of childish 'innocence'. In that respect, male rationality is shown to be an absolutist order, literally part of the natural scheme of existence. The poem is kept from bathos in its description of the girl and the hen only by the variety of tone and irony of language; this variety keeps a tension between the micro and macrocosmic worlds

In another poem which combines a child protagonist and an encounter with death the child does not accede to a world of rationality, but in death gains for the first time its full status as a member of its family. 'Dead Boy' recalls the fact that the reader who recommended John Crowe Ransom's early poems to his publisher was Robert Frost. This is a very Frostian poem, from its resigned, seemingly placid, yet in

fact troubled narration, to the imagery;

The little cousin is dead, by foul subtraction,  
A green bough from Virginia's aged tree,  
And none of the country kin like the transaction,  
Nor some of the world of outer dark like me.<sup>42</sup>

This idea of the 'transaction' between death and life recalls Frost particularly; but the 'transaction' means more, it is also a transaction of life for familial acceptance. In life the child was considered unfit by the judgmental narrator to be part of the family;

A pig with a pasty face, so I had said,  
Squealing for cookies, kinned by poor pretense  
With a noble house. But the little man quite dead,  
I see the forbears' antique lineaments.<sup>43</sup>

In death the child, transformed now to a 'little man' reveals his kinship with the family. His death also causes the remaining family to cohere; the image used at the end of the poem is unitary;

But this was the old tree's late branch wrenched away,  
Grieving the sapless limbs, the shorn and shaken.<sup>44</sup>

and though a cliché, the family tree is reinvigorated in the imagery here, as it is in the argument of the poem. The narrator of "Dead Boy" like that of "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" is anonymous, and almost seems part of a neighbourly chorus, someone not so closely related to the death that his grief can be simple, but instead weighing the death's meaning in his mind, and seeing the issue in a wider context. The family in these poems, though failing, is afforded an authority from which it is hard to escape; even death cannot allow it. In that it may resemble Southern Society, which before now has been referred to as a "Family Romance"<sup>45</sup>,

and in support of this connection between family and region we can note the reference in the first stanza of this poem to 'Virginia's aged tree', which collapses images of the family tree with the natural connection of family and land.

As was indicated above, in "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" Ransom de-centres the poem by making the geese represent all the loss of the child. In yet a further displacement strategy, Ransom sometimes refers to characters as animals, or fully transforms his characters into animals: in the poem "Prelude to an Evening" which will be examined below, the protagonist is a "tired wolf" in the first stanza, and the poem "Crocodile" sustains its transformation throughout the poem. The Crocodile of the title is shown living the life of an adventurous expatriate American. His characterisation recalls the adventuring Davy Crockett who was "half horse half alligator". The poem is interesting because it can so clearly be read as a commentary from a writer whose career was, at the time of his writing centripetal, returning to the ambit of his birth, upon the type of travelling which he had experienced in his youth. The Crocodile protagonist visits the haunts of the bohemian American expatriate:

This is the Rive Gauche, here's the Hotel Crillon<sup>46</sup>

and on his trip the Crocodile replays many of Ransom's own European experiences. He addresses the Oxford Union, as Ransom did. He displays a more prurient version of Ransom's interest in Freud as he:

... meditates the obscene complexes  
And infinite involutions of the sexes,  
Crocodile could be a psychoanalyst.

He even seems, by way of a macabre pun, to touch upon Ransom's experiences in

France during the First World War:

Where are the brave poilus? They are slain by his French.  
And suddenly he cries, I want to see a trench!

Throughout, however, the poem makes comedic play with the Crocodile's unfitness for the world he visits. Like the Crocodile who here wears grey spats, and puts up his umbrella, the expatriate, the poem says, is an unnatural thing, divorced from his rightful life. The verse worries at the dislocation:

It is too too possible that he has wandered far  
From the simple centre of his rugged nature.  
I wonder, says he, if I am the kind of creature  
To live by projects, travels, affairs du coeur?

The cosmopolitan demeanour is revealed as a sham, and the essential amphibious nature of the crocodile which the poem always declares, making his various disguises comedic, overpowers the "delusion" that the Crocodile is anything other than a Crocodile. More, the departure from the Crocodile's home is seen, in what is by now a favourite Ransom image, as an assault upon the tree, which stands here not just for the family, but the generative, slow organic nature of society:

But who would ever have thought it took such strength  
To whittle the tree of being to its points  
While the deep-sea urge cries Largo, and all the joints  
Tingle with gross desire of lying at length.

where it is clear that the surrender to the relaxation of "lying at length" is a relief after all the "lying" of the protagonist, which has been sustained "at length" and for far too long. The argument is witty but, if read more seriously as a comment on

Ransom's own experience, argues that the cosmopolitan life is a strain for the native born, and that the powerful attractions exercised by one's roots always reassert themselves over a life of mere intellectual and physical travel.

This poem also describes a movement at the heart of Ransom's experience. Self-realisation as a writer came for him not in the travel which was so important as a source of new material and new perspectives for many Cosmopolitan American Modernist writers, but in the return from Europe after the First World War to the part of the United States which could fairly be termed "home". For Ransom however return was not comforting. It allowed him to apply many of the philosophical concerns which he had developed at Oxford and Nancy to the physical world which he knew so well. In this poem, travel, with its pretensions of broadening the mind, is shown as a delusion. At the end of the poem the crocodile returns and:

...lies with his fathers, and with his mothers too,  
and his brothers and sisters as it seems right to do;  
The family religion is good enough for him.

Though the poem almost defeats its own rhetoric, for the image of lying with one's fathers and mothers in an area bounded by its acceptance of the family religion recalls burial, not life. This poem deals then with two sorts of displacement, both highly rhetorical. The first is the physical and cultural displacement of the Crocodile protagonist, the second, set up to undercut the first, displaces what may be Ransom's own experience into that of a Crocodile for satiric purposes. The dislocation and displacement here is not just the displacement of the traveller and the displacement into an animal figure though: the tone of the poem is witty, polished, "disinterested", and displaced from naturalistic discourse.

Another interesting, and at moments arrestingly lyrical poem which enacts a

displacement into an animal is the poem "Prelude to an Evening" which begins:

Do not enforce the tired wolf  
Dragging his infected wound homeward  
To sit tonight with the warm children  
Naming the pretty kings of France.<sup>47</sup>

Ransom's gloss on this poem was interesting in that it stressed the essentially domestic subject of the poem:

Here is a man returning in the evening from his worldly occupation to his own household. He has had plenty of encounters with the world's evils, and his imagination is immoderate and wayward; it has blown the evils up, till now he manages to be attended habitually by a vague but overwhelming impression of metaphysical powers arrayed against him: The poem is the man's soliloquy as he approaches his house.<sup>48</sup>

For Ransom, the image of the wolf is a heroic metaphor, which stresses something of the feelings of the man, and his sense of wounded pride. It is in short a comic exaggeration. But the figure of the wolf is itself frightening in the fairy tale manner, and though the poem quickly rehabilitates the threatening image, the "warm children" seen in the first stanza might be imagined by the reader struck by the lupine image and the fairy tale tone, to have just come out of the oven.

This displacement into the animal form, with its threatening implication is not a technical failure though, for the poem continues to vary rather limpid domestic

images with an air of threat. Thus:

All day the clock will metronome  
Your gallant fear; the needles clicking,  
The heels detonating the stairs cavern.

Freshening the water in the blue bowls  
For the buckberries with not all your love,  
You shall be listening for the low wind,  
The warning sibilance of pines.

Which combines the strikingly exact imagery of the clicking needles and the feet on the stairs with an air of expectant threat, which is resolved finally in the poem in a small vision of domestic happiness. The poem represents Ransom's ability to transform the particular and the domestic into the universal without narrative strain.

### **Formalist and Non-Formalist Readings of Ransom's Poetry**

Unsurprisingly perhaps, given the strength of Ransom's arguments for formal restraint in poetry, and his emphasis on the formal aspects of the poet's craft, most critics have chosen to read Ransom's poetry using an essentially formalist literary criticism. Karl F. Knight for example describes his approach in The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom as a close analysis of the:

three distinct but related levels of the use of language... The first level is that of diction in general; the second that of figurative language, with particular attention to the metaphor, Ransom's favourite trope; and the third that of symbol.<sup>49</sup>

Robert Buffington straightforwardly describes his technique in The Equilibrist as "the simple one of considering the best poems one by one, few of which have received close readings."<sup>50</sup> Thornton H. Parsons makes explicit what is in other formalist critics an undeclared premise when he cites Ransom's formalist methods as

the justification for his own:

...I believe that an austere restriction to formal analysis and evaluation of the poems is quite consistent with Ransom's own rigorous esthetic [sic] principles, and especially with his critical ideal of the poet's anonymity.<sup>51</sup>

Thus Ransom's own formalism in turn sanctioned the formalist analyses of his own poetry. In the formalist criticism of Ransom's verse, one of the key terms is Irony. For Ransom, ironic distance becomes an aesthetic tool which preserved the distance of the narrator from the action being described. It also becomes the central term in the vocabulary of those critics who have attempted a purely formalist reading of Ransom's work.

Karl F. Knight notes:

an ironic attitude in poetry results in the recognition of at least two and perhaps more opposing elements in a given situation. Irony in this sense is a device for inclusiveness and restraint. The ironist sees the co-existence of oppositions in his subject, and he refuses to simplify the situation or his attitude towards it...this kind of irony is more than a literary device; it is a philosophical viewpoint - dualism.<sup>52</sup>

Ransom himself indicated that irony was more than simply a formal effect. One of the most interesting influences on Ransom's aesthetic comes from Freud. Ransom was one of the first critics in America to review the translations of Freud which were becoming available in the 1920s, but Ransom's reading of Freud confirmed his own temperamental and aesthetic bias when he notes that Freud was an ironist, and articulates the condition of being an ironist as "to be aware, sharply and grimly, but not too painfully, of the constant involvement of life with death."<sup>53</sup> Ransom's reading of Freud should be noted as an indication of his tendency to read philosophy in a way which confirmed his own interests and convictions. The sanction which Ransom took from his reading of Freud is clear in the irony of his poetry, which through a formal duality expresses something of the bitter-sweet combination of sorrow and pleasure which Ransom saw in Freud's work.

Although formalist readings of Ransom make something of a fetish of the notion of irony, there is a simple reason for the predominantly formalist bias to Ransom criticism; Ransom's poetry, with its close attention to tone, is peculiarly rewarding to

formalist readings, as many of the essentially formalist readings above indicate. Certain of Ransom's poems however do not divulge their full meaning to formalist analysis and a few actively resist a merely formalist approach. Consider the cases of "Agitato Ma Non Troppo" and "Philomela." As was indicated above, the two poems derive much of their meaning from their place in the volume which contains them, and their relationship to the volume which preceded them; "Agitato Ma Non Troppo" depends upon this knowledge because it introduces the collection with an effective declaration that the poems it contains will be very different from those contained in the first volume, "Philomela" because it makes a declaration about the appropriate relationship between a poetic and the culture which generates it. To draw the full meaning from these two poems the formalist critic should also have a sense of the dynamic relationship between the individual poems in a poetic collection, and a sense of the collection's relationship to the author's previous work. These very concerns are often rejected by strict formalist analyses of the single poem.

These two examples may seem to pose only minor problems for the formalist critic. In the case of the poem "First Travels of Max" however, formalist analysis fails entirely to penetrate the meaning of the poem. "First Travels of Max" appears to be a fairy-tale in which a young boy journeys into a wood, encounters a frightening witch and returns home. Thornton Parsons said of it:

It is a curiously abortive poem, probably meant to be a dramatization of the evil that lies in wait for an innocent child. Reading it is a frustrating experience though, because the meticulously prepared atmosphere has no significant action or illumination to justify it.<sup>54</sup>

Vivienne Koch declared:

Max travels the downward path to wisdom through a "degenerate" forest where he meets an obscene Red Witch, whose evil nature is somewhat arbitrarily symbolised by a "wide bosom yellow as butter". The atmosphere of an obscure but immanent evil is adroitly built up, but the purpose for it never becomes clear.<sup>55</sup>

Behind the fairy tale narrative of this poem there is an issue of much more contemporary, Southern relevance. Accordingly, a non formalist reading recovers a specific narrative from within the disguise of an archetypal tale.

The first stanza of the poem rehearses ideas of dynastic decline.

In that old house of many generations  
The best of the Van Vroomans was the youngest.<sup>56</sup>

These introductory lines don't just praise the child, in a traditional fairy tale manner ('the king's favourite/finest daughter') but invoke the notion of the decaying family, which is offered the possibility of redemption through the character of the youngest child. The male child enacts an Oedipal rebellion by striking his maid, who occupies the place of the parents, and this infantile non serviam results, as in traditional fairy tale, in a journey through the Jungian forest. There he encounters a sexually threatening 'witch', flees from the encounter and returns home. The final stanza describes Max 'more firmly domiciliated'.<sup>57</sup> At one level the poem seems to be particularly susceptible to an analysis rather like one of Bruno Bettelheim's expositions of fairy tale<sup>58</sup>; it is didactic sexual fable, a narrative of male sexual fear, which leads to an adult engagement with the social world. The fabular style of the narrative can never be apolitical though; it is a device which in the hands of writers from sophisticated societies is politically laden, in that it attempts to wield the power of archetype to suggest that the specific narrative it wishes to tell is a basic human building block, a myth which, normally part of 'primitive' society, still underlies the sophisticated motives of the present. This poem is a skilful negotiation of far more interesting and contemporary issues. Take the stated decline of the family in the first stanza. In this poem it is less an irresistible decline, than one which may be redeemed by the protagonist. Moreover the decline is premised on a specific conflict which the narrative discloses.

To start at the centre of the poem, and to work out from it: The witch;

There in the middle of the wood was the Red Witch.  
Max half expected her. He never imagined  
A witch's house that would be red and dirty,  
Or a witch's bosom wide and yellow as butter,  
Or one that combed so many obscene things  
From her black hair into her scarlet lap;

From the catalogue of sexual disgust, take the 'bosom wide and yellow as butter.' In one sense this plays on the notion of the milk white breast which has curdled, but the notion of the young Southern boy journeying into a wood for a charged encounter with a mysterious woman brings up more particular images. In her book Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens, Louise Westling draws together various strands of Southern sociology and reportage to discuss "The Blight of Southern Womanhood". She recounts an extract from Lucius Verus Bierce's journal of a walking tour of the South in the 1820's:

The vices (of the southern population) are drunkenness, indolence, and among all classes of males, an indiscriminate connexion with the female negroes. This evil has extended so far that more than one half of the slave population are mixed with the whites.<sup>59</sup>

She quotes the sociologist John Dollard, writing in 1937 of the social and sexual behaviour of an anonymous Southern town:

It seems possible that the image of the white woman is in part conserved against sexual thought and allusions, whereas the Negro woman tends to draw the full burden of unsublimated sexual feeling.<sup>60</sup>

Westling concludes; "Thus many Southern boys began their sexual experience with

black girls...”<sup>61</sup> Note too the dominant image clusters used to describe the forest;

The black tarn rose up almost in his face.  
It was as black and sudden as the pit  
The Adversary digs in the bowels of the earth;  
Bubbles were on it, breath of the black beast  
(Formed like a spider, white bag for entrails)  
Who took that sort of blackness to inhabit etc

In the forest section of the poem, which comprises forty-nine lines, there are a dozen references to 'black', either directly, or in combination with 'dark' or 'dirty' or in contrast with 'light' or 'white'. The centre of 'darkness' is also the centre of a specifically sexual threat.

One of the most striking images, and one which collapses the racial/colour element together with the imagery of sexual threat is the 'white bag for entrails' which the spider (is it a black widow, which eats its mate?) carries. This stands as an appropriate image of young 'white' male sexual vulnerability, in the face of an unknowable, 'black' sexual threat. In this context, the witch's 'off white' bosom is just that; she is a mythologised, stigmatised black woman.

The now racialised witch's comments become relevant to the ancient family of the first stanza that the child has the chance to redeem; “Littlest and last Van Vrooman, do you come too?/She knew him, it appeared, would know him better,”<sup>62</sup> . The “witch” “knows” the family, or at least perhaps the male members of it, and would “know” the boy sexually too. He rejects the sexual opportunity, though the language of the poem, as if to state how near he was to succumbing, toys with the language of

the sexual act then quickly rejects it;

Certainly Max had come, but he was going;<sup>63</sup>

The boy returns home. The final stanza of the poem, it is important to note, does not follow on directly. The house is transformed;

A great house is Van Vrooman, a green slope  
South to the sun do the great ones inhabit,  
And a few children play on the lawn with the nurse  
Max has returned to his play, and you may find him,  
His famous curls unsmoothed, if you will call  
Where the Van Vroomans live; the tribe Van Vrooman  
Live there at least when they are at home.<sup>64</sup>

The "house" both manor building and family itself, are now "great", the boy is grown into a man, his curls unsmoothed by age, the new children play with the anonymous nurse, not Max's nurse old Katy. The final stanza then looks upon the transformation of the family's fortunes, and accordingly, the narrative voice becomes the voice of the local society; noting the progress of a prodigal son with pleasure, noting perhaps pointedly, the family transformed.

The trajectory of the poem then is as follows: the boy, youngest of a decaying family, rebels and enters the wood, where, rejecting the sexually threatening "witch" who has "known" his family, he returns home, and, in the final stanza restores his family's fortunes. This analysis of the poem reveals its use of the Southern ideological fear of miscegenation, here shown as the explanation for the decaying family, and correspondingly, for the successful family that Max is able to set up after he rejects the "dark" sexual threat of the witch. Ransom's comment on the depth of the fear of miscegenation in Southern culture is to cast it as an archetypal narrative. In this way through the "anonymous" form of the fairy tale, which we tend to think of as literally anonymous, part of an oral or folk tradition, Ransom engages with crucial Southern Narratives and transforms them into myth. Crucially, as the

extracts cited above indicate, formalist readings of this poem fail to uncover the disguised narrative and miss the point entirely.

Periodically, during Ransom's life some critics would attempt to provide non-formalist readings of his poems. One of the more eccentric of such readings is included in an unpublished letter from Kenneth Burke to Ransom dated August 17<sup>th</sup> 1962. Ransom had sent Burke his revision of "Conrad sits in Twilight" first published in the Fugitive in 1924. Ransom titled the new version of the poem "Master's in the Garden Again". Burke reads the poem according to the theory of "symbolic action" which he had presented in The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action. There he wrote:

...suppose that a writer has piled up a considerable body of work; and upon inspecting the lot, we find that there has been great selectivity in his adoption of dramatic roles... This... puts us on the track of the ways in which his selection of role is a "symbolic act." He is like a man with a tic, who spasmodically blinks his eyes when certain subjects are mentioned. If you kept a list of these subjects, noting what was said each time he spasmodically blinked his eyes, you would find out what the tic was "symbolic" of.<sup>65</sup>

In the letter to Ransom, Burke attempts to analyse the new poem by stressing the connotative psychological meanings inherent in its language. He begins by praising Ransom's poem, though for unusual reasons:

I think I can see why you should lay such store by the poem. It condenses quite a bit of psychic bookkeeping, yet within the rules of form...<sup>66</sup>

Burke then proposes a vision of the poem as highly personal; in the process he demonstrates an analytical technique which in its emphasis on individual expression and idiosyncratic formulation is almost the exact opposite of Ransom's own aesthetic:

I have always taken it for granted that any good poem is a doodle in that, like a Rohrschach test, it reveals, however enigmatically, the basic lines of the poet's own personal motivations.

Further, Burke attempts to follow through the connotative meaning disclosed by the

language in Ransom's poem:

Of course, you'd be disgrunt [sic] with me for saying that, where you speak of death, I read, "no defection" as "defecation." (Why not, if those feet that "must tread barefooted the dim lawn" are now "dripping in muck"?)

... In sum, the poet would be alone with his particular motives, as qualified by the conjugate and his age (the defective garden) Poetry can be either secularized religion (prayer) or grown up playfulness - and here the "thinker" opts for the latter.

In short, Burke maintains that Ransom's rewriting of the poem is an attempt to articulate his feelings about growing old, and his rejections of religious belief. Unfortunately Ransom's response to Burke's eclectic interpretation has been lost. Burke's analysis however should stand as a small indication that not all criticism of Ransom's poetry has been purely formalist, and that non-formalist criticism can open the poetry to an array of possible meanings which formalism may overlook, discard or reject.

### **Ransom's Poetic Revisions**

Ransom's systematic revision of his poetry was marked throughout his career. As is clear from the last chapter, Ransom was amending many of the Poems About God until almost the last minute before publication. When he chose to allow Robert Graves to republish some of the poems in Poems About God in the British collection Grace Before Meat he made syntactical alterations to many of them. In between publication in the Fugitive and collection in book form Ransom made changes to many of his poems and when individual poems from the single collections were included in the various Selected Poems many were altered at that stage. Finally in his last years Ransom devoted himself to the extensive revision of many of his best known and loved poems for inclusion in the final Selected Poems of 1969. Most critics judge these revisions purely in terms of whether the revised syntactical arrangement makes the poem more effective than it was in its previous form. They see these early alterations as mere tinkering, demonstrations of a kind of perfectionism, and the later extensive changes as demonstrations of a disastrous decline in judgement. Ransom's persistent revisions are in fact a logical development of the aesthetic he developed during the 1920s.

Ransom's poetry as indicated above, displayed internal displacement strategies with the aim of formally distancing the emotional centre of the poem from both writer and reader. Ransom's insistent strategy of editing his poetry while it was in print displayed a different kind of aesthetic distancing. Given that Ransom's major poetic phase ended around 1927 and that he was still revising his poems in 1968 for the final edition of the Selected Poems, we might posit that, as the purely creative faculties of the poet had stopped writing new verse, the critical and editorial faculties were being applied, constraining and reforming the work which had already been done. The individual stages can never be marked clearly, but in thinking about Ransom's original poems, and the effect which subsequent editing had upon them it may help to note the movement from the original desire to write, through various stages of poetic formulation, to the application of a critical intelligence to a poem which exists as a written object, at a point when the original desire to write, and the original conception of the poem may have been forgotten. The various editions of Ransom's Selected Poems contain changes to poetry originally published four decades before: by that point the poem has certainly become so well known to the poet that his attitude to it may have changed utterly.

The repeated revision of old poems, and the consequent distancing of the writer from the experience which first prompted the poem to be written, can be seen not so much as a perfectionist's worrying over local effects as a positive desire to get further and further away from the emotional events which prompted the poem. In Ransom's own words the impulse is to "lose" the experience in "exploring the appropriate objects". That this continual distancing from the original inspiration of a poem will, in Ransom's philosophy occasion a return to the real world, is an unresolved paradox which arises out of Ransom's aesthetic. Ransom himself said of the revision of "Master's in the Garden Again" that the final version was "two degrees removed from the original".<sup>67</sup>In a meaningful sense, the intention in revising all of his poetry is to remove the poem from its original by two or more degrees.

One particularly striking example occurs in the poem "Miriam Tazewell". The poem was first published in the 1924 edition of Chills and Fever: It is important first

to look at how the poem functions in its original form, then to examine how subsequent editing altered its meaning. The poem as it was first published might be seen, bearing Ransom's views of nature in mind, as being a cautionary tale about a woman who accepts the pathetic fallacy; she personalises a weather condition and believes that she is persecuted by it. Is the poem though purely about the delusion of its central character? One of the key features of the poem is its mock-heroic disproportion. Critics of Ransom have tended to see that disproportion in the reaction of the spinster protagonist to the storm, and explained it by turning their focus onto the protagonist; thus Miller Williams writes:

she (Miriam) is a neurotic woman with whom Ransom brings us...to empathise<sup>68</sup>

whereas in fact the imbalance and disproportion of the poem is structural as much as thematic. What seems to happen is that the central argument of the poem is put under pressure by certain insistent formal effects, notably strong line endings. Thus in the third stanza, the line endings serve as a succession of shocks:

After the storm she went forth with skirts kilted  
To see in the strong sun her lawn deflowered,  
Her tulip, iris, peony strung and pelted,  
Pots of geranium spilled and the stalks naked.

The strong "ed" endings, with their repeated rhyming give the relentless quality. But if the reaction of the protagonist to the weather seems unwarranted, we can turn again to strong line endings in stanza four to provide the reason for the extremity of

the reaction:

The spring transpired in that year with no flowers,  
But the regular stars went busily on their courses,  
Suppers and cards were calendared, and some bridals,  
And the birds demurely sang in the bitten poplars.<sup>69</sup>

That "bridals", where the emphasis of the word at the line end is offset by its position within the list "Suppers and cards," and its casual "some" seems to have a central importance. If the forceful line endings represent the forceful effect upon the protagonist of the natural event, the "bridals" falls into that category, and, if we were hoping to apply psychology to the protagonist, much of the force of the storm would rely on Miriam Tazewell's spinster-hood.<sup>70</sup> Thus the argument of the poem seems redeemed from merely stating the over-reaction of the protagonist by the very strength of the poem's formal effects. If the poem is imbalanced, then paradoxically, that imbalance creates the meaning of the poem. Not surprisingly, weakening the formal effects would radically alter the meaning of the poem.

Ransom revised this poem for inclusion in the 1945, 1963 and 1969 editions of his Selected Poems. In the revision for the 1963 version the rape image is played down, much of the masculine imagery is removed, some of the line endings are softened and the poem loses its quality of arch disproportion. It becomes as a result conventional, unpressurised, more harmonious and less successful, and for the 1969 edition of the Selected Poems, the masculine imagery is restored, with an amendment to the final stanza which combines elements of both the original poem and an alteration introduced into the 1945 edition:

To Miriam Tazewell the whole world was villain,  
The principle of the beast was low and masculine,  
And not to unstop her own storm and be maudlin,  
For weeks she went untidy, she went sullen.<sup>71</sup>

The new final stanza emphasises the perversity of the protagonist by the convoluted usage "not to unstop" which suggests the awkwardness of her behaviour, and the ease which it would be to give it up. What these amendments show is the poem moving in and out of focus, its meaning being pushed more or less onto the character of the protagonist by variations in the formal effects. That effect may be due to the writer's perception of the poem as a formal object, and the continual rewriting and editing of it as such, so that the original impulse which led to it being written is forgotten. In fact the poem works when it works because of the disproportion between its argument and its formal effects, between what Ransom called "structure" and "texture".

The astonishing lengths to which Ransom's revisions could go can also be seen in a poem which is revised into no fewer than fourteen distinct versions, and which, in the process changes its name three times. Originally published in the Fugitive in 1924 as "Tom, Tom the Pipers Son", it has its final incarnation forty five years later in the Selected Poems of 1969, as "The Vanity of the Bright Boys", having been called "The Vanity of the Bright Young Men" in the Selected Poems of 1963. The original poem was a picaresque in the first person, telling a story of fruitless travel in a fairy tale mode. In the process of its revision into a third person poem about the fruitless quest of a scholar who felt that he had "lost a kingdom somewhere", the poem is shorn, at the very last moment, of its "I" voice, though in a fascinating way. The revision of the poem just before its final publication as "The Vanity of the Bright Boys" was identical to the final form except for one detail; whereas the poem would appear in print in the Selected Poems of 1969 written in the third person, this was written in the first. Thus it began:

Absurd in my tight black coat like a sleazy beetle  
I wasn't minding my looks,  
I was looking at me, the boy bereaved of a title  
Minding his dreams and books.

The final revision was a transformation of the poem into the third person, which is how it was published in the 1969 Selected Poems. The reference to "the boy bereaved of a title" in this final poem is justified at one level as a continuation of the theme of "Tom, Tom the Piper's Son", namely that the protagonist of the poem is self-righteously deluded, and feels that he has been cheated of his proper station in life. The various revisions of this poem have been studied in some critical depth, notably by William Pratt and by Miller Williams<sup>72</sup>. Without duplicating their, mostly formal, observations on the sequence of alterations which the poem undergoes, it is worth noting that this poem manages to combine the two themes of Ransom's aesthetic: displacement and anonymity. The poem is repeatedly displaced from its own textual origins and at the last moment it is shorn of any residual hint that it might possibly be a quizzical autobiographical portrait which aims at undercutting the intellectual pretensions of the scholar-poet.

#### **"What Ducks Require" and "Persistent Explorer"**.

As was indicated earlier, not all of Ransom's poems abide entirely by the formalist aesthetic which he established during his mature phase. "What Ducks Require" and "Persistent Explorer" two of the later poems which Ransom produced during the 1920s also test the limits of formalism and seem to cast an illuminating aspect on Ransom's poetic output as a whole. It has already been established that Ransom saw poetry as offering a particular mode by which reality could be apprehended. Ransom's poem "Persistent Explorer" is devoted to an extended dramatisation of the process of perception. The poem is fascinating because it seems to display an almost unique moment of poetic self reflexiveness in Ransom's oeuvre: it shows the poet exploring the conceptual limits imposed by his own aesthetic. The conventional critical view of Ransom stresses that he was a minor poet writing within a narrow and well delineated rhetorical range, returning again and again to the same themes and effects, and most concerned with domestic scenes. "Persistent Explorer" is the poem where Ransom seems to approach being a major poet, although perhaps a more accurate formulation would be that the poem shows a writer who willingly embraced the definition "domestic" attempting to apply his aesthetic to a major Romantic dilemma.

Albert Gelpi has noted that the poem's setting rehearses Romantic precedents: "Wordsworth crossing the Simplon Pass, Shelley on Mount Blanc, Manfred atop the cataract on the Jungfrau"<sup>73</sup> The Explorer of the title surveys the sort of massive natural event that Kant had indicated was the prerequisite for the registration of the sublime. Since Ransom's poetry is generally unconcerned with rearticulating visual imagery it is the sound which first registers:

The noise of water teased his literal ear  
Which heard the distant drumming, and so scored:  
"Water is falling-it fell-therefore it roared.  
Yet something else is there:is it cheer or fear?"<sup>74</sup>

The poem is an attempt to discover the character of the "something else", to interrogate the scene in search of it, using critical, rational, and crucially *scientific* processes. The logical, mind of the explorer notes pedantically that "Water is falling-it fell- therefore it roared", and the next stanza recounts the next stage in his thought; his apprehension is denied by his senses, yet:

But listen as he might, look fast or slow,  
It was common water, millions of tons of it  
Gouging its gorge deeper, and every bit  
Was water, the insipid chemical H<sub>2</sub>O.

The explorer is frustrated: nothing in the scene seems to account for the momentous feeling of immanence which he registers. Yet that inclusion in the text of "H<sub>2</sub>O" is very interesting: firstly because on the page it looks anything but "insipid", its molecular solidity is suggested by its solidity as a textual molecule. It is included in that form because it represents the explorer's empirical examination of the phenomenon; he knows that the water is composed out of molecules which are insipid, everyday, uninteresting, but the visual phenomenon of seeing the massive

waterfall suggests more than that, as the visual solidity of the type "H2O" suggests to the reader. Even "seeing" down to the molecular level, in the manner of the empirical explorer, does not reveal the mystery.

The poem "Persistent Explorer" is formally significant in the same sort of way as "Miriam Tazewell"; repeated emphasis pressurises the argument. Thus, despite the assertions throughout the poem that the waterfall is "only water", the very length of the interrogation, over the eight stanzas which convince us of the persistence of the explorer, indicates the presence either of a genuinely transcendent force, or of the explorer's conviction that one exists. At one level the explorer registers the disparity of the massive natural event with transcendent vision, at another, he notes its continuity:

Its thunder smote him somewhat as the loud  
Words of the god that rang around a man  
Walking by the Mediterranean.  
Its cloud of froth was whiter than the cloud

That clothed the goddess sliding down the air  
Unto a mountain shepherd, white as she  
That issued from the smoke refulgently.  
The cloud was, but the goddess was not there.

The cloud is "whiter" than that cloud which divulged the goddess, and the noise "louder" than the voice of the god, yet still it refuses to reveal these supernatural interventions. The poem attempts to present the choice made by the explorer, and it ends on an apparently conclusive note:

From the deep thickets of his mind the train,  
The fierce fauns and the timid tenants there  
That burst their bonds and rushed upon the air,  
Why, he must turn and beat them down again.

The explorer crushes down his fancy, and in the process rejects the Romantic attraction of death:

He would not sit upon a rock and die.

and turns his back upon the fantasy world; he convinces himself that he has rejected the delusion that there may be more to the physical world than meets the eye, and that he has not succumbed to the conceptual collapse that he imagines the sublime to represent. In the final stanza he declares that he will seek "another country" presumably on lower ground, where the massive physical forces which might lead to the sublime do not exist. The ending of the poem seems much like "Agitato ma non Troppo". It represents an acceptance of limited terms, of restraint as opposed to the dangerous possibility of release. However this poem seems less definite in its conclusions; the lyrical language of:

Many are the ways of dying; witness, if he  
Commit himself to the water, and descend  
Wrapped in the water, turn water in the end,  
Part of a water rolling to the sea.

Which, with its incantatory power, its rhythmical, tidal insistence, recalls the Romantic cult of surrender to death as a sensual surrender of rationality, a surrender of the conceptual struggle. Though the stanza is quickly rejected by the abrupt:

But there were many ways of living, too,

which, even in its literal, abrupt language rejects the drugging lyrical forces, that jerk

back to life is presented as a cowardly act:

And let his enemies gibe, but let them say  
That he would throw this continent away  
And seek another country-as he would do.

This poem ends then with the sense that in accepting a reduction of terms, the explorer has settled for the pleasures of a more modest world. If the poem resolves what actions the explorer takes, it leaves the question of the status of the vision that he has enjoyed unresolved. Did the protagonist in fact have a transcendent vision? His attitude to it is ambivalent; part of him aches for transcendence, but he is uncertain.

What would he have it spell? He scarcely knew;

And that ambivalent desire, that sense of indecision is likely to remain with the reader, regardless of the actual decision taken by the protagonist in the poem. Far more so than in "Agitato Ma Non Troppo", which was a credo-like declaration rather than an argument, the reader is left here with the sense of what the protagonist has surrendered in his stoical choice to live in the world of ascertainable fact.

This poem received a philosophical justification in one of Ransom's prose arguments published in 1942. The occasion was a review of Kenneth Burke's book The Philosophy of Literary Form, which Ransom published in the Kenyon Review in 1942 under the public title "An Address to Kenneth Burke". In the review, Ransom takes issue with what he perceives as Burke's acceptance of the sublime as defined by Kant. Ransom presents the classic Kantian model of the sublime (the Mind's sense of elevation after perceiving a massive natural event and noting the gulf so created between Sense and Reason) as a conceptual surrender which could lead only to mysticism. Ransom's critique is on the grounds that Kant's response to cognitive dissonance is to withdraw from the world; Ransom argues for an engagement with

the particularity of the world, not a retreat into the "ur" or "un" worldliness of the sublime:

Sense has a fabulous realm to retire to beyond the reach of reason, if it wants to be so bold, a realm in which a chaotic qualitative density obtains. Matter would be its name. But if Form is empty, Matter is blind... Artists have sometimes tried, not exactly to "purify" their art, which might imply the opposite intention, but to "densify" it, to the point where it may achieve emancipation from the bondage of determinate form. The art feels wonderfully rich and strange to us then, and we strain ever so painfully to receive it; an adventure with boundless materiality. There is no passionate lover of his art who has not attempted it.<sup>75</sup>

That "adventure with boundless materiality" might serve as an attractive term for the type of poetry Ransom hoped to write. The model he proposes here before rejecting, is that of an immeasurably dense poem object, a white dwarf, packed with information and particularity, as if by weighing down the object, reason might be reinforced rather than collapse. Ransom's argument is an enaction of his belief that the world can be discerned in its density, and the sublime is only a surrender or a retreat from the conceptual duties which living in the world implies.

As far as Ransom's quarrel with the Romantics is elaborated by the poem, we may note that Ransom does not deny the attraction of surrender to the sublime; the Persistent Explorer here has to fight to keep his fancy down. But his protagonist makes a choice that Ransom's own philosophy justified; the rejection of the sublime vision, and an acceptance of the real world, even if perforce, that means an acceptance of a lesser world where the dilemmas are social and domestic. We might indeed argue that Ransom's poetry addresses the concerns of a lesser world, and note the disparity between the small domestic dramas which his poetry presents and the enormous conceptual importance which he attached to the poetic project. The poem "Persistent Explorer" is remarkable in the way which it seems to address the issues which the rest of Ransom's poetry keeps implicit. Another way to see the poem is that it tests the very limits of the type of verse that Ransom chose to write. The explorer peers out towards what is beyond the verifiable facts of the world, and,

though tempted by a vision of possibility, is unable to discern what could exist in the beyond and retreats to a world of smaller, though more certain conceptual battles.

If "Persistent Explorer" is a way of discussing the very limits imposed by Ransom's conception of his own poetry then we should not necessarily take this to mean that Ransom's poetry can only discuss itself in a poem which self consciously enacts a Romantic adventure. In one other significant poem Ransom seems to discuss the very act of creativity from within his more familiar dramatic form. The poem "What Ducks Require" was not included in any of the single volume publications, although soon after it was written, Ransom was keen that it should receive publication in Poems and Essays (1955) and the three editions of the Selected Poems.<sup>76</sup>

At a superficial level the poem seems most noticeable for its full and intricate display of Ransom's archaisms. The poem begins with a stanza which declares;

Ducks require no ship and sail  
Bellied on the foamy skies,  
Who scud north. Male and female  
Make a slight nest to arise  
Where they overtake the spring,  
Which clogs with muddy going.<sup>77</sup>

The poem, then, stresses exactly how inhuman the Ducks are. The inhospitable place they make as their home offers:

A weathering chance even in the wrack.

That place is seen as a locus where two extremes meet, or more exactly, begin.

.....the port  
Where wet and dry precisely start.

Yet it is important to note how very untypical this Ransom "animal" poems actually is. When Ransom writes elsewhere about animals he tends to stress their connection to mankind. In "Crocodile" or "Prelude to an Evening" the animals are barely transformed human beings. In "Dog" the behaviour of the animal is humorously judged by human, mock heraldic standards. Here the poem emphasises the utterly alien nature that the Ducks possess. The poem stresses:

The half-householders for estate  
Beam their floor with ribs of grass,  
Disdain your mortices and slate  
And Lar who invalidated lies,

which, even as it uses the language of human home-making, parades the difference between the two. The nest-making of the Ducks ends with the birth of a new creature:

... in that wet sequestering,  
Webtoed, the progeny is done,  
Cold-hatched, the infant prodigy tries  
To preen his feathers for the skies.

Prodigious in his wide degrees  
Who where the winds and waters blow  
On ravelling banks of fissured seas  
In reeds nestles, or will rise and go  
Where Capricornus dips its hooves  
In the blue chasm of no wharves.

This poem then, is about creativity, but a creativity which continually stresses its quality of non-human otherness. The creation arises out of the "blue chasm" far from human attempts to shore up the banks and resist the water. It is generated by the contact point of two opposite states of nature, water and dry land. Its image of a cold, inhuman version of domesticity may be seen as a comment on the avowedly

domestic tone of Ransom's other poems. In a characteristically oblique and playful manner "What Ducks Require" suggests that, despite other suggestions to the contrary, the act of creativity removes the creator from the simple certainties of the social world: the ducks like the friars, scholars or explorers of Ransom's other poems find themselves cut off from the easy certainties of human life. Whether their alienation is represented as intellectual perplexity or, as here, a species of determined obliviousness, they suggest that Ransom's vision of the role of the poet was a mediation between the certainties of the world and the more uncertain demands of the creative life. In 1924 in his review of The Waste Land Ransom had presented an early form of his aesthetic theory which characterised the intelligence of the artist as one which synthesised opposites. In "Persistent Explorer" and "What Ducks Require" he presents two versions of that same challenge: in one the protagonist struggles to synthesise his experiences, in the other the birds create in a way which the human imagination struggles to comprehend. Both poems represent oblique indications of poetic self awareness, expressed from within the formal restrictions imposed on Ransom's poetry by his aesthetic ideology.

### **Conclusion**

Ransom's mature poetry was written within a formidable rhetoric of impersonality, imposed by the aesthetic which he developed throughout the 1920s. The demands of this rhetoric forced his poetry to develop various formal strategies which enabled it to deal with its subject matter in indirect ways, avoiding the dangers of the wholehearted emotional declaration or autobiographical statement which Ransom believed were fatal to the artistic endeavour. Within the narrow limits which his own prose declarations on aesthetics allowed him Ransom's poetry presents human dramas of death, frustrated love and self delusion. The response of Ransom's poetry to these subjects is characteristically to judge the importance of the human event within a conceptual frame which allows the comparison of two separate scales of value. In some poems this allows Ransom to ironically judge modern values against the values of the past, in others it portrays the different meanings, social as opposed to private, of a significant social event like a death. Yet whilst Ransom's strict aesthetic standards allowed him to produce a small number of lyric poems which

some critics have judged to be almost perfect, those same exacting standards so restricted the possibilities available to his poetry, that they must be seen as responsible for forcing the ending of his poetic career. The very closure of his poetry, its impersonality, meant that his poetry was prevented from developing, and was destined instead to repeat the same rhetorical strategies until its energy was exhausted.

The difficulties which such a formal aesthetic imposed upon the writer of poetry, and the possible responses which could be found to that formal restriction, may be examined through the careers of those writers, some of them Ransom's pupils, who became known as the "middle generation" of American poets. Ransom's poetry is marked out against that of Lowell, Berryman, and Jarrell by its formal indifference to questions of selfhood. It is striking for example if we examine Ransom's use of the elegy against that of his pupil Robert Lowell, that whereas Lowell uses the elegy as a method of psychological negotiation, or for the venting of oedipal resentment, Ransom's elegies are public and communal, not private and obsessive.<sup>78</sup> The point here is that whereas Lowell uses the form of the elegy to satisfy a private imperative, the demands of Ransom's aesthetic pushes the form in the opposite direction, away from the personality of the poet. If Lowell's elegies seem obsessively detailed, contingent and particular, leading to a complex reflection about the self, Ransom's poems about death read as if the particular event (the death of John Whiteside's Daughter, the funeral of the Dead Boy) is entirely emblematic, and exists as a ritual in the life of the community. Ransom is concerned in his elegies with the life of the community, and how, by implication it will function after this particular death. In Ransom's poems whether there ever was a Dead Boy, or a John Whiteside's Daughter is irrelevant to the reader. In turn, the identity of the narrator in Ransom's poetry lies as the shaping intelligence in the poem, choosing words and phrases, constructing and ordering the verse. This is, apparently the only sense in which Ransom's poetry is concerned with the self.

Yet Lowell's later poetry was a reaction against the rigorous demands exerted by an aesthetic very similar to the one which determined Ransom's own work, and

delineates one response to the restrictions which such a poetic ultimately imposed. In 1974 Lowell wrote:

The kind of poet I am was largely developed by the fact that I grew up in the hey-day of the New Criticism. From the beginning I was preoccupied by technique, fascinated by the past and tempted by other languages. It is hard for me to imagine a poet not interested in the classics.<sup>79</sup>

Lowell's eventual response to what he terms the "New Critical" aesthetic, and characterises as a preoccupation with technique and a fascination with the past, was, after a period of writing formal verse, to reject rigid formal conventions and move in his collection Life Studies, to an less formalistic and rigid aesthetic, which allowed him to be more autobiographical and more flexible in the range of effects available to his poetry. Similarly Berryman abandoned a rigid formal style associated with the New Criticism and developed his own "mature style".<sup>80</sup> Nor should we dismiss these reactions as merely generational: although Allen Tate was clearly not a confessional poet in the sense that that term was used of Lowell, his later poetry too became more personal. Similarly the Fugitive Robert Penn Warren ended a long period of poetic silence with Brother to Dragons: A tale in Verse and Voices<sup>81</sup> which contained dialogues with a character named "R.P.W.": Warren's later poems continued this autobiographical theme.

Ransom can be marked out from many of the poets who followed him by what could be termed his ideological privacy. He is also, it must be said, marked out from Berryman, and from his students Lowell and Warren by the fact that their poetic lives did not end after only 15 years. For Ransom, the twin pressures of a personal restraint and a powerful aesthetic of anonymity would have meant that the poetic routes his students followed after rejecting formalism were closed to him. No reader could conceive of Ransom turning to a confessional or private poetry: the notion is almost absurd. Ransom's final years were spent not in the production of new poems, although he often indicated that he would like to write more<sup>82</sup>, but in the amendment of his earlier ones, a process which ironically continued the impulse of his aesthetic towards elision and effacement.

Whilst the aesthetic insights which he developed during the writing of his own poetry would serve his attempts from the late 1930s onwards to clarify the aesthetic basis of literary criticism, it ultimately led to the end of his own poetic career. After 1927, Ransom wrote only 2 more poems. His poetic career was therefore at an end as the 1920s ended. His desire to commit a comprehensive version of his aesthetic to paper did not die with his poetic career however.

Nevertheless, Ransom's desire to continue to refine his aesthetic was to take an unexpected turn in the next stage of his career.

Before examining that next major phase, it is important to consider his poetry in relationship to the major aesthetic movement of the first half of the Twentieth Century: how do Ransom's poems relate to literary Modernism?

### Coda: Ransom and Literary Modernism.

According to the conceptual formulation used by Robert Graves and Laura Riding, John Crowe Ransom was a modernist. In the chapter of A Survey of Modernist Poetry (1927) entitled "The Unpopularity of Modernist Poetry With The Plain Reader" Graves and Riding cited Ransom as a practitioner of demanding modern work which placed an interpretative burden on the reader. They argued:

The plain reader trying to keep up with the poetry of his time will be more likely to choose a poet such as the American Carl Sandburg or the English John Drinkwater, belonging to a dead movement which has reached its limit and will expire with the death of its authors, than one belonging to a live movement (such as E.E.Cummings or John Crowe Ransom) which asks him to risk his critical judgement.<sup>1</sup>

Later, they note that subtle variety of tone, and accordingly, a marked opportunity for interpretative indeterminacy characterised Ransom's "Captain Carpenter": "the poet has committed the unforgivable modernist sin of allowing the reader to have more than one reaction to a single poem."<sup>2</sup>

Graves and Riding's definition of "modernist" leaned heavily on the supposed difficulty such poetry posed for an imaginary "plain reader" and their notion of "modernism" made much of its disruption of an implied contract of convention between reader and writer. "Modernist poetry" was "advanced contemporary poetry"<sup>3</sup>, "advanced" in the sense of "aesthetically sophisticated" and "contemporary" in the sense of its chronology. Many years later, Ransom too seemed to accept Graves and Riding's premise as a way of defining modernist writing. He described modernist writers as "Poets Without Laurels" in The World's Body:

"The poets I refer to in the title are the "moderns": those whom a small company of adept readers enjoys, perhaps enormously, but the general public detests; those in whose hands poetry as a living art has lost its public support.

<sup>4</sup>

Graves and Riding had greeted the frustration of the plain reader's expectations with pleasure, seeing it as a way of freeing the modern writer from the crass constraints of bourgeois taste, and liberating him to write a pure aesthetic poetry. Ransom views

the historical dislocation with a clear ambivalence. He enumerates the esteemed roles that poets used to play within society:

Poets used to be the bards and patriots, priests and prophets, keepers of the public conscience, and naturally, men of public importance. Society crowned them with wreaths of laurel, according to the tradition which comes to us from the Greeks...<sup>5</sup>

For Ransom the “purity” of modernist poetry, its freedom from the moralism which was the hallmark of traditional, particularly Victorian poetry, represents the dominant cultural characteristic of modern life. That characteristic Ransom calls “Puritanism”. Ransom’s “Puritanism”, which is not to be confused with the religious movement, is the “zealous... contriving”... “driving force of all our modernism.”

“Our period differs outwardly from other periods because it first differs inwardly. Its spiritual temper is puritanical; that is, it craves to perfect the parts of experience separately or in their purity, and is a series of isolated perfections. These have often been brilliant. But perhaps the modern program, on the whole, is not the one under which men maintain their best health and spirits. A little fear to that effect is beginning to cloud the consciousness of the brilliant moderns.”<sup>6</sup>

Whereas Graves and Riding saw the dominant characteristic of modernist writing as being its advanced aestheticism, Ransom sees modernist writing as reproducing in literary form the dominant intellectual tendency of modernity, a historical state which Ransom associates in this essay with intellectual pluralism, and identifies in an economic and cultural sense with the disruptions caused by science. Two key notions in this essay, namely that literary modernism represented on the literary plane the characteristics of the historical period known as modernity, and that “the modern programme” was psychically disabling, are significant ideas in much of Ransom’s critical reaction to modernism. These themes will be explored in a moment.

Ransom’s formulation of literary modernism however inevitably raises the question of what exactly the relationship was between Ransom’s own poetry and literary modernism.

The mere dates on which Ransom’s poetry was written would lead the reader to speculate about its relationship to modernism. The Fugitive was produced between

April 1922 and December 1925, a period which coincided with one of the major phases of modernist publication. Chills and Fever was published in 1924, two years after The Waste Land, and two years before Pound's Personae. Two Gentlemen in Bonds was published in 1927, only a year before Yeats' The Tower. During the 1920s Ransom also made a number of major prose declarations of his attitude towards modernism. One way to approach the relationship of Ransom's own poetry to modernism is to follow one of his most famous prose discussions of a key modernist work.

Ransom's review of Eliot's The Waste Land was published in July 1923 in the New York Evening Post Literary Review under the heading "Waste Lands". Though the review is philosophically serious it also comes close, unusually close for Ransom, to being personally abusive. Ransom begins by declaring:

The imagination of a creative artist may play over the surface of things or it may go very deep, depending on the quality or availability of the artist's mind.<sup>7</sup>

As the review continues, it becomes clear that Ransom considers that Eliot's imagination is of the former sort. Eliot's poem is held up against Ransom's exacting aesthetic and unsurprisingly, it fails to satisfy the reviewer. The review ends with Ransom declaring that the evidence of The Waste Land calls Eliot's earlier achievements into doubt; it proves that his earlier poems were merely precocious accidents:

... they were diabolically specious, and the true heart of the author was to be revealed by a very different gesture.<sup>8</sup>

But the review is not just an assault on Eliot, it provides Ransom with an opportunity to announce something of his own aesthetic. Early in the review, before he has even

turned to Eliot's poem he declares:

A property of easiness is what the artist must come to, against even the terrible and the ecstatic moments of history... with the individual artist, it comes with age; though not entirely as reckoned by the Gregorian calendar... A soul shaking passion is very good if the artist will wait for it to age; the bigger the passion the deeper it will go in the integrating passages of the mind, and the wider will be the branching associations it will strike out. When it comes forth eventually it will have depth and context, too.<sup>9</sup>

Ransom had given his own poetic expression to this aesthetic declaration in his "Agitato Ma non Troppo" written earlier in 1923.<sup>10</sup> The aesthetic which Ransom presents here, with its emphasis on restraint of emotion and formal control is familiar from the extensive discussion above. In this context Ransom uses his review of Eliot's book as a stage for the presentation of his own aesthetic. Having established his own aesthetic view he uses it to savage Eliot. The root of this vehement rejection lies in Ransom's failure to fully understand Eliot's method of juxtaposition in The Waste Land. This failure in turn has its roots not in mere incomprehension but in Ransom's firm adherence to a poetic which stressed the importance of formal rigour and aesthetic unity in poetic utterance. Ransom declares:

I do not know just how many parts the poem is supposed to have, but to me there are something like fifty parts which offer no bridges the one to the other and are quite distinct in time, place, action, persons, tone and all the unities to which art is accustomed... Mr Eliot... assails the philosophical or cosmical principles under which we form the usual images of reality, naming the whole phantasmagoria Waste Land almost as plainly as if he were naming cosmos Chaos. His intention is evidently to present a wilderness in which both he and the reader may be bewildered, in which one is never to see the wood for the trees.<sup>11</sup>

This strategy so offends against Ransom's notion of art that he declares that any critic must resist it. In its place he puts his own conception of the artist's responsibility and function:

The mind of the artist is an integer, and the imaginative vision is a single act which fuses its elements. It is to be suspected that the author who holds his elements apart is not using his imagination, but using a formula, like a scientist anxious to make out a 'case'; at any rate, for art such a procedure suggests far too much strain and tension.<sup>12</sup>

Here Eliot seems to fall foul of one of Ransom's habitual formulations, the distinction between the discourse of science and art. But this distinction is a mere detail in Ransom's larger argument. Since Ransom has earlier made clear that he considers Eliot's poem to be not just modern but "the apotheosis of modernity" it is clear that his review is central to any discussion of Ransom's attitude to modern poetry. Ransom recognises the distinctiveness of "modernity" and in recognising the "extreme disconnection" of Eliot's poem as the "apotheosis of modernity" registers the sense of dislocation which in so many modernist thinkers is the hallmark of modernity. For Ransom the creative mind naturally exhibits a synthesising intelligence. The artist's response to confusing or dislocated experience is to attempt to synthesise it into a new unity. If the experience is utterly new, then the synthesis may be of a new kind, but it will still be a synthesis. Clearly there is conceptual gulf between Eliot and Ransom. Ransom seems to be suggesting that, since the natural characteristic of the artist is to unify conflict, then only by not being an artist could the writer carry off the kind of poetic display which Eliot exhibits. The discontinuity of modernity demands, as far as Ransom is concerned, a greater and greater effort from the artist to offer a unified work of art. Anything less is a conceptual surrender, representing the collapse of the independent mind to the mere variety of existence.

This review brought a swift and sharp rebuke from a quarter familiar to Ransom. Allen Tate wrote a strong rebuttal of Ransom's article which was published in the next issue of the New York Evening Post Literary Review and caused a major rift between the two men, which was only fully resolved a year later. Tate accused Ransom of futility in his application of a theory of creativity as a grounds for critical judgement, and of naiveté in not realising the value of Eliot's juxtapositional practice.<sup>13</sup> The argument serves to illuminate some of the philosophical tensions which were at work in the Fugitive group. Of the group Tate was by far the most conversant, and comfortable with the tenets of cosmopolitan Modernism. Early in 1922, soon after joining the group he had translated Baudelaire's "Correspondences" and when Hart Crane read his first published poem it indicated to Crane that its author was already a disciple of Eliot's. In fact by that date Tate had not read Eliot but after receiving Crane's letter he did, and was soon championing Eliot's poetic

poetry which appropriately responds to the "real" world.

The fundamental consideration is that the moderns are well instructed in the practice of the traditionalists. But this is what has happened: they find the old practice trite, and ontologically inadequate for them. Yet they lack any consistent conception of what a new practice might be-and a new practice that would be radical enough is probably not possible- and therefore they work by taking liberties with the old practice, and irregularize and de-systematize it, without denying it. 35

Similarly, the moderns can be characterised because of their demand for poetic directness:

They do not find sufficient profit in that traditional poetic labor which consists in the determinate metering of a determinate discourse. I have argued that some ontological triumph, something impossible for pure discourse, may be secured in this way. They are acquainted with the technique, and find it too easy. The well-metered discourse is impaired for them because it is transparently artful; they want a more direct and less formal knowledge. 36

Almost two decades after his prose attack on Eliot, which had accused him of not having an appropriate modern aesthetic, here Ransom revisits many of the same themes in his attempt to discern the ontological nature of poetic utterance.

Since Ransom's response to the formal aspects of modernist poetry was often negotiated through an engagement with the aesthetic practice of T.S.Eliot, it is instructive to jump ahead to the very end of Ransom's career when in a prose footnote he addresses his earlier response to Eliot's work. One of Ransom's last essays is "T.S.Eliot: A Postscript" which he wrote as an Afterword to the republication of The World's Body by The Louisiana State University Press in 1968. Ransom begins the postscript with the air of a man returning to unfinished business: his prose post-script aims to resolve the long standing argument with the now dead Eliot.

Ransom announces his willingness to recant one of his complaints against The Waste Land:

I mean, of course, the obscure references to quite specific items or texts within the "tradition," as it existed in many ages and languages. I think Eliot, with the approval of Pound, who was himself a referentialist, must have reckoned that the common reader would make a fine sense anyhow out of the passages in which they were embedded. I didn't believe it, till I saw how many readers did get the sense and skimmed easily over the references. I saw even better, right under my nose, how many people liked the poem all the better by checking up all the references.

In fact this late "understanding" of Eliot is merely a different species, of Ransom's earlier misunderstanding. Forty five years after his original essay on The Waste Land Ransom still cannot conceive of a positive reason for Eliot's juxtapositional method in that poem. His only explanation, after considering the matter, is that Eliot must have realised that his readers could understand the poem by skimming over the references. Ransom still cannot see how the form of The Waste Land could itself be meaningful, or how its juxtapositions could themselves contain a structural and thematic meaning which the reader could understand. His declaration that many people like the poem "all the better by checking up all the references" surely pushes the argument into a kind of absurd comedy: this is the defence of a teacher of modern poetry who sends his class off to the library to complete an assignment, perhaps with relief, not a serious aesthetic analysis of a significant poem.

How do the varying stages of Ransom's criticism of Modernism relate to his own work?

Ironically, given Ransom's unflattering definition of literary modernism, it may seem from our own historical view-point that modernism provides the most appropriate paradigm within which to view Ransom's poetry. Thomas McHaney has suggested that:

...Modernism was in southern soil early enough; and the literary movement usually called the southern Renaissance was, in reality, a southern branch office of the midwestern division of the North American franchise of that international movement in the arts that flourished in Paris, London, Milan, Munich and other capitals during the second and third decades of the twentieth century.<sup>39</sup>

And James H. Justus has also argued that “ Unlike the fiction, poetry in the South tended to reflect the impact of modernism as much as it celebrated its regionalism”.<sup>40</sup>

As the critic attempts to orientate Ransom within these different paradigms, it is important to bear in mind always the particular qualities of Ransom’s verse, namely its attention to formal control, its interest in Classical notions of aesthetic order, and its resistance to forthright emotional statement.

Perhaps a clearer notion of Ransom’s own relationship to literary modernism may be possible if we attempt to make a distinction between the different forms which literary modernism may take. Significantly, if one examines the geographical shape of Ransom’s career against those of the “exiles and émigrés”<sup>41</sup> of Cosmopolitan Modernism it is striking that whereas the progress of an Eliot or a Pound was centrifugal, radiating out from Missouri or Idaho to London or Paris, Ransom’s trajectory after a period in Oxford and France was centripetal, returning to the centre which he had left. This progress, which McHaney argues was a characteristic not just of Ransom’s career but also of Glasgow, Faulkner and Welty’s seems to indicate a very different paradigm at work in modernism in the South. Interestingly, the non political aspect of Ransom’s argument in “Modern with the Southern Accent”, namely that the strong social conventions of life in the South enabled Southern writers to resist some of the more attenuating qualities of modern life, is echoed in some of the more recent analyses of modernism in the South. Richard J. Calhoun argues for example<sup>42</sup> that the region’s writers did not feel historical discontinuity as strongly as those from outside, for reasons broadly similar to the ones Ransom suggests.

Not least because of the rigorous formal demands which Ransom made of his own poetry, his career cannot be simply mapped onto what is now seen as the dominant form of poetic modernism in the 1920s, and few critics would class Ransom as a modernist as confidently as Graves and Riding did in 1927. Finally though, an appropriate place to situate Ransom’s writing, with its strong formal conventions and interest in classical precedents would be with the poetry of his admirer and

collaborator Robert Graves. Graves' poetry, like Ransom's is often preoccupied with the tension between idealised values and debased reality. Graves' poetry too is clearly "modern" but is not "modernist" if that term is defined by the poetic practice of Eliot or Pound. Though Ransom may have balked at the classification, a definition which accepts different strains to literary modernism may indeed see Ransom as a literary modernist after all.

### Chapter 3: Myths and Modernity

#### Introduction:

As the 1920s ended Ransom was still trying to produce the authoritative statement of aesthetic analysis on which he had laboured throughout most of the decade. Despite the various formulations he applied, his aesthetic ideas seemed to resist his attempts to systematise them. In September 1925 he had outlined his plans for a book on the "gothic principle in English poetry" in a letter to Robert Graves. This book would display a "special reference to Milton, or to Shakespeare."<sup>1</sup> By December of that year, Ransom's theme had grown to include: "a very fine chapter I think, on Religion and Gothic, in which I show that all religions that are vital are folk products first, and contain sensational and obscene features in plenty;"<sup>2</sup> By September 1926 Ransom was focusing on an attempt to analyse "the third moment" of perception as outlined in a letter to Allen Tate. This book would be an attempt to systematise "a great mass of observations I have to make about literature."<sup>3</sup> Neither of these books were to be completed; "the Gothic Tradition" was immediately reformulated, and as noted above Ransom was unable to shape "The Third Moment" into a form which satisfied him.

The text which Ransom wrote in a nine week burst of activity at the end of the 1920s points more clearly towards his political preoccupations of the 1930s than his aesthetic concerns of the 1920s. Entitled God Without Thunder, Ransom's first prose text proclaimed in its subtitle that it was "An Unorthodox Defence of Orthodoxy". If religious orthodoxy might have been expected of the son and grandson of Methodist preachers, the unorthodox modern philosophy which the book displayed might also have been anticipated from the sophisticated intellectual which Ransom had become. In all other respects the text was extraordinary. Originally entitled "Giants for Gods", it was, Ransom later wrote, perhaps in an attempt to mitigate it, "a hot and hasty book on religion"<sup>4</sup>. God Without Thunder is an attempt to analyse the changing relationship between man, God, nature and science. Despite the fact that it developed out of a long period of meditation on philosophical aesthetics, Ransom's literary

background and interests do not dominate his theme; the book contains more detailed references to the world of science than to the literary classics.

As has been noted above with regard to Poems About God Ransom's early exposure to the teachings of the Methodist church would have meant that he could certainly be expected to have been aware of the theological debates which raged during his early life. Whether he believed in anything like the apparently straightforward faith of his father is more problematic; certainly by the 1920s he recognised that his religious beliefs were far from conventional. In 1924 he wrote to the Chancellor of Vanderbilt University Edwin Mims explaining that one of the reasons he had turned down a lucrative job offer from the Southern Methodist University in Dallas Texas was because "I don't feel with my lack of orthodoxy I would be playing fair in accepting Southern Methodist University retainers."<sup>5</sup> Evidently by that date his views were so well known that he could be open and reasonably light-hearted about them. To Robert Graves he confessed that he feared the religious atmosphere at Dallas would have placed a limit on the range of his intellectual concerns: "So I turned down an extra five hundred dollars...and will remain longer in what is really an abode of great freedom."<sup>6</sup>

In 1919, Ransom's Poems About God had been described by one reviewer as "rabid".<sup>7</sup> On that evidence, a reader who knew of Ransom's early publishing history might have assumed that this new book of "unorthodox" religiosity would be a disguised attack on the religious experience. In fact Ransom presents his book as a defence of belief, albeit one which justifies belief by highly unusual arguments.

God Without Thunder begins in a tone of self consciousness, with what appears to be a personal lament that the writer cannot enjoy conventional religious belief. In the process Ransom displays as personal *angst* the dynamic which his book will go on to present as a historical process; past and present have become fractured, and the modern world does not allow the individual to enjoy the integrated belief in God that

his ancestor accepted as natural. Ransom declares:

"I am the son of a theologian and the grandson of another, but the gift did not come down to me."<sup>8</sup>

Yet even this apparently bald sentence is ambiguous: which gift has the writer been unable to inherit from his forebears? The gift of faith, or the gift of theologising? The language of the sentence implies the latter. It is certainly an arresting beginning to a text which puts "God" so clearly in its title, and it immediately introduces one of the book's themes; the reason that modern man finds belief difficult is because modern life does not display the characteristics which in the past were the prerequisites of belief. The attitude of present-day society to religious belief is so radically different from the attitudes of the past that in order for modern man to return to orthodox belief, new and unorthodox paths will have to be found.

The reader may glean a clue to the interpretation of the dense text which follows from the foreword: God Without Thunder is dedicated to Sydney Mtrron Hirsch. Hirsch was a member of the Fugitive group which met first at his home then at the house of his brother-in-law James Frank. An invalid by the time the group met, Hirsch styled himself as a religious mystic, and was fond of long rambling speculations on arcane spiritual topics. Hirsch's characteristic intellectual technique was to draw upon etymological dictionaries to provide the hidden mystical knowledge which could be revealed to reside in words. During the meetings of the Fugitives Ransom apparently enjoyed puncturing Hirsch's monologues with a cool logic; here he seems to defer to Hirsch as an expert in the field of religious speculations.

Ransom writes: "I have some confidence that you will think my view of religion to be the true and orthodox one"<sup>9</sup>, before going on to explain that as his other readers are laymen he will have to avoid technical terms. Since Hirsch seems to have been an eccentric and unstructured religious thinker, who was fascinated by Rosicrucianism and drew his inspiration from consulting the Kabbalah and Tarot, this tribute hints at the curious text to follow. Most modern critics have viewed Hirsch as a pathetic figure, "a sad inadequate"<sup>10</sup>, but Ransom's tribute to him seems

genuine. It may be that Stephen Matterson, the author of Berryman and Lowell: The Art of Losing is correct when he suggests that "Hirsch's influence on Ransom has been consistently underrated."<sup>11</sup> In some senses however the influence which Hirsch exerts on God Without Thunder is malign; Ransom's text also seems on occasion to display an eclecticism which is more inspired than logical.

Yet even these hints, clues and suggestions do not fully warn the reader what to expect from the text that follows. Ransom's "Unorthodox defence of Orthodoxy" is not just unorthodox in its argument, but also in its range and methodology. Though the most obvious way to categorise the text would be "theology" this is a book about God which contains lengthy discussions of topics normally out-with the domain of theology like chemistry, mathematics and physics yet has nothing to say about central religious ideas like visions, mysticism, conversion, saints, sacrifice, or confession. Neither, though it champions a form of belief, does it have much to say about the psychic condition of believing or the interior life of the religious convert.

The structural organisation of the text fails to make its argument any clearer. Although the book is divided into sections, the logical separation between chapters is not always apparent, and the division suggested by chapter titles is not always adhered to. Its chapters are poorly differentiated and as a result they often blend into one another. This last fault may be largely a product of the fact that Ransom wrote the book in little more than two months.

But if God Without Thunder is not a predictable book in any sense, then at least it is identifiably a book of its time; many of the specific examples cited in the text occurred in the late 1920s, in the years and months immediately preceding its composition. Though these examples, like the meeting of scientists and religious men in December 1928 with which the book begins, are described in some detail they often seem to be the immediate events which have encapsulated broader themes and movements for the writer. Many of the issues which the book discusses, like the deficiencies of scientific discourse, were long standing concerns of Ransom by 1929. Since the text aims at a long historical argument, the writer takes as many opportunities as possible to discuss his own favourite themes.

The book proper begins with the description of a scene which Ransom invests with immense symbolic meaning. In December 1928 in Washington DC forty-five scientists, clergymen and educators had signed what Ransom describes as a manifesto, declaring the compatibility of modern science with religious belief. Ransom portrays this declaration as a peace treaty at the end of a war between science and religion, representing in essence the capitulation of the "religionists" to a triumphant scientific community. Ransom sees an immensely harmful idea embodied in the declaration and his whole text is based on an analysis and rejection of it. Since Galileo Science and Religion had been disputing the nature of creation, the physical laws which governed the universe, and the place of man in the world. Ransom sees the 1928 declaration as an armistice in this long conceptual battle and gloomily imagines a future division of responsibilities between the two discourses: religious men would no longer dispute the scientists' authoritative definition of the behaviour of natural forces and the role of religion would be reduced, with the blessing of the scientists, to the delineation of what is acceptable in human moral conduct. Ransom objects that in this scheme religion would be reduced from being a coherent conceptual method of comprehending the complexity of all existence, to mere ethics. Religion would have nothing to say about the laws of the physical world, or the behaviour that man should exhibit towards nature. It would for example no longer argue against evolutionary theory; instead it would accept that its role was to define the moral behaviour of man in a scientifically determined world. Ransom contends that man's moral conduct depends not just upon his conception of other men, but upon his conception of the whole universe in which he lives. If man's conception of the universe sees him as only one part of a larger creation, then man will, Ransom believes, act with restraint and responsibility towards the rest of creation. A scientifically defined world which stresses the capacity of man to transform his environment as he sees fit will necessarily give man license to behave in an imperious way towards nature. Ransom realises that this declaration of "peace" is merely the logical culmination of a clutch of ideas which have been growing in power since the beginning of the "modern" era. That era Ransom identifies as being the era of scientific discovery and power.

Ransom goes on to delineate some of the other ideas which are associated with the victory of science over religion. He objects to a notion that he has seen taking hold of the public imagination; namely that since the amount of information discovered by scientific research is growing exponentially, allowing man unprecedented knowledge about and power over the world, it must be God's will that the mystery of His world should be understood and mastered for the service of man. Ransom is opposed to the notion "that God as the ruler of the Universe governs it in such a manner as to make it accommodate itself to the welfare of man."<sup>12</sup> Whereas the religious world view had seen man as one of the creations of God, the scientific world view places man as the dominant creature in creation, greater than all the other creations of God. Therefore, as the religious world view had stressed the *responsibilities* of man towards the rest of creation, the scientific view of the world stressed the *possibilities* available to man to fulfil his desires. This removes from man a sense of his own weakness and gifts him a sense of his own omnipotence which will inevitably lead to hubris.

It is a small step from believing that it is God's will that man should improve his knowledge of the world to believing that science itself represents the will of God. Ransom disapprovingly refers to the first telegram sent via a cable under the Atlantic, which conveyed the message "see what wonders God has wrought" and interprets it as a clear example of the idea that God is now taken to work through the actions of scientists. Ransom's view of the scientists' actions is very different to the popular conception; the scientist in Ransom's view strips away the power of God by revealing the mystery of the natural forces which control the physical world. Here Ransom identifies the power of God with His mystery. If the mystery of how the physical universe is governed is explained then God's power is reduced. God would not will the reduction of his own power. Therefore Ransom concludes God cannot sanction the scientists' activities

The powerful opening to God Without Thunder demands careful explanation. Throughout his various writings Ransom holds a view of science which is essentially consistent. For Ransom of course science is a powerful though ultimately incomplete discipline which abstracts from the richness of life and categorises experience

according to its own needs. It pays no attention to the knotty particularity of the natural world or of human experience; instead it is interested only in what can be analysed and classed. His views dated back to at least 1923 where in his review of T.S.Eliot's The Wasteland he lists two different ways of recording experience:

"Science writes it down in one way, by abstracting a feature and trying to forget all the rest. Art writes it down in another way, by giving the feature well enough, but by managing also to suggest the infinity of the original context."<sup>13</sup>

Six years later, Ransom wrote in his article "Classical and Romantic":

..however admirable we may consider efficiency when it is the property of a steam engine, or of a course of medical treatment, or of a servant, it does not necessarily impress us as an excellence when it is a property of our own psychic experiences.<sup>14</sup>

His discussion of science in God Without Thunder is congruent with this distinction between efficiency and value, but here the discussion has been injected with a topical urgency, and is expressed through immediate examples. As the beginning of the book makes clear, Ransom is responding to what he sees as pressing recent developments in the 'war' between science and religion; his opening chapter is littered with direct references to recent events and the citation of particular, named, scientists or religious men who have made public declarations that Ransom disapproves of.

It is central to Ransom's thesis that scientific reasoning and scientific values are, in 1930, in the ascendancy over religious ones. He sees the complex of ideas which has arisen around scientific exploration to be so ideologically pervasive that he describes it as a "New Religion". This idea of the "New Religion" provides the determining structural principle of the first few chapters of God Without Thunder. Having asserted in one of the section headings that "The Dynasty of Heaven Changes" Ransom has to explain how. This leads inevitably to Ransom's analysis of "The New God", and even "Christ as Scientist". Yet Science is not a simple substitute for Religion: Science and Religion offer, crucially for Ransom, very different types of knowledge about the world. To simplify Ransom's argument: Science is effective and efficient when directed towards particular problems whereas Religion provides a

settled and authoritative system of knowledge. Science may tell us *how* the universe functions, but it cannot tell us *why*.

Since these new scientifically-inspired ideas make "A New Religion," Ransom constructs their credo:

And now to see how the scientist represent their God: as "one revealing himself through countless ages in the development of the earth as an abode for men, and in the age-long inbreathing of life into its constituent matter, culminating in man with his spiritual nature and all his God-like powers."<sup>15</sup>

..What specific doctrines emerge from this obscure credo?...I believe there are at least two doctrines implied here which are of all importance in the new religion.

The first of these is that God as the ruler of the universe governs it in such a manner as to make it accommodate itself to the welfare of man. The earth is for man's abode; and God "developed" it; this phrase suggests that his instrument was an evolutionary or scientific process. Thus God is a scientist; the universe is his workshop; but among his productions he has produced man, and all the other productions are for man's benefit.

The second doctrine would seem to be this: Man is God-like himself. God is the great original scientist, but man is himself a little scientist. for he can understand God's scientific technique, and he can actually in considerable degree apply it in the human sphere, anticipating God, and hastening the course of his great works.<sup>16</sup>

A further important result follows from the changes Ransom has described. Science provides man with greater power over his environment than ever before, and allows him certain techniques to analyse the physical laws which govern the behaviour of the natural world. Since the scientists equate the discovery of this knowledge with the revelation of the will of God, man has lost the sense that God may be inscrutable and unpredictable. Ransom contrasts this profoundly modern perception with the response of men to the God of the Old Testament.

The Old Testament God behaved according to motives which were incomprehensible to his followers. Accordingly He was feared as well as loved by them. Ransom takes it that God's inscrutability meant that His actions could not be characterised merely as being for the benefit of mankind. This sense was a continual

reminder that the world was an inexplicable place, an idea which would continually remind men that there was a greater power than himself. For Ransom the loss to popular consciousness and belief of the God of Thunder of the Old Testament is a cause for lamentation in itself, and especially because he has been supplanted by a lesser divinity:

We wanted a God who wouldn't hurt us; who would scrap all the wicked thunderbolts in his armament. And this is just the God that has developed popularly out of the Christ of the New Testament: the embodiment mostly of the principle of social benevolence and of physical welfare.<sup>17</sup>

Elsewhere Ransom complains that this new God functions at the level of "Rotary...like Y.M.C.A. and Boy Scouts."<sup>18</sup> This new God clearly allows his worshippers to understand Him, and since Ransom is most concerned here with the attitude of man to the natural world, the perception of the new God clearly allows man to respond to the natural world not as a fearful inferior but as a confident controller and manipulator of natural events. In short the new God is so reduced that He allows man to hold the attitude towards Him that Ransom associates with the scientist, and not the respectful attitude of the "religionist". Ransom augments his own personal complaints with what seems to be a traditional Protestant concern about graven images:

The new God also denies himself form and professes to be non-representational; nevertheless, he is much more defined than the old God. This is a naturalistic age, and its God is nature. But then there are two natures- depending on the temperament of those who behold nature. By poets, religionists, Orientals, and sensitive people, nature is feared and loved - hardly the one without the other. But by scientists and modern Occidentals, nature is only studied and possessed. They are aware only of the nature which conforms to the laws they are able to formulate; the nature of the naturalists.<sup>19</sup>

Since by sensitive people nature is able to be "feared and loved" Ransom takes a leap of logic and declares that the mysterious God of the Old Testament was the author of

evil as well as good. The critic Keiran Quinlan analyses Ransom's position:

he conceives of the world as being made up irremediably of both good and evil and that whatever being made it must contain both qualities<sup>20</sup>

Ransom's pseudo-Manichean declaration may be seen as one of the first points in the book where his argument leads him to a position which has gone well beyond "common sense" if we take that term to mean here the sense of the world which is held in common by members of a community.

### **The Value of Myth**

Thus far Ransom has been concerned with the new idea of God, an idea which he has crystallised out of the unarticulated, yet powerful intellectual tendencies inherent in modernity. For Ransom the essential nature, likely behaviour and expectation of any god is communicated through the narrative of myth, and he devotes a number of chapters to an analysis of myth as an agency for the communication of religious and other beliefs. As we have seen, Ransom rejects the view that religion should be merely a system which determines moral behaviour, maintaining instead that religion is firstly a systematised worship of God, defined as *other*, and necessarily out-with the rules of the physical universe:

We may refer to him as a god, a Person, a Mind, an Intelligence, a Purpose, an Agent, An Activity, a Force, a Principal- but he is necessarily behind, over, above, in, or under nature, and there his inaccessible to science<sup>21</sup>.

As myth defines man's relationship to that *other*, it also sanctions what is acceptable behaviour towards the physical universe which God has created. From man's respectful relationship to the natural universe flows his relationship to his fellow man. For Ransom, the proper relationship between man and nature is enshrined in the myths which the Old Testament provides of the relationship between man and the natural world. In the Old Testament man existed in a fearful and respectful relationship to Nature. He was uncertain when the rain would come, if his crops would fail, if his animals would thrive or die. Accordingly his life had to be tied to

the greater rhythms of the Natural world. His sense of the omnipotence of the God who controlled and created Nature amplified these feelings of insecurity, and of course the God demanded obedience from him and occasional sacrifice. To Ransom this system might not have been efficient, according to the standards of science but it represented an aesthetically pleasing and unified whole.

This particular defence of myth may seem to be a case of Ransom defending religion at the place where it had been seen to be weakest. From Galileo onwards through Darwin, scientific exploration had supplanted the religious explanation of systems like cosmology or creation, and the religious myths which had previously interpreted these events came to be seen after a period of fierce disputation, as something of an embarrassment to post-scientific religious people. In order to preserve the integrity of their beliefs, liberal theologians on the whole abandoned the idea that the religious myths could be anything other than parables. In his defence of the power and importance of myth, Ransom is displaying a rhetorical strategy which prefigures his rhetoric in I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition. There too he will take an powerful critique which had been directed against the belief he wishes to uphold, in that case the idea of "backwardness", and attempt to reverse the polarity of the binary opposition, by arguing the benefits of "backwardness." Here Ransom attempts to argue the benefits of a myth which has been proved by science to be based on a misconception of the physical universe. Ransom professes to be much concerned with the embarrassment of religious men on discovering that the myths they believed were premised on a view of natural laws which were proved to be false. Here the Scopes "monkey trial" provides an obvious and pertinent example of the clash between scientific theory and a tenaciously held local myth of creationism. Ransom's response to this issue is an ingenious piece of rhetorical sleight of hand. He argues that if a myth is proven to be based on a theoretical misconception of the physical universe, that does not mean the myth is meaningless; only by misunderstanding the purpose of myths would a theologian see myths as vulnerable to the complaint that they have their scientific principles wrong. Ransom does not accept that religious myths can be analysed out of their power by science; indeed he maintains that the analyses of historians and critics have missed

the point of myths:

I believe that religious myths, including those of the Bible, are unhistorical and unscientific, precisely as our gallant historians and higher critics have recently discovered; but that their unhistorical and unscientific character is not their vice but their excellence, and that it certainly was their intent. <sup>22</sup>

For Ransom the myth is not a poetic expression of an abstract physical law, which might be vulnerable to the proof or disproof of science. Instead it is an encoding of both a complex physical reality and a complex emotional reality. The myth does not offer an abstracted view of one of the physical laws controlling the Universe, instead it is a compact and complete vision of man's sanctioned behaviour towards the world.

In contrast to the rigorous simplicity of science, the myth is to be valued for its attempt to convey the quality of a knotty particularity;

The myth maker is a desperate man, for he has a memory. He remembers the remarkable individual in the richness of his private existence. He sees very little relation between that individual and the dry generalisations into which science would fit him. He would do the individual the honour of a representation which will leave him somehow with that fullness of being which by right he possesses. Unwilling to testify to the individual through only some of his terms, after the method of science which lets the most of his being escape, the myth maker abandons the idea of any natural or historical formulation, and tries one that is meant to look non-natural and unhistorical. This is for provocation. The myth maker would sting us into awareness, by this device, and compel us to perform the critical act of recollection, to restore the individual image, or else to go back and seek a fresh experience. <sup>23</sup>

and later;

... myth resorts to the supernatural in order to represent the fullness of the natural. <sup>24</sup>

The extract above is clearly a development of the aesthetic ideas Ransom was attempting to articulate during the 1920s. In 1926 in the letter to Allen Tate which articulated his perception of "The Third Moment" he discusses the means that are available to man to enable him to recover the moment of immediate vivid first experience. He asks "How can we get back to that first moment? [of perception]

There is only one answer: By images" and he later lists "the five different states or operations" in which man attempts to reconstitute "the fugitive first moment" : dreams, fancies, religions, morals and art."<sup>25</sup> Ransom's depiction of myth can be compared to his notion of poetry; both contain within them a view of a discrete event and both resist the encroachment of scientific perception. In God Without Thunder religious myth is portrayed as a type of narrative which attempts to capture the intimate particularity of first experience, and re-convey that powerful sensation to the individual who believes the myth.

Ransom's notion of the religious experience implies for example that the parables in the Old Testament should not be read as metaphors, with an universally applicable meaning which could be abstracted from their imagery, but as attempts to convey a particular discrete set of experiences which showed the manifestation of God's will. To follow Ransom's logic; if the myths were merely metaphors then that would allow for a God whose actions could be abstracted into principles. If the principles to which the God acted could be easily understood by man, then it is a short step to a God who could be understood, or second guessed by man. Ransom wishes to retain the idea of God being essentially unknowable so he proposes a vision of myth which points back to historical particularities rather than poetic universalities. As a way of further explaining this highly eclectic notion, Ransom provides a further clue in the foreword to the British edition of God Without Thunder. There he points with approval to the text of A New Commentary on Holy Scripture, including the Apocrypha, edited by Bishop Gore and Professors Goudge and Guillaum, and especially to an essay and note it contains on "The Mystical Interpretation of the Old Testament". In the essay, Darwell Stone writes:

Mystical interpretation explains the additional or allegorical or spiritual sense which is held to underlie the literal significance of persons or events or things or sayings. The principle of it was recognised by St Paul in his phrase "which things have further meaning"<sup>26</sup>

Ransom maintains that noting the additional meaning of a religious event should not be confused with simplifying the story to a spiritual essence. That would imply that

God's actions could be abstracted and understood. According to Ransom's understanding of myth, it should be retained in as much concrete detail as possible and not simplified to an essence. He argues:

..a myth which has flourished once will perish when its devotees become too squeamish, and begin peeling off its wrappings of concrete detail, saying that they are interested only in the "heart" of its mystery- but finding in the end that the heart which they arrive at is only an abstract essence which has no blood in it. The modern preacher now addresses his public prayers to an abstraction, and is careful not to require of the worshippers more than the minimum of that indignity that consists in entertaining a lively image of the God. In this way the priest abdicates his function-though I do not doubt but that it often seems to the priest that he must choose between losing his myth and losing his constituency. <sup>27</sup>

This idea, of the gritty detail of the story being essential to its purpose, also has its roots in an earlier attempt to systematise Ransom's aesthetic. In his letter to Robert Graves of December 2nd 1925 Ransom's discussion of "Religion and Gothic" included the declaration:

Gothic gives *undigested* facts, concrete reality in all its stubborn identity...and the usefulness of Gothic.... is to resist the too-easily philosophising process and hold us to the fact. <sup>28</sup>

There is a clear congruence between the two positions; in both Ransom calls for an understanding of myth not for some abstract content which it is imagined to have, but instead for particular information about the relationship of God and man. However this idea does seem to be contradicted by one of Ransom's other assertions. Later in God Without Thunder he argues that for myths to be effective, they must chime with the social conventions of the society which would subscribe to them; "we cannot hope to find our religious experience in a religion which causes us

to blush", and he suggests certain aspects which modern man would find unacceptable:

We respond sympathetically to a myth only if it suits us racially and culturally. We are now living in cities for the most part. Not only do we not live in an agricultural society, but the agricultural life has come to be held in a certain scorn. We could not therefore, probably if we were perfect creatures of our age, accept with relish a mere Rain-God, or a God of vegetation. We have no longer any particular relations with the beasts, and we could not care for totemism or a myth which defined God as an animal. We have developed a rigorous censorship with regard to expressing the bodily affections, particularly those of sex- how then could we feel happy with myths which publicly employed phallic images for God.<sup>29</sup>

The extract above does not coherently follow from Ransom's previous argument. Ransom seems to suggest that the believer attempts to satisfy a pre-existing desire for belief by selecting or rejecting a religious myth according to his prejudices. Yet Ransom's attempts to suggest why men should reject Rain gods, or Phallic gods on cultural grounds is essentially irrelevant to his argument: his text is concerned with why contemporary man, the product of a culture rooted in Judeo-Christian belief, has rejected the Judeo-Christian God. Contemporary man should have no cultural reason for rejecting the God of the Old Testament unless Ransom at root believes that scientific rationality has so taken over modern life that it determines the deepest beliefs and desires of modern man. If it has, then the book which Ransom is writing is destined to be worthless. Ransom also fails to ask why pre-scientific man's beliefs were not strong enough to ensure his resistance to science. If man has a tendency to believe in those myths which are attuned to his way of life and which reflect his deepest cultural prejudices then why did pre-scientific man, enjoying the idyllic cohesion of action and belief allow science to drive a wedge between belief and practice?

The list is unsettling in other ways. We have explored the contradiction which lies at the heart of Ransom's claim that we only respond well to a myth if it suits us "culturally", but Ransom's uncharacteristic claim that we respond "racially" to religious belief must also be examined. This suggestion can be tied to one of the other characteristic tropes on display in God Without Thunder; namely Ransom's

opposition of the Occidental and Oriental minds. Ransom suggests that the Occidental mind is essentially the scientific mind, logical and abstracting. The Oriental mind, which he may have associated with the Jewish Sydney Mtrron Hirsch is intuitive and spiritual. Ransom finally approves the Oriental type of mind more than the Occidental, squaring it with his opposition to science and Platonism, and his valorisation of the poetic or artistic comprehension of reality. Here he similarly seems to use the term "racial" to convey all sorts of prejudices, and suggest all manner of intuitive thought processes. In short he uses race as a shorthand for a particular conceptual strategy. This problematic issue does not receive any more attention in this book, though in I'll Take My Stand Ransom's essay similarly uses the idea of the "European" and "American" minds as shorthand definitions of complex ideological tropes.

Ironically, Ransom's argument for a coherence between cultural prejudice and religious belief make a better argument *for* a metaphorical interpretation of myth than against. A metaphorical interpretation of myth makes a distinction between the central, universal meaning of the myth and the mere concrete detail of the narrative. In other words a metaphorical interpretation of myth would prevent the myth from seeming like a story about primitive people which modern people might balk at. Ransom's argument also seems to portray the believer as a consumer, selecting the God which pleases him most from a list of alternatives. If this had been Ransom's point he might have used it as another demonstration of modern man's crippling self-consciousness. In fact, oblivious to the many contradiction now inherent in his argument he presses on.

Ransom goes on to suggest what are for him the important qualities of myth:

- (1) The myth must be important...
- (2) The myth must be vivid and energetic...
- (3) But the myth must, on the whole, be in keeping with our taste...
- (4) A myth must be institutionalised, or become a social possession ...

The fourth point on this list insists that the myth is not just a story; the myth is believed and encoded as part of the society's conception of itself: "The myth maker is a legislator whose legislation has been adopted."<sup>31</sup> Accordingly the myth will define the relationship of a society's members to God and to nature. Therein lies its central importance for Ransom.

Many critics have found Ransom's use of the term "myth" to be perplexing. Wayne Knoll notes: "Ransom saw the religious mentality as mythic, that is fictive".<sup>32</sup> In fact Ransom never explicitly defines a myth as a simple invention. In addition to the various explanations he gives of the function of myth, he comes closest to a definition when he says: "The myth of an event is a story, which invests the natural with a supernatural background, and with a more-than-historical story." Rather than being an invention, a myth is to Ransom a codification of information, a type of primal narrative, the roots of which may lie in a historical, or factual event. In other words, myth may represent all the fascinating concrete details of the actual experience by invoking the presence of a force which is not natural. Knoll's emphasis on the fictive side of myth is misleading; there will be points in the narrative where it is unclear if Ransom "believes" in God or in a god- but one of his central ideas does not have that idea so easily at its heart, awaiting the discovery of the sceptical critic. If we emphasise myth as a type of narrative, rather than myth as an imaginative fiction then Ransom's problematic text may become slightly clearer.

But Ransom goes beyond asserting that myth is a story; he maintains that myth is a "psychic necessity":

It is my idea that the myth should be defined for the modern unbeliever in terms of its psychic necessity - by a sort of natural history of supernaturalism. This is a quite unorthodox way to justify orthodoxy, but I imagine it is the only effective way of persuasion that remains now."<sup>33</sup>

Thus far Ransom's argument could be seen to suggest that myth is a way of communicating the truth about God in a systematic way, which takes for granted the needs of followers to have examples of their God which are easily understood and

concrete. In his next step Ransom steps far beyond even "unorthodoxy". He emphasises that gods are created to fill a pre-existing psychic need in human beings:

The Gods who have been legislated into official existence by the will of the whole society are defined in myths which tell us what they are like; how they have performed in the physical universe and in human history; what sort of conduct they require from their subjects, the members of the community. The sanctity, majesty, divinity, taboo, with which they are invested, are to represent in the most binding way possible the power and determination of the social will that lies behind them.<sup>34</sup>

This assertion seems to suggest that a god or God is the invention of man, the manifestation of a social desire on behalf of mankind to create a figure more powerful than himself, in order to articulate certain innate feelings about man's helplessness in a dangerous world. This statement seems paradoxical when related to what has gone before. Ransom had begun by complaining that science had reversed the proper relations between God and man - now he seems to be maintaining that God is in some way an invention of man's in the first place. This suggestion, which is of course atheistic, seems to make Ransom's work into a kind of social anthropology of religious belief. Man has a psychic need to tell himself stories about how his Universe works; the myth of an inscrutable God is a way of encoding man's feelings about the immensity and unpredictability of the world in which he lives. However a few pages later, Ransom is scathing about anthropological attempts to explain the development of religious belief, noting at one point after describing an anthropologists view of befuddled primitive man and his search for fire: "What a primitive man this is! No beast was ever so incompetent!"<sup>35</sup>

Rather than exploring the implications of the statement he has made, and without noting that it absolutely contradicts the sense of his book thus far, Ransom continues. Now he attempts to explore religion's role in the determination of society, and is

concerned with what type of society a people who believe in God may create:

The religion of a people is that background of metaphysical doctrine which dictates its physical economy...this view of religion might be called, scornfully or otherwise, an "economic interpretation of religion." But I would feel obliged to add the following reservation: Religion is not necessary for all political economies, but particularly for a certain kind of political economy...There are in the main just two economies: the one is the religious and the other is the secular. The former is the conservative, the latter is the progressive. In history it is always the conservative policy which the religionists favour.<sup>36</sup>

This idea will find fuller discussion in Ransom's explicitly Agrarian writing. The agricultural world, which is grouped here with religious observance and artistic enterprise, lives in what is for Ransom the only rewarding relationship to nature. The industrial, scientific and technological world is exploitative of the natural world in both practice and theory. Ransom seems to have come to yet another idea of myth; that of myth as code. The belief in God, he seems to suggest, encodes certain forms of behaviour. It is unclear if Ransom is aware how far he has travelled in his defence of orthodoxy; since his position from now on is decidedly unorthodox. A sign of this unorthodoxy at a semiotic level is that from this point onwards in the text Ransom displays the confusing strategy of using technical terms in highly idiosyncratic ways, often giving a personal meaning to terms with very different conventional uses-later he will discuss "Ghosts" which he defines as abstract intellectual personalities - now he comes to the sort of religionists whom he most admires: he terms them "Fundamentalists."

### **Fundamentalism**

Ransom declares that religious Fundamentalism displays the attitude towards nature which he approves of; "My own view is that all the first class religionists are Fundamentalists"<sup>37</sup>. His definition of the "religious history" of "a good Fundamentalist" is however rather unorthodox: he begins by seeing the Fundamentalist as a philosopher, who moves from the belief in a principle onto a myth which embodies that principle. Ransom maintains that myths are more concrete than principles.

And yet the belief in myths requires some "imagination":

And yet still he had not done all. The enjoyment of myths in general does not quite make a Fundamentalist. The act that yet remained was *to pick out of all the myths a particular one to profess and to keep*. This act he performed; and at that stage he became a full fledged Fundamentalist.<sup>38</sup>

The Fundamentalist, to borrow Kant's phrase again, has legislated his God into being, not found his somewhere, and if he means business he will stand by his own legislation.<sup>39</sup>

This is a definition of Fundamentalism which would have enraged the Fundamentalists. The Fundamentalist Christians who were growing in number in the Southern states at the time Ransom wrote, would not have conceived of their devotion to their God as a choice to be made between rival "myths". Indeed what *made* them Fundamentalists was their certainty that they knew of a God who was true, concrete and living and who had revealed His truth to them. Nor could they think of themselves as having legislated their own God into being. In their conception of the world, an actual God, who was their creator, was revealed to them. To suggest that He was created by them to satisfy some pre-existing personal psychic need would be offensively heretical, and blasphemous.

Keiran Quinlan suggests: "It need hardly be stressed that Ransom's manoeuvring here has nothing whatsoever to do with a defense of the southern Fundamentalist churches..."<sup>40</sup> In fact the matter is not so clear cut, and Ransom's use of the term cannot just be dismissed as a piece of perverse misnaming. Though the Fundamentalists wouldn't recognise Ransom's description of their methods or beliefs, Ransom writes in such a way as to suggest that he is well aware of the reality of Fundamentalism. The manner in which he deals with the discussion seems to suggest that he was aware that his readers would relate his "Fundamentalists" to the Southern Fundamentalists. He writes provocatively:

I will try to imagine the religious history of a good Fundamentalist as a perfectly intelligent course of action. There seems to be nothing preposterous in that combination.<sup>41</sup>

Of course the final line would not be necessary unless he noted that to many of his reader there *was* something preposterous about the combination of Fundamentalism and intelligence. That gesture seems to take cognisance of the stereotype which had attached to Fundamentalism during the 1920s. During the Scopes anti evolution trial in Tennessee, the Fundamentalists had been held up by Northern journalists to personify all that was benighted, backward and ignorant about southern culture. HL Mencken warned in Prejudices in 1926 "heave an egg out of a Pullman window and you will hit a Fundamentalist almost anywhere in the United States today"

[They] are thick in the mean streets behind the gas works. They are everywhere where learning is too heavy a burden for mortal minds to carry, even the vague, pathetic learning on tap in the little red schoolhouses. They march with the Klan, with the Christian Endeavour society, with the Junior Order of United American Mechanics, with the Epworth League, with all the Rococo bands that poor and unhappy folk organise to bring some new light of purpose into their lives. They have had a thrill and they are ready for more. <sup>42</sup>

It is in the context of the equation of Fundamentalism with ignorance, prejudice and reactionary politics that Ransom has to make his rhetorical gesture, to quell the immediate response of his readers. Ransom then immediately goes on to delineate different forms of Fundamentalism, by considering the "affair of Dayton Tennessee."

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Ransom characterises the anti-evolution trial in Dayton as a battle between a Fundamentalism which was valiantly defending a myth, and the natural scientists who were militantly pressing the claims of their destructive rationality. It happened that the Fundamentalists believed in a myth which "casually included in its embrace a Ptolomaic astronomy and some natural history which naturalists seemed to have demonstrated to be in error". Ransom declares that the fault the defenders of the myth displayed was in holding all the features of their myth to be equally sacred

when in fact the features of the Ptolomaic astronomical model weren't essential parts of the myth.

They were confronted with a cruel pair of alternatives: whether to admit exceptions to a body of doctrines which they had loyally adopted, and possibly bring them into disrepute, or to continue holding to them in their entirety at the cost of public ridicule".

Again Ransom is contradicting his earlier position. If the Fundamentalists were to willingly surrender some of the concrete detail of the myth they were upholding then they were guilty at one level of abstracting the myth, or seeking to make it into a metaphor for something else. According to Ransom's earlier position, the myth either stands in its entirety or it is lost. Ransom judges that neither "of the belligerents at Dayton escaped with perfect honour":

The religionists were teased into giving battle on a field which they were bound to lose. They were infatuated in their devotion, they were so brave that they were foolish.

But the scientists on the other hand were so naturalistic, and so obtuse, that they lost caste while they were winning the field. They succeeded in their tactics, but they lost in their strategy, for they alienated the public sentiment of the region.<sup>44</sup>

This then was a conflict between the philosophically naive and the ideologically self satisfied: Ransom's language makes it clear that he disparages the self satisfied scientists more clearly. More generally, he concludes that there are good and bad Fundamentalists, and the difference between them is that the good Fundamentalist realises that he believes in a myth; i.e. a narrative. The bad Fundamentalists on the other hand:

..have never understood the God whom they profess. They think he is a natural cause who can be touched, and persuaded to govern natural events for them. They think that in religion they have a way of access to his favour. It is quite as miserable a piece of thinking as any natural scientist cares to call it.<sup>45</sup>

Again, Ransom's conception of the Fundamentalist is far from that which the Fundamentalist himself would have; the existing physical power of God was another

of the bulwarks of Fundamentalist faith. Ransom prefers a sophisticated Fundamentalist who can think himself into a position and make himself believe it, which may be close to Ransom's own rhetorical strategy here. But he does allow that the bad Fundamentalist, even if he is deceived as to the function of the universe, might at least gain comfort, and an incidental benefit from his beliefs:

... the commandments it entails make a better thing out of the lives of the ignorant than their own devices would be likely to do. The office which a religion fulfils for a society is to inform its members of what expectations they can reasonably cherish in this life; and the mercenaries who serve religion do not get precisely the reward which they claim but, do get a code, an occupation, and a career. <sup>46</sup>

In some respects this statement gestures towards existential notions of belief, that the value of faith only comes after the leap of faith, but its tone is at best paternalistic and at worst elitist, since it suggests that self-deception may have the effect of comforting those who are too literally minded to realise the ignorance of their philosophical position. Ransom's defence of Fundamentalism seems to be an eccentric, even perverse position, even if we accept that there is some space between the Fundamentalists of whom he approves and the Fundamentalists of the Southern states. As with his insistence on the importance of myth, he can be seen as rushing to defend those points of religious belief which, in the years before he began to write, seemed to be weakest.

Ransom's intellectually perverse defence of Fundamentalism had however a direct social and political meaning in the precise historical context of the late 1920s. George Marsden writes in Fundamentalism and American Culture :

...at least temporarily [after the Scopes trial until the first few years of the 1930s] fundamentalism was a focal point for the real hostility of rural America towards much of modern culture and intellect. This rural element was not entirely new to fundamentalism. Some tent-meeting revivalists had long been capitalising on anti-liberal sentiments. Yet this element had never before been central to the movement. <sup>47</sup>

By 1930 of course, Ransom was intellectually and practically committed to a movement which was hostile towards much of modern culture and intellect, and which rooted that hostility in a valorisation of the values of the rural South. Given that Ransom was no "tent-meeting revivalist" it is interesting to note that his defence

of Fundamentalism in God Without Thunder occurs at a historical period where "at least temporarily" Fundamentalism is seen as a focal point for those who are critical of modernity. Writing in his book The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism William Hutchison describes Ransom's "co-belligerency with fundamentalism" but classes his defence of a tradition belief as "neo orthodox", not Fundamentalist.<sup>48</sup> Ransom's plan of action at the end of God Without Thunder, such as it is, points the reader back to the orthodox Christian churches, not to the Fundamentalist ones. Indeed in the preface to the British edition of God Without Thunder Ransom goes out of his way to praise the work being done on the bible by Higher Critics, work which was anathema to the Fundamentalists, and was a traditional stumbling block between liberals and traditionalists in the Christian church. Nothing in Ransom's familial or intellectual background fitted him for a defence of fundamentalism. A strategic sense that the fundamentalists were at the cutting edge of the dispute about modernity temporarily justified what otherwise seems like a contrived intellectual posture.

The final stage of Ransom's attack on the scientific method uses what seems to be another paradoxical device; he sets out to prove that the scientists also indulge in worship, by elevating their concepts to the level of gods. The chapter in which he attempts this argument is given the unusual title "Ghosts including the holy". Ransom begins by arguing that he thinks of "ghosts" as the names or personalities ascribed to objects which have a postulated existence; he cites the example of scientific ether which had a postulated existence in order to satisfy a scientific theory. Other, supersensible objects, like England, The Roman Catholic Church or the Twentieth Century, would similarly be "ghosts" because, although they are too large to comprehend fully, they have an ascribed personality. Ransom moves on from this discussion of the "ghosts" which represent certain characteristics to suggest that the belief in the supersensible, or the postulated and imaginary makes the scientist more like the religionist than he assumes. This rhetorical coup is an attempt to argue that the scientists are not disinterested rational observers, but men who

believe their own set of myths. Thus:

He [the scientist] is likely to imagine, for example, that there is no God, but that there is indubitably evolution, or Progress: when God, Evolution and Progress may well be names of the very same sort, and represent the same kind of object.<sup>49</sup>

The myths of the scientist and the myths of the religious man do differ however in the richness of their conception. Accordingly, Ransom describes what he sees as the paradox surrounding the "God" of the scientists:

...so science leads to God, and the God that science worships has at least the prime dignity of a god, that he is sufficiently imposing in his stature.

But the Gods of science are not so great in another sense. as the specific Movers, authors and legislators, they are Simple Persons. They have a "single track" mind, and know but one thing at a time...It is very comfortable to believe that they rule the world, since we understand so well their technique: for it would follow that we can do some ruling of our own. But the sceptical mind does not take hold of such a belief with much conviction.<sup>50</sup>

Thus while the Scientists' god is at least powerful, he is too easily understood to be properly worshipped, since after all he is merely the personification of one force, or physical property. This section of the book mirrors an earlier complaint of Ransom's. Earlier he had argued that scientists wanted a God that they could second guess, and whose actions they could predict. Here Ransom suggests that the gods they have postulated for themselves out of their scientific work fulfil these criterion to the letter. The God of the religionists would be more complex and less comprehensible than these mere principles elevated to the status of gods. This assertion is an attempt to critique the scientists' habitual intellectual defence of rationality, by maintaining that they are no more "rational" than the believer is, and that like him they worship an abstraction: however Ransom has again provided a "defence" of orthodoxy which no orthodox believer would support. How many Christians would agree that their god is the "same kind of object" as Evolution or Progress? Ransom takes liberties in the defence of supposed orthodox belief which no orthodox believer could accept.

After this detailed discussion Ransom's conclusion to God Without Thunder is almost apologetic. After briefly criticising the abstract language and sentiments of an Anglican prayer book Ransom goes on to discuss in some detail why the Greek Orthodox Church is the most truly orthodox and ancient of all the Churches available to worshippers. However, since his own reservations about worshipping in a way which fits the racial and sentimental biases of the individual are in force, he recognises that turning *en masse* towards Greek Orthodoxy is highly problematic and he concludes that the reader who has been convinced by his argument should make every effort to turn whichever church he chooses to worship in back towards orthodoxy. This bathetic ending shows Ransom finally emerging from the highly charged terms of his rhetorical discussion into the cold light of practicality, and finding himself at a loss as to what his speculations might actually imply in practical terms. It seems to stress what the reader may have felt throughout the book; that Ransom is at his happiest in God Without Thunder elaborating the concerns which are long standing parts of his own intellectual repertoire. When these themes are played out Ransom finds himself less confident in his analysis and proposals.

What makes the terms, and the length of Ransom's discussion more astonishing is that many of the philosophers whom he had studied had already addressed, and resolved, most of the issues which he explores. For example though Ransom had read, and obliquely refers to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason he does not address Kant's attempted resolution of the epistemological crisis caused by the incompatibility of Science and Religion. Kant argued that God was not present in the world but existed instead in the moral imperative which pressurised man to improve himself. Science's claims about the nature of the Universe could not dislodge God because God resided in the soul. Similarly, though Ransom almost addresses the issue in his discussion of the faith which the Fundamentalist persuades himself into, he does not come round to an analysis of Kierkegaard's severing of faith and knowledge. Kierkegaard's resolution of the fact that faith cannot be proven, but must be believed, is in one sense the same type of celebratory response to the conflict of Science and Religion that Ransom's book is. Both agree that Religion is not crippled if Science seems to undermine it, and that man must embrace rather than recoil from

the irrationality of belief. The unreasonable aspect of Faith is its very nature. Faith must be leaped into, and the struggle against rationality is part of the struggle of Faith.<sup>51</sup>

Ransom's reason for not endorsing either of these positions is that both Kant and Kierkegaard ultimately glorify the individual. Kant sites God within the individual and Kierkegaard celebrates and relies upon the individual's capacity for faith in the face of the rigours of rationality. Ransom wished to retain a religious system which continually reminded man of his subordinate place within creation. Accordingly he could neither accept Kant's premise, that the withdrawal of God from the Universe could be accommodated if God was seen as working on the human soul, nor Kierkegaard's celebration of individual human will. The logical conclusion of Ransom's arguments indicate that he aspires to nothing less than the re-establishment of an integral Universe, in which the rule of the God of the Old Testament exercised absolute power and received unquestioning devotion. This logical conclusion can be demonstrated by Ransom's rejection of the notion of the trinity, and his diminishment of the Christ-figure to the status of a demi-god. Monotheism clearly has at its root the belief that one principle governs the Universe. A Monotheistic universe in which the God exercised complete control would, necessarily, be a Universe without conflict. Given that this was logically the only conclusion to Ransom's argument it was perhaps inevitable that his practical recommendations to his readers were half-hearted at best. There is little the individual can do to re-establish the monotheistic universe.

Accordingly, God Without Thunder is a religious book in a sense that very few religious readers would recognise; in Modernism and American Protestantism William Hutchison groups Ransom with other non-theologians who produced books on the religious debate for general readers in the 1930s. Joseph Wood Krutch, author of The Modern Temper or H L Mencken who wrote A Treatise on the Gods produced books which, with journalistic flair, attempted to simplify and popularise many of the current debates surrounding religious belief, faith and science. Ransom was certainly happy to pose as an amateur writer, indeed at times he seems to glory

in his status, and he provides a defence of his intellectual amateurism in his text:

God, I should think, is best an object for the speculation of amateurs - men whose human equipment is excellent because it is various and comprehensive, who have relished the fullness of sensibility, who have not been pulled by their scientific tendencies out of all respect for the private individuality of objects and events.<sup>52</sup>

But what strikes the reader about the text is not its amateurism but its astonishing eclecticism. God Without Thunder seems to stress the element of autodidacticism in Ransom's intellectual background, since it reveals both his specialist readings in a wide variety of scholarly disciplines none of which he had any official involvement with, and his struggles to relate, or, as is his aim, unify them. Similarly, despite Ransom's willing adoption of the term "amateur" to describe his generalist approach, God Without Thunder is a book which an amateur reader would find extremely problematic. Its language for example would discourage readers who had merely a general interest in its subject, as this, admittedly decontextualised, extract indicates:

*And that was the very beginning of Occidentalism,: the substitution of the Logos the Demigod for the Pneuma, the Holy Ghost, the tetragram, the God of Israel.*<sup>53</sup>

Nor does Ransom's problematic use of language stop at using specialised terms; sometimes he uses normally accessible terms which he chooses to define in idiosyncratic ways. As noted above, Ransom's "Fundamentalists" are quite unlike southern Fundamentalists and his "ghosts" or "demons" are not the ghosts or demons of the general imagination. Accordingly, grouping Ransom with Mencken and Krutch is highly inappropriate. Krutch and Mencken aimed to popularise an abstract debate, whereas Ransom aims at abstracting and analysing a popular misconception. In God Without Thunder he analyses a popular belief which he has diagnosed and subjects it to rigorous intellectual and philosophical investigation.

In form, Ransom's book is noticeable for its philosophical tone, breadth of reference and dialectical approach which advances its argument by hypothesis and rebuttal. The organisation of the book does not however assist in clarifying its message. It moves from an attack on a recent truce between scientists and religionists to a "frank" analysis of the nature of religious belief, to a discussion of the nature of the abstract speculations of scientists. It ends with a coda which calls for those readers who have been convinced by its arguments to turn back to orthodox worship, though it has not convincingly shown that it understands the nature of orthodoxy. Accordingly the subtitle to Ransom's analysis might have more accurately been cast as "an unorthodox defense of unorthodoxy".

In that Ransom is returning to the relationship between science and the natural world, an issue that had previously exercised him, the theologian Wayne Knoll accuses him in his essay "Ransom as Religionist" of "fighting a private war"<sup>54</sup> on this issue. Ransom can certainly be seen as focusing his own intellectual concerns through a discussion of recent events. But his argument can also be seen as a distant echo of another rather more public war. The terms of Ransom's attack seem to echo some of the skirmishes in the long battle between Modernists and Traditionalists in the American Protestant churches.

In The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism by William R. Hutchison, Religious Modernism is characterised as a complex trope which incorporates three essential elements: primarily religious modernism is the conscious and intended adaptation of religious ideas to modern culture, secondarily the idea that God is immanent in human cultural development, and revealed through it, and thirdly religious modernism displays a confidence that human society is moving towards realisation of the Kingdom of God.<sup>55</sup> Ransom offers an idiosyncratic critique of the second and third items on this list, and portrays science as the agent through which these modernistic notions could work. In the debates between the modernists and Traditionalists in the American church "human cultural development" was often equated with humanitarian social reform or with institutions which attempted to put the humanitarian beliefs of the New Testament into effect in the social world. Ransom was indirectly engaged with these issues as will be indicated later, but if we

substituted "scientific" for "cultural" in the second section of the definition of religious modernism above and added "through science" to the third we would come close to a paraphrase of Ransom's major intellectual complaints in God Without Thunder. Ransom is concerned that advocates of scientific development use rhetoric to justify their experimentation which equates scientific discovery with the immanence of God. The comprehension of the rules and systems which determine natural forces is then taken as the "revelation" of God's immanence. The end result of scientific exploration is, according to the scientists, that something approaching the Kingdom of God is nearing on Earth. In recognition of what he sees as the pervasiveness of this idea, Ransom even entitles one chapter in his book "Christ as Science"<sup>56</sup>. If Ransom is picking up some of the themes of the Fundamentalist/Modernist clash in the American churches then he seems to be doing so more to provide his own case with an added historical authority than to participate in an argument which was essentially resolved by 1930, in favour of the modernists.

Keiran Quinlan argues that Ransom suffered from a loss of religious faith and that God Without Thunder is an attempt to articulate "an alternative philosophy to live by"<sup>57</sup>. It is hard to find any conclusive evidence that Ransom suffered a loss of religious faith which left him in need of any other overarching system to replace it, and as has been noted, one of the conspicuous failures of God Without Thunder is in articulating anything approaching an alternative philosophy to live by. Rather, this is an avowedly intellectual enquiry proceeding along lines which had concerned Ransom. In keeping with his own declaration that it was a book of "homebrew theology" its dominating principle is eclecticism.

Does the text, as William Hutchison suggests "re-establish the whole body of Christian mysticism at one stroke" ; although Ransom's discussion of myth is confused and confusing, his advocacy of belief in myths as a psychic necessity, does not mean that he finally advocates belief in something which is known to the worshipper to be untrue; a myth for Ransom is a code, not a lie. It is coded behaviour in which a socially advantageous action is given a non utilitarian justification, or which an intellectual belief leads to behaviour which is itself socially or personally efficacious.

One early British review in the Times Literary Supplement of 24th December 1931 chose to focus the contradictions at the heart of the text in the intellectual contradiction which was inherent in Ransom's biography:

Some books are such impersonal comments on life that they are virtually anonymous. Others bear so clearly the impress of the author's personality that an inquiry into his antecedents and the circumstances of his life is at once prompted.

"God Without Thunder" belongs to the latter class of books. Mr Ransom is the son and grandson of theologians and is well known in America as a poet. his parentage explains the subject of his studies and his calling accounts for his treatment of it. Mr Ransom was also a Rhodes Scholar from Tennessee whose mind was steeped in the gracious humanism of Litorae Humaniores. In such circumstances many men would have reviled the images of their father's gods; but Mr Ransom has chosen to accommodate the thunderous Deity of Dayton to the sweeter temper of Oxford. <sup>58</sup>

It seems appropriate to begin our comprehension of Ransom's aims by noting how he begins his book, with the declaration: "I am the son of a theologian and the grandson of another but the gift did not come down to me." That declaration is an expression of modern angst, that the forms and rituals of the past no longer fit the modern world. Ransom believes that the forms of the past contained much that was valuable and that the present has debased those forms. Yet he recognises that the present is so radically different from the past that in order to get back to those valuable older forms of behaviour, new justifications of orthodoxy have to be found. This explains his desire to offer a "full and frank" account of the religious experience, which aims to begin with first principles. Accordingly the difficulty of this text, its extraordinary eclecticism, its confusing use of language and even its bathetic ending, all draw from its paradoxical position of being a text which valorises historical actions, but attempts to rejustify them for the present. For all his defence of an integrated past, Ransom's book is an eloquent example of the intellectual dislocations inherent in modernity. Ransom's book declared its intention to justify orthodox belief by unorthodox means. Its contention was that the modern world needed to seek different paths to belief than the pre-modern. Though the text is self-declaredly an attempt to

celebrate pre-modern values, what its perplexing incoherence indicates is how "modern" its author's characteristic mental processes truly are. Ransom's attempt to "frankly" analyse the religious experience finally sees him endorsing a view of God which has Him as the intellectual creation of those who would worship Him. Ransom might be seen to have reversed cause and effect. Many might believe, even now, that religious belief offers not only spiritual rewards to the individual, but also a sanction to personal behaviour which indirectly benefits the larger society. Few would argue, as Ransom does, that that realisation may provide a defence of faith.

### CONCLUSION

It is important to follow the twists and turns of Ransom's argument in some detail in order to demonstrate the extraordinary position which he eventually puts himself in. Having begun by arguing against the arrogance of a science which had supplanted God and elevated man to the position of supreme being, he goes on to suggest that God was a creation of man's anyway, an imposed idea which served as a form of supernatural sanction for habitual cultural activity. He then argues that the only respectable religious belief is fundamentalism, but a fundamentalism which actually creates the god which it worships.

What does a reader who has followed Ransom's argument through the complex structure of God without Thunder actually emerge with as a validated position? Wayne Knoll writing in "Ransom as Religionist" concludes:

Paradoxically, in his intense and committed desire to restore to God His thunder, Ransom proffered a concept so thin and bloodless, so abstractly ethereal that it was psychologically impracticable for anyone but himself, and even he did not persist.<sup>59</sup>

What then does Ransom's extended argument actually signify? Perhaps Ransom

comes closest to suggesting the significance of his text when he notes:

...the doctrine which defines God, and man's relation to God, is really a doctrine which tries to define the intention of the universe, and man's proper portion within this universe. It is therefore his fundamental philosophy, it expresses the conviction he holds about his essential destiny, and it is bound to be of determining influence upon his conduct.<sup>60</sup>

Orthodox belief, in Ransom's view serves as a powerful way of enforcing a non alienated and aesthetically pleasing relationship between man and society. At the root of Ransom's argument then lies the desire to return to an idyllic and harmonious life, one which pertained before the encroachments of science into the existence of man. God Without Thunder is an attempt to argue man back to the position of intellectual and social integrity which Ransom aspires to. As such the impulse behind it is towards the harmonious vision of a life which affords aesthetic pleasure. This practical aesthetic appropriately develops out of Ransom's more explicitly philosophical aesthetic speculations of the 1920s. If there is a religious view here at all, it is ultimately one which raises aestheticism to such a level that the pleasures of the aesthetic and the rewards of religious belief are interchangeable. The next distinct stage in Ransom's career was to provide a more detailed justification for the aesthetic rewards of non-alienated life.

## **Chapter 4: A Political Aesthetic.**

### **Introduction: Pre-Agrarian Politics**

More than a decade after Ransom, Tate, Davidson and Robert Penn Warren turned their energies from poetry to Agrarian agitation, Allen Tate dramatised the moment in which their conversion became inevitable:

I told [Ransom] that we must do something about Southern history and the culture of the south. John had written, on the same day, the same message to me. The letters crossed in the mail.<sup>1</sup>

Tate's assertion of a convenient coincidence suited his rather theatrical sense of historical destiny and implied that the tug of history pulled the Fugitive poets towards public affairs, but it should not be taken at face value. It served the purpose of the Agrarians to maintain that the parlous state of the South *demand*ed commitment from them, as it served to imply that the South's defence demanded a similar commitment from others. This aspect of the Agrarian experience demands considerable scepticism. In the sixty-six years since the publication of I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition<sup>2</sup> the volume and its participants have received detailed critical attention. The events leading up to the publication of the book have been exhaustively explored and the philosophy which it expounded has been variously linked to Confederate defences of Slavery, Jeffersonian agrarianism, Twentieth Century fascism and ecology.<sup>3</sup> What has received little notice is the fact that Agrarianism did not represent John Crowe Ransom's first involvement with conservative politics.

In September 1912 whilst a twenty five year old student at Oxford, Ransom had written to his father enclosing a long essay on Lord Hugh Cecil's book Conservatism which had absorbed him for some weeks. In the accompanying letter Ransom notes "I have done a good deal of writing this summer, and it has helped greatly to clear up my ideas. ...I find that I never know my own thoughts till I write them down."<sup>4</sup> In the essay Ransom criticises Cecil's seminal statement of conservative philosophy for

leaning too heavily on the twin pillars of justice and the code of Christian ethics as revealed in the New Testament. Ransom queries the latter notion:

... the reader can hardly fail to question its relevance in discussing the rival merits of political parties: The New Testament is concerned with individual dealings, and leaves it to political theory to pronounce upon the proper functions of states.

With regard to the notion of the centrality of "justice" to conservative philosophy, Ransom is no less scathing.

No application of the author's standard helps us to fix any logically consistent meaning to his frequent use of such terms as justice and rights. His logic is especially bewildering when he comes to the subject of fiscal policy. Here is a conspicuous example of argument that gets nowhere: "The simple consideration that it is wrong to inflict an injury upon any man suffices to constitute a right of private property where such property already exists." The attitude of conservatism towards recent schemes of discriminatory taxation is simply to oppose any legislation that tends to effect a redistribution of wealth as being confiscatory and unjust. This attitude requires a faith in the justice of the previous distribution; but conservatism dispenses with that requirement by the easy method of denying that justice has anything to do with the acquirement of wealth in open competition. It is insisted that no ethical question is involved in the original distribution of new wealth but that grave injustice attends any redistribution of old wealth. This distinction would seem more convenient than logical.

Accordingly, after much consideration, Ransom rejects Cecil's argument for conservatism, as it seems to him to be insecurely based in philosophical theory and prone to being self-serving in the philosophy which it does evoke. Ransom's rejection of a purely legalistic and fiscal conservative model in 1912 is highly significant given his Agrarian allegiance in the 1930s to a conservative model of traditional social and economic values. Ransom's involvement in conservative political activity during his twenties went well beyond the reading and analysis of books. In 1953 Ransom wryly recalled that he had often spoken at a Tory debating club

during his time at Oxford:

I can recall almost verbatim the following passage in one debate.

*Mover of the Question*:-I may as well say, Sir that I am a Tory, and I take that to mean that I am dedicated with all my being to the defense first of my Sovereign, and then of my Church.

*Interruption from the Floor*:- Shame, Sir! Do you not think a Tory is obligated to defend the Empire?

*Mover*:- I accept the gentleman's rebuke and thank him for reminding me. I am dedicated to the defense, thirdly, of the Empire.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to stress Ransom's early involvement in Conservative political activity to counter Tate's idea that Agrarianism drew its participants into politics for the first time. The apparently ambiguous stance of the Fugitive towards its region and the critical view that Ransom's early poetry was above all formalist has contributed to a view of this phase of Ransom's career as a sudden swerve towards a political commitment to the South. In fact, Agrarianism was an adult form of the political conservatism which had marked his intellectual development during his early twenties.

The significance of Ransom's unpublished thesis on Cecil's Conservatism, and its centrality to the development of his thought is indicated by its clear influence on Ransom's first published article. This first published piece was also, significantly, on a political and philosophical rather than literary topic. "The Question of Justice" published by the Yale Review in 1915 deals with the moral rights of both combatants in the First World War. In it Ransom attempts to argue the case of both protagonists by applying classical notions of justice. Given his later political allegiances, one choice of comparison early in the essay seems ironic:

Each as I conceive it stands on solid moral ground; and the tragedy is that two good ideals should prove so irreconcilable. This is not a new phenomenon. It happened in our own Civil War, where the North was fighting with the loftiest missionary zeal to emancipate an oppressed class, and the South was fighting for political freedom. The motives of the present war are quite different from those, yet, perhaps they may be similarly paired off as motives of equivalent moral worth.<sup>6</sup>

Ransom argues that in deciding which of the national protagonists has justice on its side the neutral spectator has to define which sort of justice is most relevant to the case in hand. There are two different forms of Justice: the British side appealed to a form of static justice which ultimately derived from Aristotle and which argued above all that the status quo represented justice, the Germans supported a form of creative justice which would give to each man what he merited. In practical terms this would allow Germany the acquisition of new colonies. This distinction between the justice of the status quo and the justice of the fair redistribution was exactly the point which lay at the heart of Ransom's thesis on Conservatism.

The article also reveals an implicit tension in Ransom's thought: on the one hand he aims to apply classical notions of justice to the combatants in the war, on the other he incidentally reveals that his own conception of society is not based on classical philosophy but is instead organic. Mr Norman Angell, whom Ransom characterises as an 'economic pacifist' had suggested that the solution to Germany's 'problem' of overcrowding was not to expand into colonies, but to encourage emigration. Ransom's rejection of the notion reveals that he holds a traditional conservative view of society's structure:

Mr Angell's theory amounts to the suggestion that Germany can turn her surplus population over to such countries as the United States and Canada, and be assured that they will find there all the necessities of life. He forgets that man does not live by bread alone. It is like asking a father who is too poor to bring up his children to turn them over to a rich man whose ways of life he does not approve. Mr Angell shares with other economists the old fallacy that the only values that appeal to human nature are those computable in pounds and pence.<sup>7</sup>

As early as 1915 then Ransom believed that that the nation could be compared to a family, that economic values were not as important as traditional human values and that the identity of the national community was so important that it should not be diluted by emigration. These views which descended from his exposure to conservative philosophy and debate at Oxford indicate that Ransom had a conservative notion of society long before he turned that analysis to the service of

Agrarianism. The roots of that activity accordingly lie much deeper than an exchange of letters in the late 1920s.

In the secondary and critical literature which has grown up around I'll Take My Stand and the Agrarian project, much attention tends to be paid to finding the discrete historical event which triggered some of the Fugitives into Agrarian activity. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the most commonly cited event tends to be the Scopes trial which had served to polarise opinion within the South<sup>8</sup>. In fact a more broadly rhetorical view of I'll Take My Stand is needed, one which closely examines the strategies used by the group in pressing their case. Underpinning this discussion is the knowledge that Agrarianism represented a systematic political exploration of the vital second element in Ransom's aesthetic; the need for man to live in harmony with his world, a harmony which would incidentally afford him an aesthetic pleasure.

### **Reading "I'll Take My Stand"**

One problem lying in the path of any cultural analysis of Agrarianism rests in the fact that the discipline which could provide a methodology for such an analysis was itself the victim of a concentrated Agrarian attack. Donald Davidson's war on the sociologists of Chapel Hill was conducted on two fronts. At a theoretical level Davidson conceived of sociology as being based on abstraction, the study of mankind in the mass, using scientific data to categorise human behaviour. At a political level, Davidson feared that the sociologists aimed to stress, by comparative tables and graphs the "backwardness" of the South when compared to the North and accordingly that sociology aimed to reform and alter the distinctiveness of Southern life.<sup>9</sup> Davidson maintained that the complexity of society could only be appreciated from within, by an observer who was a participant in the complexities of social existence rather than one who aspired to the impartiality of a scientist. As Louise Cowan has pointed out, Davidson was never able to "consider himself as a detached observer of society, isolated from it, and in a sense alien to it."<sup>10</sup>

Rather than being drawn into the details of the sociological debate which ran on throughout the 1920s and 30s, it is important to look instead for a theory which would allow an analysis of the clearly political nature of Agrarian activity. Though Alexander Karanikas incoherently attempts to apply nationalist theory to the Agrarians in his book Tillers of a Myth, John Shelton Reed's much briefer discussion in A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians after Fifty Years<sup>11</sup> is much more suggestive. Reed, having lamented that there is no such thing as a theory of sectionalism, argues in "For Dixieland: The Sectionalism of I'll Take My Stand" that nationalist theory can provide insights into the backgrounds of the Agrarians

Another characteristic of nationalists is that they are drawn from precisely the least traditional elements of the nation. Their educations, their occupations, their travel and their location in the cities distance them from the culture they propose to defend. Moreover they often begin at some distance from it: it is almost a commonplace that nationalists are likely to be from the geographical fringes of their nations, and they are often from minority groups as well.....

... It may be, in other words, that most of the Agrarians were *born* at some distance, geographically and psychologically, from the dominant tradition of the South... It appears that someone has to stand at a certain remove from his culture in order to see it as something that can be dealt with, accepted or rejected by an act of the will. Analysed and *used*.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, Reed is extremely unclear as to which nationalist movement could provide an appropriate model against which to consider the Agrarians' activities. Accordingly he indiscriminately draws examples from Gandhi, Michael Collins the Irish nationalist, Clemenceau and the young Turks. This widely drawn list clearly includes nationalists of very different kinds, representing everything from anti-imperial nationalists to the leaders of national states who invoke chauvinistic national sentiments in time of war.

If we are to consider the South in a nationalist analysis then it is vital to be clear about the specific details of the Southern situation. A political unit which had enjoyed a certain autonomy had, after a military defeat been conquered by and absorbed within its Northern neighbour. As a section within a larger state the South might be compared with a Catalonia, or a Basque country, or a Scotland. Crucially, unlike the first two examples, the South in 1930 was bereft of those characteristics which a nationalist might consider to be advantages in pressing his case. It is clear

that the inhabitants of the South did not speak a different language from the North (though they displayed a distinctive, and characteristic range of accents), did not stem from a different ethnic group (there were clearly different ethnic groups *within* the South, but the South was not differentiated in any simple way from the North by ethnicity) and did not display different religious beliefs (although the strength and persistence of religious belief in the South may have marked it out from the North) Most of the "cleavage points" which have allowed successful nationalist movements to prosper did not apply in the South of the 1930s. Indeed it may seem to an outsider that one of the strongest marks of Southern distinctiveness was a faith and belief in Southern distinctiveness. As one critic has argued "The American South is therefore not a place or a thing; it is not a collection of folkways or cultural distinctiveness. It is an idea".<sup>13</sup>

One of the most influential texts in recent nationalist analysis is Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities.<sup>14</sup> In place of identification with blood, race and soil, the tainted trilogy of nationalist belief, Anderson proposes a vision of the nation, and of nationalism which places *self* identification at its core. This model is highly relevant to the South in general and to the Agrarians in particular. Because Anderson's model identifies the role of shared ideas in shaping national identity, it clearly gives a privileged position to intellectuals and writers, who serve to generate, debate and refine such ideas. This stress on the central importance of imaginative coherence in nationalist debate addresses one noticeable aspect of I'll Take My Stand; the sense in which the various writers are generating different versions of the South; occasionally versions which are in direct contradiction to one another.

This would also explain why some of the Agrarians including Ransom saw the North's dominance of the South as being essentially ideological. The professional historian Frank Owsley's contribution to I'll Take My Stand seems to provide a very

modern view of colonisation at the level of ideology:

... the South either had no history or its history was tainted with slavery and rebellion and must be abjured. There was for the Southern child and youth until the end of the nineteenth century very little choice. They had to accept the Northern version of history with all its condemnations and carping criticisms of Southern institutions and life, with its chanting of "John Brown's Body," its hanging of Jeff Davis on a sour-apple tree, its hosannas to factories and mines and the growth of populations as the only criterion of progress and the crying down and discrediting of anything agrarian as old fashioned and backward. As time rolled on, the chorus of "John Brown's Body" swelled even louder and louder until the lusty voices of grandchildren and great-grandchildren of rebels joined the singing.<sup>15</sup>

Owsley's contribution to the volume combines a fairly sophisticated analysis of intellectual indoctrination with virulently primitive opinions on race, including the observation that after the Civil War the South had been "turned over" to its former slaves "some of whom could still remember the taste of human flesh and the bulk of them hardly three generations removed from cannibalism."<sup>16</sup> Owsley's contention that the South had been indoctrinated out of an understanding of its own past, and therefore had lost contact with its own history clearly points however to another important aspect of the Agrarian project.

Although as a volume I'll Take My Stand is clearly posed against what the authors see as the disruptive effects of modernity, in another sense it is profoundly modernist because it recognises the historical dislocation which has befallen the South. In order to re-engage with the past the Southerner, Tate famously observed must take hold of his tradition "by violence"<sup>17</sup>. That suggests clearly that, in Tate's view, the historical chasm which separates the Southerner from an organic relationship with his past must be bridged by an act of the will. If even intellectuals in the South, including professional historians had lost a sense of their own organic relationship with the past then it follows that those who would wish to re-establish the connection needed to present a vision of the past, albeit a partial one. In one sense that is what the contributors to I'll Take My Stand had to do, and what, drawing upon different strands of the South's traditions, they did present in varying forms.

Though it was Tate who most clearly stated the need for the Southerner to make a conceptual leap to regain his own history, Ransom's work also contained a defence of the necessity of belief:

The Gods who have been legislated into official existence by the will of the whole society are defined in myths which tell what they are like; how they have performed in the physical universe and in human history; what sorts of conduct they require from their subjects, the members of the community. The sanctity, majesty, divinity, taboo, with which they are invested, are to represent in the most binding way possible the power and determination of the social will that lies behind them. The commandments are the oldest and most fundamental prescriptions which society has imposed upon itself.<sup>18</sup>

If we erase the idea of godliness from this passage (or perhaps complete the erasure of the divine which Ransom seems to be effecting himself) then we arrive at a vision of a belief which is generated by a society to reflect its own vision of itself, and thereafter serves to codify social conduct within that society. Ransom suggests that powerful social myths determine the relationship of human beings within the ordered form of a conservative society.

To apply the argument of Ransom's religious text to the political one in hand, myths about the South would also serve to express "the power and determination of the social will that stands behind them". In I'll Take My Stand attractive myths about Southern life are mobilised in an attempt to establish a coherent relationship with the past, and thus ensure that the South resists modernity and follows a path which is clearly related to, and a natural development from its own distinctive past experience.

Deciding how I'll Take My Stand should be read is itself problematic. Is it a political programme; a collection of essays on a common theme; a poly-vocal literary text, or all, or none of these? Do we first have to decide which genre the text fits within and draw our analytic method from that, or will a decided methodology allow us to determine its generic nature?

Richard Gray in Writing the South: Ideas of an American Region, having noted I'll Take My Stand's apparent contradictions, values the book for, not despite, its inconsistencies:

Unity, coherence, and inclusiveness may be a part of the critical orthodoxy, eminently respectable literary virtues...but we can value a book just as much for its intractability, its eccentricities and paradox, and the circuitous, endlessly labyrinthine routes on which it manages to lead us. <sup>19</sup>

Perhaps a useful idea to posit in this context of ideological incoherence is "Amateurism", meaning here not shoddily produced but non professionalised: although some of the authors of I'll Take My Stand were professional historians the key figures were poets, and literary intellectuals, turning to political discourse as amateurs. The further meaning of Amateurism, with the added sense of being open, participative, is an important idea in I'll Take My Stand, which, in that it afforded the opportunity for twelve writers to contribute their, often disparate views on the South, can be seen as a forum, a place of discussion, almost as a literary form of the front porch which was the site of the Fugitive discussions and was a traditional Southern site of convivial meeting and debate.<sup>20</sup>

Above all, it should be remembered that the authors of I'll Take My Stand were not interested in writing social science; they didn't aim at an analysis of the South's past, or of Southern identity; instead they wanted to make an appeal to the precedent of Southern history as a springboard to political action in the present. Perhaps then they can be excused if their history or economics, or political arguments were loosely defined, or even contradictory; I'll Take My Stand was not a scholarly book, instead it aimed towards action.

### **Ransom's Contribution to I'll Take My Stand**

Ransom composed not just the first essay in the book, but wrote the introduction largely himself.<sup>21</sup> To the reader, his contributions would frame the ones which followed. In crucial ways too his essay is very different from those others, and in many ways is much more closely related to his own earlier work than to the current concerns of his fellow Agrarians. Ransom's essay and introduction are so formalised

that they constitute a type of rhetoric. The use of that term may initially seem eccentric: Ransom's way of writing about the South seems very different to traditional Southern political oratory and seems to be very different from that of Thomas Wolfe or W.J.Cash. Nevertheless, in its highly formalised structure and dialectical oppositions, Ransom's essay "Reconstructed but Unregenerate" is clearly an example of writing in a highly rhetorical mode.

Ransom's contribution to I'll Take My Stand functions by setting up a series of rhetorical tensions. From the outset his contribution declares that it will represent a sectional interest, and one which can be read as a critique of more prevailing values:

It is out of fashion in these days to look backward rather than forward. About the only American given to it is some unreconstructed Southerner, who persists in his regard for a certain terrain, a certain history, and a certain inherited way of living. He is punished as his crime deserves. He feels himself in the American scene as an anachronism, and knows that he is felt by his neighbours as a reproach.<sup>22</sup>

Ransom's introduction here immediately sets up a model of historical progress which will recur throughout the essay. "Backwardness" had been part of the rhetoric used against the South since before reconstruction, pressing home on the South the need to modernise. Here Ransom uses the language of progress against its supporters. The Southerner "looks back" not nostalgically but in reaction to the American's headlong, undignified rush, valorised as "progress", into the future. Ransom also charges the very terms "America" and "American" with ideological meaning. Throughout this essay, the terms "American" and "America" are used in specifically ideological ways. "America" is used to represent two different geographical areas; firstly the whole of the United States, and secondly, purely the Northern States, which are measured against the South as a different region. "American" is also an ideology which is distinct from the Southern way of life and anathema to it. In short the term represents two distinct geographical entities and a separate ideological force which can effect either geographical entity, but never arises purely from the South, being rather imposed upon it. What remains consistent within these three usages is the sense of the distinctiveness of the South, the way in

which the Southern way of life functions as a critique of the way of life of the larger "America" and the way in which the Southern way is pressurised by the American. Ransom indicates that the South has been devalued and marginalised:

Of course he (the "unreconstructed Southerner") is a tolerably harmless reproach. He is like some quaint local character of eccentric but fixed principles who is thoroughly and almost pridefully accepted by the village as a rare exhibit in the antique kind.<sup>23</sup>

Ransom warms to his theme, describing how the idea of the South is used as 'local colour' to enliven the American scene:

They (Americans) like to use the South as the nearest available locus for the scenes of their sentimental songs, and sometimes they send their daughters to the Southern seminaries. Not too much, of course, is to be made of this last gesture, for they do not expose to this hazard their sons, who in our still very masculine order will have to discharge the function of citizenship, and who must accordingly be sternly educated in the principles of progress at progressive institutions of learning.<sup>24</sup>

In 1941 Wilbur J. Cash, whose The Mind of the South Richard H. King has recently suggested was a response to the same crisis of political modernity which galvanised the Agrarians<sup>25</sup>, anatomised the figure of the 'Southern Belle' in the hagiography of southern politics. Cash wrote:

...the Yankee must be answered by proclaiming from the housetops that Southern Virtue, so far from being inferior, was superior, not alone to the North's but to any on earth, and adducing Southern Womanhood as proof.

The upshot, in this land of spreading notions of chivalry, was downright gyneolatry.<sup>26</sup>

Ransom however took a very different meaning from this trope of feminine virtue. In February of 1927 Ransom had written to Tate mentioning a review that had just been published in a Dallas newspaper. George Bond had criticised Ransom's poetry for being insufficiently Southern, but Ransom dismissed the complaint by suggesting to

Tate that Bond's values were debased:

...the Southernism he has in mind is a recent feminised (or as you say, sentimentalised) vulgarism that represents a terrible declension if I know anything about the values.<sup>27</sup>

In Ransom's thought 'feminsiation' represented a loss of power and resort to sentimentality. Accordingly for Ransom to cite the attractiveness of the South for Yankee businessmen to send their daughters to complete their education is a sign for him of the South's decline into powerlessness. In the process he argues that the figure of the Southern Belle is a way of keeping the South in a passive role. Here Ransom, in the service of renewed Southern political power is subverting a favoured Southern image. It is an early sign of the way in which Ransom will set up charged oppositions in this essay, often turning or distorting traditional ideological tensions to achieve his rhetorical ends. Accordingly, a few pages later Ransom reverses the imagery often applied to American life which stresses the youthful vigour of American society: Ransom suggests that the Southern way of life is "mature" whilst the American way is adolescent:

Boys are very well pleased to employ their muscles almost exclusively, but men prefer to employ their minds.

The more measured way of life of the South will;

appear stupid, necessarily to men still fascinated by materialistic projects, men in a state of arrested adolescence; for instance, to some large if indefinite fraction of these United States.<sup>28</sup>

As many critics have noted, this moment reverses a whole set of cultural metaphors about the "New World" with its innocence and vigour opposing the decadent Old World of Europe. But the central dichotomy which Ransom's essay sets up is Continental; In the first section of his essay Ransom maintains;

The South is unique on this continent for having founded and defended a culture which was according to the European principles of culture...England was actually the model employed by the South.<sup>29</sup>

throughout Ransom's essay, England is a model of stability and security, of man's proper relationship with the land. He maintains that "England did her pioneering an

indefinite number of centuries ago...and has been living pretty tranquilly on her establishment ever since." This image addresses an idea from 19th century American historiography, that the North and South of the nation had been settled by different parties. Whilst the North had been founded by the Roundheads after the Civil War, the South had been settled by the English Cavaliers. Accordingly, the North had developed a utilitarian, progressive society, and the South had developed a settled, hierarchical rural society. Ransom seems to accept the idea, for rhetorical purposes; accordingly he suggests, since the traditions of working with the land have been passed down from generation to generation;

...they (the English) have elected to live their comparatively easy and routine lives with the tradition which they inherited, and they have consequently enjoyed a leisure, a security, and an intellectual freedom that were never the portion of pioneers.

The pioneering life is not the normal life, whatever some Americans may suppose.<sup>30</sup>

This section of Ransom's essay serves as a critique of the guiding idea of pioneering, of conquering the American soil. He indicates that pioneering could never serve as an ideological description of the history of the South, which was settled early, and securely, and later in the essay he will link the pioneering spirit of American society to the onward march of industrialisation, which he maintains threatens the South.

The stability of English society is contrasted with the inherent instability occasioned by the American desire for perpetual change:

The human life of English provinces long ago came to terms with nature, fixed its roots some-where in the spaces between the rocks and the shade of the trees, founded its comfortable institutions, secured its modest prosperity - and then willed the whole in perpetuity to the generations which should come after, in the confidence that it would afford them all the necessary human satisfactions. For it is the quality of a seasoned provincial life that it is realistic...But it is the character of our urbanized, anti-provincial, progressive, and mobile American life, that it is in a condition of eternal flux. Affections, and long memories, attach to the ancient bowers of life in the provinces; but they will not attach to what is always changing.<sup>31</sup>

Ransom's argument is that progress is not an evil in itself, as long as it aims at the clearly defined goal of achieving a settled and improved state of peace with nature. Since his argument must necessarily prove that the South achieved this measured life, and did not fall into the American trap of fetishising progress, he quickly explores Southern history in those terms. In the process he provides another powerful statement of his view of the "aesthetic" way of life:

There are a good many faults to be found in the old South, but hardly the fault of being intemperately addicted to work and to gross material prosperity. The South never conceded that the whole duty of man was to increase material production, or that the index to the degree of his culture was the volume of his material production. His business seemed to be rather to envelop both his work and his play with a leisure which permitted the activity of intelligence.<sup>32</sup>

Ransom's vision of antebellum Southern Society is of a settled squirearchy constituted of authoritative social relationships. Though he refers to the "loosely graduated social orders, not fixed as in Europe" it is clear that his model of the past is one in which order was maintained through hierarchy. The settled social life of the region he maintains led to the South developing an existential nature opposed to, and balancing the separate existential nature of the North:

The Northern temper was one of jubilation and expansiveness [after the Civil War], and now it was no longer shackled by the weight of the conservative Southern tradition. Industrialism, the latest form of pioneering and the worst, presently overtook the north, and in due time has now produced our present American civilisation. Poverty and pride overtook the South; poverty to bring her institutions into disrepute and to sap continually at her courage; and a false pride to inspire a distaste for the thought of fresh pioneering projects, and to doom her to an increasing physical enfeeblement.<sup>33</sup>

Ransom's view of cultural difference here is highly ideological; at the time he was writing "Reconstructed but Unregenerate" his only direct experience of living in England had been during his period as a student in Oxford before the First World War. Accordingly his view of "England" is essentially monistic, even touristical. The highly rhetorical nature of Ransom's use of the term "England" can be demonstrated by an event which occurred after the publication of I'll Take My Stand. Ransom was invited to defend the ideas it contained at a series of public debates. In one of those

public debates, in Richmond Virginia Ransom accused his opponent Stringfellow Barr of being a closet socialist:

...since he wants state action he is a laborite - he is prepared to let labor become a political party and run the government as in Great Britain. But let us go further yet. Socialism of the variety practiced in a half way house like Great Britain is a programme of regulation which... approaches every day closer to communism.<sup>34</sup>

At one level this merely refers to the argument, expounded by the other contributors to I'll Take My Stand that industrialism leads inexorably to Communism. Indeed, until the last moment, the volume might have been called Tracts Against Communism. At another, there is a sense that the "Great Britain" Ransom refers to, which is being taken over by protocommunists, is very different to the "England" which displays a habitual and settled conservatism. The two ideas seem to function in different realms; the first in the political environment of a public debate, the second in the rhetorical arena of Ransom's argument. There, England is so much a rhetorical, idealised bargaining counter, that when, in the real world it changes its political colours, it has to be identified by a new name.

Nor, even within Ransom's argument in I'll Take My Stand do "Europe" and "America" divide on clear lines; at one point he declares;

The progressivist HG Wells has outlined very neatly his scheme of progress, the only disheartening feature being that he has had to revise it a good many times, and that the state to which he wants us to progress never has any finality or definition. Browning and Wells would have made good Americans, and I am sure they have got most of their disciples on this side of the Atlantic; they have not been good Europeans.<sup>35</sup>

Here the philosophical convictions applied to certain national groupings become (even more) tenuous as they are contradicted by the real characteristics displayed by individuals from the nations involved. Ransom's strategy here seems to be that the terms "American" or "European" describe a habitual ideological position; they do not seem to indicate that all Americans, or all Europeans have to behave in the ways suggested. Though the term used is racial, the characteristic ascribed is not. Tate held much the same view: in 1929 Tate wrote a letter to Donald Davidson which stated: "We must be the last Europeans, there being no Europeans in Europe at present."<sup>36</sup>

In general, race holds a paradoxical position in Ransom's argument. The logic of his argument about the European nature of the South is at least partly racial; he suggests that an English form of cultural and economic development had occurred in the South because the South was habitually settled by English emigrants. Accordingly, one follows "English" ways if one's forbears were English. This tendency too can be noted in Ransom's earlier life. When at Oxford Ransom had travelled during a vacation throughout Europe, his letters to his family were full of racial and racist observations about the people whom he met. At one point he wrote:

While there are many fine faces in Germany...I have not seen in either English or American faces, though possibly in French, anything like the very great proportion of coarse and brutal expressions that strike one very forcibly while travelling in Germany.<sup>37</sup>

In this essay though, one racial issue connected with the South is notably absent; Ransom does not discuss slavery in the South.

The issues of blackness and of slavery in the Old South, and in the Agrarian view of the South in the future, had almost caused the volume to fall apart before it was begun. Robert Penn Warren's essay had been judged by Donald Davidson to be overly sympathetic to liberal views and to the opinions of the New South. It had nevertheless been included with alterations by Davidson. If Ransom does not address blackness as an issue it is because he habitually elides the experience of Black Southerners, declaring;

Slavery was a feature monstrous enough in theory, but, more often than not, humane in practice;<sup>38</sup>

which is an optimistic gloss on reality. Further, his declarations on the behaviour and characteristics of "the Southerner" are clearly only applicable to white Southerners, and to few of them. His case that:

The arts of the section, such as they were, were not immensely passionate, creative and romantic; they were the eighteenth-century social arts of dress, conversation, manners, the table, the hunt, oratory, the pulpit. These were arts of living and not arts of escape; they were also community arts, in which every class of society could participate after its kind.<sup>39</sup>

can only be sustained by ignoring the lives of most of the Southern population before the Civil War. The work of subsequent historians upon the characteristics of the slavery system, and on the experience of black slaves show the passage above as a piece of whites-only rhetoric. In one sense though Ransom was clearly addressing a white Southern audience, for whom a characteristically partial vision of history was traditional.

As if to emphasise the highly theoretical nature of his discussion, Ransom is peculiarly brief when discussing what Southerners should practically *do* to escape from their current situation of enthrallment to industrialism. His practical programme, limited almost to a coda at the end of his chapter, consists of two options. Firstly he suggests that Southern leaders could "arouse the sectional feeling of the South to its highest pitch of excitement in defense of all the old ways that are threatened"<sup>40</sup>. Secondly he suggests that the South could pool its forces with the agrarian movement in the Mid West, to resist the encroaching industrialisation. In this respect I'll Take My Stand can be portrayed as an intellectuals' programme which had the effect, for a short time, not of galvanising the South, but of placing the intellectuals who wrote it at the centre of Southern political debate. Removed from the possibilities of a tightly constructed rhetorical discussion, and placed in the environment of public debate, Ransom's tightly argued speeches tended to be swept away by the barnstorming oratory of his opponents.<sup>41</sup>

Before examining the significance of Ransom's stance in I'll Take My Stand it is instructive to look at the fascinating moment in "Reconstructed but Unregenerate" in which Ransom addresses the contradiction inherent in his use of "England" as a unitary emblem for Southern aspiration: Scotland. Suddenly Ransom argues that the South should be like Scotland; distinct and yet part of a larger whole; he declares that then it would be:

A very local and peculiar culture that would none the less be secure and respected. And Southern traditionalists may take courage from the fact that it was Scottish stubbornness which obtained this position for Scotland; it did not come gratuitously; it was the consequence of an intense sectionalism that fought for a good many years before its fight was won.<sup>42</sup>

In The Mind of The South W.J.Cash would compare the South to Ireland in a famous passage; "Not Ireland nor Poland, not Finland nor Bohemia... was ever so pointedly taken in the very core of its being as was the South" <sup>43</sup> Ransom means something rather different by his use of Scotland. He does not wish to suggest that the South is a colonised territory, dominated by an imperial power. Rather he wants to suggest that the South could have an honourable and distinct identity within a kind of Union with the North. Yet Ransom's use of Scotland here as an example of a secure political section is paradoxical at a number of levels: firstly, in 1930 there were a number of Scots who would not have accepted Ransom's description of Scottish culture as "secure and respected" and did not believe that "the fight was won"; many of them would articulate their claims for greater Scottish autonomy in terms not dissimilar to those used by Ransom in I'll Take My Stand.<sup>44</sup> At one level then, his use of the idea of "Scotland" is as emblematic as his deployment of "England." Scotland, he believes, is secure at the level of its culture, which can be read as the culture of the South is, as a critique of the larger culture of which it is a qualified part. The argument here is paradoxical; the South, with its own various State legislatures, is in Ransom's argument, less secure in its position within the United States, than a Scotland which had in 1930 no indigenous government at all. Similarly the "peculiar and local" culture of Scotland, is likely to be, according to his own argument, merely ornamental, as much an embellishment to the life of a powerful neighbour, as the South which is "the nearest available locus" for "sentimental songs".

It may seem that Ransom's rhetorical discussions in I'll Take My Stand have much to do with politics and little to do with aesthetics. Yet underlying the various rhetorical strategies which have been closely analysed above is Ransom's belief that a certain way of life offers an intrinsic aesthetic pleasure. Ransom's defense of the way of life of the Old South offers a particular version of this phenomenon. To cite his pregnant example again:

The arts of the section, such as they were, were not immensely passionate, creative and romantic; they were the eighteenth-century social arts of dress, conversation, manners, the table, the hunt, oratory, the pulpit. These were arts of living and not arts of escape; they were also community arts, in which every class of society could participate after its kind.<sup>45</sup>

If we consider this brief point in comparison with the discussion above of Modernism, which it is remembered, Ransom saw as a manifestation of modernity on the aesthetic plane, it is clear that Ransom is here presenting a vision of a particular non-alienated aesthetic relationship with society. This underlying theme should be noted, even in the next distinct phase of Ransom's progress, which takes him into an extremely detailed engagement with the political and economic process.

### **Agrarianism: the Next Phase**

During the 1930s, the group were stung by the accusation which greeted the first volume that they were "type-writer Agrarians".<sup>46</sup> In fact, Paul Conkin notes, a variety of practical plans were discussed in the months before I'll Take My Stand was published:

Other practical proposals at the time of drafting I'll Take My Stand included "support for consumer boycotts, direct aid to farmers, direct opposition to the Republican Party (the party of industrialism), and [they] even held out the possibility of a new agrarian political party if they could not capture or control the Democratic Party."<sup>47</sup>

After the publication of first volume the group attempted to put the meat of economic analysis on the bones of their rhetorical and historical observations. Ransom turned his energies to researching and writing a book which would provide a thorough-going economic analysis of the effect of the capitalist economy on the South and of the possibilities offered by an more humane economic alternative. The economic research connected with this book occupied him for almost two years between 1930 and 1932, and it was completed while Ransom was in England on a Guggenheim Fellowship.

After its rejection by a number of publishers Ransom wrote to Tate that he was unhappy with the book and it was assumed that he had destroyed the manuscript.<sup>48</sup> A copy of the unpublished manuscript to Ransom's missing book Land! now lies in the Fugitive Archive in Vanderbilt University. To date it has not received any critical analysis, and this thesis offers the first detailed reading of this vital element in Ransom's developing Agrarian thought. The manuscript is one of the missing links

in Ransom's career. To any student of the political phase of Ransom's life it is a highly significant document. Its existence is almost as important as a discovery of Ransom's "Third Moment" document would be for a full analysis of his aesthetics.

### LAND!

It is clear from the introduction to Land! that Ransom intended it to be a natural sequel to I'll Take My Stand. In the Preface to Land! Ransom notes of I'll Take My Stand that:

Perhaps its chief significance lay in the fact that here were twelve men of presumptive intelligence standing together on some principles rather at variance with the orthodox doctrines of the American economic society.<sup>49</sup>

He acknowledges that the book was inadequate as far as detailed economic proposals were concerned and did not set out in any detail how an Agrarian life could be recovered. "So" he states "I have written the present little book". Whereas I'll Take My Stand was a group effort, Land! has not been written with "an imprimatur" from the group, but Ransom declares that:

I shall be happy if my colleagues or the public find in it a sort of economic sequel to the group book.<sup>50</sup>

Yet if Land! is to be seen as a sequel to I'll Take my Stand, it is a sequel on a slightly different theme. Ransom carefully attempts to orientate his new book according to the new economic crisis facing the South as a result of the Depression. This book is not to be seen merely as another declaration of sectional interest. "Nothing" he declares "of importance in this book applies solely or peculiarly to the South." Whilst the South is to be seen as the section in which the Agrarian tradition still exists most strongly, the focus of the book will be on Agrarianism and on economics rather than on the South.

In one sense though Land! is reminiscent of one of Ransom's earlier books. In God Without Thunder, Ransom had attempted to go back to first principles in order to reconstruct the roots of Christian belief: in Land! he attempts to work back to the earliest principles of economic, in order to suggest where, at some prior point, a wrong turning was made by the capitalist economies of the West. As in God Without

Thunder Ransom defends his amateur status, indeed he declares that his amateurism gives him greater insight than any expert.

I am not professionally or technically an economist. In saying this I shall be anticipating a good many of my critics. Nevertheless I shall not pretend to be prostrated when I say with it a sense of my incompetence. The amateur with all his disabilities may quite conceivably have a certain advantage over the professional; he may sometimes be able to make out a wood when the professional, who lives in it, can only see some trees.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, Land! is rooted very clearly in the Depression. The manuscript displays a pressing sense of economic crisis, and a profound awareness of the social reality of economic failure. At one point Ransom declares:

The capitalistic or molecular order is threatened with extinction.<sup>52</sup>

If I'll Take My Stand was criticised for being unrealistic, even utopian, Land! displays a recognition of immediate economic reality.

... the capitalists are probably both wearied and frightened by the ex-farmers that crowd the doors of the mills and walk the streets of the city looking for employment, and even by the little capitals that come in from the liquidated farms looking for safety.<sup>53</sup>

The text declares its contemporaneity at many points. Ransom begins his first chapter by noting that capitalism is based on competitiveness with one's neighbour:

We are engaged in a kind of civil war, though hostilities have not been declared, and scarcely even intended.....

I suppose this way of putting it is hardly too strong in April of 1932.<sup>54</sup>

The fruits of Ransom's extensive research in economics make themselves clear as he attempts to follow much the same approach he had used in God Without Thunder: he wants to understand the economic process as once he had hoped to understand the religious. Accordingly he tries to provide a simple analogy for economic activity. Surprisingly given his stated concern to resist the *social* atomisation of industrialism, and given his hostility to science, his analogy comes from chemistry.

The economic world is atomic:

Here was the theory. Every one of us was providentially equipped with a special service which he could perform for others and in return for which he could expect to obtain their services. It was as if there were so many atoms of humanity who yet were not meant entirely for the solitary state but for a communicating fellowship. The butcher swapped wares with the baker. The atoms assisted one another; they were economic atoms.

But that does not begin to describe the intricacy of our economic pattern. There was not only the simple order of uncompounded services, such as the loaf baked in the one-man bake-shop. There were services that were performed, and could only be performed, by large numbers of atoms in concert; that is, by molecules. The wares put up for exchange were mass products or molecular products strictly. They were the work of companies, corporations, cartels, and came out of factories and industrial plants. The picture of the world in 1929, so far as Americans could see it, was not the picture of so many separate point-like economic atoms but the picture of congeries of atoms, or molecules, which were already big and growing bigger. The atoms had gone molecular.....

... The more familiar name of the molecular structure is capitalism. The terms I have used are perhaps crude ones but I think they will do for sketching in outline. Capitalism means plants and factories with owners and employers; but it rests everywhere on private consent, and its benefits, if it has any are to private persons. The capitalist enterprises are molecules, and in theory it would seem that they cannot operate to the hurt of the atoms, that they cannot really go wrong.

But they have gone wrong. The novelty is that they have gone wrong in great numbers, and all at the same time. They are at a stand-still, waiting to see whether they will disintegrate or pick up again. And in the meantime every private atom connected with them is involved in their distress.<sup>55</sup>

Ransom's analysis of, and solution to the economic standstill lies with the land. He argues that the economic standstill was provoked by excess man-power which ensured that the capitalist system was "swamped beneath a personnel greater than it could assimilate into its economy."<sup>56</sup> This influx of personnel to the cities Ransom blames upon the lessening importance of the land. Both farmers and land workers abandoned the land for the cities and unbalanced the economy. Unsurprisingly, Ransom's solution to the problem lies in a return to the land. He argues that the land holds great unlocked potential. He suggests that a return from the city to the land would create the possibility of economic stability. This section of the text, with its

argument that land should be allocated an economic value can be seen to reflect the dedicated reading of the pamphlets produced by Hilaire Belloc and G.K. Chesterton in support of the English Distributionists to which Ransom devoted himself whilst in England.<sup>57</sup> The return to the land though would have to be to a certain type of farming, one which saw as its aim not the accumulation of capital but the creation of a self sufficient lifestyle for its farmers. Such a lifestyle had indeed been tried by a few of the Agrarian group. Tate had gone to live at Benfolly, a farm bought by his brother Ben, Andrew Lytle had gone to run a self sufficiency farm and even Ransom had moved to a farm a few miles outside Nashville and kept chickens and a pig. Here he notes that whilst a few individuals might go off to the land, their behaviour could easily be seen as eccentric. What is needed is a government sponsored movement:

Some eccentric persons move to the country to escape from an over-competitive society and make a primitive living in comparative peace; the Thoreaus of our time. More important than that, proposals are heard now and again in America for the relief of some local unemployment by colonising the unemployed on the nearest unoccupied land; precisely the thing which the Austrian government is said to be doing, and some of the unemployment committees in the German municipalities, though land is scarce in Germany.

In just such a movement as this lies, I think, our readiest and surest deliverance, provided we will conceive it on a large scale and work it hard.<sup>58</sup>

The experiment will fail though if the farmer sees himself as a business man. The importance of country living is that it doesn't just involve a change of locality; it involves a wholehearted change of attitude; unlike the city capitalists, the agrarian farmers will be self sufficient; their economic survival won't depend on competition which harms one's neighbours.

If there is land for all, they cut nobody's throat by farming it in this manner; and there is land for all. Any man who temperamentally cannot bear to hurt his needy neighbor had better take to the agrarian way of living, and any political economist who deplores the inevitable inhumanity of the competitive scramble might well approve a movement which is capable of enlisting an indefinite fraction of the crowded capitalist society and planting it in an economy which is not mainly competitive. By agrarianism we may restore to our economic life some of the humanity which it lacks today.<sup>59</sup>

To Ransom then, agrarianism is a kind of neighbourly economic theory since it does not depend on harming the livelihoods of those around for its success. Land! also

shows Ransom turning his attention to the wider issue of regionalism, and to what extent the geographical properties of the different regions of the U.S. determine regionalist economies and societies. Ransom is struck by the bounty of his country in terms of land availability and notes that no traveller through North America can fail to be struck by the vast emptiness of the countryside and the teeming population of the city. This contrast, and Ransom's interest in regionalism will be developed in his article "The Aesthetic of Regionalism."

Ransom also attempts in Land! to deal with the failure of I'll Take My Stand: even a dedicated Agrarian would have to note that in political terms his ideas were marginal to the concerns of most Americans. No doubt Ransom's study of economics was an attempt to make his ideals more firmly grounded in recognised and respected theory, but the agrarians had by 1932 failed to make any major impact on the political scene of the United States. In Land! Ransom also attempts to provide an explanation for that fact.

Ransom notes that for most people the true alternative to capitalism is not agrarianism but socialism. He attempts to argue the distinctions between the different political and economic systems. Ransom notes that Capitalism in America is more than a political and economic system; it is almost a religion: "It rests on a habit of mind which is native to us racially."<sup>60</sup> For Ransom Capitalism is marked out by the exercise of the private wills of many millions of individuals. No government can intervene to plan the Capitalist system, it rests upon a frantic individualism. As he writes he notes that this system has led to a surplus of production, fierce competition and over-manned occupations.<sup>61</sup>

Ransom conceives of socialism as being marked out by planning, regulation and control. In America he argues that socialism is so congenitally unpopular that it is highly unattractive to most Americans and poses no real possibility for economic transformation. The choice between capitalism and socialism is a choice between "the violent irresponsible one and the dull tyrannical one." He proposes a model of the true relationship between the different economic models; "the true opposite to

socialism is individualism”, and “the true opposite to capitalism is Agrarianism”:

To contrast them once more, Agrarianism is the economy of self-sufficient men living on the land and taking subsistence directly from it; old-fashioned and slow, but safe; and quite possible for everybody in the economic society if there is land enough. Capitalism is the economy of men who make not subsistence but money; brilliant when they make much money, as often; immensely more productive than Agrarianism because of the principle of specialisation, and creative of ingenious goods that are impossible to the other; but risky, because men live only by trade, and are at the mercy of a trading society over which individuals have no control. But both are simply techniques, and if the economic man is a free individual he may elect the one or the other.<sup>62</sup>

The attractions of Agrarianism are so great that for Ransom it is almost inevitable that the future economic settlement will be between the Capitalistic cities and the agrarian country. The future is so certain that he even goes to far as to suggest what the appropriate ratio between the country and the town should be. He finally decides that the ration of those working on the land and those living in the cities should be 9 to 1.

Whatever the ration however he sees that there will be an economic dualism, a balance between the two kinds of economies. He finally concludes:

There might even be regionalism in the sense that some regions had gone capitalistic and some had gone agrarian. That possibility likewise does not seem oppressive. There would be a constant to-do in the United States Senate between the champions of the regions, but then there is usually anyhow.<sup>63</sup>

Land! would never be published as a book, although Ransom was able to extract two articles from it: The New Republic published “The State and The Land” in February 1932 and Harper’s Magazine published “Land! An Answer to the Unemployment Problem” in July of the same year. At the time Ransom suggested in a letter to Tate that the speed of economic events meant that publishers were unwilling to publish a book which would be out of date before it was published.<sup>64</sup> The reader of the manuscript now sees different problem, ones familiar from Ransom’s other prose text God Without Thunder: it is unclear at whom the manuscript is aimed. Ransom seemed to be repeating the approach he had used in God Without Thunder and falling into the same difficulty. His approach constituted a reduction of the discipline he was studying into its logical components. He would then try to reassemble the

discipline from first principles. This approach was unlikely to satisfy any reader. An expert economist would no doubt balk at many of Ransom's "molecular" analogies, and a lay reader would find many of his visionary proposals hard to grasp or envisage. Whatever the precise objections of the publishers, the text was never published, and Ransom would never delve so deeply into economic theory again. Many of the articles which he was to publish during the remainder of the 1930s were responses to attacks made on the Agrarians or their beliefs. Nevertheless Land! does display the seriousness of Ransom's commitment to Agrarianism, at least during the period of 1930-1932.

### **The Aesthetic of Regionalism**

Though the "Statement of Principles" which began I'll Take My Stand had held out the possibility that the South could co-operate with any other section of the United States which opposed industrialism, it was often criticised as a sectional and chauvinistic document. The formation of the American Review by Seward Collins at the end of 1933 with the intention of publishing material by the Humanists, the Neo-Thomists the Agrarians and the Distributionists, provided the Agrarians with a national outlet for their articles and reviews and encouraged bridge building with other groups. Ransom made overtures in print to other groups in and outside the South, including those who had been hostile to I'll Take My Stand. In 1934 one article proclaimed hopefully: "There are strong signs of a *rapprochement* between Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and Nashville, Tennessee, as to policy and aims."<sup>65</sup> Though no alliance with the Chapel Hill sociologists proved possible, a period of alliance making with the Distributionists culminated in the publication of the joint Distributionist/Agrarian book Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence in 1936. Ransom's contribution to the book was published under a title which might have reflected his own loss of confidence in the movement he had been so closely associated with and indicates that his opinions had developed in a way which was at odds with key Agrarian tenets. "What Does the South Want?" which had previously been published in the Virginia Quarterly Review argued that

whilst the Agrarians had in the past defended the rights of farmers, they were also interested in the other economic groups in the South. Accordingly Ransom goes on to champion an economy based on *petty bourgeois* business ownership: "many owners, little businesses."<sup>66</sup> Ransom's in depth economic research during the writing of Land! had convinced him of the benefit of a mixed economic system; the enemy was not now business *per se* but Big Business. Business development would now allow the South to approach to a new aim; "the South...wants to see its industries developed, so that it may be permitted to approach closer to regional autonomy."<sup>67</sup> This new commitment to regionalism had stemmed out of Land!'s conclusion that "There might even be regionalism in the sense that some regions had gone capitalistic and some had gone agrarian."<sup>68</sup> Though the detailed economic analysis which led to this conclusion was never to be published it inspired Ransom to devote a number of his articles to the general subject of regionalism. These essays mark the beginning of Ransom's drift away from the tenets of Agrarianism as they were outlined between 1930 and about 1933.

In January 1934 Ransom published an essay in the American Review which had he had previously delivered as a talk to the Graduates club of Louisiana University. "The Aesthetic of Regionalism" displays yet another aspect of Ransom's Agrarian project. In some senses it merely develops key Agrarian arguments; it celebrates the values of rural life over urban, it provides a warning of the crushing and homogenising forces of industrialisation upon local life, and it ends with the by now familiar argument "what is called progress is often destruction". Yet it displays a different theoretical approach to its subject matter. It is neither philosophical rhetoric nor economic close reasoning. Instead it attempts to provide a model of the interrelationship of the American regions.

It begins with a curious literary echo. In 1933 T.S.Eliot had delivered a series of lectures at the University of Virginia, which would later be published as After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy. Eliot's first lecture had begun by noting his interest in I'll Take My Stand and describing how after crossing the Potomac by train he had been struck by "differences so great that their extinction could only mean the death of both cultures." The realisation had "strengthened my feeling of

sympathy with those [Agrarian] authors."<sup>69</sup> Ransom begins his article with another Southward train journey. He goes on to describe how his encounter with the native inhabitants had confirmed his own sense of solidarity with them. The parallel is so striking that it is tempting to read the beginning of Ransom's essay as an oblique acknowledgement of Eliot's tribute to the Agrarians.

In 1933 Ransom had travelled with his family to New Mexico, and whilst there had taken them to see some Native Americans. The "Aesthetic of Regionalism" begins as a reminiscence;

The scene first. The eastbound train out of Albuquerque, climbing into the mountains, winds through dry and scrubby country which has a certain fascination for green visitors from the green regions and looks incapable of supporting human life. The visitor was going to pull down his window shade and try and keep cool, when he was surprised by the sight of human habitation after all, and on a rather grand scale; a populous Indian pueblo...it was threshing time. On the outskirts of each town were the threshing floors, evidently of home made concrete and belonging to each family or unit of the tribal economy...The threshers were old and young, of both sexes and beautifully arrayed. They laughed, and must have felt pleased with their deities, because the harvest was a success, and bread was assured them for the winter.

So this was regionalism; flourishing on the meanest capital, surviving stubbornly, and brilliant.<sup>70</sup>

Ransom's engagement with these "regionalists" is that of a spectator, enjoying the sight, and constructing its meaning; the description above is one of imagined perception, rather than observation. Ransom's "Indians" live a life in tune with nature, unalienated from their labour, and innocent of the sophisticated self absorption which constrains those who observe them:

As a matter of fact the Indian life in that one animated scene appeared to the philosophical regionalist one to be envied by the pale-faces who rode with him in painful dignity on the steel train, reflecting upon private histories and futures, but neither remembering nor expecting anything as bright and charming as this.<sup>71</sup>

The paragraph hints at a connection between technology and internalisation; does the steel train create, or merely permit the self absorption of its occupants, is the

"painful" dignity painful because it is unnatural or because it is psychically destructive? The word "steel" in "steel train" is such an irrelevant inclusion that it recalls the "iron horse" description supposedly applied by native Americans to steam trains, so that for a moment Ransom imagines himself and his fellow passengers, as they might be seen by those they watch. The contrast between the "laughing", "beautiful" natives and the pained "private" travellers is clear, as is the contrast between the natural world and the metal, machine world of the train. The significance of these joyful innocents lies not just in peasant worship however: Ransom had begun this essay by stating that on his trip he gathered "two acquisitions; a scene which he saw with his own eyes, and a story he heard on good enough authority." The scene may have been most striking, but the story draws the moral: The second part of the introduction to his essay, is an anecdote recounted to him about the social behaviour of the natives. After one unsuccessful harvest in which the tribe has suffered, the federal government approach the chief with an offer of aid. He declines the money, "because it would be bad for the young men". Ransom valorises this story, as a tale of native wisdom in defence of firm community values, and for obvious reasons; It provides a positive vision of his own argument of four years earlier, that the South should resist the power of the North, whether that power is represented in industry, or in philanthropic generosity. The natives resist the attempt to "enlighten" them;

The chief knew at least as much about this as did the philosophical regionalist, and the latter knew, having been instructed when he was going about making some small purchases of Indian things, that the Indians are liable to set an inordinate value upon highly-coloured articles sold in the white ten-cent stores, which are less than trash when compared with the beautiful ornaments which Indian weavers, potters and jewellers make; that Indian bucks fancy white men's shirts, which are unworthy of them; and that they are apt to part with anything to secure alarm- clocks.<sup>72</sup>

The indian community has been wiser than the South; its elder's message about the danger of giving away traditional values for technology had been heeded. For Ransom the fact that the indian community could, by recourse to its own values, rebuff external destructive forces is both admirable and distressing; his own culture

has failed to conceive of technology as a danger at all. The image of "parting with anything to secure alarm clocks" is an apposite motif of Ransom's view of Southern foolishness. "The philosophical regionalist" who knew "about this" knew because his own region had, in failing to act as the indians did, delivered its own indigenous culture up on a plate to consumers from outside.

If at one level this example is clearly related to the message of "Reconstructed but Unregenerate"; at another the tone, and emphasis of the writing is quite different. It has been noticed that Ransom constructs himself at the beginning of this essay as an observer of the "regionalists", writing of them from outwith their experience, and ironically, in constructing their emotions from his own cursory observation of them, colonialisng their experiences. In "The Aesthetics of Regionalism", regionalism is seen not as a pressurised sectionalism within American culture, but as an unpressurised, natural subset of American society, in which the whole of the US is constructed as a collection of regions;

Coming to the theory, the first thing to observe is that nature itself is intensely localised, or regional; and it is not difficult to imagine that the life people lead in one highly differentiated area of the earth's surface is going to have its differences also...A region which is physically distinct supports an economic unit of society.. and it will develop special ways and be confirmed in them.<sup>73</sup>

Whereas in I'll Take My Stand Ransom wrote in the impassioned defence of one area, from within one type of regionalism, here he is writing from outside, from the symbolic position of the observer. His model here approaches a pluralistic attempt to contain within the body of the land a proliferation of different styles of life. That said, Ransom was pleased to articulate the values of regionalism in terms not dissimilar to those he had used to describe the values of the South: regional values are natural, they arise out of man's relationship with the soil, rather than being abstract, they are practical; in essence:

The aesthetic of regionalism is less abstract (than that of industrialisation), and harder to argue. Preferably it is a thing to try, and to feel...<sup>74</sup>

It depends upon the values of nature, which, Ransom argues, being intensely localised

itself creates localised patterns of work. In time these patterns of work;

...cease to be merely economic and become gradually aesthetic. They were meant for efficiency, but they survive for enjoyment, and men who were only prosperous become also happy.<sup>75</sup>

This idea is of course close to Ransom's reference in "Reconstructed but Unregenerate" to "the arts of living enjoyed in the South". But this essay too presents a pressurised model of regional life. The enemy of flourishing regionalism is here not homogenising industrialism, though it will arise in a moment, but eclecticism. Ransom criticises "eclectic minds"; intellectual tourists who sample from regional cultures, and sever artistic objects from the culture which produced them. The home of the rootless eclectics is the city, and whereas in "Reconstructed but Unregenerate", the city had merited only one line:

The urban South, with its heavy importation of regular American ways and regular American citizens, has nearly capitulated to these novelties,<sup>76</sup>

as that element in the South most likely to be swayed to the industrial cause, here into "The Aesthetic of Regionalism" enters a fully fledged critique of cities; at best cities are a "dangerous necessity" which generate only incidental benefits:

...for example the architecture of capitols and landscaping of parks, the drama and the other fine arts...if it invites the patterns from too many regions, in an excess of hospitality, and tries to compose its arts out of perfectly average materials, its aesthetic life will become a mere formality and perish of cold, and then it will be left with a function which is strictly economic and gross. A Capital of the world would be an intolerable city. And lesser cities, with more ambition than piety...are nearly as bad.<sup>77</sup>

and the "formal", "cold" city, which is rather like a machine, is further unnatural and inorganic:

..the cities of the machine age are particularly debased. They spring up almost overnight, a Detroit, an Akron, a Los Angeles. They are without a history, and they are without a region,...and therefore they are without a character.<sup>78</sup>

Ransom's critique of cities avoids the rhetoric often used by anti urban intellectuals; he does not pick on their excess of population, their mingling of races, their dissolving of social ties; rather he sees them as "without a history" which here means

both that they have appeared suddenly, but also that they are outwith the process of history which unfolds slowly and naturally in man's relationship to the soil. Rather than their populous nature they seem almost ghostly, as if they contain no humans at all; they are the "cities of the machine age", machine-like themselves in their blind desire to continue.

Further the city inhabitants exist in a colonising relationship to the country; deprived of culture themselves they must buy up the culture of the country, not realising that in removing the objects of that culture from their context, they are gaining only exhibits in a vast museum, objects with no life, since the city is a place of the culturally dead. Ransom says;

For now the expert travellers come through, saying, Here is a region of human genius. The region is now "made" in the vulgar sense (useless to a philosophical regionalist) that the curious and eclectic populations of far off capitals will mark it on their maps, collect its exhibits for their museums, and discuss it in their literary essays. But for the regionalists who live in the region it is made already, because they have taken it into themselves by assimilation.<sup>79</sup>

Aside from the irony that at the beginning of this essay Ransom has cast himself, as an "expert traveller", and one who bought some Indian objects, these colonising figures come to assume their real significance as Ransom's terminology starts to shift and he begins to describe the "experts" as "the moderns".

The symbol of the aesthetic torpor and helplessness of the moderns lies in their money...persons with much money, who set the standards of taste, go out and buy in with it the houses, furnitures, vases educations, lectures and doctrines, foods and drinks, clothes and millineries, of all regions, impartially; and people with less money do the same in their degree. To say that is simply to say that the age thinks it has discovered an aesthetic principle which is not regionalism.<sup>80</sup>

Here is the proliferation of culture created by increased spending power. In his invocation of "lectures and doctrines", there may possibly be a criticism of the social detritus of *avante garde* intellectualism with its passions for the exotic and the intellectual. Ransom has a topographical model of culture; the city, home to the rootless, is the locus of the moderns, and the country, home to the culturally secure is

a storeroom ripe for pillaging. This is in a sense a classic conservative critique of money dissolving and reifying social relationships; it is too a criticism of part of what we could term Ransom's trope of modernity.

It is also a vision of colonisation. It is interesting to contrast Ransom's vision of the metropolitan power collecting rural culture for its "maps and museums" with the "census, map and museum" which Benedict Anderson indicates in his *Imagined Communities* marks the way in which "the colonial state imagined its dominion."<sup>81</sup>: a way of intellectually classifying subject regions. The South does not fit the classic model of a colonised region, but Ransom's articulation of its divided nature coheres with many post colonial discourses. In this light I'll Take My Stand, with its emphasis on the ideology of industrialisation can be seen as an attempt to address an intellectual colonisation.

Ransom seems here to be operating two topographical models; a theoretical topography of the colonial relationship between city and country, and an imagined/real topography of the geographical "South". The intersection of these ideas produces fascinating results. It is clear I think, that these ideas are clustered together, and that for example industry, and the city, and the rootless eclecticism of those with too much money, are for Ransom a tightly connected trope. It is reasonable to suggest here that what Ransom truly fears in the disintegration of community relationships, and in changing industrial and economic situations lies the threat of the disintegration of identity itself. This is the notion which underlies much of his concern with the relationship between man and labour for example; Ransom recognises the sense in which the labour of the agricultural worker identifies and validates him through his connection with the changing area of land on which he works. In noting the disruptive effect of industrialisation upon work patterns Ransom is recognising the alienation of industrial labour. In Ransom's image of never ending progress there is also an image of the blind city endlessly working, without recognition of human rhythms, to some robotic logic of its own. Locked in the steel machine, the mind of man becomes morbidly turned inwards.

## Responses to Modernity: The Known and the Learned

That Ransom was the first Agrarian to demonstrate his intellectual independence of the group is not surprising; in many ways he was always a peculiar Agrarian. Of those who came together to write I'll Take My Stand there is a clear division between those who had known one another as Fugitives and who made the leap together into political activity and those who were brought in to the group for their reputations, economic or historic knowledge and political sympathies. Of Ransom, Tate, Donald Davidson and Robert Penn Warren, the Fugitives who became Agrarians something like an identikit progression occurred. Firstly they immersed themselves in Southern history, developing through research a historical sense of their own backgrounds. Then they devoted themselves to writing biographies of key Southern historical figures. Tate wrote biographies of Stonewall Jackson (1928) and Jefferson Davis (1929) and aimed to complete his trilogy with a book on Robert E. Lee, which was never published. Penn Warren's John Brown: The Making of a Martyr was a Southern attempt to demythologise a Northern Martyr. Davidson's long poems "The Tall Men" (1927) and "Lee in the Mountains" provided an outlet for his developing Southern interests, as in a different form did Tate's anti-heroic "Ode to the Confederate Dead." Davidson's "Lee in the Mountains" was a detailed reconstruction of the last days of General Robert Lee, reduced to being President of Washington College, which allowed Davidson to speak for the war hero. All the Fugitives followed a similar path of historical research and historical recreation to become Agrarians. All except Ransom.

By the late 1920s, as the commitment of the others to Agrarianism grew Ransom's poetic talents seemed to have dried up, so in one sense he could not have turned his creative energies to the same Southern themes as his colleagues. By then he was deeply immersed in philosophy and aesthetics, and his growing political commitment helped to transform many of the ideas which would have seen fruition in "The Third Moment" into God Without Thunder. But the fact remains that

Ransom did not undergo the soaking in Southern history that his colleagues did in order to become Agrarians. In many ways Ransom did not know very much about the South at all.

Ransom's argument in God Without Thunder also put him in a paradoxical situation as far as much of the Agrarian project was concerned. There was an intellectual flaw at the heart of Agrarianism which for a man who prided himself on the strictness of his logic must have been hard to sustain. Ransom's argument in God without Thunder had made much of the idea that the rational discourse of science was unable to encompass or understand all of human life, indeed that it was particularly unable to grasp that essence which made human existence most unique and worthwhile. Logically therefore, there must be a residue of special experience which would be inaccessible to reason. Ransom stated as much when he declared: "In order to be human we must have something which will stop action, and this something cannot be possibly be reason in its common sense."<sup>82</sup> At one level this was unproblematic; it even seemed to square with one aspect of Southern life. In one sense the very idea of "the South" was a complex piece of self identification, conducted at the level of "shared" knowledge, in the absence of academic discourse. Significantly, one lesson which could have been drawn from the Scopes trial at Dayton in Tennessee, was that certain sorts of academic knowledge, in this case about evolution, were *intrinsically* destructive to the coherence of Southern identity. One either accepted that the knowledge was correct or one dismissed it wholesale. There seems to be no way to acknowledge the truth of the intellectual knowledge and preserve the integrity of the social fabric, as Ransom would have been acutely aware, after his failure in God Without Thunder to do so. The prosecution of the young science teacher Scopes for teaching Darwinian evolution, and the opportunity that the trial afforded for journalists and commentators to pour scorn on the benighted South indicated to some that the words "intellectual" and "liberal" were interchangeable, and that both threatened the "coherent" values of the South. Sociologists, like Howard Odum in Chapel Hill University of North Carolina were seen by Agrarians like Davidson as covertly offering a negative critique of Southern culture. In the place of sociological data arose what William Taylor, writing in 1963 about Southern self image called a

"historical rationalisation...(this) legendary past and this fictional sociology"<sup>83</sup>. Discussion of that "fictional sociology" was sustained instead by circular justifications in newspapers and magazines. Significantly, one plan that the Agrarians discussed, in the period when their political plans seemed most serious, but which never materialised, was to buy a country newspaper to propagate their views.<sup>84</sup>

But Agrarianism demanded that Ransom offered a defence of the South. This meant that he had to defend what he saw as being distinctive and special about the South, which put him in an impossible position. How can one logically express in prose the nature of something which is inaccessible to rational analysis? For a time Ransom attempted to do just that. In "Reconstructed but Unregenerate" Ransom had noted: "The fullness of life as it was lived in the ante-bellum South by the different social orders can be estimated today only by the application of some difficult sociological technique"<sup>85</sup> which states the problem. In the present only a convoluted academic discipline could approximate the nature of the anti-bellum South; what was then a matter for living is now a matter for difficult intellectual research. This is also what Ransom suggests when he writes of the South's "arts of living and not arts of escape." By the time of "The Aesthetic of Regionalism" the problem was even more acute. Ransom seems to find that language fails him as he attempts to express the attractions of regionalism:

[There is] a subtler, but scarcely less important benefit in that their way of living is pleasant: it "feels" right, it has aesthetic quality.<sup>86</sup>

And later:

The aesthetic of regionalism is less abstract [than industrialism] and harder to argue. Preferably it is a thing to try and to feel.<sup>87</sup>

Which offers no attempt to express what is logically inexpressible. One section

demands particular attention:

... for the regionalists who live in the region it is made already, because they have taken it into themselves by assimilation.

The regionalists receive the benefit of regionalism, not the distant eclectics; it is they who have the piety, and for whom the objects and activities have their real or pious meaning. This piety is directed first towards the physical region, the nature who had always given them sustenance and now gives them the manifold of her sensibilia. It is also directed towards the historic community which has dwelt in this region all these generations and developed these patterns. It is their region and their community, and their double attachment might well seem too powerful and too natural, and also too harmless, to excite the wrath of any reputed philosophers; or it may be the envy, if the philosophers are so abstract and intellectual that they have never sufficiently felt such attachments; yet, whatever the motive be, some philosophers do actually represent themselves as aggrieved by it.<sup>88</sup>

In its attempt to communicate its argument this section almost resorts to mysticism. Objects and activities clearly have more than one meaning; one can be understood by visiting intellectuals, but the "real" "pious" meaning may only be understood by locals. Somehow the locals have "taken it into themselves by assimilation." Nature is represented here as a "who" rather than a "what" and a figure "who had always given them sustenance". At the end, as if angered by his own inability to express what he wants to write, Ransom turns on the "philosophers" who might be presumptuous enough to doubt what he has struggled to express. Only those living in an ivory tower, he seems to argue, could doubt the inexpressible something which should be valued above all others.

If sometimes this difficulty could make Ransom seem desperate, at others he seems churlish. In the article "Regionalism in the South" Ransom again struggles to describe the specific qualities that make the South distinct:

I am sure I could scarcely define it. There would be a great many features of Southern life needing to be cited as peculiar, and it would be hard to make them all fall logically under a few leading principles. What shall the Southern apologist name as the sacred essence? Is it the magnolias, the banjoes, and the pickaninnies. I cannot but sympathise with the gentlemen of the *New Republic* in detesting these pretty properties as the way of salvation. Is it the drawl of Southern speech, and the ritardato of labor? Or is it fundamentalism,

agrarianism, classicism, the Democratic party, or some other variety of abstract doctrine? It is probably a great many things at once....

...Furthermore, I should think that any regionalist feels a certain repugnance against undertaking the display of the charms of his region, the things that make it loved; they do not have to find publication at his hands, they are for private appreciation.<sup>89</sup>

Here Ransom seems to suggest that it is a breach of decorum to describe exactly which qualities he would hope to defend in the South.

In conclusion, it is clear that as a highly sophisticated intellectual Ransom had put himself in a position where the defence of his region demanded that he eschew his intellectual abilities, and indeed his own perception of himself as an intellectual. Indeed in the quote from "The Aesthetic of Regionalism" he seems to argue that intellectuals are peculiarly unsuited to the appreciation of the charms of regional life.

This was not a problem for all of the Agrarians. Davidson proved himself able, without intellectual division to devote himself to the concrete details of Southern culture to the study of folk music, or harp playing. Appropriately, Davidson's contribution to I'll Take My Stand had been an essay on the dangers of alienated art. Even as a Fugitive, Davidson's poems had been of a very different kind to Tate's or Ransom's before he fell under their influence, much more strongly musical and lyrical than theirs. Ransom and Tate were modern and at times fiercely cerebral. Davidson demonstrated another type of mind altogether. Perhaps this too may explain why it was Davidson who stayed an Agrarian long after the others had moved on.<sup>90</sup>

Agrarianism occupied Ransom for almost a decade. As the 1930s began he had been known only as a lyric poet, but Agrarianism thrust him into the political spotlight in the South, and demanded that he defend his views in vast public debates. He wrote more than twenty articles in defence of Southern or Agrarian positions, contributed to two collections of articles and composed a full length manuscript which aimed at analysing the economy of the South in defence of a more humane economic system. In short, his Agrarian activities strongly emphasised the social side of his thought.

Yet as the 1930s developed, his interests in criticism and poetics reasserted themselves, and in 1937 he made decisive break with the South. The next phase of his life was to be concerned with Aesthetics in its most traditional sense.

## Chapter 5. The Critical Phase

### Introduction.

In 1937 when John Crowe Ransom left Vanderbilt University and the South to take up the post of Professor of Poetry at a small, and then virtually unknown Liberal Arts College in Ohio, it seemed to his former academic colleagues in the South that Ransom's move represented a decisive closure of his earlier intellectual interests. Yet Ransom was entering what in many ways is the most influential phase of his life, a phase in which he was to exercise immense cultural power as an editor, critic and teacher. In June 1937 Ransom made clear to his Departmental Chairman at Vanderbilt that his move North would constitute a clean break with Agrarianism, and that the next phase of his career would be devoted to criticism. The offer from Kenyon College appealed to him because, as well as offering him an increased salary, it would allow him to devote more time to his writing:

It is true that, if this kind of writing were on regionalism or agrarianism, I would be going into foreign parts. But I have about contributed all I have to those movements and I have of late gone almost entirely into pure literary work.<sup>1</sup>

Ransom's correspondence with Allen Tate is a useful barometer of his intellectual concerns. Whereas Ransom's correspondence with Tate during the early 1930s was preoccupied with the planning of manifestos, public meetings and political strategy, after his departure from the South it returned to a pattern set in the 1920s, of detailed literary and theoretical discussion.

An early exchange between the two men sets out in microcosm many of the tensions and possibilities which were inherent in this final phase of Ransom's life, a phase defined by his devotion to criticism in general, and in particular to what became termed, after the title of Ransom's book of 1941, the New Criticism. In October 1937 Ransom, by then settled in Kenyon College, wrote to Tate, commending his essay "Narcissus as

Narcissus” Tate’s self-analysis of “Ode to the Confederate Dead.” Ransom wrote.

We certainly need some close modern critical studies; I mean modern as based on some close modern work as object of study; and we rarely get it.<sup>2</sup>

In “Narcissus as Narcissus” Tate briefly speculates on his own psychological motivation for writing his poem, before declaring that:

Poets, in their way are practical men; they are interested in results. What is the poem, after it is written? That is the question. Not where it came from, or why. The Why and Where can never get beyond the guessing stage because, in the language of those who think it can, poetry cannot be brought to “laboratory conditions.” The only real evidence that any critic may bring before his gaze is the finished poem.<sup>3</sup>

Tate’s position seems to have impeccable, even pedantic, logic; if he, as the poet, doesn’t understand his own psychological motivation, how close can any critic come to understanding it? Having discounted the analysis of his own motives from the reading of the poem, and centred the poem itself as the object of study, Tate goes on to analyse the literary form of his own verse in close and serious detail. He notes the rising intensity of the rhythms, registers characteristic rhyme structure and imagery, and discusses the shocking tactic, at least in formal terms, of the intervention of unexpected rhymes.

In his letter of response to this analysis, Ransom insists that Tate holds out for “this condition- unnecessary if you are dealing with a smart editor - that the piece follows a reprinting of the poem itself.”<sup>4</sup> This brief correspondence between the two men presents in miniature many of what would come to be seen as the characteristic strategies of the New Criticism. Tate discounts the importance of the author’s personality and motivation in order to site the poem centrally as the object of criticism. Thus he presents in a vividly accessible form, and predates by nine years, an analysis of what Wimsatt and Beardsley termed the “intentional fallacy”. His reading displays close attention to the formal devices displayed within the poem, a reading practice which would become the quintessential strategy of the New Critics. Ransom in turn urges that Tate insists upon a

presentation of his analysis which would be replicated in the orthodoxy of New Critical pedagogy: the poem abutted by its close and detailed analysis.

Yet in the same letter Ransom unwittingly displays a tension within the New Criticism. He encloses a copy of his own essay, "Shakespeare at Sonnets" which is a close analysis of Shakespeare's poetic strategy in his sonnet sequence. After its publication the essay would briefly become notorious, since it demonstrates the disruptive effect which "criticism" could have on the canon by reaching the controversial conclusion that Shakespeare's sonnets are badly constructed and that their metre clashes with their logical argument. In a comparison between Donne and Shakespeare Ransom suggests, Donne would always be found superior. Ransom may have sent Tate his essay because he felt that the approach with its close attention to rhyme, metre and argument mirrored Tate's own. Yet when Ransom chose to include that analysis in his first collection of critical essays The World's Body it was clear that "Shakespeare at Sonnets" with its close consideration of literary form was the exceptional essay in the collection rather than the rule. In the rest of his first critical text, which was comprised of fifteen essays written since the mid 1930s, Ransom's approach displayed a heterodoxy of critical practice.

In the Preface to The World's Body Ransom is careful to describe the essays it contains as:

... not altogether papers in criticism;... For the author their relation to criticism, and their value, has been this: they are preparations for criticism, for the understanding and definition of the poetic effects. They are about poetic theory itself.<sup>5</sup>

The critical and theoretical approaches displayed within the volume vary widely: the first essay which the collection republishes is "A Poem nearly Anonymous" in which Ransom's analysis of Milton's faithfulness to the literary elegy, and the role of anonymity in the poetic process also involves speculation on the influence of Spencer on Milton, and of the significance of the fact that Milton came from the clergy, and includes Ransom's attempt at a form of criticism based on imaginative empathy, as he

tries to imagine Milton's motivation as he sat to write his elegy. "Forms and Citizens" displays many of the intellectual arguments which had underpinned Agrarianism, as it relates the formal restraints on display in the work of art to the psychological and cultural restraints which sustain society. "Contemporaneous not Contemporary" is an extended compendium review of Russian fiction and "Art and Mr. Santayana" is a rather impressionistic discussion of George Santayana's aesthetics. It is unnecessary to examine each essay in detail; the range of critical responses being delineated here are easily comprehensible from even this brief overview.

It is in "The Cathartic Principle," another of the essays in The World's Body that Ransom makes the declaration which powerfully discriminates his own approach from what would come to be seen as New Critical practice: the essay is a recasting of the central concern which had motivated him from the early 1920s onwards, the need for a coherent and convincing aesthetic system which satisfied the demands of philosophical rigour and of practical application. Moreover Ransom argues, this comprehensive aesthetic theory is essential for the critic, as it is the only way to overcome the limitations of what Ransom terms "close criticism"<sup>6</sup>

The good critic cannot stop with studying poetry, he must also study poetics... Theory, which is expectation, always determines criticism, and never more so when it is unconscious. The reputed condition of no-theory in the critic's mind is illusory, and a dangerous thing in this occupation, which demands the utmost general intelligence, including perfect self consciousness.

I seem to feel that it is unfashionable for the critic to talk about theory by itself; I know that the time comes when he is obliged to do it.

This call itself, with its declaration of the need for an explicit aesthetic justification for critical practice, defines Ransom's critical position clearly. When it is combined with the other characteristic strategies displayed within The World's Body, it serves to problematise many of the easy characterisations, even stereotypes which often define discussion of the New Criticism. If Ransom's view of the role of criticism differed from that usually ascribed to the New Critics, how important and influential was Ransom's criticism from the late 1930s onward?

### Ransom's influence

Ransom's influence on the study of literature in the American academy after his arrival at Kenyon College can be mapped on two axes, the institutional and aesthetic. In the institutional realm should be considered such matters as the appointments Ransom was able to secure for colleagues, the editorial decisions he was able to make as these affected what was published in the Kenyon Review, and the establishment of the Kenyon School of English. The significance of these institutional interventions will be assessed below. First it is essential to reach some understanding of Ransom's influence on an aesthetic level. This can be determined by the analysis of his own theoretical interventions into poetic theory, and by discriminating his approach from that followed by other contemporary critics, from the criticism of the other New Critics, and where necessary against the rather two dimensional version of New Criticism which appears in the work of many critics of this period.

It is important to note at the outset that whereas the New Criticism as a critical grouping is often conceived of as being aesthetically naïve, or anti-theoretical, and allegations of both positions will be cited below, when Ransom came to Kenyon College and began to systematically engage in the close study and analysis of literature, he brought with him the detailed speculations which were the fruits of almost two decades of concerted aesthetic thinking. Indeed, an appropriate image of the aesthetic "baggage" which Ransom took with him to Kenyon, is the very manuscript for "The Third Moment" which, as it has been noted above, Ransom still had in his possession until about 1937. By the later 1930s Ransom's insistence on the vital existential imperative which art could perform, namely the return of the "whole world" to the reader or viewer, was less insistent than it had been in the 1920s. Nevertheless the fact that Ransom saw art as anything but merely ornamental, or escapist, is manifested in this phase of his career by the dedicated intensity which he applied to the critical project.

### **Statements of critical approaches;**

During the 1940s and 1950s, after the publication of The World's Body, Ransom produced a series of important essays which clarified his aesthetic views. As the 1940s began, the assertion of these views was essential to discriminate his work from the mass of the non theoretical historical scholarship which characterised the work of the English Departments of America<sup>7</sup>. As criticism became accepted more and more as the most appropriate, and most rewarding work to be done in the university during the 1940s and the 1950s Ransom's statements of theoretical approach were important in order to discriminate his work from that of other critics. In essays like "Criticism as Pure Speculation" (1941) "Wanted an Ontological Critic" (1941) "The Bases of Criticism" (1944) and "New Poets and Old Muses" (1958) Ransom aimed to systematise his criticism and discriminate his critique from the critical approaches of his peers. Whereas the essays of The World's Body had displayed a full range and variety of critical approaches as Ransom honed his poetic and philosophical opinions through criticism of poets and playwrights, these later essays are habitually critical not of poetry, but of the work of other critics.

### **Wanted an Ontological Critic**

In "Poetry: A Note in Ontology" which Ransom had published in The World's Body he had argued that ontological analysis, which might be paraphrased as the analysis of the poem in its distinctive nature, and as a way of clarifying exactly how that distinctiveness is constituted, was the most significant project facing modern critical theory.

"Wanted: an Ontological Critic" was published as the conclusion to The New Criticism and republished by Ransom as a free standing essay in the late collection of prose work Beating the Bushes. It is one of the central texts in any analysis of Ransom's attempt to make a decisive statement on how and why poetry differs from prose. In the process of attempting to make this definitive statement Ransom discriminates between his

approach and those of other critics, but then Ransom then poses an apparently simple question: which distinctive quality allows us to characterise poetry?:

It is not moralism, for moralism conducts itself very well in prose, and conducts itself all the better in pure or perfect prose. And the good critics who try to regard the poem as a moral discourse do not persuade themselves, and discuss the poem really on quite other grounds.

It is not emotionalism, sensibility or "expression". Poetry becomes slightly disreputable when regarded as not having any special or definable content, and as identified only by its capacity for teasing some dormant affective state into unusual activity. And it is impossible to talk definitively about the affections which are involved, so that affective criticism is highly distinct.<sup>8</sup>

Ransom therefore attempts to dismiss the idea that somehow the essential nature of poetry is defined by its content matter, or by its effect upon the reader. Accordingly Ransom severs one of the links with the traditional defence of poetry, Sir Philip Sidney's "instruct and delight", by rejecting the idea that poetry is in any meaningful sense moral. He also attempts to sever a more modern attempt to characterise poetry by dismissing the work of I.A Richards whom Ransom perceives as having his critical focus wrongly directed, the interest of the critic should be upon the poem, and not upon the supposed effect of the poem upon the reader. A more promising way of differentiating poetry from prose is to look at the structure of the poem: "The good critics come round to this in the end." But

What is the value of a structure which (a) is not so tight and precise in its logical side as a scientific or technical prose structure generally is, and (b) imports and carries along a great deal of irrelevant or foreign matter which is clearly not structural but even objective?... We sum it up by saying that the poem is loose logical structure with a good deal of local texture.<sup>9</sup>

By "structure" Ransom means argument, that logical element which might be expressed in a prose statement, and by "texture" Ransom means the full array of formal devices used by the poet, including metre, poetic language, metaphor and symbolism. Ransom's distinction between "structure" and "texture" may be his most famous critical declaration. Before discussing the significance of these terms, it is important to discuss their origin in Ransom's criticism. Primarily, it is vital to note the specific way in which

Ransom generates the terms: the phrasing of the extract above indicates that Ransom's final adoption of these critical terms arises out of a testing manoeuvre; he is asking himself questions about the nature of poetry. He has a philosophical distinction which he wishes to make, and comes in a very tentative manner to the two terms which best express that distinction for him. Whilst the two terms are an important formulation of the aesthetic distinction which Ransom hopes to register, they are only one formulation. There is a tendency to read the New Criticism as codified by a series of rigorous formal distinctions expressed in key terms and concepts: whilst Ransom's distinction here is certainly intended to have meaning, it differs from Brook's "paradox" or Wimsatt's "fallacies" because Ransom's declaration is not a constant preoccupation which he systematically applies in every critical situation. As the extract above indicates he comes to the term in a groping manner; "structure" and "texture" are the best way in which he can express the actual, more complicated, philosophical distinction he wishes to make. This sense of the literary formulation as the best possible distinction available to the critic at a determinate time is an important one here.

The "structure" and "texture" terms are important, because Ransom goes on to provide a distinctive formulation of the manner in which poetry is written by the poet. He suggests that the form of the poem arises as the resolution of a conceptual battle. The poet has a sense of what he wants the poem to say, a stage at which, Ransom suggests, the intended poem is an argument which may be represented in prose form. He also has a sense of how he wants the poem to sound. The actual poem is the resolution of the best representation of the poet's formal argument, qualified by the best resolution of his desire to make it represent certain sound effects.

In the process of resolving this conceptual tussle the poet generates a object which is conceptually distinct and autonomous. To register the crucial distinction between the poem and any other kind of discourse, Ransom again states that it is important to develop a theory which registers the categorical, ontological, distinctiveness of poetry.

He states:

I suggest that the differentia of poetry as discourse is an ontological one. It treats an order of existence, a grade of objectivity, which cannot be treated in scientific discourse.<sup>10</sup>

Here Ransom clearly wants to generate a conception of the distinctiveness of poetry which can be seen to have the authority of a rigorous philosophical inquiry. It is striking for example that his argument about how the poem is created, the vision of the poet shaping his prose discourse by his desire for it to be represented in a desired sound-form, is strikingly at odds with his various discussions of how his own poetry came to be written. Writing to Robert Graves in 1922 Ransom hit an almost mystical note when he declared:

When a poet does something he likes, I'm sure it is usually because he has turned on one of his subliminal selves and let him do most of the work.<sup>11</sup>

And similarly Ransom's notes to the final Selected Poems emphasise the fleeting nature of the inspiration which led to his own poetry being written<sup>12</sup>. There is little indication there of the fierce conceptual struggle which here he indicates is the hallmark of the creative process for the poet. The explanation for this curious contrast between the decidedly whimsical tone of many of Ransom's discussions of the origins of his own verse, and his decidedly serious and dedicated analysis of the poetic process in others, lies in the fact that Ransom is attempting to provide an explanation of poetic function which has aesthetic authority and does not rest on personal anecdote. Thus, when Christopher Ricks notes of Ransom that he "is more than a critic because a true poet"<sup>13</sup> we should qualify that Ransom's defence of poetry never rested on any subjective statement of his own personal method of composition. Rather Ransom aimed to generate a distinction about the nature of poetry which could be used as a basis for close and detailed textual analysis by others.

Ransom's formulation in this essay can also be recast to suggest that poetry treats an order of existence which is radically different from the discourse of science, here identified with the logical arguments which can so easily be expressed in prose; this

distinction is a constant in Ransom's criticism from the 1920s; the world is so varied that it cannot be represented in the discourse of scientific inquiry.

We live in a world that must be distinguished from the world, or the worlds, for there are many of them, which we treat in our scientific discourses. They are its reduced, emasculated, and docile versions. Poetry intends to recover the denser more refractory original worlds which we know loosely through our perceptions and memories. By this supposition it is a kind of knowledge which is ontologically distinct.

I have failed to find a new critic with an ontological account of poetry.<sup>14</sup>

Graham Hough has noted<sup>15</sup> that Ransom's text The New Criticism is often taken to be a defence, or a manifesto for the New Critical movement. In fact, as the extract above indicates, Ransom's book ends with his declaration that he has not found in any of the critics whom he analyses the quality which he believes to be so important in criticism, namely a sense of the distinctiveness of poetic discourse. Accordingly even in the text which is taken by many to give the New Critics their name, Ransom is critiquing the inadequacy of New Critical practice.

Ransom returned to the distinction between the business of criticism and the concerns of the aesthete in 1941 in a contribution to a collection of four essays which addressed the Role of the Critic. He was in debate with Edmund Wilson, Norman Foerster the Neo-humanist critic, and W.H.Auden. Ransom entitles his contribution "Criticism as Pure Speculation." Though this title seems to hint at a lack of intellectual rigour, and at a flight from social reality in the critical model he proposes, Ransom used that title in order to make the distinction between the emphases of his opponents: the Marxism which Wilson endorsed in his contribution clearly emphasised the reflective social role of poetry, and Ransom believed that Foerster's criticism merely reflected unsystematic philosophical ideals. Ransom begins by noting that a chasm normally separates the critic and the aesthete. Any professional critic is familiar with the technical practices of the poet (if the poet is a conventional one) but, in the absence of

any aesthetic theory of poetry how are poets who make diversions from conventional practice to be judged:

"The intent of the critic may be well be then, first to read his poem sensitively, and make comparative judgements about his technical practice...Beyond that it is to read and mark the poem knowingly: that is with an aestheticians understanding of what a poem actually "is".

These early critical interventions are attempts to discriminate Ransom's own critical approach from those of his competitors. In these essays, speeches and articles, Ransom places heavy emphasis on what he sees as the distinctive quality of his approach, namely its theoretical rigour. In this sense many of Ransom's critical analyses of the early 1940s offer, sometimes incidentally, theoretical justifications of Ransom's ideal critical method. There was however another aspect to Ransom's criticism which could be most accurately termed strategic. Ransom's strategic interventions often have less to do with the substantive theoretical issues involved than they have to do with an attempt to damage an opponent, improve the position of an ally or differentiate Ransom's form of criticism from one which suddenly seemed uncomfortably close in an ideological or institutional sense. All of these forms of engagement are displayed at different times in Ransom's critical work. Indeed, the strategic element was never entirely absent from his criticism, as his various attempts to respond to Marxists or Neo-humanist critics above indicate. However some of Ransom's critiques are clearly related to the institutional rather than theoretical competition of rival critical methods.

In 1944 Ransom used his ideological position on the correct critical method to be used in the analysis of poetry to severely critique the approaches of another critical movement, the Chicago group of Neo-Aristotelians. Ransom's essay, "The Bases of Criticism" which was published in the Sewanee Review 52 was a response to R.S.Crane's critical study programme at Chicago University. Whilst Ransom had praised Crane in "Criticism Inc." for "putting the [critical] revolution into effect in his own teaching"<sup>16</sup> by 1944 the Chicago Neo-Aristotelians seemed to have so grown in influence that they might have threatened the New Critics.<sup>17</sup> Ransom's review of the

study programme at Chicago can be read as an attempt to critique the Neo-Aristotelians for strategic reasons while cloaking that attempt in theoretical terms. Ransom begins by attempting to situate himself as the elder figure of the critical movement:

It seemed to me such a promising occasion that I tried to make a little fanfare for it, when Mr. Crane inaugurated a programme of critical studies at the University of Chicago nearly ten years ago.

This placement gives Ransom a privileged position from which to lament that the Neo-Aristotelians had failed to live up to his expectations. He moves quickly on to the substantive issue at the heart of his discussion; the Neo-Aristotelians are barren formalists who have fetishized the formal aspects of literary study:

And now so soon comes Mr Trowbridge a public convert to a doctrine, making his profession of faith, and at pains to show his acquaintance with scriptures which he looks upon as canonical. The speculations under study at Chicago have already hardened into dogma, and we may well come to our opinion about a critical position which people call neo-Aristotelian.

After some routine abuse of papers by Norman MacLean and Charles Olson as "portentous, and burdened with doctrinal commentary" Ransom adopts a favourite judgmental trope; the two critics have displayed their critical immaturity by producing mere *explications de textes*:

"which French schoolboys learn to recite in their poetry classes....It is as if because in its ordinary performance this scarcely amounts to a full-sized labour for adult critics glorying in their strength that they do it too well, or overdo it, and elicit from the poems marvels of logical finesse in which it is difficult to believe."

Habitually Ransom had taken critical positions against those who undervalued the theoretical aspects of literary study; here he is faced with an exactly opposing task. The neo-Aristotelians have a rigid and demanding theoretical structure within which to situate their criticism, but they are critically deficient because they apply their theory formulaically. The critic cannot restrict himself merely to a concern with the aesthetics of poetry; instead that concern with aesthetics must be focused on the critical act: "[Croce] had an aesthetics but it denied him a criticism...." Ransom argues against purism, by which he means mere theoretical purity and suggests in effect that we should accept an impure criticism, allowing social or moral commonplaces into our

accept an impure criticism, allowing social or moral commonplaces into our speculations. "If [Olson] applies the logical commonplaces-as he does- what is the objection to the moral one?"

Similarly he implies that the neo Aristotelians fetishize the historical and critical distinctions which they make the basis of their critical judgement; what had been for Aristotle a supple and living system is in the hands of his self-declared followers an exercise in barren formalism and the obsessive application of conventional distinctions.

Ransom's stinging criticisms of other literary approaches to the text were not merely focused on those who seemed to threaten the ideological and institutional hegemony of the New Critics. In 1954 he published an article called "The Concrete Universal: Observations on the Understanding of Poetry". In it he discussed one of the canonical texts of the New Criticism W.K. Wimsatt's The Verbal Icon: Ransom's article is an attempt to discriminate between early and late New Criticisms. Ransom notes that Wimsatt's work is characterised by its "late and technically accomplished" <sup>18</sup>quality. Characteristically, however, Ransom uses the opportunity to refer wryly to Wimsatt's delineation of the "hazards and 'fallacies'" which hedge about his critical practice. Ransom uses the essay to critique the philosophical base of Wimsatt's criticism, and to clarify his own position.

I must say for the benefit of current readers that about fifteen years ago [Ransom is referring to 'Criticism as Pure Speculation'] I was thinking of the poem as having a logical structure or framework, and a texture whose character was partly irrelevant to the logical form and purpose. My "texture" in particular has given offense, and the fact is that I had no sooner uttered it than it struck me as a flat and inadequate figure for that vivid and easily felt part of the poem which we associate peculiarly with poetic language. I wish now to recast my definition entirely, though I shall only use another figure whose disabilities I am well aware of in advance. It will be an absurd figure, but that has made it more admirable for me, so that I have been using it as a mnemonic device, to remind me of the several interests which have got themselves into the compound structure of a poem.<sup>19</sup>

Ransom's organic view here is another way of resisting the critical tendency to abstract the elements of the poem from one another. This tendency to recantation, or clarification will serve as another indication of Ransom's habitual terminological looseness in the definition of his critical aims. Indeed at times Ransom seems to take pleasure in mocking the seriousness of the poetic formulations generated by the other New Critics. At one memorable moment in the Kenyon Review he notes: "a poem is much more like a Christmas Tree than an organism."<sup>20</sup>

If Ransom comes close in the end to criticising many of the practices of the New Critics in public articles, then his private letters make many of his complaints more pointedly. In an unpublished letter to Arthur Mizener from 1949, Ransom notes what he sees as the failures of the New Criticism:

You've got precisely to the point where, as far as I know, all the New Critics of poetry got, and where they are still stranded: viz. The poem deals with the concrete or the particular, and the more show of concretion or particularity, to make it indefeasible and beyond controversy, by the new critic the better. Because they have no philosophy they can't go further.<sup>21</sup>

Mizener responded:

Of course your [sic] quite right about the whole thing. I keep wishing so much that Cleanth [Brooks] would emerge from the chrysalis stage, for instance, and stop being so stubborn about the whole thing so far as poetry is concerned... it is one thing to talk about the new criticism in the atmosphere which existed when THE WORLD'S BODY came out; these ideas were striking, stimulating, needed then and always... but those ideas are as false a note in the present atmosphere of criticism as a lecture at a cocktail party; you wouldn't write them now for this occasion when we have reached the horrible stage of Glossaries of the New Criticism... and a general ossification into learning in the worst sense.<sup>22</sup>

What Ransom was willing to say in 1949 in private he was to repeat in 1952 in the public form of an essay entitled "Poet's and Flatworms":

How confidently, twenty years or so past, were some of us offering a new "understanding of poetry"! I will not say, ho brashly; for the innovation was real, it was momentous; but it was not complete, and now it has bogged down at most embarrassing point. In the Academy the verbal analysis has pretty well secured its place and tenure, but its end products are only half finished, and their ragged showing does not alleviate the original apprehensions of the opposition.

By the early 1950s then, Ransom had, in both private and public become a clear critic of the New Critics. His major objection from the late 1930s onwards remained consistent, that the New Critics should pay close attention to what made the poem a distinctive form of discourse. This insistence, which developed out of Ransom's clear project to develop an aesthetic from the beginning of the 1920s onward, marks him out in a very distinct way from Brooks, Wimsatt, R.P. Blackmur and the other New Critics.

In this particular respect, many analyses of the New Critics have stressed the movement's philosophical inadequacy. Morris Dickstein suggests that for the New Critics theory followed practice only as justification:

...the New Criticism itself was not interested in ideas, which it considered a little extrinsic to the literary work, and it showed relatively little interest in theory except as an afterthought to justify its procedures of close reading...<sup>23</sup>

Ransom displays the opposite tendency, not theory as retrospective justification for practical criticism but instead a close interest in theory as the premise of critical discussion. Moreover, although Ransom was happy to rhetorically situate himself as "the old man of the New Criticism"<sup>24</sup>; it is clear that he retained a commitment to the movement remaining up to date, alert to the nuances of the work of other critics, and alive to the possibilities offered to it.

It is important to make a final discrimination in this regard: it was noted above that Ransom's "texture" and "structure" distinction was of a qualitatively different kind from the "affective" or "intentional" fallacies of Wimsatt and Beardsley, because Ransom's terms were the mere representations of his philosophical ideas, terms which at best approximated to the correct expression of his ideas, whereas Wimsatt's terms became fetishized as one of the restraints which the critic must always exercise. Similarly we might argue that Ransom's chiding, cajoling and occasionally excoriating attitude towards his fellow New Critics stemmed from the realisation that the grouping "New Criticism" was not an institution to be valued and defended *per se*. The grouping was valuable to Ransom in that it did the effective job of criticism. If it did not he attempted to change it. In this respect he was utterly unsentimental.

To demonstrate the importance of Ransom's philosophical argument for criticism, and to show how clearly it marks him out from the other New Critics it is instructive to compare Ransom's The World's Body to another canonical text of the New Criticism also published in 1938, Brooks and Warren's Understanding Poetry.

### UNDERSTANDING POETRY (1938)

Whereas Ransom's The World's Body is a collection of essays on critical themes which ranges from an analysis of the poetic meter of Shakespeare, to a pair of interlocked essays discussing the classical aesthetics of Aristotle to a critical demolition of the minor sentimental poetry of Edna St Vincent Millay, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's Understanding Poetry, published in the same year displays a very different face of the New Critical project, and one which came to be accepted by many hostile critics as the true representation of the movement: Brooks and Warren's text is intended for use in the classroom as a scholastic tool, as can be seen by the tone of its introductory "Letter to the Teacher":

Although the book does suggest a variety of exercises for the student, such as analyses modelled on those in the book, comparisons of the prose and poetic versions of the same material, comparisons of poems treating the same theme, etc., the possibility for development along this line is almost infinite and can be adapted to individual needs.<sup>25</sup>

The book develops through different lessons, suggests exercises for the teacher to set the class, and provides a glossary of technical terms: its tone and approach indicate how closely it is related to the needs of classroom teaching.

However the text is premised not just upon the satisfaction of an institutional demand, but upon making a theoretical distinction: its introduction provides a discussion of the distinction between scientific and poetic language in a form that Ransom himself would have approved. Firstly it suggests three critical practices which the critic must eschew, namely a mere paraphrase of the prose "argument" of the poem, an analysis of the historical or biographical materials relating to the poem, and didactic or inspirational interpretation<sup>26</sup>. This distinction is not included as one of the discussion points which

the teacher may wish to debate with his or her class: for the writers it is a mere statement of their own critical premises, and the book presses on with the task in hand, the systematic close reading of poetry shaped here for the demands of the class room.

That Ransom was not unconcerned with the demands of classroom teaching can be seen from his textbook Topics for Freshman Writing: Twenty Topics for Writing with Appropriate Materials for Study. (1935) But although Ransom's text was produced as a classroom aide it was not concerned with literary criticism, but instead with answering the question "What shall we [freshmen] write about?"<sup>27</sup> The book was a collection of topical prose pieces arranged by subject. The freshman of 1935 following the scheme of Ransom's book was encouraged to think first about "The Making of a freshman" by reading extracts from the prose work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Capers and Thomas Henry Huxley and then to move on to consider "The Function of the College". Ransom's own political concerns of 1935 intrude in his inclusion of topics like "The Land" "Machinery and Civilization" "Nationalism and Foreign Trade" and "Religion and Morals on the Campus" with edited versions of previous essays and books either quoted or retitled: "Myths are Still Good by John Crowe Ransom" was an edited version of God Without Thunder.

The significance of Topics for Freshman Writing is that it indicates that whilst Ransom was certainly not oblivious to the requirements of classroom teaching, his work is clearly divided between simple pedagogical texts devoted to assisting the teacher with practice in the classroom, and demanding critical and aesthetic work. When Ransom turns his interest to critical prose he is not aiming primarily at the class room, or indeed at an undergraduate audience.

It is ironic therefore that Hugh Kenner has argued that Ransom's influence was most keenly felt in the arena of pedagogical practice: Kenner goes so far as to suggest that

Ransom's was the determining influence behind the most practical of the New Critical publications:

By 1938 there had come into existence a textbook called *Understanding Poetry*, of which [Ransom] did not write a line apart from some of the verse it contained, but which, following our mythological method, we may nearly say he composed throughout without lifting pen to paper. <sup>28</sup>

Kenner also suggested that the critical practice associated with New Criticism was so clearly related to pedagogical methods, that the New Critical reading of a poem could be reconstructed from a perusal of the marks left on the blackboard at the end of a lesson:

A typical black-board at the end of the hour would display words encircled, with little colliding arrows; would show lines broken into phrases, with perhaps some stresses marked; and would generally be faithful to the discussion of which it carried the traces... <sup>29</sup>

Similarly John Paul Russo emphasised the cohesion between the dedicated practicality of the movement and the focused work demanded in the class room:

[New Critics] fostered the straightforward, roll-up-your-sleeves attitude to criticism. <sup>30</sup>

In order to discount this technocratic model of critical practice, at least as far as it refers to Ransom, it is important to note that Ransom's own class room style was far from a model of highly focused "New Critical" practice. The poet Anthony Hecht, who was admitted to Kenyon College after the Second World War under the G.I. Bill was taught by Ransom, but describes a teaching style very different from Kenner's characterisation

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of concentrated, detailed, and diagrammatic poetic study. Hecht notes:

His class behaviour is difficult to describe except to say that I first mistook it for diffidence. Mr Ransom did not analyse, he inquired; and he invited the class to join his enquiry...Neither can I remember his uttering any memorable pronouncements, nor can I point with accuracy to any particular thing that I learned with him. <sup>31</sup>

That the "New Criticism" had two faces, one focused on the theory of criticism, the other on classroom practice has been noted by many critics: one recently noted the division between the two as essentially generational. Leitch in his History of American Criticism from the 1930s to the 1980s <sup>32</sup> suggests that the New Criticism had a "second wave" which was devoted to the statement of literary theories: In this second wave Leitch argues, came books like Austin Warren's Theory of Literature (1949), William Wimsatt's The Verbal Icon (1954), Murray Krieger's The New Apologists for Poetry (1956) and Brooks' and Wimsatt's Literary Criticism : A Short History (1957). Yet, as Morris Dickstein's comment above indicates, these theoretical analyses were often seen as merely retrospective justification, a theoretical grounding for a teaching practice which was actually entirely pragmatic in its response to the new practical demands placed on the American educational system by a huge influx of new students during the 1940s and 1950s. That Anthony Hecht entered Kenyon College in 1946 on the G.I. Bill is significant, as is the behaviour of the publishing house Henry Holt in that year when they approached Ransom for permission to republish the widely praised separate section at the back of Topics For Freshman Writing: "A Handbook in Brief" deals with Sentence Structure, Punctuation and Composition and was widely noted for its clarity. Holt wished to publish the section as a separate edition to cope with the number of former service men who were entering the universities after the end of the Second World War. <sup>33</sup> Ransom, again preoccupied with purely critical writing didn't have time to produce what may well have become, financially, his most profitable book. Whilst Terry Eagleton, writing in what may be the contemporary version of this form of publication, a

text which aims to offer an introduction to literary theory for British undergraduates,<sup>34</sup> argues that the practical, material base of exponential growth in the U.S. University System determines the critical procedures of the New Critics, and explains the value of a critical system which is so closely related to classroom practice, it is important to discriminate between the demands of practice and the concerns of theory. Graff's analysis of the relationship between the practical demands of University teaching and the theoretical approaches of the New Critics more accurately demonstrates that the relationship between the two is interconnected and dynamic rather than rigidly deterministic.<sup>35</sup>

It is the pedagogical aspect of the New Criticism which has provided most fruitful ammunition for those who wished to caricature the whole theoretical project. The most powerful cliché of what the New Critics represented is drawn equally from a critique of the rigid theoretical justifications of a late New Critical scholar like Wimsatt, an adoption of the caricature which historical scholars used of the upstart "critics" who threatened their discipline and their jobs during the 1940s and a reflection of the watered down close-reading practices which remained after the New Critics had suffered an ideological collapse in the 1950s.

That even New Critics most associated with the technically detailed and non-ideological aspect of the "New Criticism" felt abused by the caricatures of their opponents can be seen from Cleanth Brooks' introduction to his late collection of essays A Shaping Joy in 1971:

The pigeonhole assigned to me carries the label "The New Criticism." Now, it is bad enough to live under any label, but one so nearly meaningless as "The New Criticism"- it is certainly not *new* -has peculiar disadvantages. For most people it vaguely signifies an anti-historical bias and a fixation on "close reading". The New Critic would seem to be trapped in a cell without windows or door, staring through a reading glass at his literary text, effectively cut off from all the activities of the world outside- from history and science, from the other arts, and from nature and humanity itself.<sup>36</sup>

The final discrimination which should be made on the ideological plane between Ransom's characteristic form of criticism and the New Criticism is this: as we have seen, the issue of reading is so central to the New Criticism, that many critics have seen a characteristic form of reading practice and pedagogical method as offering a distinctive definition of the New Critics. It is ironic therefore that Ransom's own criticism is marked by a characteristic *absence* of what could be termed critical "readings." The nearest that Ransom gets to a "reading" in the accepted New Critical definition of that word is in "Shakespeare at Sonnets" in The World's Body but even that discussion is also marked by speculations on "the dry Protestant Temper" of Doctor Johnson and a comparison between the "university poet" Donne and the "amateur" Shakespeare.<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, whereas Ransom may have taught some of the New Critics, like Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, and whereas his distinctions between the language of prose and the language of poetry may have inspired others, like Wimsatt, he does not himself practice that critical method which is taken by many as the very hallmark of New Criticism. In Ransom's critical work there may be philosophical and literary distinctions aplenty but there are no close readings of irony, ambiguity or tension in individual lines of individual poems.

### **Institutional influence: The Kenton Review and the Literary Quarterlies.**

Having mapped some of Ransom's influences on what was described above as the "aesthetic axis" it is now important to turn to the exercise of his influence on the specifically institutional realm. Since by definition institutional influence is concerned with the exercise of power within socially and politically determined arenas, the extent of Ransom's influence here might be imagined to be easier to assess and analyse than in his aesthetic criticism. Yet paradoxically, the exercise of power in the academic environment has always displayed an inversion of openness and closedness. Appointments, committee decisions and editorial judgements tend to be made in secret:

in comparison, an essay, article or book, is, whatever the intrinsic rhetorical difficulties it may pose, a comparatively "open" or public statement. The distinction is valuable because it enables us to note that many of Ransom's opening shots in the campaign for criticism in the American academy were placed in arenas which took advantage of their "public" status as a way of directing attention to the changes which needed to occur in the very closed and private heart of the academic establishment. Ransom knew that the pressure for criticism would always encounter a firmly opposed response: the success of criticism could not depend on concessions made by the more traditional literary scholars in the academy. Accordingly, in a variety of ways he aimed to appeal over the heads of the older historical scholars. For example, Ransom was careful to publish many of his most confrontational articles and essays in journals where he could guarantee that personal contacts or editorial influence would secure their publication. A fascinating indication of Ransom's decisive shift from Agrarianism to criticism can be seen in his use of the American Review, which had been formed in 1933 as a sympathetic arena for the publication of Agrarian, Distributionist and other political pieces, for the publication of early and significant critical arguments like "Poetry a Note in Ontology." From 1935- 1942 Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren were editing the Southern Review, and an indication of Ransom's expectation of a sympathetic response there can be seen in a letter to Allen Tate of 1937 where he notes:

The Southern Review... is slipping... To bear on this point I enclose a letter from the two Associate Editors. The boys deal pretty pedantically with my poor paper you will see... The thing is, I believe that Cleanth is showing his limitations as a thinker with one thing on his mind at a time, and he is not providing for Red the suggestions and stimuli that Red requires.<sup>38</sup>

Ransom clearly expected that he would be published in the Southern Review as a matter of course, and the temporary rejection of his essay "Shakespeare at Sonnets" provoked him into uncharacteristic abuse. Soon however, Ransom was himself to be able to exercise the power of editorial control over a powerful literary quarterly.

The Kenyon Review began with backing from Kenyon College's president Chalmers and was launched in January of 1939; Ransom was to edit the Review for the next 20 years. At the height of its powers, and despite its small circulation,<sup>39</sup> it was the most influential literary review in America. The review afforded Ransom remarkable opportunities. Though it took up considerable energy which he might have devoted to more critical writing, it also gave him the perfect forum for the publication of his own aesthetic criticism to a small but influential audience, and allowed him to shape the policy of the literary quarterly in every respect. As editor, Ransom was involved in the commissioning of articles, the selection of books for review, the choice of reviewer, and even the layout of text. Through the opportunities which the magazine presented for preferment, criticism and discrimination he was able to exert considerable cultural power. The Kenyon Review also shows us more about Ransom the critic; because the critic is revealed in his role as editor; what kind of critical material did Ransom choose to play host to in his Review?

When Ransom came to Kenyon, his reputation as an Agrarian was well known, and a little feared. In the first issue of the Review however, there was little to suggest that its editor was an Agrarian, or even necessarily a Southerner. Issue 1 began with an article by John Peale Bishop on Thomas Wolfe who had recently died, allowed Ford Madox Ford the space to send a "Paris Letter" describing the artistic life of the French capital, contained two poems by the young "R.T.S. Lowell" and essays on W.H. Auden and Franz Kafka by Delmore Schwartz and Phillip Rahv respectively. To indicate that the new review was not purely focused on literary or critical matters, it also contained an article by Paul Rosenfield on American Music. The issue also contained an "Editorial Note" by Ransom, setting a pattern which would continue for some years. This very first note indicates what would become two abiding issues in the life of the review. One half dealt with Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns a new text by Walter Clyde Curry. Clyde Curry had been on the edge of the Fugitive group and his new book argued that Shakespeare had been a much more systematic thinker and philosopher than had been previously noted. Ransom, though supportive of the book, was unconvinced by its thesis.

The other Editorial note marked the publication of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's Understanding Poetry. Ransom declared:

...now it is the Age of Criticism. One need only cite: Eliot, Richards, Empson, Tate, Winters, Blackmur- a list of critics the like of which has certainly not been furnished in literary history at one time before... It may occur to the cynical observer of education to reflect; What a pity that Understanding Poetry will have to be accepted by the teachers before it can reach the students, and not the other way around.<sup>40</sup>

In this note Ransom pinned the Kenyon Review's colours firmly to the mast. It was to be the journal which would reflect and participate in the Age of Criticism. In its pages it would make full use of the range of good critics and good criticism available, and it might, if necessary, make use of the implied threat to over-reach the teachers of literature and go directly to the students in order to convey its message of good critical practice.

To those readers who knew of Ransom's background, the Editorial Notes might have conveyed an implicit threat; in the first edition of this, Northern, Quarterly Ransom had reviewed a book by an old Nashville acquaintance, and acclaimed another by his friends and allies Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks. Similarly, those at Kenyon College who had followed the manoeuvrings behind the review's inception would have known that Ransom had for some time intended that Allen Tate would be his deputy, and had only backed down when it became clear that there wasn't enough money available to pay Tate's salary. Ransom would also make extensive use of Robert Penn Warren and Allen Tate as reviewers and reviewed: the first few issues for example contained reviews of Tate's The Fathers and Penn Warren's novel Night Rider. Was this critical review to be a Trojan horse for Southern or even Agrarian ideas?

These suspicions were rife in Kenyon College at the time the Review began, not least perhaps because the English Department at the College was conservative and suspicious of the critical movement. One exemplary answer to the charge that Ransom favoured Southern and Agrarian writers would lie in his treatment of the Agrarian who had remained closest to the ideas of 1930, Donald Davidson. Davidson, still living in

Nashville saw the appointment of his friends to important editorial positions as an opportunity for the Agrarian cause to move on to another phase, and for his own writing to gain a larger audience. As far as Ransom was concerned however, Davidson's articles, on folklore, or politics did not fit into the review, and so they were rejected. Ransom did not publish any of Davidson's articles in the Kenyon Review. Davidson came to feel more and more isolated from his fellow Agrarians and slipped into personal dejection and into extreme racial politics in Tennessee. In Ohio, the Review demanded its own logic, and under Ransom, the Kenyon Review gathered contributions from the major intellectual figures of the day regardless of their political or regional affinities.

During the first seven years of its publication the review published articles by Marshall McLuhan, Kenneth Burke, Erwin Panofsky, Walter Gropius and Lionel Trilling. It also published studies of Sartre, Brecht, Henry Miller, Frank Lloyd Wright and even Theodore Adorno's "Social Critique of Radio Music" and "Theses on Art and Radio today". Alongside this varied list of contributors should be placed an eclectic list of subjects; during the first four years alone the Review published articles upon photography, philosophy, Russian music, architecture, the International Encyclopedia of Unified Science, the French novel 1925-1940, and the Nazi repression of philosophical teaching.

As the Review grew in reputation it introduced Ransom to a wider range of intellectual influences than ever before, and allowed him to develop several intellectually satisfying friendships. Through correspondence connected with the Review Ransom became intellectually close to Kenneth Burke, Richard Blackmur, Lionel Trilling and Arthur Mizener amongst others.

The success of the Review led, again with the support of Kenyon's President Chalmers to the formation of the Kenyon School of English, a summer school which brought to the College's Campus many of the most distinguished critics of the late 1940s and 1950s. This School represents the convergence of many lines of influence relevant to the development of criticism in the American academy. In the first place it represents a new

focus on intense professionalisation, compounded with a view of a developing critical community where critics could meet and work together for a concentrated three week period each year. It provided an opportunity to test Ransom's contention that only criticism offered to the most able students on American campuses the intellectual stimulation they demanded, since the student body at the Summer Schools was drawn from voluntary enrolment, and, because it was supported by a Grant from the Rockefeller Foundation it represented the increasing involvement of America's industrial and commercial institutions in supporting academic life.

This final area demands some comment. Ransom's period as Editor of the *Kenyon Review* co-incided with the increasing corporatisation of American literary, cultural and academic life. In 1940 Ransom assumed the title of "Carnegie Professor of Poetry" as the Carnegie Foundation entered into a commitment to pay the cost of Ransom's salary and many of the expenses of the *Kenyon Review*. Although the involvement of large commercial institutions in supporting cultural activity could be traced from the 1920s (Ransom it may be remembered completed the manuscript for Land! whilst in Britain supported by a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation), the increased involvement of powerful commercial interests in academia opened up a new arena of institutional influence for intellectual figures like Ransom. The commercial bodies offered grants, scholarships and trust funds which could support writers, critics and academics involved in research. Ransom began to spend an increasing amount of time either negotiating directly with the grant-giving bodies or filling in references for former colleagues or students who wished to apply for such monies.<sup>41</sup> In Creating Faulkner's Reputation<sup>42</sup> Lawrence H. Schwartz traces the transformation of the career, and financial stability of William Faulkner through an analysis of the grants and fellowships which he was able to receive in post-war America, largely, Schwartz argues, through the support of figures like Allen Tate, Ransom and others. As far as Schwartz's substantive argument is concerned, the form of literary power broking he describes seems more plausible in the case of Allen Tate than Ransom, especially as Tate knew at first hand the necessities, and occasionally the privations of free-lance writing, whereas Ransom made his career

within the relative stability of the academy. Yet what Schwartz's book convincingly explores is the creation of a new high-cultural environment in American Cultural life after the Second World War, and the increasing involvement of Commercial institutions in supporting and underwriting that life. It need hardly be noted that Ransom's activities as a kind of "cultural broker" represented an ironic activity for a man who, in what increasingly came to be seen from Kenyon as a previous life, had once raged against the hegemony of big business. In 1952 Ransom revealed how easily the artistic and commercial worlds had joined in his thinking when, in a contribution to a forum on "The Social Role of Art and Philosophy" he stated:

The artist claims his freedom. He cannot hire himself out...He is like a businessman, perhaps a small one, but at any rate he is like one who is sole owner of his business.<sup>43</sup>

Before attempting to unify these disparate strands in Ransom's critical, cultural and aesthetic life, it is important to examine many of the more political arguments which have been made about the practice, method and ideology of the New Criticism.

#### Political Readings of the New Critical Project.

To turn from the committed political activity of Agrarianism to the close reading and intricate analytical practice of the "New Criticism"<sup>44</sup> is apparently to move from active involvement with the public world to a contemplative preoccupation with a private one. Perhaps what seems like the stark contrast between Ransom's speech making, polemicising and journalistic sallying of the early 1930s and his teaching, editing and critical essay writing of the late 1930s onwards has caused many literary critics to question the political significance of Ransom's literary criticism, and New Criticism as a whole. This concern with the politics of the New Criticism is not a recent critical preoccupation; critics like Tate, Ransom and Robert Penn Warren were often received by other academics from the 1930s onward with a scepticism partly based on the residual doubt that they were Agrarian wolves in critical lambs clothing,<sup>45</sup> and during the bitterness which occasionally marked the movement to criticism in the American

academy the fact that a few of the most important New Critics had been Agrarians offered their opponents a opportunity for easy political abuse. In 1947 Robert Wooster Stallman offered an analysis of the theoretical connections between "The New Criticism and the Southern Critics" in a memorial volume dedicated to John Peale Bishop.<sup>46</sup>

One of the most influential "political" readings of the New Criticism is advanced by John Fekete's The Critical Twilight: Explorations in the ideology of Anglo-American Literary theory from Eliot to McLuhan. Focusing on Ransom as the "navigator" of the transition "from Fugitive to Agrarian to New Critic" and of critical theory to "a new social location"<sup>47</sup> Fekete reads the New Criticism through Ransom's career, and sees the New Criticism as a mode of capitulation to established institutional power, which accepted a reduction in ideological aims after the collapse of Agrarianism. Fekete argues that after the collapse of Agrarianism occurred because of a failure to build a strategic connection between theory and political activity, the apparently exclusivist New Criticism incorporated many of the ideological positions of Agrarianism in a depoliticised form. Thus he argues that the Agrarian critique of industrialisation was reduced in the New Criticism to a critique of science, and that whereas Agrarians aimed to create a new social structure in which art could function in a non-alienated form, the New Criticism merely accepted the function of art within the established boundaries of the existing social structure.<sup>48</sup> Central to Fekete's analysis is the sense that the New Criticism was conceptually counter-posed to Marxist critiques of literature, which stressed the connections between the literary product and the society which generated it; as Marxist critiques failed to become dominant after the political collapse of the American Marxist movement in the 1930s, the New Criticism was able to occupy the vacated conceptual space:

The New Criticism was able to move in, not to combat a strong left wing position, but rather to occupy the vacuum left by the failure of socialist criticism to realise its opportunities;<sup>49</sup>

This final aspect of Fekete's analysis has recently been challenged by Mark Jancovich in his book The cultural politics of the New Criticism.<sup>50</sup> Jancovich's book, which aims

to situate the New Critics historically, is a sustained critique of Fekete's analysis, and of the reading of the New Criticism contained in Lentricchia's After the New Criticism.<sup>51</sup> Jancovich's close engagement with Fekete's argument can be seen by the fact that he even draws the title of his text from Fekete.<sup>52</sup> Jancovich challenges Fekete's analysis that the New Criticism was a neutered, academised version of Agrarianism. Fekete is writing from within the academy, Jancovich notes; he clearly doesn't feel politically neutered. In fact the New Criticism remained attractive to social radicals; even, Jancovich asserts, to radicals on the left, denied more overt socialist positions by the cultural forces which Fekete himself analyses. Though Jancovich never gives an example of such a figure, presumably he is alluding to Kenneth Burke who described himself as an independent Marxist and who, through his frequent publication in the Kenyon Review and membership of the Kenyon school of English, became associated with the New Critics, and was a friend of Ransom's.

Jancovich maintains that Fekete misjudges the final stage of Ransom's career, and that his characterisation of the political surrender of the New Criticism to the dominant social reality underplays or ignores the transformatory political struggles with which the New Criticism engaged, with the aim of changing the practise of literary study in the American Academy. For Jancovich, Ransom's "New Criticism" *continued* the radical critique of American society which had been the aim of Agrarianism although Ransom is ultimately a "limited"<sup>53</sup> critic: and his criticism is a *cul de sac*: "He came to accept the very position which he had formerly criticised; that literature was merely a refuge from, or compensation for, the alienated activities of modern society."<sup>54</sup> In order to stress the theoretical continuity of the Agrarians' ideological position Jancovich attempts to supplant Fekete's view of Agrarianism as an essentially bourgeois movement. He argues instead that its roots lie in the pre-Capitalist Southern slave-economy. He also discounts the view that Ransom held an exclusive view of aesthetic activity, stressing instead the connections which Ransom habitually made during his Agrarian phase between the form of the society and the literary forms which it produced<sup>55</sup>. Above all he emphasises the radical aspect of the New Critical

transformation of the academy, placing great stress on the confrontational tactics which Tate in particular used while attacking the historical "scholars" in the name of criticism. Though Jancovich's is a valuable attempt to reflect the campaigning aspect of the New Criticism as radicalism rather than amelioration, his attempt to stress the congruence of the social analysis offered by Agrarianism and the literary analysis offered by the New Criticism relies on a judgement of the value of many of Ransom's critical essays which is highly idiosyncratic, and depends upon dating Ransom's withdrawal from Agrarian activity as late as 1945.<sup>56</sup>

Ransom does not fit easily into Jancovich's scheme, but nonetheless he attempts to analyse the relationship between Ransom's Agrarianism and his criticism: Jancovich suggests that Ransom's critical work can be divided into 3 stages:

During the first stage, which covers the period up to approximately 1936, Ransom was writing the articles in which he clarified his New Critical positions, articles which he published in The World's Body. The second stage covers the period from 1936-1941 when Ransom was involved in the arguments over the study of literature in the universities. Finally, in the period after 1941, he began to severely limit the range of his criticism. Consequently, Ransom's New Critical positions were not developed after his involvement in Agrarianism, but were clarified during his engagement in the movement.<sup>57</sup>

Jancovich is intent on proving that for Tate, Warren and Ransom Agrarianism and the New Criticism were co-temporal. The analysis of Ransom's career above may fit this scheme but in every other respect it is a distortion of what actually occurred. It is certainly true that many of the essays which made up The World's Body had been written by Ransom in the 1930s, the time of his active involvement with Agrarianism, but as I have indicated above, Ransom's interest in the formal aspects of literary art stemmed from at least the early 1920s, preceding his interest in Agrarianism. Similarly The World's Body ends with the essay "Criticism Inc." calling for a more systematic literary study, which even in 1938, Ransom clearly does not feel exists. Ransom's text which is sometimes taken to give the "New Critics" their name wasn't even published until 1941 and The New Criticism also ends with an appeal for the sort of literary criticism which he wanted.. From 1936-1941 Ransom was involved mostly, not with

arguing about the teaching of literature in universities, but in writing his own critical essays and editing the Kenyon Review. After 1941 he continued to edit the review and also began to produce some of the most interesting essays in his career which begin to discriminate his own approach from the "New Critics" and others on the critical scene. Accordingly one could conclude, *contra* Jancovich "Consequently, Ransom's "New Critical" positions were not developed during his involvement in Agrarianism, but were clarified when his engagement in the movement had ended."

Jancovich's desire to prove that the "New Criticism" arose at the same time as Agrarianism also disfigures his discussion of other writers; for example he says of Allen Tate:

Tate's first book, Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas is often seen as an important collection of New Critical articles, but it was actually a selection of papers and reviews on both literature and society which he had written during the first stage of his career. For example, his essay on Emily Dickinson was originally published in 1928 when he was still trying to establish the movement which became known as Agrarianism.<sup>58</sup>

Here, Tate's essays are inconvenient to Jancovich's argument because they were written too early. If the New Criticism and Agrarianism are co-temporal and Tate's essay "Emily Dickinson" dates from before his wholehearted involvement in Agrarianism then in Jancovich's scheme it simply cannot be New Critical. Jancovich's emphasis on the need for the dates of New Critical and Agrarian endeavours to coincide derives from his attempt to resist Fekete's argument that the New Criticism was simply the domesticated form which Agrarianism transformed itself into once it had become clear that Agrarianism had no viable independent political existence. Jancovich needs the two movements to mesh in time, but in both Ransom's case and Tate's, this is only possible by doing violence to the historical record.

What distinguishes Fekete's analysis from Jancovich's is that Jancovich allows the New Critics a level of political sophistication and self-awareness which Fekete denies them. Fekete's argument seems to suggest that whilst Ransom continued to display many of the ideological positions he had held as an Agrarian, he was unaware of the

philosophical implications of his aesthetic views; he innocently continued to re-enact ideological positions which were a mere formalistic echo of his earlier political activity. For Jancovich the Agrarians themselves made a conscious decision to change strategy and take their political activity into a new covert form:

It was hoped that the transformation of the academy would enable the distribution of their social and cultural criticism, and so encourage further social and cultural changes. The shift [from Agrarianism to Criticism] was not one of political position, but merely a tactical manoeuvre. They had simply identified a more immediate and practical way of promoting their position.<sup>59</sup>

There are a number of issues raised by this suggestion. It is certainly true that during the Agrarian period some of the Agrarians, notably Tate, had seen the need for extensive cultural activity to complement the purely political agitation, as Tate's proposal for a Southern academy of "positive reactionaries" indicates.<sup>60</sup> However, if one notes the reaction of Donald Davidson to the critical activities of his former Agrarian colleagues after the middle of the 1930s then it is clear that Davidson felt intellectually as well as physically abandoned by his old comrades. As far as the custodian of the Agrarian flame was concerned New Criticism certainly did not promote the position of the Agrarians. Instead it represented a capitulation to the North and to the values which the Agrarians had opposed.<sup>61</sup>

The second point is this: Ransom, Tate and Warren had been so intensively involved in political activity that they were unlikely to mistake it for anything else. Though Ransom sometimes enjoyed using the language of politics or warfare when describing the struggle over criticism, as when he wrote to Tate: "Am much interested in the Princeton version of the war between creative literature and scholarship"<sup>62</sup> that does not necessarily imply that he thought of the war within the Universities in the same way, or even as the same battle as his previous Agrarianism. Ransom, who had been the victim of the University politics of Vanderbilt<sup>63</sup> could not help but be aware that University departments were political institutions; but he was in a better position than most academics to realise the difference between micro and macro political activity.

Notably, both the analyses discussed above depend upon a severe restriction of whom is considered to be a New Critic: Ransom's list of New Critics would have certainly included RP Blackmur, W.K. Wimsatt, Cleanth Brooks William Empson and Allen Tate. He also expressed qualified agreement with I.A. Richards, Yvor Winters and T.S. Eliot. Yet the figures on this list held a wide range of political opinions. Tate and Eliot's politics are well known. Wimsatt and Blackmur were New Critics who had never been involved with Agrarianism, Cleanth Brooks, though an undergraduate at Vanderbilt between 1924 and 1928 had not been involved in either Fugitive or Agrarian activity and Robert Penn Warren had by the end of the 1930s become a political liberal. How then should we read the politics of the new Criticism if we apply the model of Fekete or Jancovich to this larger list of critics? Is one to assume that there was a hard core of "political" New Critics who somehow directed the activities of the non-political others? Did the "non-political" New Critics carry out what they felt to be unpolitical literary analyses which were in fact, as far as Ransom or Tate were concerned, highly political? If not did the criticism of the "non-political" New Critics display the same political meaning, or covert message as that of the "political" New Critics? Fekete's emphasis, in particular, of the guiding and "navigating" role which he sees Ransom performing for the whole New Critical movement recalls the guiding role of the Leninist vanguard party, operating as an intensely dedicated and politicised group directing the activity of a larger and less ideologically focused organisation. Fekete may be mapping a political model from his own tradition onto the activities of the New Critics. In short, whilst the New Critics' ideological opponents may, in their most hostile or embattled moods have liked to pretend that there was a nation-wide conspiracy of New Critics, there is no clear, easy or programmatic political relationship between the various figures who were important in the New Criticism. Whilst the institutional changes which occurred within American Departments of English certainly involved "political" upheaval of a sort, it is important not to confuse institutional politics with macro political agitation.. Finally, if one wished to discuss the relationship between Agrarianism and the "New Criticism", it is important to note that not all Agrarians made the step

into the New Criticism. One figure from the 1930 group remained a dedicated Agrarian yet never made the step into New Criticism at all; Donald Davidson's continued devotion to Agrarian ideas took him into folklore and ultimately into the propagation of racist politics; not into the critical movement which was to transform the teaching of English literature.<sup>64</sup>

It would be wrong to suggest all political analyses of the New Criticism follow the relationship between Agrarianism and the New Criticism in the close and deterministic detail of Fekete and Jancovich. Tobin Siebers' Cold War Criticism and the Politics of Skepticism<sup>65</sup> starts from a wider premise, that the literary criticism generated during the Cold War reflects the ideological conflicts of the larger political climate:

We are afraid that the cold war will never end, and so the history of the cold war is the story of our skepticism about endings, intentions, interpretations, and calculations concerning troop movements, weapons, negotiations, and claims to truth and falsehood. We are forever watchful and on our guard. Our fear contributes an essential part to the cold war mentality. It determines the distrust, suspicion, paranoia and skepticism that have always characterised the cold war era.<sup>66</sup>

The New Criticism appeared in the 1920s and 1930s, but it is most associated with the post-war world, when it acquired a institutional status with the help of the post-war boom in population and education. Those texts most frequently anthologised as examples of the New Criticism and from which its basic principles are drawn appeared in the first years of the Cold War. "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy" by Wimsatt and Beardsley were published in 1946 and 1949. Cleanth Brooks's The Well Wrought Urn, which includes both "The Language of Paradox" and "The Heresy of Paraphrase," came out in 1947, and two years later Brooks published "Irony as a principle of Structure." Modern criticism is a product of the cold war, and the repeated emphasis by the New Critics on objectivity, ambiguity, paradox, the impossibility of paraphrase, and double meaning are part of the cold war climate.<sup>67</sup>

For Siebers the representative New Critics are Wimsatt, Beardsley and Brooks, those later New Critics who avoided involvement in Agrarianism altogether. At a stroke his argument transforms the "politics" of the New Criticism: rather than seeing the New

Criticism as a hangover from the 1930s representing or encoding in covert or in subjugated form the concerns of Agrarianism, the movement is recast as an ideological response to the nervy, uncertain political climate of the Cold War. The careful, detailed and objective reading of the later New Critics can be seen here as a response to a world where the interpretation of public events is necessarily uncertain due to misinformation and propaganda. On the one hand this means that the readings of the "Cold War critic" tend to reflect the macro-politics of the Cold War in their concern with irony, indeterminacy and ambiguity, on the other, the critical act is given a privileged function since it offers the opportunity to penetrate the "fiction" of Cold War politics, and resolve its ambiguities. Only by a form of careful "close reading," alert to the dangers of hysteria and false statement, can the critic, here standing as the representative citizen/philosopher (and Siebers' analysis implies that one of the effects of the Cold War was to demand that *every* citizen became a philosopher, weighing truth and fiction) find his/her way to a stable judgement in a world of propaganda. However, whilst privileging the role of the critic in the interpretative confusion of the Cold War, Siebers' also portrays the New Critics he discusses as turning away from the public world, in search of a private literary domain in which interpretative tensions may be resolved in a form which offers solace to the perplexed citizen. Accordingly, Siebers returns to a paradigm which sees the New Criticism as a retreat from the world. Though these two contradictory aspects of his text are not resolved, Siebers' ingenious argument avoids the simple binary oppositions and occasionally dogmatic substitutions of Fekete and Jancovitch. Nevertheless the very nature of Siebers' argument resists the demand for proof; he argues for a recognition of the way the political climate in its widest sense effects the language and strategies of criticism.

The arguments of Fekete, Jancovitch and Siebers rely to varying extents on the same perception; that in crucial ways the purely technical analyses of the New Criticism disguise a series of undeclared political beliefs. In short, they feel that there is more to the ideology of the New Criticism than meets the eye. In selecting those critics who seem to be the least "political" of the New Critics as the quintessential representatives

of Cold War Criticism, Siebers provides what is perhaps the apotheosis of the idea that the New Criticism contains political ideology in inverse relationship to how overtly that ideology is paraded. These analyses of the "covert politics" of the New Criticism are at root so similar that they themselves should be analysed.

It is striking for example that readings which search for the covert politics of the New Critical formation tend to focus on Ransom, or on the later New Critics, rather than on Tate who combined close reading practices with clearly identifiable politics. For example when in 1956 Tate finally gained academic tenure as Professor at the University of Minnesota<sup>68</sup>, his biographer notes that "he was away a good deal of the time." <sup>69</sup>Tate "was away" attending events like the 1952 Congress for Cultural Freedom in Paris which was sponsored by the C.I.A. Tate's "reactionary" politics were overt: many "political" readings of the New Criticism have an interest in the politics of the movement only when it is conceived to be covert.

Other critics have suggested that the New Criticism did not disguise a political agenda as much as a religious one. For some time the New Criticism has been considered by many critics as a discipline which either draws upon religious knowledge, assumptions and critical strategies or smuggles them into the reading of the literary text. For the editor of one recent collection which proclaims itself to be concerned with "the present and future of literary theory" the New Criticism so clearly conceals religious concerns that the real issue is merely to decide which ones:

Whether or not one should see the New Critical move towards the reification of the text as an aborted Protestant Revolution, as a Neo-Catholic Renaissance, or as an attempt to find at least marginal acceptance in the "real" world of scientific discourse with equal claims to a transcendence of ideology, is a historical question whose answers are already being sketched by many scholars.<sup>70</sup>

And Jonathan Culler states:

We critics of the Age of Eliot have been unable to see our method for what it is; we accept Christianity as Tradition and think it bad taste to argue about religious dogma; we regard Eliot's religion as a personal matter which, of course, informed the poetry but otherwise need not concern us. We see the religious commitments of American New Critics as merely anecdotal.<sup>71</sup>

The problem with Culler's statement is that in many ways evidence about the religious beliefs of the American New Critics is "merely anecdotal". Certainly Ransom and Cleanth Brooks came from very similar Methodist backgrounds, and certainly Allen Tate converted to Roman Catholicism, but there are several discriminations which should be made around the issue of religious belief. Firstly a writer who has a strong religious belief and holds firmly to their religious faith is in many ways less likely to confuse or conflate the function of poetry with the function of religious worship: knowing one clearly they would be unlikely to mistake it for the other. Tate made this point explicitly when he wrote: "literature is neither religion nor social engineering."<sup>72</sup> Secondly it may be that the Religious backgrounds of the New Critics should be seen as just that, backgrounds, representing at best certain shared cultural experiences or expectations, though even those can be overstated, since Southern Methodism and Roman Catholicism share little in terms of doctrine, ritual or creed. Finally, in the case of Ransom with whom this analysis is overwhelmingly concerned it will be clear from the earlier discussion of Ransom's religious convictions that his theological views were so eclectic that it is unlikely that he might hold them in common with anyone else. Perhaps the most pleasing response by a new Critic to the accusation that the movement relied on Anglican or Catholic classical leanings came from R.P.Blackmur who, when asked about his religious beliefs responded "I am a Jewish Protestant with Catholic leanings." This response indicates something of the irritation of many New Critics at the easy codification of their textual practices, and of the danger of making an assumption that religious belief has any simple meaning.

Ransom himself seldom responded to the accusation that the New Criticism had a political agenda. One unpublished response serves to indicate his views. A vociferous opponent of the New Criticism, Robert Hillyer, who had won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1934, was appointed to the English Faculty of Kenyon College in 1949, possibly in a move by Kenyon's President to prevent the English Department from being staffed entirely by New Critics<sup>73</sup>. Hillyer immediately set out to publicise his views that the New Critics were a conspiratorial cabal who:

through logrolling, discreet acquaintanceship, academic positions and brow-beating... have gradually acquired power... they are wholly concerned with irony, the meaning of meaning, paradoxes, ambiguities, ambivalences, dichotomies - and indeed double talk... they will tell you that the sonnets of Donne are better than the sonnets of Shakespeare.<sup>73</sup>

This final accusation was clearly a jibe aimed at Ransom's essay "Shakespeare at Sonnets" in The World's Body. When Hillyer's article was repeated in The Kenyon Collegian Ransom, who was teaching at Indiana University, was pressed to respond to it, and although he resisted any pressure to reply directly, his private letter to a colleague in the English department indicated his irritation:

Am awfully tired of people wondering about the politics of my, or anybody's critical position: I find, even here, where they don't know much about it, the tendency for people to read a lot of ambition and Socratising [sic] and some sort of party line, and deep plotting, into a speech, paper, essay etc. That Kenyon boy was sure to crop up. I'd have laughed at him, I think.<sup>74</sup>

This minor incident serves to illuminate in microcosm many of the tensions which were occurring in the English Departments of America's Colleges and Universities during the 1940s and 1950s, as the New Criticism vied for supremacy with the older scholarly historical analysis. Ransom's clear anger could either indicate that he felt that analysis of the cabal-like nature of the New Criticism was correct, or that he had heard it so many times that he was tired of it. It is probably appropriate here to take Ransom's letter at face value; as a critic who was deeply committed to the philosophy of literary form, he may well have felt that speculations about the politics of the literary act merely diverted from what he would have seen as the true purpose of criticism.

## CONCLUSION

The New Criticism, judges William Cain<sup>75</sup> became just criticism, so successfully assimilated into the Departments of English Literature that it became invisible and all pervasive:

So deeply ingrained in English studies are New Critical attitudes, values, and emphases that we do not even perceive them as the legacy of a particular movement. On the contrary: we feel them to be the natural and definitive conditions for criticism in general.

The current invisibility of Ransom's own critical work within the academic system however does not betoken its pervasive power. Rather Ransom's interests are literally absent, judged, if considered at all, to be so particular and time specific that they are irrelevant to contemporary critical study. Specifically, Ransom's concern with the ontological reality of the literary text might be seen to have been assumed by the new New Critical approaches of Deconstruction and Semiotic analysis, although whether Ransom would himself have felt at home in a more explicitly theoretical literary studies is debatable. One of the characteristics of Ransom's aesthetic was he always stressed, that it was fundamentally practical, or, as he declared in "Criticism Inc." "philosophy sounds hard, but it deals with natural and fundamental forms of experience." This materialist and pragmatic bent to Ransom's criticism seems highly idiosyncratic in the terms of the contemporary theoretical reading of literary texts. In assessing why Ransom's influence as a theorist did not survive him, it is important to note, and to ask why Ransom's criticism in his "critical phase" seemed to offer stronger critiques than proscriptions.

This situation arose out of a paradox which lies at the heart of Ransom's aesthetic aspirations. Ransom's dedication to the promulgation of an effective, rigorous and philosophically sound aesthetic system is one aspect of his project which remains constant from the 1920s to the end of the 1950s. At first the system was to be propounded in the form of an authoritative single volume, but, appropriately given that Ransom's aesthetic concerns were always bound up with his practical ones, his mind

turned to social and political issues. When he entered his decisive critical phase it became clear, perhaps even to Ransom himself, that previously he had always used a group of other minds to hone his own critical positions, in the Fugitive group or the Agrarian circle. Accordingly, much of Ransom's energy during the New Critical phase was spent on critiquing the work of other critics and using them as the whetstones on which to sharpen his prose. This explains why Ransom's texts tend characteristically to be collections of essays; even The New Criticism is essentially comprised of four essay-length sections in which Ransom critiques the critical practice of others in an attempt to clarify his own. Similarly Ransom relished the opportunity to review new texts, or engage with their authors in print. Accordingly a dissonant situation arose where Ransom's central aesthetic concerns were always defined peripherally against the various writers whom he criticised. His central concern about the distinction between science and art remained with him throughout his life, but was never satisfactorily expressed or codified. Given the emphasis on the text which the New Criticism insisted upon, it is strikingly ironic that Ransom failed to produce an authoritative text which might have secured his aesthetic reputation.

Whilst this aesthetic failure has prevented Ransom from being a significantly influential theorist, the pressure to critique others, which may have been driven by his dissatisfaction with his own failure to produce an aesthetic text, enabled him to vigorously exploit many of the institutional and intellectual opportunities which were open to him. This chapter has traced both the ideological development of Ransom's criticism and the institutional manifestation of the criticism which he endorsed. In the process it has traced what can be seen as an exemplary twentieth century tale of academic professionalisation and career success. Many critics have argued that in this final critical phase of Ransom's life, a unique historical opportunity arose which Ransom was in a strong position to exploit. Gerald Graff concludes of Ransom:

If there was a single career whose personal trajectory perfectly coincided with the institutional fortunes of criticism, it was that of John Crowe Ransom.<sup>76</sup>

And similarly, Hugh Kenner noted:

What a critic may hope to accomplish in his lifetime is no more than a few acts of clarification, and if Ransom almost inadvertently accomplished more it is because his unusual powers were aided by a historical opportunity.<sup>77</sup>

Yet if the final stage in Ransom's career seemed to represent a fruitful union between the writer's interests and talents, and a broad historical opportunity, it also represents a convergence of many of the themes of the earlier phases in Ransom's life.

Finally it is important to note therefore that in the Critical Phase Ransom was able to combine the dedicated interest in aesthetics which had characterised his period as a Fugitive with an institutionalised form of the campaigning, speech making and political agitation which had characterised his Agrarianism. The select colloquies of scholars who met together out of a dedication to intellectual criticism and developed into friends at the Kenyon School of English were a professionalised, adult form of the Fugitive Group, and the oppositional role which the New Critics played within the academy mirrored the intellectual alienation of the Fugitives and led to fierce power struggles as intense as any that had occupied the Agrarians. Indeed, through the Kenyon Review, Ransom even managed to edit a small journal, different in form, though similar in scale to the one which the Agrarians had once planned to run. As if recognising at some level that all the elements in his earlier life had converged again, except one, Ransom even devoted the final years of his life to trying to rewrite his poetry. This phase therefore is a synthesis, and an appropriate ending to many of the themes developed throughout Ransom's life and career.

## Conclusion

First, the poet puts on the mask. It places him before his public-and in his own mind for that matter-as an anonymous person and not as himself. The mask covers his face sufficiently to conceal his actual identity, and intimates that he is not to reveal it otherwise...

(John Crowe Ransom: "The Tense of Poetry" 1938)

John Crowe Ransom's career can be seen as a sequence of shifts and strategic engagements which nevertheless advance a remarkably consistent project. This thesis has dated Ransom's attempt to generate a philosophically rigorous aesthetic system from the early 1920s, and has noted how the incompletely articulated assumptions of that early aesthetic bore upon the production in the 1930s of critical texts which seem, initially, to be essentially social and political. During the final stage of Ransom's career the early aesthetic work served to exert a continual pressure towards aesthetic rigour, forcing the participants in the various stages of the New Critical project towards clarification. Possibly too, the unfulfilled ambition was, in an existential sense, the dynamo which powered many of Ransom's skirmishes during "the Critical Phase", skirmishes which are elaborated in some detail above. In this sense Ransom's career is a curious combination of progression and repetition. If we examine the apparently distinct and discontinuous phases of that career it is clear that the three groupings Ransom was involved in bore remarkable internal similarities. Each group, Fugitive, Agrarian and New Critical, combined intense internal loyalties with an essentially oppositional relationship to the outside world. Thus the Fugitive poets felt at odds not just with what they perceived as the

debased literary culture of the South but also with the attitudes of the Vanderbilt University administration. The Agrarians were an oppositional group within the South, operating out of the city which at the time had a good claim to be the centre of Southern Modernism, and the New Critics, though a more diffuse grouping were oppositional within the academy. In each case the self perception of the grouping was that it was a pressurised minority. Further, within each oppositional group Ransom felt the need to perform an oppositional role. A detailed analysis of the roles which Ransom played within the Fugitive, Agrarian and New Critical groupings would note that Ransom's actions typically combined loyalty with competitiveness and reaction. In each phase Ransom responded to and ultimately reacted against the dynamics of group responsibility, displaying impatience and frustration if some of his colleagues found it hard to keep up with his own intellectual development. In the Fugitive group Ransom and Tate formed an aesthetically sophisticated vanguard which was openly critical of the less sophisticated poets within the group. Ransom was the first to perceive and react against the intellectual incoherence which was implicit in Agrarianism. The New Critical grouping was more diffuse than those which had previously involved Ransom, and was the only one to become anything like an institutional orthodoxy yet even here Ransom's role combined the authoritative position of an elder statesman with the chiding role of a radical internal critic. That a critic who exercised a consistently radicalising role within three groups which were themselves powerfully opposed to the status quo should habitually be thought of as a conservative is only one of the ironies which confronts any thoughtful critic of Ransom's career.

The reintroduction into Ransom's published record of the two deliberately erased texts itself helps to redefine his career. By reintroducing the erased Land! and the suppressed Poems About God we can see that in one sense Ransom's career was constructed on a dialogic model. The emphatic and aesthetically unrestrained Poems About God gave rise to the aesthetically controlled poetry of Chills and Fever. (Even the title of Ransom's second volume of poetry indicates the centrality of the idea of dialogue to his imagination.) The aesthetically demanding and abstract Third Moment text was destroyed only after the production of the critical and thematically based The World's Body. The rhetorical politics of I'll Take My Stand invited the detailed practical proposals of Land! and the softening which that text displayed towards the small-holder capitalist system had a longer term response in Ransom's apparently un-alienated participation in a cultural arena which by the 1950s was underpinned by extensive and unprecedented support from America's most wealthy corporations.

It would be tendentious however to claim that the reintroduction of Ransom's erased and suppressed texts, and the postulation of an underlying unity to his career, serves in any meaningful sense to simplify his career. In many ways indeed the reintroduction of these presumed missing or disowned texts problematises a career which at some level Ransom wished to simplify, a desire which he demonstrated by reshaping through overt determination and editorial control. The reintroduction of the erased texts may restore some sense of progression to the career but it inevitably raises the question of what Ransom believed himself to be doing.

Rather than resting on a biographical answer to that question, an answer which would stress the testimony of Ransom's friends and colleagues, many of whom commented on a personal manner which was withdrawn and secretive, it is instructive to relate Ransom's strategy to the demands of his aesthetic work. As demonstrated above Ransom aspired to producing an aesthetic which was philosophically rigorous. Accordingly, one possible explanation for the suppression of a text might lie in the simple sense of it failing to satisfy the demands of rigour. This explanation certainly seems appropriate to Ransom's response to The Third Moment. In addition we might note that Ransom's critical work was not important in the sense that it was expressive of his point of view, but instead because it allowed him to articulate, to work through, a set of principles to their conclusion. This tendency can be seen in God Without Thunder which is an attempt to re-articulate religious belief from first principles, and Land! which applies the same principles to a detailed analysis of contemporary economics. In other words, Ransom's books were firstly of use to him, as detailed ways of thinking. The suppression of the book does not erase the thought, as Ransom's decision to retain the manuscript of The Third Moment until 1938 indicates. Only when The World's Body was completed could the manuscript of the earlier book be destroyed, but the aesthetic ideas which the earlier text discussed nevertheless became part of the later published volume. Accordingly, even suppression can serve the ends of rigour, since each partially unsuccessful attempt at articulation of the central thesis can be reincorporated into the larger project.

Even if the overall shape of Ransom's career becomes clearer when viewed through his larger aesthetic aims, there remain many paradoxes about Ransom's career as it is centred on his person. One is that the conventionality of his personal style, and the fact that he was considered to be a conservative disguised what was in fact a sophisticated, and in many respects a determined modern outlook. Although his personal demeanour seemed to look back to his father's day, and though the range of his activities, in economics, aesthetics and theology seemed to indicate that he had a Victorian breadth to his career, clearly Ransom is, intellectually very much a post Victorian, and one who beneath his courtliness had a view of intellectual life which was singularly short on compensatory or reassuring illusion. In this vein it is also clear that the swerves and manoeuvres of Ransom's career offered him incidental opportunities for empathic insight. It is surely no coincidence that Ransom could write with such acuity about the strategies other writers used to disguise and defend themselves because at some level he identified the connections between such strategies and the impulses which drove his own writing. Ransom's writing seems to be a curious negotiation between impersonal authoritative statement and profoundly personal motivation. As Ransom used manners to define himself in the social arena his writing, while it is never "mannered" in the sense of being stiff, maintains its own decorum. His writing responded to deep personal motivations yet paraded its sense of composure and stability. In that sense Ransom may have more in common with another writer of tranquil surfaces and troubled depths who is now viewed to have combined decorous public behaviour with private manoeuvring. Robert Frost recommended Ransom first volume of poetry for publication. The men may have had more in common than either would have recognised.

Finally, at the end of this long and, by convention, impersonal critical analysis I will allow myself to make a personal observation. In April 1995 I visited Kenyon College in Gambier Ohio, where I was able to spend a number of days working in the Chalmers Memorial Library and talking in some detail to those members of the academic staff who remembered John Crowe Ransom and continued to value his contribution to the intellectual community at Kenyon. Still living in Gambier, in the house which was built by the College for her parents after John Crowe Ransom's retirement is Helen Ransom Forman, the executrix of the Ransom estate. After I had spent a number of hours talking to Mrs Forman she invited me to work in John Crowe Ransom's study which is in the basement of the house. There I was amazed to discover that his desk held the manuscript for the final edition of the Selected Poems, in addition to some letters and scraps of paper which held isolated jottings. The study also contained what remains of Ransom's extensive library, including the volumes of Latin poetry and prose which he had worked from while a young man studying at Oxford. By the time I came to Gambier my work on what is now this thesis was well advanced. I had provisionally concluded that Ransom's record of suppressing and burning his manuscripts indicated a greater degree of self consciousness about his own career than other critics had believed. Inevitably, I was anxious to see if anything in Ransom's study confirmed or refuted this impression. Beside Ransom's desk, in what I was later assured was essentially the order he had left them was every critical volume published about the poet before his death. In the margins of nearly all of these books were notes made in Ransom's own handwriting,

querying, confirming or expanding many of the observations made about his own poetry. Every critic who has described Ransom's final years has noted the ageing poet's alterations to his own poetry. None had ever had such powerful and concrete proof that Ransom's self awareness extended to a quizzical interest in his own critical reputation. The excitement of that discovery served to confirm my thesis, at least in my own mind. Yet if it served the purpose for me of satisfactory closure, the implications of Ransom's critical self consciousness are so fascinating that they should serve to re-open the critical analysis of a career and a body of writing which has, in my view, prematurely been seen as exhausted and complete.

That, clearly, is work for another thesis.

Edinburgh.

1<sup>st</sup> June 1996.

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## NOTES

### Introduction

- <sup>1</sup> Thomas Daniel Young, Gentleman in a Dustcoat: A Biography of John Crowe Ransom. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976) pp445-475.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p476-479.
- <sup>3</sup> Robert Lowell, "John Crowe Ransom 1888-1974" in Robert Lowell: Selected Prose (London: Faber and Faber, 1987) p20-28.
- <sup>4</sup> Allen Tate, "Relections on the Death of John Crowe Ransom" in Sewanee Review 82 no4 Oct-Dec 1974 pp545-551.
- <sup>5</sup> George Lanning, "Ransom as Editor" in John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography (ed.) T.D.Young (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968) p211, 213.
- <sup>6</sup> Howard Mumford Jones & Walter B.Rideout (eds.) The Letters of Sherwood Anderson (Boston, 1953) p389.
- <sup>7</sup> Lee Bartlett (ed.) Kenneth Rexroth and James Laughlin Selected Letters (New York: Norton, 1991) p313.
- <sup>8</sup> For very different approaches to the "Renaissance" see John Bradbury: Renaissance in the South: (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), Richard H. King, A Southern Renaissance (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1980)
- <sup>9</sup> Thomas Daniel Young, Gentleman in a Dustcoat Louisiana State University Press 1976, Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom (eds.) T.D.Young and John Hindle (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1984, Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom T.D.Young & George Core (eds.) (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), Keiran Quinlan, John Crowe Ransom's Secular Faith (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1989)
- <sup>10</sup> Keiran Quinlan also notes Ransom's "peculiar, nonescapist understanding of 'aesthetic'" in John Crowe Ransom's Secular Faith p86.
- <sup>11</sup> Louise Cowan, The Fugitive Group: A Literary History. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959)
- <sup>12</sup> Bill Woolsey, "In Search of the Fugitives" The Nashville Tennessean Magazine August 12<sup>th</sup> 1951.
- <sup>13</sup> T.D.Young (ed.) John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968)
- <sup>14</sup> T.D.Young, Gentleman in a Dustcoat (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976) xv
- <sup>15</sup> George Core. The Editor of the Sewanee Review's comment was carried as an endorsement on the paperback edition.
- <sup>16</sup> Thomas Daniel Young, Gentleman in a Dustcoat: A Biography of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976) pp445-446.

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## NOTES

### Chapter 1: Pre-Fugitive Poetry

- <sup>1</sup> John Crowe Ransom, Poems About God (New York: Henry Holt, 1919)
- <sup>2</sup> Donald Davidson, Southern Writers in the Modern World, (Athens Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1958) p14.
- <sup>3</sup> Robert Penn Warren, "John Crowe Ransom, A Study in Irony" in John Crowe Ransom, Critical Essays and a Bibliography (ed.) T.D.Young (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968) p33.
- <sup>4</sup> Randall Jarrell, "John Ransom's Poetry" in Poetry and the Age (London: Faber & Faber, 1973) pp93-106.
- <sup>5</sup> Vivienne Koch: "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom" in John Crowe Ransom, Critical Essays and a Bibliography (ed.) T.D. Young, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968) p115.
- <sup>6</sup> Robert Graves, Introduction to John Crowe Ransom's Grace After Meat (London: Hogarth Press, 1924) p7.
- <sup>7</sup> John Crowe Ransom, Selected Poems (New York: Alfred A.Knopf, 1969) p112.
- <sup>8</sup> Fred Bornhauser, Disowned Progeny: The Early Poems of John Crowe Ransom Unpublished Phd Dissertation, (Cornell University, 1966)
- <sup>9</sup> John Crowe Ransom, Poems About God (New York: Henry Holt, 1919) v.
- <sup>10</sup> T.D.Young and G.Core (eds.), Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) p100.
- <sup>11</sup> Christopher Morley to Alfred Harcourt Jan 27th 1919. Henry Holt Collection Firestone Library, Princeton.
- <sup>12</sup> T.D.Young & George Core (eds.) Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985)pp124-128.
- <sup>13</sup> J. Howard Woolmer, A Checklist of the Hogarth Press 1917-1946 (Rever Pennylsalvania, 1986) 400 copies of Grace After Meat were published in October 1924. By 10th February 1926, only 139 copies had been sold.
- <sup>14</sup> John Crowe Ransom, Selected Poems (New York: Alfred A.Knopf, 1969) p112.
- <sup>15</sup> Vivienne Koch, "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom" in Thomas Daniel Young, (ed.) John Crowe Ransom, Critical Essays and a Bibliography, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968) pp115-116.
- <sup>16</sup> John L.Stewart, John Crowe Ransom (University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers no 18 1962) p14.
- <sup>17</sup> Keiran Quinlan, John Crowe Ransom's Secular Faith (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) pp14-25.
- <sup>18</sup> John Crowe Ransom, Poems About God (New York: Henry Holt, 1919) vi.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp15-16.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., vii.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp6-10.
- <sup>22</sup> T.D.Young, Gentleman in a Dustcoat (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976) p39.
- <sup>23</sup> John Crowe Ransom, Poems About God (New York: Henry Holt, 1919) pp37-38.

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- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., p60.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp33-34.
- <sup>26</sup> T.D. Young and G. Core (eds.), Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom: (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) p100.
- <sup>27</sup> Louise Cowan, The Fugitive Group: A Literary History. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959) p38.
- <sup>28</sup> John Crowe Ransom, Poems About God (New York: Henry Holt, 1919) p13.
- <sup>29</sup> Letter from John James Ransom 7th April 1919: Henry Holt Archive. Firestone Library, Princeton University.
- <sup>30</sup> John Crowe Ransom: Poems About God (New York: Henry Holt, 1919) p68.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., p63.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., p50.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., p42.
- <sup>34</sup> Vivienne Koch, "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom" in John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography (ed.) T.D. Young (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976) P116.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., p19.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., p52.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., p25.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., p71.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., p62.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp3-6.
- <sup>41</sup> Vivienne Koch: "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom" in Thomas Daniel Young, John Crowe Ransom, Critical Essays and a Bibliography, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968) p116.
- <sup>42</sup> T.D. Young, "The Fugitives: Ransom, Davidson, Tate" in The History of Southern Literature (eds.) Rubin et.al. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) p321.
- <sup>43</sup> Robert Penn Warren, "Notes on the Poetry of John Crowe Ransom at His Eightieth Birthday," Kenyon Review XXX (1968) pp322-323.
- <sup>44</sup> John Crowe Ransom: Poems About God (New York: Henry Holt, 1919) p72.
- <sup>45</sup> "Roger Prim", "Ego" The Fugitive Vol.1 No1 (April 1922)
- <sup>46</sup> Robert Buffington, The Equilibrist: A Study of John Crowe Ransom's Poems, 1916-1963. (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967) p38.
- <sup>47</sup> W. Osborne, "John Crowe Ransom: Towards a Pastoral" in Southern Literature in Transition (eds.) P. Castille & W. Osborne (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1983) pp87-101.
- <sup>48</sup> T.D. Young & George Core (eds.) Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) p105.
- <sup>49</sup> Louis Untermeyer Dial, 66 (May 31, 1919) p562-563.
- <sup>50</sup> J.C. Ransom Poems About God (New York, Henry Holt, 1919) p72.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., vii.

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<sup>52</sup> John L. Stewart: John Crowe Ransom (University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers no. 18 1962) p15.

<sup>53</sup> J.C. Ransom, Selected Poems (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945) p60.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p59.

<sup>55</sup> Thornton H. Parsons, John Crowe Ransom (New York: Twayne, 1969) p17.

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## NOTES

### CHAPTER 2 : The Mature Fugitive

<sup>1</sup> In February 1928 Ransom wrote to T.S.Eliot offering a chapter of a book "dealing with the general aesthetic problem" for publication in The Criterion. That the chapter dealt with "the painter's problem" indicates that Ransom's interests were not limited to poetics. Ransom to T.S.Eliot February 5<sup>th</sup> 1928, Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom (eds.) T.D.Young and George Core (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) p177.

<sup>2</sup> John Crowe Ransom, "Editorial Note" The Fugitive issue no.3

<sup>3</sup> Louise Cowan, The Fugitive Group: A Literary History (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959)

<sup>4</sup> T.D.Young & George Core (eds.), Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) p134-134.

<sup>5</sup> Radcliffe Squires, Allen Tate: A Literary Biography (New York: Pegasus, 1968) p30.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Daniel Young records that Ransom burned many of his papers before he left Vanderbilt University for Kenyon College in September 1937. When Donald Davidson discovered Ransom in a smoke filled office on the Vanderbilt Campus in late August 1937 Ransom apparently explained "I am getting ready to move to Ohio". Ransom clearly chose to retain "The Third Moment." If he had no further use for it, this would seem to have been the perfect opportunity to destroy the manuscript. T.D.Young, Gentleman in a Dustcoat (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976) xvi.

<sup>7</sup> From a letter to Allen Tate, September 5, 1926. Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom (eds.) T.D.Young & John Hindle (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984) p339.

<sup>8</sup> T.D.Young and George Core (eds.), Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) p157.

<sup>9</sup> Rene Wellek, American Criticism 1900-1950 (London: Johnathan Cape, 1986) p161.

<sup>10</sup> J.C.Ransom, The New Criticism (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1941) p16.

<sup>11</sup> John Crowe Ransom, Selected Poems Third Edition, Revised and Enlarged (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969) p146.

<sup>12</sup> J.C.Ransom, "A Poet Nearly Anonymous" in The World's Body (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938) p1.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p2.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p39.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p2.

<sup>17</sup> Louis D. Rubin Jr. "A Critic Almost Anonymous: John Crowe Ransom Goes North," in The New Criticism and After (ed.) Thomas Daniel Young. (Charlottesville: University press of Virginia, 1976) pp14-15.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p17.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Keiran Quinlan, John Crowe Ransom's Secular Faith (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) p96.

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- <sup>21</sup> William Klein, "A Critic Nearly Anomalous" in Sewanee Review Vol.CII Number 3 Summer 1994 pp392-408.
- <sup>22</sup> William Klein, The Self as Critic Unpublished Manuscript, Kenyon College c1993.
- <sup>23</sup> These various attempts to introduce the historical facts about the real John Crowe Ransom into his own critical readings may be attempts to get around the formidable barrier of privacy which Ransom built around his own life. George Core even devotes an essay to why Ransom and the other Fugitives were so unattracted to the autobiographical mode. (Core, G. "Lives Written and Unwritten" in Located Lives: Place and Idea in Southern Autobiography (ed.) J.Bill Berry (Athens: 1990) pp52-65.
- <sup>24</sup> In the introduction to Grace After Meat (London: Hogarth Press, 1924) Robert Graves compared Ransom to Frost and noted: "In their manner, we find an extremely fastidious art disguised by colloquialisms and a pretense of every-which-way (to use Frosts own word)"
- <sup>25</sup> J.C.Ransom, Selected Poems: Third Edition, Revised and Enlarged (New York: Alfred.A.Knopf, 1969) p146.
- <sup>26</sup> John Crowe Ransom, Chills and Fever (New York: Alfred A.Knopf, 1924) p13.
- <sup>27</sup> "Roger Prim" "Ego" The Fugitive Volume 1, April 1922.
- <sup>28</sup> John Crowe Ransom, Selected Poems Third Edition, Revised and Enlarged (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969) p127.
- <sup>29</sup> L.Riding and R.Graves, A Survey of Modernist Poetry (London: William Heinemann, 1927) p230.
- <sup>30</sup> John Crowe Ransom, Selected Poems Third Edition, Revised and Enlarged (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969) p127.
- <sup>31</sup> J.C. Ransom, unpublished letter to Allen Tate February 11<sup>th</sup> 1923. Tate Papers Firestone Library, Princeton.
- <sup>32</sup> J.C.Ransom Chills and Fever (New York: Alfred. A.Knopf, 1924) pp94-95.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> J.C.Ransom Selected Poems (New York: Alfred A.Knopf, 1945) p8.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> Winters, Yvor, "John Crowe Ransom or Thunder Without God" in In Defence of Reason, (New York: Swallow Press, 1947) pp502-55.
- <sup>37</sup> Miller Williams, The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1972) p13.
- <sup>38</sup> Elsewhere Randall Jarrell suggests that "Ransom's poems are produced by the classical, or at worst semi-classical, treatment of romantic subjects." "John Ransom's Poetry" in Poetry and the Age (London: Faber & Faber, 1955) p95.
- <sup>39</sup> J.C.Ransom, Selected Poems (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945) p42.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup> J.C.Ransom, Selected Poems (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945) p3.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>45</sup> Richard King, A Southern Renaissance- The Cultural Awakening of the American South 1930-55, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) p8.

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- <sup>46</sup> J.C.Ransom, Selected Poems (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969) p45.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p147.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p151.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p12.
- <sup>50</sup> Robert Buffington, The Equilibrist: A Study of John Crowe Ransom's Poems, 1916-1963 (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967) p15.
- <sup>51</sup> Thornton H. Parsons, John Crowe Ransom (New York: Twayne, 1969) Preface.
- <sup>52</sup> Karl F. Knight, The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom (The Hague: Mouton, 1964) p18.
- <sup>53</sup> Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Group Psychology, reviewed by J.C. Ransom in Saturday Review of Literature, 1. (October 4, 1924) p161-162.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p152.
- <sup>55</sup> Vivienne Koch, "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom" in John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography (ed.) T.D. Young (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968) p123.
- <sup>56</sup> J.C.Ransom, Selected Poems (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969) p39.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p40.
- <sup>58</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy-Tale (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976)
- <sup>59</sup> Louise Westling, Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens (Athens Georgia: Georgia University Press, 1985) p23.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p27.
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>62</sup> J.C.Ransom Selected Poems (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969) p40.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>64</sup> J.C.Ransom, Selected Poems (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969) pp40-41.
- <sup>65</sup> Kenneth Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action (Baton Rouge: Louisiana state University Press, 1941) pp19-20.
- <sup>66</sup> Unpublished letter from Kenneth Burke to John Crowe Ransom August 17<sup>th</sup> 1962. Fugitive Archive Vanderbilt University.
- <sup>67</sup> J.C. Ransom, Selected Poems (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969) p122
- <sup>68</sup> Miller Williams The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1972) p25.
- <sup>69</sup> J.C.Ransom Chills and Fever (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1924) p28.
- <sup>70</sup> Although Karl F. Knight is going too far when he writes of "Miriam's perverted involvement with her botanical charges" The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom (The Hague: Mouton, 1964) p82.
- <sup>71</sup> J.C.Ransom, Selected Poems (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969) p3.
- <sup>72</sup> William Pratt, "Metamorphosis of a Poem" in Mississippi Quarterly, 30 (Winter 1976-77), pp29-58. Miller Williams, The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom (New Jersey: Rutgers University press, 1972)
- <sup>73</sup> Albert Gelpi, A Coherent Splendour (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) p41.
- <sup>74</sup> J.C.Ransom Selected Poems (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969) pp77-78.
- <sup>75</sup> J.C.Ransom, "An Address to Kenneth Burke" Kenyon Review IV 1942 pp218-237.

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<sup>76</sup> Unpublished Letter to Tate June 25<sup>th</sup> 1927, Tate Collection, Firestone Library, Princeton. “[“What Ducks Require”] represents me at this writing as a late piece, and (as my poems go) a most adequate one.”

<sup>77</sup> J.C. Ransom, Selected Poems (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969) p 90.

<sup>78</sup> Robert Lowell, Life Studies, (London: Faber & Faber, 1969) In another respect the New Criticism seemed to serve Lowell well: Paul Mariani suggests in Lost Puritan: A Life of Robert Lowell ( New York: Norton, 1994) that Lowell's volume Land of Unlikeness “received a surprising number of reviews, due to the ability of the New Critical network to get the word out.” p119.

<sup>79</sup> Robert Lowell, Kenyon Collegian, December 15th, 1974.

<sup>80</sup> Peter Jones, 50 American Poets, (London: Pan, 1979) p283, John Berryman Selected Poems 1938-1968 (London: Faber & Faber, 1972)

<sup>81</sup> Robert Penn Warren, Brother to Dragons, A Tale in Verse and Voices. (New York: Random House 1953)

<sup>82</sup> As late as 1956 Ransom indicated at the Fugitive reunion that “I have never been happy with the thought that I have left poetry. I've continued to make threats of writing more poems.” Rob Roy Purdy, Fugitives' Reunion Conversations at Vanderbilt, May 3-5, 1956 (Nashville: University of Vanderbilt Press, 1959) p182.

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## NOTES

### Coda: Ransom and Modernism

- <sup>1</sup> L. Riding and R. Graves, A Survey of Modernist Poetry (London: Willian Heinemann, 1927) p100.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid., p 106.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p9.
- <sup>4</sup> J.C. Ransom, "Poets Without Laurels" in The World's Body (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1938) p55.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., p56.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., p63.
- <sup>7</sup> J.C. Ransom, "Waste Lands" New York Evening Post Literary Review 14<sup>th</sup> July 1923 vol iii pp825-826.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Ransom mentions the poem as having been "just written" in a letter to Tate of February 23 1923. Ransom to Tate February 23 1923, held in the Tate Collection, Firestone Library Princeton
- <sup>11</sup> J.C. Ransom, "Waste Lands" New York Evening Post Literary Review 14<sup>th</sup> July 1923 vol iii pp825-826.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> See Thomas Daniel Young, Gentleman in a Dustcoat: (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1976) pp150-159.
- <sup>14</sup> Allen Tate, "A Reply to Ransom" New York Times Evening Post Literary Review 4<sup>th</sup> August 1923, vol iii p886.
- <sup>15</sup> Radcliffe Squires, Allen Tate: A Literary Biography (New York: Pegasus, 1971) p39.
- <sup>16</sup> Daniel Joseph Singal: The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press 1982.) p83.
- <sup>17</sup> Tate of course was soon to make his name in both artistic centres. Radcliffe Squires, Allen Tate: A Literary Biography (New York: Pegasus, 1971) pp55-99.
- <sup>18</sup> Thomas Daniel Young & George Core, Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) p139.
- <sup>19</sup> Radcliff Squires, Allen Tate: A Literary Biography (New York: Pegasus, 1971) p47.
- <sup>20</sup> Quoted in T.D. Young Gentleman in a Dustcoat (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976) p276.
- <sup>21</sup> Letter from Ransom to Allen Tate May 6 [1924] , Tate Collection Firestone Library, Princeton.
- <sup>22</sup> Ransom acknowledged this in the "Acknowledgements" to The World's Body in which he wrote of Tate: "Between us, when the talk was at a certain temperature, I have seen observations come to the surface in a manner to illustrate the theory of communal authorship."
- <sup>23</sup> J.C. Ransom: "The Feasting of Maionides and Stephen Daedalus" in New Republic, 59 (August 14, 1929) p342.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> J.C.Ransom "Modern With The Southern Accent" in Virginia Quarterly Review, 11 (April 1935) p184.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p186.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp191-192.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp193-194.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Daniel Young and M.Thomas Inge, Donald Davidson (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc. 1971) p122.

<sup>35</sup> J.C.Ransom: "Literature and the Arts: The Poems of T.S.Eliot: A Perspective" in New Republic December 8<sup>th</sup> 1952 p16.

<sup>36</sup> J.C.Ransom: "Wanted: An Ontological Critic" in Young and Core (eds.) Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984) p177.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p178.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas L.McHaney, "Literary Modernism: The South Keeps Going" in Southern Literature in Translation: Heritage and Promise (eds) P.Castille & W.Osborne (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1983) p 43.

<sup>40</sup> James H.Justus, "Poets After Midcentury" in The History of Southern Literature (eds.) Rubin et al. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1985) pp535-556.

<sup>41</sup> Terry Eagleton, Exiles and Émigrés (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970) pp9-19. Robert Crawford, "Modernism as Provincialism" in Devolving English Literature (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992)

<sup>42</sup> In Richard J.Calhoun, & John C. Guilds, A Tricentennial Anniversary of South Carolina Literature, 1670-1970. (North Carolina: North Carolina University Press, 1971)

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## NOTES

### Chapter 3: Myths and Modernity

- <sup>1</sup> T.D.Young & George Core, (eds.) Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) p145.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid., p148.
- <sup>3</sup> Thomas Daniel Young & John Hindle(eds.) Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984) p8.
- <sup>4</sup> T.D.Young & George Core, (eds.) Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) p181.
- <sup>5</sup> T.D. Young, Gentleman in a Dustcoat: A Biography of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976) p143.
- <sup>6</sup> T.D.Young & George Core, (eds.) Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) P139. (Ransom may also have feared that his teaching freedom might have been restricted if he accepted the offer from Dallas. Vanderbilt had resolved its battles with its church sponsors a generation before and Ransom was free to teach there without ecclesiastical interference)
- <sup>7</sup> Louise Cowan, The Fugitive Group: A Literary History . (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959) p38.
- <sup>8</sup> J.C. Ransom, "A Letter to S.M.H.", God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defence of Orthodoxy (London: Gerald Howe, 1931)
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Paul Conkin, The Southern Agrarians (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988) p15.
- <sup>11</sup> Stephen Matterson, Berryman and Lowell: The Art of Losing. (London: MacMillan, 1988) p23.
- <sup>12</sup> J.C. Ransom, God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defence of Orthodoxy (London: Gerald Howe, 1931) p16.
- <sup>13</sup> J.C. Ransom, "Waste Lands" in New York Evening Post Literary Review vol. iii (July 14, 1923) pp825-6.
- <sup>14</sup> T.D.Young & T.Inge,(eds.) Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984) p 35.
- <sup>15</sup> J.C. Ransom, God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defence of Orthodoxy (London: Gerald Howe, 1931) p15.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp16-17.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., p5.
- <sup>18</sup> T.D.Young & George Core, (eds.) Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) p181.
- <sup>19</sup> J.C. Ransom, God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defence of Orthodoxy (London: Gerald Howe, 1931) p32.
- <sup>20</sup> Keiran Quinlan, John Crowe Ransom's Secular Faith (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) p49.
- <sup>21</sup> J.C.Ransom, God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defence of Orthodoxy. (London: Gerald Howe, 1931) p15.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp56-57.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p67.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> T.D.Young & George Core, (eds.) Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) p155.

<sup>26</sup> Darwell Stone, "The Mystical interpretation of the Old Testament" in A New Commentary on Holy Scripture, including the Apocrypha, (eds.) Bishop Gore and Professors Goudge and Guillaum, (Cambridg: Cambridge University Press 1930)

<sup>27</sup> J.C. Ransom, God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defence of Orthodoxy (London: Gerald Howe, 1931) p91.

<sup>28</sup> T.D.Young & George Core, (eds.) Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) p148.

<sup>29</sup> J.C. Ransom, God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defence of Orthodoxy (London: Gerald Howe, 1931) p92.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p91.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p84.

<sup>32</sup> Wayne Knoll, "Ransom as Religionist" Mississippi Quarterly 30 (Winter 1966-67) pp111-136.

<sup>33</sup> J.C. Ransom, God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defence of Orthodoxy (London: Gerald Howe, 1931) p83.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.,p86.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p107.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.,p118.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.,p97.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.,pp100-101.

<sup>40</sup> Keiran Quinlan, John Crowe Ransom's Secular Faith (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) p52.

<sup>41</sup> J.C. Ransom, God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defence of Orthodoxy (London: Gerald Howe, 1931) p97.

<sup>42</sup> H.L.Mencken, Prejudices: Fifth Series (New York, 1926) in Henry May (ed.) The Discontent of the Intellectuals: A Problem of the Twenties (Chicago, 1963) pp25-30.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p103.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p104.

<sup>45</sup> J.C. Ransom, God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defence of Orthodoxy (London: Gerald Howe, 1931) p100.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p104-105.

<sup>47</sup> George M. Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelism: 1870-1925 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) p188.

<sup>48</sup> William Hutchison The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) p271.

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- <sup>49</sup> J.C. Ransom, God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defence of Orthodoxy (London: Gerald Howe, 1931) p326.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp330-331.
- <sup>51</sup> Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Pure Reason (London: Everyman, 1940), Soren Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1989)
- <sup>52</sup> J.C. Ransom, God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defence of Orthodoxy (London: Gerald Howe, 1931) p254.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid., p334.
- <sup>54</sup> Wayne Knoll, "Ransom as Religionist" Mississippi Quarterly 30 (Winter 1966-67) pp111-136.
- <sup>55</sup> William R Hutchison, The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) p2.
- <sup>56</sup> J.C.Ransom, God Without Thunder (London: Gerald Howe, 1931) p143.
- <sup>57</sup> Keiran Quinlan, John Crowe Ransom's Secular Faith (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989)
- <sup>58</sup> Unsigned Review of God Without Thunder ,Times Literary Supplement, December 24th 1931.
- <sup>59</sup> Wayne Knoll, "Ransom as Religionist" Mississippi Quarterly 30 (Winter 1966-67) p111-136.
- <sup>60</sup> J.C.Ransom, God Without Thunder (London: Gerald Howe, 1931) p3.

## NOTES

### Chapter 4: A Political Aesthetic

<sup>1</sup> Allen Tate, "The Fugitive, 1922-1925: A Personal Recollection Twenty Years After", in Princeton University Library Chronicle, III (April 1942), p84.

<sup>2</sup> Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930) Hereafter referred to in the text for convenience as I'll Take My Stand

<sup>3</sup> Richard Gray, Writing the South: Ideas of an American Region (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), Alexander Karanikas, Tillers of a Myth: Southern Agrarians as Social and Literary Critics. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), Walter Sullivan, Allen Tate: A Recollection. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), Eugene Genovese, The Southern Tradition: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1994.) Paul Conkin. The Southern Agrarians. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988.)

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Father and Unpublished Dissertation Tennessee State Archive and Museum Ransom papers Box 7 file 9.

<sup>5</sup> J.C.Ransom, "Empirics in Politics" reprinted in Poems and Essays (New York: Vintage Books, 1955) p143.

<sup>6</sup> J.C.Ransom, "The Question of Justice," in Yale Review, 4 (July 1915) p685.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p688.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Davidson himself cited the importance of the Scopes trial in galvanising the Fugitives.; T.D.Young, Gentleman in a Dustcoat (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976) p201. Ransom does not mention the trial in his correspondence.

<sup>9</sup> Fred Hobson, "Odum, Davidson and the Sociological Process" in Tell About the South: The Southern Rage to Explain (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983) pp180-243.

<sup>10</sup> Louise Cowan, The Fugitive Group (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959) p102. See also T.D.Young and M.Thomas Inge: Donald Davidson (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1971) p127.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Karanikas, Tillers of a Myth (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), William C.Harvard & Walter Sullivan (eds) A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982)

<sup>12</sup> William C.Harvard & Walter Sullivan (eds) A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982) p58-59.

<sup>13</sup> David L.Smiley, "The Quest for a Central Theme in Southern History." The South Atlantic Quarterly Vol71 No. 3 pp307-325.

<sup>14</sup> Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities (London: Verso 1983)

<sup>15</sup> Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930) p65.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p62.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p174.

<sup>18</sup> J.C. Ransom, God Without Thunder (London: Gerlad Howe, 1931) p121.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Gray, Writing the South: Ideas of an American Region (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) p143.

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- <sup>20</sup> "There used to be a time when southern houses were known for their front porches: a place to cool off, to watch the world, to talk things over": "The Front Porch" by Harry L. Watson and John Shelton Reed, Southern Cultures Duke University Press Inaugural Issue 1993.
- <sup>21</sup> Paul Conkin The Southern Agrarians (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988) provides a detailed analysis of the planning which eventually produced I'll Take My Stand
- <sup>22</sup> J.C. Ransom, "Reconstructed but Unregenerate" in I'll Take My Stand (New York: Harpers and Brothers, 1930) p1.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid. The critic Sheldon Hackney's observation in "The South as a Counterculture" provides an appropriate gloss on the perception which Ransom articulates from inside; "The key to the Southern past is that Southerners are Americans who have taken on an additional identity through conflict with the North" "The South as a Counterculture" The American Scholar Volume 42, Number 2, Spring 1973.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., p2.
- <sup>25</sup> Richard H. King, "Cash and the Crisis of Political Modernity" in W.J. Cash and the Minds of the South (ed) Paul D. Escott (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992) p67-89.
- <sup>26</sup> W.J. Cash, The Mind of the South (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941) p89.
- <sup>27</sup> J.C. Ransom to Tate February 20<sup>th</sup> 1927. Tate Collection. Firestone Library, Princeton.
- <sup>28</sup> J.C. Ransom, "Reconstructed but Unregenerate" in I'll Take My Stand (New York: Harper and Brothers 1930) p5.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., p3.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., p4.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., p5.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., p12.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., p15.
- <sup>34</sup> T.D. Young, Gentleman in a Dustcoat (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976) p221.
- <sup>35</sup> J.C. Ransom, "Reconstructed but Unregenerate" in I'll Take My Stand (New York, 1930) p6.
- <sup>36</sup> Thomas Daniel Young and John Tyree Fain The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974) pp229-230.
- <sup>37</sup> T.D. Young & George Core (eds), Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) p64 .
- <sup>38</sup> J.C. Ransom, "Reconstructed but Unregenerate" in I'll Take My Stand (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930) p14.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., p12.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., p22.
- <sup>41</sup> T.D. Young, Gentleman in a Dustcoat: A Biography of John Crowe Ransom. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976) p222.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., p24.
- <sup>43</sup> W.J. Cash, The Mind of the South (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941) p108.
- <sup>44</sup> W.S. Power, Scotland and the Scots (Edinburgh: The Moray Press, 1930)
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., p12.
- <sup>46</sup> T.D. Young, Gentleman in a Dustcoat (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1976) p217.

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- <sup>47</sup> Paul Conkin, The Southern Agrarians (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1989) p74.
- <sup>48</sup> T.D. Young and George Core. Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press) p210.
- <sup>49</sup> Unpublished manuscript for Land! Vanderbilt University Fugitive Collection Preface i.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., Preface iii.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid., Preface vi.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid., Chapter IV p30.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., Chapter I, p1.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid., Preface iv, v, vi.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., Chapter I, p10.
- <sup>57</sup> Paul Conkin, The Southern Agrarians (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press 1988) p101.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., Chapter I, p18.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., Chapter I, p19.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid., Chapter III p29.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid., Chapter I, p4.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid., Chapter IV p32.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid., Chapter IV p29.
- <sup>64</sup> T.D. Young and George Core (eds.) Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1985) p210.
- <sup>65</sup> John Crowe Ransome [sic] "Regionalism in the South" New Mexico Quarterly, 4 (May 1934), pp108-118.
- <sup>66</sup> J.C. Ransom, "What Does the South Want?" In Virginia Quarterly Review 12 (April 1936) p181.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid., p185.
- <sup>68</sup> Unpublished manuscript for Land! Vanderbilt University Fugitive Collection Chapter IV p29.
- <sup>69</sup> T.S. Eliot, After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy (New York: 1933) p16.
- <sup>70</sup> T.D. Young & John Hindle, (eds.) Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge, 1984) p45.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid., p46.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid., p48.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid., p49.
- <sup>76</sup> J.C. Ransom "Reconstructed but Unregenerate" in I'll Take My Stand (New York: Harper's and Brothers, 1930) p8.
- <sup>77</sup> T.D. Young & John Hindle (eds.) Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984) p51.
- <sup>78</sup> Ibid., p55.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p50.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp55-56.

<sup>81</sup> Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism (London, Verso, 1983) p164.

<sup>82</sup> J.C Ransom, God Without Thunder (London: Gerald Howe 1931) p190.

<sup>83</sup> William R Taylor: Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character (New York, 1963) p16.

<sup>84</sup> Benedict Anderson writes: ". the very conception of the newspaper implies the refraction of even 'world events' into a specific imagined world of vernacular readers; and also how important to that imagined community is the idea of steady, solid, simultaneity through time." Imagined Communities p63. Another beguiling thought: as I have indicated Ransom had read the philosophical work of John Dewey in the early 1920s. did he also read Dewey's article "Americanism and Localism" in The Dial (Fall 1920) with its declaration "The newspaper hasn't been afraid of localism. It has revelled in it, perhaps wallowed in it is the correct word... We are discovering that the locality is the only universal."

<sup>85</sup> J.C Ransom, "Reconstructed but Unregenerate" in I'll Take My Stand (New York: Harper's and Brothers, 1930) p14.

<sup>86</sup> T.D.Young & John Hindle (eds.) Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge 1984) p46.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p48.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p50.

<sup>89</sup> J.C.Ransome [sic], "Regionalism in the South" in New Mexico Quarterly Volume Iv 1934 p108.

<sup>90</sup> For a defence similar to Ransom's see the later Agrarian writer Richard Weaver:"For even a threshold understanding of the Southern mind, one must recognize that the South's intractability in the face of statistics proceeds from a positive and not a negative factor, as has been more commonly supposed. There appears to exist, furthermore, an essential linkage between this virtual defiance of analysis and the South's cultivation of legend and anecdote. No other section compares with it in fecundity of stories of all kinds; and it is almost the rule for an untutored Southerner to be adept in the telling of tales. But always for him the point of the story is the story, and he is stopped and confused when a single statement is extracted from it for sociological or political analysis." "Aspects of the Southern Philosophy" in Rubin & Jacobs Southern Renaissance: The Literature of the Modern South. (Baltimore, 1953) p18 .

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## NOTES

### Chapter 5: The Critical Phase

- <sup>1</sup> Thomas Daniel Young & George Core, Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) p223.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid., p225.
- <sup>3</sup> Allen Tate: "Narcissus As Narcissus" Collected Essays p249
- <sup>4</sup> Thomas Daniel Young & George Core, Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) p225-226.
- <sup>5</sup> J. C. Ransom; "Preface" to The World's Body (New York Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1938) vii
- <sup>6</sup> J.C. Ransom, The World's Body (New York: Charles Scribners and Sons, 1930) p173.
- <sup>7</sup> For a detailed history of this period in American Academic life, see Gerald Graff, Professing Literature: An Institutional History (Chicago: University of Chicago 1987)
- <sup>8</sup> Thomas Daniel Young and Thomas Inge (eds.) Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom.(Baton Rouge 1984) p147.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., p148
- <sup>11</sup> Thomas Daniel Young & George Core, Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) p111.
- <sup>12</sup> J.C. Ransom. Selected Poems: (New York: Alfred. A.Knopf 1969)pp109-159.
- <sup>13</sup> Christopher Ricks, T.S.Eliot and Prejudice (London: Faber & Faber, 1988) p12.
- <sup>14</sup> Thomas Daniel Young and Thomas Inge (eds.) Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom.(Baton Rouge 1984) p148.
- <sup>15</sup> Graham Hough, "John Crowe Ransom, The Poet and Critic" in John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography (ed.) T.D.Young (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1968) p192.
- <sup>16</sup> J.C. Ransom: "Criticism Inc." The World's Body(New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1938.)\_ p330-331.
- <sup>17</sup> Gerald Graff. Professing Literature (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987) and Vincent B.Leitch American Literary Criticism from the 30s to the 80s (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988)
- <sup>18</sup> Thomas Daniel Young and Thomas Inge (eds.) Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom.(Baton Rouge 1984) p277
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.,p282.
- <sup>20</sup> J.C. Ransom: Kenyon Review 7[1945] pp294-295.
- <sup>21</sup> Unpublished letter to Arthur Mizener March 14<sup>th</sup> 1949.Fugitive Collection, Vanderbilt University Library.
- <sup>22</sup> Unpublished letter to John Crowe Ransom March 16<sup>th</sup> 1949. Fugitive Collection, Vanderbilt University.
- <sup>23</sup> Morris Dickstein, Double Agent; the Critic and Society.( Oxford, Oxford University Press 1992) p37

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- <sup>24</sup> Unpublished letter to Arthur Mizener March 14<sup>th</sup> 1949
- <sup>25</sup> Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren "Letter to the Teacher" Understanding Poetry (New York: 1938)
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> J.C. Ransom, Topics for Freshman Writing: Twenty Topics for Writing with Appropriate Materials For Study (New York: Henry Holt, 1935) p5.
- <sup>28</sup> Hugh Kenner, "The Pedagogue as Critic" in T.D.Young (ed) The New Criticism and After, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia 1975)p41
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., p43.
- <sup>30</sup> John Paul Russo, "The Tranquilized Poem: the Crisis of New Criticism in the 1950's" in Texas Studies in Literature and Language Vol. 30 No.2. 1988. p205.
- <sup>31</sup> Anthony Hecht, "John Crowe Ransom" American Scholar (Summer 1980)p381.
- <sup>32</sup> Vincent B Leitch American Literary Criticism from the 30s to the 80s (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988)
- <sup>33</sup> Unpublished letter from Henry Holt & Co. to John Crowe Ransom January 1946. The Henry Holt Archive, Firestone Library, Princeton.
- <sup>34</sup> Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory: An Introduction (London: Basil Blackwell, 1983) pp47-50.
- <sup>35</sup> (For example, Graff discusses the ways in which the New Criticism had to tailor its ideological views to comply with a pre-existing model of professionalisation drawn from the historical scholars, before gaining enough power to create its own model of professionalisation.)Gerald Graff, Professing Literature: An Institutional History, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979) p146.
- <sup>36</sup> Cleanth Brooks A Shaping Joy (London, 1971)
- <sup>37</sup> J.C.Ransom "Shakespeare at Sonnets" in The World's Body (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938) p294, 299
- <sup>38</sup> Thomas Daniel Young & George Core, Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) p233
- <sup>39</sup> George Lanning in "Ransom as Editor" suggests that the circulation of the review at its largest was "about 2000." T.D.Young, John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976) p217.
- <sup>40</sup> J.C.Ransom, "Editorial Note" Kenyon Review 1 (Spring 1939)
- <sup>41</sup> T.D.Young, Gentleman in a Dustcoat (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976) p380.
- <sup>42</sup> Lawrence H. Schwartz, Creating Faulkner's Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988)
- <sup>43</sup> J.C.Ransom: "The Community of Letters": in Poems and Letters (New York: Vintage 1955)p111.
- <sup>44</sup> T.D.Young, Gentleman in a Dustcoat (Baton Rouge, 1976) p295
- <sup>45</sup> Stallman, Robert Wooster, "The New Criticism and the Southern Critics" in A Southern Vanguard (ed) Allen Tate (New York, 1947) pp.28-51
- <sup>46</sup> John Fekete, The Critical Twilight: Explorations in the ideology of Anglo-American Literary theory from Eliot to McLuhan, (London 1977) p44.

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- <sup>47</sup> *ibid* pp45-47.
- <sup>48</sup> *ibid* p49.
- <sup>49</sup> Mark Jancovitch, The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1993.)
- <sup>50</sup> Frank Lentricchia, After the New Criticism. (London, 1983)
- <sup>51</sup> "In other words the cultural politics of the New Criticism are linked with the political culture of the period, and, as in the rest of the modern critical tradition, the cultural methodology reveals its politics directly." John Fekete, The Critical Twilight (London, 1977) p 49
- <sup>52</sup> Mark Jancovitch, The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993) p33
- <sup>53</sup> *ibid* p105
- <sup>54</sup> See J.C.Ransom "Modern With the Southern Accent" in Virginia Quarterly Review, 11 (April 1935)
- <sup>55</sup> "Finally, in 1945, Ransom announced that he no longer believed in either the possibility or the desirability of an Agrarian restoration." Jancovitch, The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism (Cambridge, 1993) p 105. In fact Ransom's recantation of Agrarianism "Art and the Human Economy" was merely a formal recantation of a position he had abandoned many years before, as even Donald Davidson acknowledged.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p35.
- <sup>57</sup> *ibid* p46.
- <sup>58</sup> *ibid* p71.
- <sup>59</sup> As outlined in a letter from Tate to Davidson August 10<sup>th</sup> 1929.
- <sup>60</sup> Paul Conkin, The Southern Agrarians (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988)
- <sup>61</sup> T.D.Young and George Core (eds) Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge:Louisiana State University Press 1985) p268
- <sup>62</sup> T.D.Young, Gentleman in a Dustcoat, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press 1976) p273-290.
- <sup>63</sup> Paul Conkin, The Southern Agrarians (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988) p111
- <sup>64</sup> Tobin Siebers' Cold war Criticism and the Politics of Skepticism(Oxford: Oxford University Press 1993
- <sup>65</sup> *ibid* p29.
- <sup>66</sup> *ibid* p30.
- <sup>67</sup> Rene Wellek notes that the hostility of the academic establishment meant that "It took Blackmur, Tate and Winters years to get academic recognition" A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950. American Criticism 1900-1950 (London: Johnathan Cape, 1986) p147.
- <sup>68</sup> Radcliffe Squires, Allen Tate: A Literary Biograh. (New York: Pegasus: 1971) p190.
- <sup>69</sup> Virgil Lokke, "Introduction" in The Current in Criticism: Essays on the Present and Future of Literary Theory (eds) Clayton Koelb and Virgil Lokke Indiana 1987 p11.
- <sup>70</sup> Jonathan Culler, "The Future of Criticism" in The Current in Criticism: Essays on the Present and Future of Literary Theory (eds) Clayton Koelb and Virgil Lokke Indiana 1987 p36..
- <sup>71</sup> Allen Tate: Essays of Four Decades (New York,1968) p619
- <sup>72</sup> T.D.Young, Gentleman in a Dustcoat (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University press, 1976) p 390

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<sup>73</sup> Robert Hillyer, American Mercury January 1950, p65.

<sup>74</sup> J.C.Ransom, unpublished letter to Denholm Sutcliffe, October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1949. Chalmers Memorial Library, Kenyon College.

<sup>75</sup> William Cain, The Crisis in Criticism: Theory, Literature and Reform in Literary Studies (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984.) p105.

<sup>76</sup> Graff, Professing Literature: An Institutional History: (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1987) p155.

<sup>77</sup> Hugh Kenner, "The Pedagogue as Critic" in The New Criticism and After (ed.) Thomas Daniel Young, John Crowe Ransom Memorial Lectures 1975. P36.

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