

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Sandra Crawford Nesbitt entitled "The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom: Women as Metaphysical Symbols." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

B. J. Leggett
B. J. Leggett, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Dick Reimer

Allison R. Enser

Accepted for the Council:

Cowminkel
The Graduate School

THE POETRY OF JOHN CROWE RANSOM:
WOMEN AS METAPHYSICAL SYMBOLS

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Sandra Crawford Nesbitt

August 1983

To Paul, Laurel, John, and my parents

And to the memory of my grandfather

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate John Crowe Ransom's use of women as metaphysical symbols in his poetry, revealing the relationship between the poetry and the critical, social, and, ultimately, philosophical theories he proposed. For too long the divergent facets of his career have been dealt with in isolation: he is often labeled "Fugitive," "Agrarian," "New Critic," or, worst yet, "regional" Southern poet. Actually, a synthesis of all of Ransom's ideas is effected in his poetry. The dramatic mode of the majority of his poems lends itself to analysis of his characters as evidence of this fusion. Specifically, the male/female polarity represents the crux of Ransom's dualistic world view. The poem itself, as the supreme form of art, reconciles the two.

The introductory chapter comments on Ransom's views of philosophy, religion, poetry, and criticism, concentrating on a germinal philosophic discourse that influenced the direction of his ideas in the Agrarian and New Criticism movements. This essay, "The Third Moment," explains the symbolic relationship between his characters in virtually every poem.

Following the philosophical progression of this essay, the second chapter deals specifically with the initial phase of experience, the "First Moment": absolute innocence and unity, untainted by abstraction. Only females exist in this realm. Ransom's poems celebrate the young girl oblivious to transience and unaware of her sentience, her fusion with a reality that males can only envy.

The next chapter traces the progress of that child as she moves, inevitably, into the sterile world of Ransom's maiden ladies. Perfection and oneness with reality, it seems, cannot sustain themselves against the onslaught of abstraction. Lacking the ability to conceptualize, Ransom's old maids suffer blindly, understanding neither themselves nor their alien worlds. They either become embittered or turn temptress, thus avoiding or invading a hostile male world.

The last chapter deals with those poems which have both males and females present. Women are no longer center stage. Instead, the paradox of the thinking male, who recognizes his separation from reality (Ransom's "Second Moment") but--because of thinking rather than feeling--cannot heal the breach (Ransom's "Third Moment"), becomes the central issue of the poems. Women, here, merely heighten the tragic dilemma of men. Thus, in his poems the full expression of Ransom's philosophy is achieved.

An examination of the roles women play in Ransom's poetry reveals, then, the central dissociation thesis of all of Ransom's theories: the unknowableness of ultimate reality. Ransom's well-documented irony centers on the human condition that women perceive but do not conceive (even literally); while women are thus unable to enjoy their unity of being, men's conceptions merely lead them to futile observation of women's perceptions, their oneness with reality.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. DISSOCIATION: JOHN CROWE RANSOM'S PHILOSOPHICAL, CRITICAL, AND POETIC THEORIES	1
II. RANSOM'S INNOCENTS: THE UNINSTRUCTED	19
III. SPINSTERS AND TEMPTRESSES: THE DEFEAT OF INNOCENCE . . .	41
IV. WOMEN AS LOVERS: THE EQUILIBRISTS	61
LIST OF REFERENCES	96
VITA	103

CHAPTER I

DISSOCIATION: JOHN CROWE RANSOM'S PHILOSOPHICAL, CRITICAL, AND POETIC THEORIES

In John Crowe Ransom's poem "Painted Head"¹ the persona, viewing a painting in a gallery, laments the portrait's literal "decapitation" and "truancy" from the body as it hangs lifeless, "shrunk to its own deathlike surface." The observer then extends literal to symbolic, commenting on the inadequacies of Platonism, mind over body, thought over feeling. Ransom, who considered "Painted Head" one of his favorite poems,² dealt with few other themes than this: the "philosophy of the poet who does not want to sacrifice the interest of the body for the interest of the head."³ The theme permeates his ideas of an agrarian society, his concept of modern religion, his logic/texture theory of poetry, and his concept of the ontological critic. Perhaps the poem is Ransom's purest statement of his own idea of dissociation: "So hardly one they terribly are two." The thrust of all his work is in the direction of unity; only in his poetry does he succumb to the reality of

¹"Painted Head," in Selected Poems, 3rd ed. (New York: 1969, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.), p. 91. Unless noted otherwise, future references to Ransom's poetry are to this edition of Selected Poems (SP) and will be cited in the text.

²Thomas Daniel Young, Gentleman in a Dustcoat: A Biography of John Crowe Ransom (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1976), pp. 450-51.

³John Crowe Ransom Reads His Works, Carillon Records, YP 306, 1961.

experience, that absolutes cannot be reconciled, that duality is the central tragedy of existence.

Ransom's preoccupation with dissociation was first recognized in the significant essay on irony by Robert Penn Warren,⁴ who contended that Ransom, like T. S. Eliot, yearned for a seventeenth-century fusion of sense and sensibility. Modern man, corrupted by the disjointing of head from body by the morass of science and technology, suffers from a permanent historical alienation. Ransom, Warren feels, directs his energy "to defend man against a revolution which, by a dogma of unadulterated reason, has endangered his sensibility; which has, in fact, promoted its dissociation."⁵ Like Eliot, Ransom deals with a world in which "the ignoble present is suddenly thrust into contrast with the noble past."⁶

Warren's correct diagnosis of Ransom's central theme of dissociation of sensibility, however, fails to define the source of the disease accurately: the breach is not merely historical, brought on by science or materialism, or psychological, corrupted by knowledge of the inner recesses of the mind. On the contrary, as Vivienne Koch reveals, "the split in sensibility reflects human problems which have always given rise to conflict, and probably

⁴"John Crowe Ransom: A Study in Irony," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, XI (January, 1935), 93-112; rpt. in *John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography*, ed. Thomas Daniel Young (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1968), pp. 24-40.

⁵Warren, p. 30.

⁶Warren, p. 38.

always will."⁷ Ransom's dissociation is not historical, but philosophical. Unity has been impossible all along. When Ransom first read the Warren essay, he commented that the natural state of man was to be an "oscillating mechanism"⁸ in a sort of metaphysical purgatory, aware of his circumstance but lacking the wherewithal to snatch order from chaos or to synthesize thought and feeling. Ransom felt Eliot wrong in emulating the seventeenth-century poets, for he felt no real fusion occurred then or at any time:

For it would seem that from the precise moment when the race discovers that what has seemed to be an undifferentiated unity is really a complex of specialized functions, there can be no undifferentiated unity again; no return. We do not quite know how to feel a thought. The best we can do is to conduct a thought without denying all the innocent or irrelevant feelings in the process. The dualism remains.⁹

This irreconcilable disparity that tempered the direction of his The New Criticism in 1941 began, as he explains in the introduction to The World's Body, as a general aesthetic of poetry that blossomed into a treatise which Ransom labored over (but never published because it was "too abstract") in 1926. Ironically, he "consign[ed] to the flames"¹⁰ the very essay that became the seminal idea of his very diverse critical and poetic career. Preserved only

⁷"The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom," Sewanee Review, LXVIII (Spring, 1950); rpt. in John Crowe Ransom, ed. Young, p. 117.

⁸Robert Penn Warren, "Notes on the Poetry of John Crowe Ransom at His Eightieth Birthday," Kenyon Review, XXX (Spring, 1968), 321.

⁹The New Criticism (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1941), pp. 183-84.

¹⁰John Crowe Ransom, The World's Body (NY: Scribner's, 1938; rpt. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1968), p. vii.

in summary in a letter to Allen Tate, Ransom's essay traced the source of man's dissociation. Initially entitled "The Third Moment," the essay proposed the thesis that there are three stages in the "historical order of experience":

1. The First Moment: An intuitive, instinctual level of being. "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."
2. The Second Moment: A cognitive, conceptual level. "The moment after. This moment is specific for human experience as distinguished from the ideally animal experience. Biologically man is peculiar in that he must record and use his successive experience; the beasts are not under this necessity; with them the experience is an end in itself, and takes care of itself. In the second moment cognition takes place. . . . 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."
3. The Third Moment: Awareness of the fragmentary nature of experience--no absolutes exist. "We become aware of the deficiency of the record. All our concepts and all our histories put together cannot add up into the wholeness with which we started out. Philosophical syntheses do no good . . . they only give us a Whole which, as Kant would say, is obtained by comprehensio logica and not by comprehensio aesthetica--a Whole which it is only necessary to say fails to give us satisfaction. The world of science and knowledge which we have laboriously constructed is a world of illusion; not one of its items can be intuited, we suddenly appear to ourselves as monsters, as unnatural members of humanity; and we move to right ourselves again How can we get back to that first moment?"

Random continues with the idea of how we are to "reconstitute the fugitive first moment" by moving through five stages from dreams to fancies to religion to morals, and, ultimately, to art. Poetry,

in particular, is experiential; the poem is only as good as its success in returning to primal knowledge.¹¹

Indeed, this idea is the basis for Ransom's significant works over a decade later. His first major book, The World's Body (the title becomes his image of that "fugitive first moment"), appeals to the poet to present the "thinginess" of things, to wed concept to percept (through metaphor) to achieve unity. The New Criticism, three years after The World's Body, seeks out an "ontological critic" who recognizes the significance of that metaphor in recapturing the initial moment of human experience; Ransom's "ontological critic" is to reconstitute the First Moment without alienating its delicate fusion through undue critical abstraction. Thus the aesthetic of poetry as knowledge.

Undoubtedly, the evolution of Ransom's philosophy owes a great deal to those philosophers that he mentions frequently in his criticism, men like Kant, Schopenhauer, Hegel. But his greatest debt is probably that to F. H. Bradley, with whom Ransom studied in his Oxford days of 1911 to 1913. Bradley's concept of the Absolute, or raw reality, which man intuits through "immediate experience" corresponds to Ransom's First Moment. The futility of the mind's ordering of that experience parallels the frustration of the Third Moment. Bradley felt that the ordering of experience through abstraction merely distorts the Absolute. Much as, F. P. Jarvis writes, a

¹¹Letter to Allen Tate, 5 September 1926, quoted in Louise Cowan, The Fugitive Group: A Literary History (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1959); rpt. in Young, Gentleman in a Dustcoat, pp. 175-77.

blind man . . . presumes to know the entire elephant by merely touching its trunk, . . . the scientist . . . feels that he has trapped the object in his formula or definition and can use it at a later date for some practical purpose. . . . The scientist is the blind man . . . who, touching the trunk, is unaware that the elephant also has two tusks, four legs, and a tail. The poet or artist, on the other hand, is aware of the whole elephant. For him, the elephant was done an injustice by the blind man who presumed to dispose of it on the basis of his limited experience of the trunk.¹²

Science, Ransom came to believe as Bradley had before him, because it abstracts the immediate objects we must intuit, perceives only partial truth. It is the responsibility of art and religion to return to wholeness, to reconstitute the "fugitive first moment."

The villain Science is taken to task in God Without Thunder (1930), Ransom's "theological homebrew"¹³ which urges a return to the inscrutable God of the Old Testament and a turning away from the Man-God Christ, "the spirit of the scientific and ethical secularism of the West."¹⁴ In the Garden of Eden, Satan is the "Demigod, the Prometheus, the Spirit of Secular Science," who would like to set up falsely as the God, the Ruler of the Universe.¹⁵ We must return to God his "thunder," and we must negate the modern, scientific, Occidental approach to faith, the elevation of man to God which robs

¹²"F. H. Bradley's Appearance and Reality and the Critical Theory of John Crowe Ransom," Papers on English Language and Literature, I (Spring, 1965); rpt. in John Crowe Ransom, ed. Young, pp. 207-8.

¹³God Without Thunder (1930, rpt. Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1965), p. 110.

¹⁴Ransom, God Without Thunder, p. 320.

¹⁵Ransom, God Without Thunder, p. 140.

man of full mystical experience. Let man "resist the usurpation of the Godhead by the soft modern version of the Christ, and try to keep the Christ for what he professed to be: the Demigod who came to do honor to the God."¹⁶

Science, all-devouring and abstract, destroys the myth of the unfathomable God, and thus destroys the immediacy of the First Moment. In later essays Ransom would substitute Art for God, but at this stage he was content to denigrate the secularization of modern religion that sacrifices body for head. The workings of science were insidious, and Ransom began to see that "much of the discontent of modern society was the result of its apotheosis of science in its applied form, industrialism."¹⁷ Ransom, convinced of the primacy of immediate experience against abstractionism, moved from his defense of God to his defense of an agrarian society.

In retrospect, Ransom's dabbling in the Agrarian Movement, an attack on the industrial South, was basically philosophic rather than economic or political. Aroused by the sensational journalism of the Scopes trial of 1925,¹⁸ Ransom codified a defense of a South "in which leisure, grace, civility can exist in harmony with thought and action, making the individual's life a wholesome, harmonious

¹⁶Ransom, God Without Thunder, pp. 327-28.

¹⁷Louis Rubin, The Wary Fugitives: Four Poets and the South (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1978), p. 55.

¹⁸Cowan, p. 245.

experience."¹⁹ Ransom shared with his fellow Agrarians, who collectively published I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition (1930), the idea that

the South, which had gone whoring after the strange gods of industrialism and modernism, must return to its old community heritage, forsake the modern, urban doctrine of progress, and loyally defend a traditional, agricultural, rural way of life, in order to make possible the harmonious, mannered society in which the fine arts and the arts of living alike flourish.²⁰

In terms of Ransom's philosophy, the Old South was perhaps the last vestige of society in which the "fugitive first moment" could be reconstituted. Only union with the soil could enhance unity of being.

Ransom's one poem that is a tribute to Agrarianism, "Antique Harvesters," deals with the classical image of the Old South--tawny leaves of autumn, stooped but determined old harvesters, fox hunters riding over the hill. His reverential tone urges that young upstarts hold fast to the genteel tradition of the soil and pay homage to the land that sustains them, personified as the Lady in the poem:

Bare the arm, dainty youths, bend the knees
Under bronze burdens. And by an autumn tone
As by a grey, as by a green, you will have known
Your famous Lady's image; for so have these;
And if one say that easily will your hands
More prosper in other lands,

¹⁹Louis Rubin, "The Poetry of Agrarianism," in The Faraway Country: Writers of the Modern South (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1963), p. 166.

²⁰Rubin, Wary Fugitives, p. 42.

Angry as wasp-music be your cry then:
 "Forsake the Proud Lady, of the heart of fire,
 The look of snow, to the praise of a dwindled choir,
 Song of degenerate specters that were men?
 The sons of the fathers shall keep her, worthy of
 What these have done in love." (SP, p. 84)

Following the ritual of the Old South, Ransom believes, will preserve harmony, civility, serenity and free man of the taint of modernism and the deification of science.

For the rest of the Agrarians, a genteel, harmonious, non-materialistic South was an end in itself, a communal Utopia wary of siege by technology and industrialism. For Ransom that was simply not enough, for his South was merely a means to an end, a geographical greenhouse in which to nourish his delicate aesthetic. The reality, of course, was that the Agrarians envisioned

a society that very likely never existed, but one that should have existed, in which men could live as individuals and not as automatons, aware of their finiteness and their dependence on God and nature, imbued with a sense of the deep inscrutability of nature, dedicated to the enhancement of the moral life in its aesthetic and spiritual dimensions.²¹

In 1945, Ransom sadly lamented that his meanderings in Agrarianism were no more than philosophical wishful thinking:

I find an irony at my expense in remarking that the judgment just now delivered by the Declaration of Potsdam against the German people is that they shall return to an agrarian economy. Once I should have thought there could have been no greater happiness for a people, but now I have no difficulty in seeing it for what it is meant to be: a heavy punishment.²²

²¹Rubin, "Poetry of Agrariansim," p. 159.

²²"Art and the Human Economy," *Kenyon Review*, VII (Autumn, 1945), rpt. in *Beating the Bushes* (NY: New Directions, 1972), p. 134.

Recanting his Agrarian stance in society, failing to restore to God "his thunder" in religion, Ransom finally turned to his last source to cure philosophical dissociation: poetry.

Ransom's preeminence in the Fugitive movement at Vanderbilt University in the 1920's led to a poetic career that spanned, roughly, a little more than a decade. Indeed, after the Twenties, Ransom wrote few poems and spent more time, until his death, with revision than creation. Like the other Fugitives (there is no indication that the name of the group was initiated by Ransom's "fugitive first moment" of experience in his essay "The Third Moment"), Ransom wanted to create an atmosphere in Southern life where an aesthetic could flourish minus the stereotype of Southern mindlessness and opulence. Kenneth England notes,

Their fleeing was from the bourbon brahmins, the magnolia romancers, the spreaders of sweetness and light. And when they had fled away too far, they fled back to the Southern tradition which they considered a good tradition. They aimed to eschew sentimentality. They wanted to carry knowledge to the heart of the common reader in vital images that would induce sharp and clear reactions.²³

Ransom's poems, with their archaisms and courtliness laid against a lush Southern terrain, meshed well with the subjects of other Fugitives, notably Donald Davidson and Allen Tate. However, just as he was at variance with the Agrarians about his motives for supporting the Old South and attacking industrialism, Ransom eventually disagreed with his fellow poets as to the role and function

²³"They Came Home Again: Fugitives Return," Georgia Review XIV (Spring, 1960), 83.

of poetry. He thus turned to poetic theory to justify his stance: poetry must ultimately be cognitive, a way of knowing the unknowable.

Returning to the ideas of "The Third Moment," Ransom sees poetry as the supreme art, the means to recapture the "fugitive first moment" of complete oneness with reality. "Ransom . . . is concerned with the tendency in the post-Renaissance world to emphasize the objective, the quantitative, the abstract, and to deemphasize the subjective, the qualitative, the concrete."²⁴ Science merely abstracts and distorts pure reality, forever veiling the "thinginess" of things:

Where is the body and solid substance of the world? It seems to have retired into the fulness of memory, but out of this we construct the fulness of poetry, which is counterpart to the world's fulness.²⁵

Like Wallace Stevens, whom he admired, Ransom saw poetry as the supreme mythology to return concretion to external reality (to move, in his terminology, from the Third Moment back to the First). In The World's Body he writes,

In all human history the dualism between science and art widens continually by reason of the aggression of science. As science more and more completely reduces the world to its types and forms, art, replying, must invest it again with body. The one technical process requires the other.²⁶

²⁴William Van O'Connor, "The World as Body," Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), 437.

²⁵Ransom, The World's Body, p. x.

²⁶The World's Body, p. 198.

In the modern scientific world, the poet has the weighty responsibility of restoring the fullness of the world's body. He must take seriously his position "as the keeper of ritual, the creator of ceremonies . . . using the forms to infuse into the consciousness the kind of knowledge that only the arts could provide. . . ." ²⁷

In The World's Body and The New Criticism Ransom maps out a poetic theory based upon the concept of poetry as knowledge. James Magner observes,

This emphasis on poetry as knowledge is intense in The World's Body, as the title obviously indicates. It may be Ransom's great and pervading contribution to letters and to man that he has urged man to love reality and not the misplaced concreteness of cold abstraction He has been so absorbed with the world's exquisite unpredictability that he has ordered his definition of poetry to it. ²⁸

That definition involves a fusion of the First and Second Moment of experience, objective and subjective reality.

In The New Criticism Ransom defines a poem as "a loose, logical structure with an irrelevant local texture," ²⁹ with structure representing the thesis, the abstraction or paraphrasable element of the poem, and texture representing the "free detail," the concretion:

The poem was not a mere moment in time, nor a mere point in space. It was sizeable, like a house. Apparently it has a plan or a central frame of logic, but it had also a huge wealth of local detail, which sometimes fitted the plan

²⁷Rubin, Wary Fugitives, p. 290.

²⁸John Crowe Ransom: Critical Principles and Preoccupations (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), p. 112.

²⁹The New Criticism, p. 280.

functionally or served it, and sometimes only subsisted comfortably under it; in either case the house stood up.³⁰

The structure/texture dichotomy represents the two absolutes of human experience, the conceptual and perceptual worlds. Sister Mary Janet sees this dichotomy as a reflection of Ransom's belief in poetry as knowledge:

Structure for [Ransom] is the framework of meaning in the poem, the prose argument Texture, on the other hand, is the qualitative dimension of the poem, that which is beyond--the rational concept, all the disparate, heterogeneous detail of the situation including metaphor and meter. Texture is a remembrance and a testimony of the original image, the initial experience, with all its wealth and individuality. Where structure equals the universal, texture equals the concrete. Ransom compares the structural framework of the poem to its skeleton: it is the texture which gives it body. From out of the fulness of the memory the poet constructs "the fulness of poetry, which is counterpart to the world's fulness."³¹

It is through the metaphor that the world's fullness is achieved. Using metaphor, the poet captures the particularity of the world, not by imposing limitations or aggressively ordering the fullness of the world, as the logic of the poem, alone, might do. Since reality is always in flux, the metaphor, ever flexible, changes as well. A poem with mere logical argument would remain static.

In The World's Body Ransom defines three types of poetry, the physical, poetry of things; the Platonic, poetry of ideas; and the metaphysical, the union of perceptions (things) and conceptions

³⁰ John Crowe Ransom, "Criticism as Pure Speculation," in The Intent of the Critic, ed. Donald A. Stauffer (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1941), p. 110.

³¹ "Poetry as Knowledge in the New Criticism," Western Humanities Review, XVI (Summer, 1962), 204-5.

(ideas). Only in the realm of the metaphysical does true poetry lie. Absolute metaphysical resolution is impossible ("Give us Dualism, or we'll give you no Art")³², but the poem, through the metaphor, more nearly approaches philosophical unity than any other mode of human expression.

In later critical works, Ransom would label this metaphor the "Concrete universal," borrowing his terminology from Hegel. The concrete was to represent the individual, the particular; the universal reflected the abstract and the generalized. Like Yeats' fusion of the dancer and the dance, Ransom articulated his concrete universal into the static and the dynamic. Poems, in the hands of skillful poets, become epiphanies of sorts, taking the dynamic immediate experience and freezing it in momentary stasis; it was to be the critic's responsibility to render the poem dynamic again: he must pull from the poem its dynamic immanence.

Though the appellation "New Criticism," a formalist critical theory, was derived from Ransom's book of the same name, Ransom was not, in the purest sense of the word, a "New Critic." His aesthetic of the ultimate metaphysical significance of poetry separated him from the mainstream of formalistic criticism. Criticism must be ontological:

Ransom set out to broaden and deepen the base of literary criticism to provide it with an ontology that would enable it to deal meaningfully and systematically with the aspects of human behavior revealed in the art object. It is for this reason that he was critical of the formal critic who

³²John Crowe Ransom, Letter to Allen Tate, March 1927, quoted in Cowan, The Fugitive Group, p. 214.

did his verbal analysis and stopped. Although he believed that a close reading of the text must precede any other critical operation, he insisted that a critic's job goes beyond exegesis.³³

Alfred Kazin called formalistic criticism a search for "a kind of apotheosis in a void."³⁴ Without a firm ontological base to formalistic criticism, Ransom might agree.

Ransom believed most critics were not schooled in proper critical techniques. A critic who deals with only structure (the logic or thesis of the poem) to the exclusion of texture (metaphor, sound devices, meter) has dealt with no more than the paraphrasable content of the poem. The ontological critic moves past paraphrase to a scrutiny of texture and the rich layers or irrelevancies in the poem. Special attention is given to irony, image, paradox, tone, the various ambiguities of the poem.³⁵ In other words, close analysis demands that the critic (1) deal with the reality as an entity, (2) attempt to conceptualize and come to terms with it, and (3) effect a synthesis of the two. Ontological criticism is a mere restatement of Ransom's First, Second, and Third Moments.

His poetry consciously tries to provide the correct atmosphere for that ontological critic. As Wallace Stevens says, "What John

³³Thomas Daniel Young, "A Little Divergence: The Critical Theories of John Crowe Ransom and Cleanth Brooks," in The Possibilities of Order: Cleanth Brooks and His Work, ed. Louis P. Simpson (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1976), p. 193.

³⁴"Criticism at the Poles," in On Native Grounds (NY: Reyrall and Hitchcock, 1942), p. 430.

³⁵William J. Handy, Kant and the Southern New Critics (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1963), p. 82.

Crowe Ransom does is to make a legend of reality."³⁶ Dissociation and the duality created by the schism between feeling and thought, the immediacy of the First Moment versus the abstract reflection of the Second and Third, preoccupies the major portion of his poetic output. Paradox and irony are Ransom's weapons against man's dual nature. He peoples his poems with heroes and heroines who struggle futilely against a world not of their making.

Indeed, most of Ransom's poems are in the dramatic mode, polarizing men and women into the two extremes of experience. Man's basic metaphysical dilemma repeatedly surfaces in the poems as a male/female dichotomy: the alienation of gender becomes microcosm for the alienation of the human experience. Transience, decay, mortality become minor themes for Ransom, but these eventually pay service to the larger theme of dissociation. Mortality in his poems, for example, marks the end of philosophical dissociation--and it is just that: coming to ends, not coming to terms. The protagonists of Ransom's poems remain dissociated until their deaths; death is resignation, not reconciliation.

Ransom's dramatic poems are rarely anchored in time and place (despite his label as "Southern" poet); rarely is there even a sense of "world" out there: his poems are small vignettes, not an expansive cosmos. Indeed, Ransom seems to use the Southern locale more as thematic juxtaposition than as symbol. He sees the Old

³⁶"John Crowe Ransom: Tennessean," Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), 367.

South, as his fellow Fugitives did, as a highly unified society, a coherent and sustaining community. There are no Prufrocks in Ransom, spiritually alienated from their worlds and themselves. Ransom uses this communal wholeness as backdrop to his concept of philosophical alienation: significantly, the unity of Southern society mocks the tormented protagonists who know that they do not know. Where there is no historical alienation, a pure philosophical alienation stands out more boldly, more ironically. The central paradox of his poetry, on which all of his irony is built, is that impossible metaphysical resolution.

This is hardly a new theme in modern poetry, but perhaps it is nowhere polarized as much as in Ransom. Women, and his poems are replete with women, become the First Moment, the "world's body," the fullness of immediate experience, but they lack the abstraction to celebrate that fullness on a conscious level. Men, introspective and cerebral, as the Second and Third Moment, observe the female fullness but cannot join with it--dissociation is the permanent human condition. The disparity creates a tenuous balance between the sexes in his poems; even in the poems where no male is present, a male narrator looms over the scene, recording, nostalgically, the wholeness of the females he observes. His men are always dissociated and fragmented; his women, even if rigid, have a sense of unity.

Though frequently white-gloved and pristine, Ransom's women cannot be dismissed as mere archetypes of Southern genteel society. His females represent absolute innocence that never comes to realize there is no meeting ground between innocence and experience. This is

no magnolia-and-mint-julep world, but a microcosm of the painful duality that has plagued humanity from time immemorial. If we are ever to return to the "fugitive first moment" of pure reality, Ransom constantly repeats in his poems, it will be through the perfected form of womanhood, but that perfection is not without its costs and sacrifices. The unique but complex role of women in his scheme of things represents the very core of Ransom's critical and poetic theories.

CHAPTER II

RANSOM'S INNOCENTS: THE UNINSTRUCTED

"Beauty is of body," Ransom says in his poem of dissociation, "Painted Head," and he continues with a lyrical tribute to the body's fullness:

The flesh contouring shallowly on a head
Is a rock-garden needing body's love
And best bodiness to colorify

The big blue birds sitting and sea-shell flats
And caves, and on the iron acropolis
To spread the hyacinthine hair and rear
The olive garden for the nightingales. (SP, p. 92)

Here is the world of Eliot's mermaids and Stevens' Susanna, a world of perfection and unity of being possible only in the realm of poetry. The body becomes a transcendent image, a First Moment experience that provides its own epiphany. As in the poetry of William Butler Yeats, whose ideas parallel Ransom's ("Ransom," Randall Jarrell says, must be the only person in the world who has been influenced . . . by both early and late Yeats."³⁷), metaphysical resolution comes in the guise of women; in Yeats' "Among School Children" the dancer's body weds subjective and objective reality:

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.

³⁷"John Ransom's Poetry," Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948); rpt. in Poetry and the Age (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), pp. 97-98.

O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
 Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
 O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
 How can we know the dancer from the dance?³⁸

The world's body, for both Yeats and Ransom it seems, exists incarnate in the bodies of females. Ransom, however, receives his intimations of immortality not from dancers but from innocent little girls, lithe young women, and brittle, intractable spinsters who people the vast majority of his poems.

Even in his first poem "Sunset" (1917), Ransom deals with the special aura that surrounds women. In this dramatic monologue the male narrator senses a chasm between himself and his love as they wander over fields and meadows; he cannot fathom her preoccupation: she seems attuned to things otherworldly while he communicates only with the mundane--spotted cows and Rover, his dog. The narrator awaits her return to a world he can understand:

You are looking away over yonder
 To where the crooked rail fence gets to the top
 Of the yellow hill
 And drops out of sight
 Into space.
 Is that infinity that catches it?
 And do you catch it too in your thoughts?
 I know that look;
 I have not seen it on another girl;
 And it terrifies me,
 For I cannot tell what it means,
 But I think
 It has something to do with God.³⁹

³⁸The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats (New York: Macmillan, 1956), p. 214.

³⁹Poems About God (New York: Henry Holt, 1919), pp. 14-15.

Missing is the introspective reflection or ironic detachment of Ransom's mature poems, but the gist of his female symbolism is here: there is an unfathomable void between the world of men and the world of women; the First Moment of experience, the "God-world" of the girl, cannot be reconciled with the world of cows and dogs.

Poems About God (1919), the volume in which "Sunset" appeared, is a regrettable, rather clumsy collection of poems dealing with that same inscrutable God that Ransom argues for in God Without Thunder, but the collection does little to advance Ransom's idea about a philosophical base to his poems. In his attempt to shun intellectualism, Ransom "too often dons homespun or overalls"⁴⁰; his quest for simplicity reads more as simple-mindedness. Other than "A Christmas Colloquy," in which a little girl pleads with her father to forget the theology of the holiday and discuss only the toys she might receive, Poems About God spends little time in counterpointing innocence and experience in quite the manner of his more mature work.

A kind of Blakean world of absolute innocence and experience is achieved in the later volumes, far superior to his first work. In Chills and Fever (1924) and Two Gentlemen in Bonds (1927), Ransom comes to terms with poetic technique and his own poetic themes. In The World's Body he writes,

Where is innocence . . . ? The aesthetic moment appears as
a curious moment of suspension; between the Platonism in us
which is militant, always sciencing and devouring, and a
starved inhibited aspiration towards innocence which, if it

⁴⁰John M. Bradbury, "Ransom as Poet," Accent, XI (Winter, 1951), 47.

could only be free, would like to respect and know the object as it might of its own accord reveal itself.⁴¹

In these later poems Ransom synthesizes his idea of the ontological responsibility of art with the symbols in his poems. The bare-boned philosophy of the "fugitive first moment" emerges fully clothed in his poems as a world of innocents, a world of young girls tripping across the wet grass or taking arms against their shadows. Ransom creates a "fable of childhood"⁴² in which innocence buttresses itself against the corruption of knowledge, a sphere inhabited by mortal men. Knowledge comes to his innocents but always at great cost to both informer and informed.

The child state becomes Ransom's symbol of immediate experience and unity of being. It is through the innocent eyes of children, particularly little girls, that jaded adults return to the First Moment. Childhood, "that last area of wilderness left to the genteel imagination,"⁴³ in Ransom's scheme is a prelapsarian world which avoids confrontation with the treacherous reality of common experience and mortality. The thrust of art is in the direction of return to the child state, to that moment untainted by abstraction that dissociates man from his surroundings. Ransom's aesthetic demands a recognition of the speciality of childhood which adults must reconstitute through memory:

⁴¹The World's Body, p. 130.

⁴²Koch, p. 122.

⁴³Leslie Fiedler, "A Kind of Solution: The Situation of Poetry Now," Kenyon Review, XXVI (Winter, 1964), 61.

It is the dream, the recollection, which compels us to poetry and to deliberate aesthetic experience. It can hardly be argued, I think, that the arts are constituted automatically out of original images, and arise in some early age of innocence. . . . Art is based on second love, not first love. In it we make a return to something which we had wilfully alienated. The child is occupied mostly with things, but it is because he is still unfurnished with systematic ideas, not because he is a ripe citizen by nature and comes along already trailing clouds of glory. Images are clouds of glory for the man who has discovered that ideas are a sort of darkness.⁴⁴

In the modern, technological world ideas have become a "sort of darkness"; the sudden confrontation of the world of ideas with the world of children provides tragic undertones to Ransom's poems of childhood. The duality of a world that is versus a world that we wish to be provides ironic tension in these poems, some of Ransom's finest.

The domesticity of Ransom's poems seems to work against such weighty philosophical import, but, in actuality, Ransom juxtaposes the "colloquial and the pedantic"⁴⁵ to reinforce the ironic contrast. One hardly expects metaphysical musings in a poem about dead hens, but that is precisely the case in Ransom's excellent poem "Janet Waking" (SP, p. 12). Janet "wakes" in the poem on many levels: to the morning, to the reality of death, and to the "mourning" of her pet hen. The poem moves deftly from the mundane to the metaphysical:

⁴⁴The World's Body, pp. 116-17.

⁴⁵Cleanth Brooks, "The Modern Southern Poet and Tradition," Virginia Quarterly Review, XX (April, 1935), 313.

Beautifully Janet slept
 Till it was deeply morning. She woke then
 And thought about her dainty-feathered hen,
 To see how it had kept.

"Running across the world upon the grass," Janet discovers Chucky's demise from a bee sting. Her father, "who cannot help knowing how small a place in the scheme of things is occupied by the deaths of hens,"⁴⁶ attempts to instruct the child in the inexorable transience of all things:

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 in how deep
 Was the forgetful kingdom of death.

Janet "would not be instructed" because she cannot be instructed; her world of perfection cannot sustain such intrusions as mortality.

Indeed, the revision of the line "Running across the world upon the grass" from the sentimental line of the 1925 version, "Running on little pink feet upon the grass"⁴⁷ suggests a larger philosophical implication for Janet than in the original. Janet's world, in which she "beautifully slept," is that delicate innocence that has no defense against malevolence; her subterfuge must stave off confrontation with the forces that inevitably must defeat her.

⁴⁶Graham Hough, "John Crowe Ransom: The Poet and Critic," Southern Review, I, New Series (January, 1965); rpt. in John Crowe Ransom, ed. Young, p. 196.

⁴⁷"Janet Waking," The Fugitive, IV, (September, 1925), 86.

Those forces are represented by the father and by the seemingly detached narrator who appear bemused by the earnestness of Janet's grief for the hen. The sardonic humor and mock-heroic tone of the poem ("But alas, / Her Chucky had died"; "It was a transmogrifying bee"; "Now the poor comb stood up straight / But Chucky did not") represent the world of adults who do not seem to fathom the significance of the trivial deaths of hens. The last stanza, however, modulates the tone, and there is poignancy in the recognition that Janet "would not be instructed." Vivienne Koch notes,

Chucky's death is rightly viewed by the adult narrator as part of the give and take of a "natural" universe The final stanza completes the evaluation; it becomes clear that the narrator accepts the significance of Chucky's death on Janet's terms The relationship between Janet and the hen is right because it is a human one; the relationship between the narrator and the hen is right, because he sees her as part of a larger scheme of which her mortality is a sign; finally, the relationship between the narrator and Janet is right, because while he does not accept her evaluation, he understands it.⁴⁸

The narrator's role here is twofold: First, he conceptualizes the experience--the deaths of hens are not worth such effusive grief; second, he remembers innocence and longs for that time unsullied by "the forgetful kingdom of death." The narrator clearly passes through the second and third phases of cognition that Ransom describes in "The Third Moment." The ironic tension between knowledge and nostalgia calls forth memory of Andrew Marvell, "and we remember that Marvell wrote of a nymph complaining of the death of

⁴⁸Koch, p. 133.

her faun, and of little T. C. in a prospect of flowers."⁴⁹ Ransom trots out a tested metaphysical theme, couches it in the colloquial and the grandiloquent, and makes a statement about the tragic circumstance of the "daughters of men" and of the men themselves. The poem successfully fuses the thought/feeling duality in the simplest and most unpretentious of subjects, using a range of tone and wit that snatches it from the grasp of the maudlin.

Thornton Parsons chastizes the aloofness with which Ransom's narrator treats the death of the hen:

If the narrator is the father of a girl receiving her first awareness of death, he should not be capable of so much flippancy. For the complexity and sophistication of this poem Ransom has paid with a disunity, with a diminution of the central emotion--a Pyrrhic victory at best.⁵⁰

What Parsons fails to realize is that such flippancy is part of Ransom's scheme, for it is the introspective, abstracted narrator who sees humor in the bulge on poor Chucky's head. Such flippancy counterpoints the solemnity of the nostalgic narrator in the last stanza (Notice "Janet implored us"--italics added; the narrator has been drawn into the drama) who becomes painfully aware of Janet's innocence that cannot recognize the reality of death. He yearns for that First Moment world that she so naturally inhabits. Only in the world of men (and all of Ransom's narrators are men) can dissociation be articulated and mourned. Janet grieves over her brown hen, but

⁴⁹Hough, p. 185.

⁵⁰John Crowe Ransom (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969), p. 45.

the narrator, in the last stanza, grieves over much larger concerns, for the plight of men (and men is meant literally here) who can never achieve Janet's oneness. The poem may be "flippant," but its real thrust is tragic: the range of tone merely accentuates the multiplicity of the male experience.

The narrators of the other poems function in much the same way as that of "Janet Waking." In his poems about the fullness of women, it is necessary to have a male narrator who can articulate the dissociation that women cannot conceptualize. This narrator observes "the isolated moment of perception"⁵¹ and tempers it with his own introspection, producing, as Cleanth Brooks calls it, a poetry "so fine grained, so agate hard, so toughminded"⁵² while being, simultaneously, gallant and tenderhearted. The females of his poetry may live in an illusory world, but the males, by their very nature, must face up to the horror that lurks just beneath the surface. In that respect, the narrator becomes a passive hero who musters what courage he can against a world he sees all too clearly. Randall Jarrell notes:

Instead of listening through the hands, with closed eyes, as one is sucked deeper and deeper into the maelstrom, one listens with one's eyes open and one's head working about as well as it usually works.⁵³

⁵¹Jane Marston, "Persona and Perspective in John Crowe Ransom's Poetry," Mississippi Quarterly, XXX (Winter, 1976/1977), 70.

⁵²"The Doric Delicacy," Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948); rpt. in John Crowe Ransom, ed. Young, p. 68.

⁵³Jarrell, p. 88.

Though this consciousness remains in the background of Ransom's poems, it cannot be dismissed: the narrator is, in essence, the prism through which the radiance of first experience is filtered. If women are the texture of his poems, then men are the logic--one cannot be observed to the exclusion of the other.

A more detached narration of the defeat of innocence occurs in "Necrological" (SP, pp. 42-43), in which a Carmelite friar, "with much riddling [in] his head," wanders over a battlefield at dawn, observing the "gory and fabulous." His spiritual training has convinced him of the inferiority of the body, but his observation of the "spilled" brain of the horse and the "spilled" groin of the knight plants certain doubts about the primacy of the spiritual over the physical. He is, Robert Buffington says, "a monist at the point of turning into a dualist"⁵⁴ who cannot reconcile the two modes of experience. In the carnage he spies a young girl clinging to her fallen lover:

Beneath the blue ogive of the firmament
Was a dead warrior, clutching whose mighty knees
Was a leman, who with her flame had warmed his tent,
For him enduring all men's pleasantries.

The stanza polarizes passion and intellect, and the friar is left forever changed by his perceptions. The poem ends with a note of uncertainty appropriate to a novice dualist:

⁵⁴The Equilibrist: A Study of John Crowe Ransom's Poems, 1916-1963 (Nashville: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 1967), p. 40.

He sat upon a hill and bowed his head
 As under a riddle, and in a deep surmise
 So still that he likened himself unto those dead
 Whom the kites of Heaven solicited with sweet cries.

The lost leman and her passionate warrior suggest that "those who forge an integrated life will assuredly achieve what the friar cannot attain through withdrawal and suppression."⁵⁵ They represent the fullness of the world's body that the friar, in this keen moment of perception, seems to long for. Miller Williams feels that

The friar is being initiated into the world of the senses, the concrete. He has become brother, and more. He identifies with the dead ones who, ironically, are being lured into heaven. It is as if they, by their flesh and its experience have become heir to a heaven the friar has not guessed and probably can never know.⁵⁶

The leman's defeat is tragic, but not without meaning--she has given the full measure of life to living. The friar, in Ransom's subtle irony, belongs more appropriately to that register of the dead (as the title "Necrological" suggests) than any of the slain, for he belongs to the sphere of modern man⁵⁷ who, in sterile abstraction, dies without ever having lived.

Death, whether of brown hens or youthful warriors, brings to an end the agonizing over man's duality. The friar left "riddling" upon the hill will never reconcile his experience; he will merely

⁵⁵Karl Frederick Knight, The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom: A Study of Diction, Metaphor, and Symbol (London: Mouton, 1954), p. 78.

⁵⁶The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 61-62.

⁵⁷Richmond Croom Beatty, "John Crow Ransom as Poet," Sewanee Review, LII (Summer, 1944), 353.

end it. Ransom's preoccupation with death lies not so much in the finality of the experience, the body's end, as in the interruption of the epistemological quest. John Lincoln Stewart notes,

Only in death, where the difference seems most immense, does it end. And death, Ransom told his friends, is "the greatest subject of poetry, the most serious subject. . . . there's no recourse from death, except that we learn to face it, and to get on speaking terms with it, and then to have the characters who leave us and bereave us pass as magnificently as possible. And then, life must go on. So in many poems of mine I think I intended for a resolution of that sort to be apparent." A resolution, that is, to accept the ambiguity.⁵⁸ (*Italics added*)

That double vision, that ambiguity, frequently surfaces in his poems about the deaths of innocents, particularly young girls and vibrant young women. The male narrator, through carefully controlled irony, expresses outrage at the triumph of a death "where the greatest energy and beauty seemed triumphant, [with] evil and suffering patiently waiting where innocence and joyousness seemed most secure."⁵⁹ This is precisely the lesson of "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" (SP, p. 7). In this controlled little elegy, which Ransom claimed to have written in a couple of days without changing so much as a word,⁶⁰ the death of John Whiteside's daughter gives rise to a unique narrative viewpoint. The namelessness of the child in the poem suggests that she will be abstracted and depersonalized;

⁵⁸The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 206-7.

⁵⁹John Lincoln Stewart, John Crowe Ransom (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), pp. 25-26.

⁶⁰William Pratt, The Fugitive Poets: Modern Southern Poetry in Perspective (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1965), p. 42.

actually, the opposite is true, for she becomes as endearing and humanized as any of Ransom's poetic innocents.

The poem follows the traditional elegiac form:

The five quatrains follow as a structure, the three-stage progression which is a convention of the genre: from statement or indication of occasion of grief to expression of grief and from thence to reconciliation to or transcendence of grief. And, again in accordance with the convention the concluding consolation is developed directly and organically out of the context established by the reactions to the girl's death which immediately precede it.⁶¹

Actually, in Ransom's hands the structure of the elegy serves to underscore the relationship, both narratively and philosophically, between narrator and dead child. The first stanza counterpoints movement and stasis:

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

The middle stanzas, rich in lyricism and archaisms, catalog the misadventures or the irrepressible sprite. ". . . the naughtiness has been transmuted, by events just transpired, into a kind of fanciful story-book dream world"⁶²:

Her wars were bruited in our high window.
We looked among orchard trees and beyond
Where she took arms against her shadow,
Or harried unto the pond

⁶¹M. E. Bradford, "A Modern Elegy: Ransom's 'Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter,'" Mississippi Quarterly, XXI (Winter, 1967/1968), 44.

⁶²Robert Penn Warren, "Pure and Impure Poetry," Kenyon Review, V (Spring, 1943), 239.

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!

The final stanza returns to the stasis and reality of death:

But now go the bells, and we are ready,
 In one house we are sternly stopped
 To say we are vexed at her brown study,
 Lying so primly propped.

The heavy iambic beat and harsh alliteration of "sternly stopped" and "primly propped" heighten the sense of stasis in the stanza.

The opening and closing stanzas are clearly filtered through the narrator's intelligence. The middle three are given over to the luxuriance of the little girl's routine. Her "wars" are domestic, her enemies no more than geese with noon apple-dreams. This frame narrative in the first and final stanzas--with the shortened last lines, the repetition of "brown study," and the emphasis on stasis--brings into sharp contrast the chasm between innocence and experience. Like Janet, this child is not instructed in mortality; she simply dies. The narrator must become heir to the repercussions of that death.

The narrator must deal with the savage irony that "the child [he] wished would be still is still, despite all that activity which [his] adult occupations deplored"⁶³; he must mourn "the deliciousness

⁶³Warren, "Pure and Impure Poetry," p. 238.

of the lost world which will never look the same from the high window."⁶⁴ He now realizes he sat in his "high window," physically and intellectually separated from the child's full expression of life where she "took arms against her shadow," with that marvelous child-like pun on "arms" (that "shadow" might be an even grimmer pun resides only in the mind of the narrator and the reader, and only in respect to the occasion of the poem). That he is "vexed"⁶⁵ at her brown study, Robert Penn Warren believes, ameliorates the pathos of the poem⁶⁶; he is resigned to the ambiguity of the experience of death, but that does not mean he cannot at least show irritation at the irrationality of the death of children. Yvor Winters says that the tone is too carefree and that the narrator should evoke more genuine grief:

. . . the dead child herself is treated whimsically, as if she were merely a charming bit of bric-a-brac, and the life of the poem resides in a memory of the little girl driving geese. . . . the dead child becomes a playful joke, and the geese walk off with the poem.⁶⁷

But this narrator is a dualist; he tempers his anguish with his rationale: railing against the human condition serves no end.

⁶⁴Warren, "Pure and Impure Poetry, p. 238.

⁶⁵"Vexed" seems to be to Ransom's poetry what "slouching" is to Yeats'. A great deal of critical attention has been given to its use here.

⁶⁶"John Crowe Ransom: A Study in Irony," p. 35.

⁶⁷"John Crowe Ransom; or Thunder Without God," in *In Defense of Reason* (New York: Swallow Press and William Morrow and Co., 1947), p. 518.

"Dead Boy" (SP, p. 38), which almost serves as a companion poem to "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter," deals with the death of a child, but with quite a different approach. "Bells" concentrates its energy on the absence of movement, movement that implies life in its fullest sense. The vexation rises from the inability to appreciate the living child when the opportunity was there and from the inability to reconcile innocence with experience, life with death. "Dead Boy" chooses not to support such singleness of purpose, for the poem observes the multiplicity of viewpoints at the death of the child: "He was pale and little, the foolish neighbors say"; "The first fruits, saith the Preacher, the Lord hath taken"; "A sword beneath his mother's heart--yet never / Woman bewept her babe as this is weeping." The stock responses to a death, the narrator implies, are very much in evidence. He was, if the truth be told, "a pig with a pasty face" who seemed to take on significance only in death.

The weight of these various viewpoints is carried through two motifs: first, a financial metaphor that distances and abstracts the death (his death "by foul subtraction" has left none of the county kin liking "the transaction"); second, and more significant, an organic metaphor, for "a green bough from Virginia's aged tree" has been "wrenched away, / Grieving the sapless limbs, the shorn and shaken." A mood of desperation settles on the conclusion of the poem as the "sapless" elder members of the family gather around the last of the line. Only the narrator, who comes from the "world of outer dark," seems to be able to appreciate the layers of reactions to this death of a rather petulant child.

If "Bells" and "Dead Boy" are both elegies, they are elegies of quite different sorts. "Bells" is an elegy for a child, who once existed in a mystical realm alien to the narrator's experience; "Dead Boy" is an elegy for an abstraction, for the emphasis is clearly on the "dynastic wound," the death of an ancestral line of a revered Virginia family. Even the titles of the two poems suggest the contrasting treatment: "Dead Boy," as the title implies, is treated objectively, ritualistically--he is more thing, more symbol, than child; "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" suggests the celebration of her innocence and wholeness so abruptly confronted by the mortality we all must face. The death of little girls, it seems, is tragic as the loss of innocence, the senseless termination of the "fugitive first moment." Little boys eventually become abstract men, so the aura of abstraction looms even over their untimely deaths.

In "Vision by Sweetwater" (SP, p. 27), one of Ransom's finest but most neglected poems (even by Ransom himself who omitted it from the 1945 edition of Selected Poems), the first person narrator relies less on ironic detachment than in "Dead Boy" or "Bells." In the lyrical, impressionistic movement of the poem, the narrator observes the fusion of girls, meadows, and stream in a dream-like sequence:

Go and ask Robin to bring the girls over
 To Sweetwater, said my Aunt; and that was why
 It was like a dream of ladies sweeping by
 The willows, clouds, deep meadowgrass, and river

Robin's sisters and my Aunt's lily daughter
 Laughed and talked, and tinkled light as wrens
 If there were a little colony all hens
 To go walking by the steep turn of Sweetwater.

These bird-like creatures (indeed, the poem is in "The Innocent Doves" section of Selected Poems) represent a momentary perception of the First Moment, and the narrator longs to linger in that perfection:

Let them alone, dear Aunt, just for one minute
Till I go fishing in the dark of my mind:
Where have I seen before, against the wind,
These bright virgins, robed and bare of bonnet,

Flowing with music of their strange quick tongue
And adventuring with delicate paces by the stream--
Myself a child, old suddenly at the scream
From one of the white throats which it hid among?

The scream shatters that perfection that cannot last: in the confrontation of innocence and experience, the narrator moves momentarily into innocence, but the "bright virgins" move inexorably toward experience. The scream issues forth from the dark recesses of the mind, the racial memory, the collective unconscious.⁶⁸ The last lines thrust the poem into the vortex of the inevitable triumph of evil and abstraction over innocence. Robert Penn Warren says of the ending,

What kind of poem would "Vision by Sweetwater" be without the last two lines? It would be charming, beautifully rendered, nostalgic, haunting. But then comes the scream. What power, with what complexity, bursts forth here! Why is the boy "old suddenly"? For one thing, it is a scream hinting, in its very lack of specificity, at terror, loss, pain, containing all the tragic utterance that life may come to demand--bursting forth in sudden nakedness after the prattle of the girls in their "strange quick tongue." But what strangeness, to the boy, in their prattle has prepared him, and us, for the shocking strangeness of the scream? As a young boy, he is outside the world of the girls, fascinated but uncomprehending, shy but yearning

⁶⁸Williams, p. 75.

toward their mystery, and when the scream bursts forth, it is charged, not only with terror, loss, and pain, but with sexuality. It is a Dionysiac scream, a darker reality, bursting forth to violate the innocent dream of "ladies sweeping by," to chill into sudden silence the gay, innocent festival of the "bright virgins" moving by the water in their "delicate paces" as on a frieze.⁶⁹

The "vision" is an epiphany for the narrator, a view of reality usually denied to the abstract and intellectual minds of men.

There are all the elements here of a Greek tragedy⁷⁰: recognition and peripety take place; he must painfully return to his inadequate world.

But Ransom's narrators do not go down to defeat easily; there may be ironic acceptance of the world that is, but only after considerable hungering after sustained innocence and a world that should be. In "Blue Girls" (SP, p. 11) the narrator is both attracted to and repelled by the sight of young girls strolling across a college campus; in his soliloquy he admonishes them to take heed of the oppressive air of the academic environment which may corrupt their naturalness:

Twirling your blue skirts, traveling the sward
Under the towers of your seminary
Go listen to your teacher old and contrary
Without believing a word.

The spirit of these lines echoes that of Yeats' "Michael Robartes and the Dancer" in which the dancer asks, "May I not put myself to college?" Robartes hastily replies,

⁶⁹"Notes on the Poetry," p. 341.

⁷⁰Williams, p. 63.

Go pluck Athene by the hair
 For what mere book can grant a knowledge
 With an impassioned gravity
 Appropriate to that beating breast,
 That vigorous thigh, that dreaming eye?⁷¹

In both poems, the education of young girls is to be intuitive; intellectual or abstract endeavors would merely taint their unity of being. They must cultivate, instead, their prescience and oneness with reality.

The soliloquy continues with a comparison to the winsomeness of birds reminiscent of "Visions by Sweetwater":

Tie the white fillets then about your hair
 And think no more of what will come to pass
 Than bluebirds that go walking on the grass
 And chattering on the air.

Birds, in Ransom's symbology, are equated with integration, with the "unity of nature" that he always associates with females. Blue implies "fullness and vitality as opposed to withdrawal or decay"; it is the "natural experience of the integrated personality."⁷² Blue girls become bluebirds--but that blue will surely fade, and the poem takes on an urgent carpe diem theme:

Practise your beauty, blue girls, before it fail;
 And I will cry with my loud lips and publish
 Beauty which all our power shall never establish,
 It is so frail

For I could tell you a story which is true;
 I know a woman with a terrible tongue,
 Blear eyes fallen from blue,
 All her perfections tarnished--yet it is not long
 Since she was lovelier than any of you.

⁷¹The Collected Poems, p. 173.

⁷²Knight, pp. 102 and 107.

With a touch of "modernity and the lingering hint of the seventeenth-century lyric,"⁷³ Ransom gives a new slant to the theme of transience. "Practise your beauty" implies an artificially imposed order, a "discipline, a rigorous act of the will"⁷⁴; the narrator's use of such harsh diction contrasts sharply with the naturalness of the girls themselves, but even his harsh pronouncements pale in comparison to that "terrible tongue" that the blue girls will eventually possess. It is a hard lesson to learn--and he cannot bring himself to teach it (remember that he merely soliloquizes here)--that chattering bluebirds inevitably degenerate (or "fail" in the language of the poem) into sharp-tongued, blear-eyed old women. The ambivalent narrator does not reconcile his own conflict of sense and sensibility. Stewart observes,

For does he approve or disapprove of the blue girls? Does he see them as silly and vain or as pathetic? Which is the better wisdom for them, their instinctive little skills in practicing their beauty or his drab realism? The poem does not settle the issue though it teases us down to the last line with the possibility that the judgment will go against the girls. Then, with superb timing, Ransom has the speaker remark that the fearful lady was lovelier and suggest how much he appreciates and regrets the falling of the evanescent beauty in which the girls are absorbed. Perhaps theirs is the better knowledge after all.⁷⁵

Ransom, for one, believes that theirs is the better knowledge after all, that the innocence of the world's body and the elusiveness of

⁷³Hough, p. 197.

⁷⁴Howard Nemerov, "Summer's Flare and Winter's Flaw," Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), 418.

⁷⁵The Burden of Time, p. 239.

the "fugitive first moment" must be preserved at all costs. But, dualist that he is, he also realizes the mutability, the frailness, of that innocence. What happens to a Janet or the blue girls or the other innocent doves who sustain unity of being but, as they age, remain uninstructed, alien in an abstract, rigidly ordered world? They enter a nebulous realm heralded, appropriately, by the scream from the white throats in "Vision by Sweetwater." There is a gentle pathos that underlies Ransom's poems about young girls; there is a pervasive sense of the tragic that permeates his poems about mature women.

CHAPTER III

SPINSTERS AND TEMPTRESSES:

THE DEFEAT OF INNOCENCE

Innocence glorified in Ransom's little girls becomes innocence ossified in his maiden laides; the suppleness of a Janet or John Whiteside's daughter moves past the scream at Sweetwater to become the brittleness of the spinsters Miriam Tazewell or Emily Hardcastle. The protective myopia that serves Ransom's innocents in good stead as children degenerates into a blind Blanche DuBois passion as adults. While they cling tenaciously to their rather tenuous hold on primary experience, maturity inevitably loosens that bond, moving them closer to the very abstraction which destroys the essence of their beings. Ransom's innocents exist in a world of rigidly defined moral order, an abstracted man's world. It is humanly impossible--for either men or women--to synthesize experience to the extent that the wholeness of that moral order can be seen. Men at least recognize the schism, but women, tragically, cannot articulate their alienation; they are all feeling, all body, and the best they can muster is their own microcosmic order, their "gyroscope in chaos"⁷⁶ as Donald Stauffer calls it, which in the larger scheme of things, seems absurd, irrational. Ransom's women age, grow bitter, dry up,

⁷⁶"Portrait of the Critic-Poet as Equilibrist," Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948); rpt. in John Crowe Ransom, ed. Young, p. 90.

and die without ever fathoming the paradox of their dilemma, for they are First Moment beings in a Third Moment world. True unity cannot sustain itself against the deluge of dissociation. They remain, sadly, symbolic children, blindly following their intuitions and psyches beyond their intellectual comprehension. They are simultaneously (and again paradoxically) the most fertile and sterile of individuals.

The lesson that Ransom's women never learn is that growth demands change, that not to change is to die; to paraphrase Ransom's Agrarian stance, they remain uninstructed and unregenerate. Since they cannot accept the transience of life (because they are incapable of reflecting abstractly on the nature of life), they remain like Yeats' gilded birds in Byzantium; perfection is consuming and belongs to a world of art rather than a human world. Time becomes females' greatest enemy: first, because it destroys the beauty that is the external sign of oneness; second, because it augments the chasm between association and dissociation. Ransom's women, after all, commune with the "world's body"; they concentrate on the concretion of all things. They are thus more subject to the ravages of time than the abstraction of men who are not intellectually time-bound in quite the same sense. Louis Rubin, with a touch of Ransom's own tone, calls time in these poems "the grim raper,"⁷⁷ for mutability is frequently the metaphor for the ultimate assault on female oneness

⁷⁷Wary Fugitives, p. 32.

and security. Time is the province of men, and women simply will not be "instructed" in its significance.

Ransom's own attitude about the predicament of women in his poems is basically that of the gallant Southern gentleman who respects the dignity of old maids, even though their concerns be ephemeral. There is a Southern charm and ceremony in his poems about grown women, even though the Old South metaphor reflects nothing more than Ransom's pipe dream of an agrarian, integrated, cultivated society in which unity of being is possible. "Here Lies a Lady" (SP, p. 140) captures both that Southern flair and the peculiar dilemma of women in the real world as one of his innocents--married but rendered poetically virginal--is confronted with the reality of her own imminent death. This lady "of beauty and high degree" vacillates between fever and chills, the heat of passion and feeling and the cold of abstraction and thought. Her family and the "medicos" gather round to observe her movement from one sphere to the other:

For either she burned, and her confident eyes would blaze,
And her fingers fly in a manner to puzzle their heads--
What was she making? Why, nothing; she sat in a maze
Of old scraps of laces, snipped into curious shreds--

This is the realm of the female who meets death on her terms, ordering her world not through reconciliation but by the trivial snipping of lace, following an intuition even she cannot understand. Much more "rational" is the "chill" phase, when cold abstraction triumphs:

Or this would pass, and the light of her fire decline
 Till she lay discouraged and cold, like a thin stalk
 white and blown,
 And would not open her eyes, to kisses, to wine;
 The sixth of these states was her last; the cold settled down.

Appropriately, "the cold settled down"; abstraction and the world of men and mortality takes its toll.

The last stanza belongs to the narrator, who interprets her death through a male consciousness:

Sweet ladies, long may ye bloom, and toughly I hope ye may thole,
 But was she not lucky? In flowers and lace and mourning,
 In love and great honor we bade God rest her soul
 After six little spaces of chill, and six of burning.

Was the lady of "high degree"--and the "degree" pun here has a range of connotations and tones: social standing, college achievement. (a "blue girl," no less), or, literally, thermometer reading--"was she not lucky?" Most critics chide Ransom's loss of tone here,⁷⁸ but the felicity of her death is in keeping with Ransom's philosophy: in a dissociated world, death ends the trauma of attempted resolution of the extremes. It is as if the blue girls had died while twirling their skirts rather than as wizened, bitter old maids. Innocence that dies in a state of grace, with "six little spaces of chill, and six of burning," has not succumbed to the inexorable fate of disillusionment. Sweet ladies will not bloom long, the narrator already knows, and they will not "thole" (endure) toughly. Perhaps the best of deaths for an innocent is not to realize the magnitude of mortality but to snip lace and remain virtually untainted.

⁷⁸In particular, Parsons, p. 47.

The young girl in "Piazza Piece" (SP, p. 9) is not quite so "lucky"; she must confront death head on. In this Petrarchan sonnet, the allegory of death confronting innocence is acted out as the "gentleman in a dustcoat" (with the marvelous, rich irony of death protecting itself from dust) attempts to communicate with a lovely lady, trying to make her "hear." But her ears are "soft and small," and she seems oblivious to the reality of her circumstance. In the octave, he reminds her, as he waits in her garden, of the dying roses and the "spectral moon," but she staunchly defends her position. The sestet is given to her response:

--I am a lady young in beauty waiting
 Until my truelove comes, and then we kiss.
 But what grey man among the vines is this
 Whose words are dry and faint as in a dream?
 Back from my trellis, Sir, before I scream.
 I am a lady young in beauty waiting.

The setting here, Parsons believes, is reminiscent of Shakespeare's Juliet, the relationship between death and lady suggests Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death"; the tone reflects Scott's Proud Maisie.⁷⁹ Whatever the allusion, the poem is not entirely successful: it is too staid, too chivalric, too lacking in vitality to initiate real sympathy for the lady's plight. Nonetheless, it provides the motif for several of Ransom's poems, that, sad though it be, the only marriage bed that awaits his innocents is the grave, and that perfection, in a finite world, can cohabit only with death. The spinsters of his poems fight valiantly, but they all succumb to

⁷⁹Parsons, pp. 65-66.

mortality. For every "lady young in beauty waiting" there is "a grey man among the vines." Women are defeated, but there is a majesty in their defeat that both Ransom and reader alike must admire.

There is a dignity, for example, that underscores the seemingly trivial plight of "Miriam Tazewell" (SP, p. 3), who cannot assimilate nature's storms with the disruption of her geraniums and irises. She first attempts to stay nature's course by sheer denial; she would not be "instructed":

When Miriam Tazewell heard the tempest bursting
And his wrathful whips across the sky drawn crackling
She stuffed her ears for fright like a young thing
And with heart full of the flowers took to weeping.

But nature is unmoved by Miriam's torment and answers tears by objectively following its due course:

But the earth shook dry his old back in good season,
He had weathered storms that drenched him deep as this one,
And the sun, Miriam, ascended to his dominion,
The storm was withered against his empyrean.

Miriam has no affinity for the order of the cosmos; she feels violated. The only world that she fully controls, her flower garden, has been robbed of its splendor; appropriately, she sees this onslaught of the well-ordered universe in sexual terms:

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

Further injury is thrust upon poor Miriam when the world chooses not to note her tragic circumstance; she takes issue with an order impervious to her chaos:

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.

There is a conspiracy against Miriam that even the birds and the stars have joined. Miriam cries no more, for she has seen the futility of that gesture; yet, she simply replaces one passive gesture for another; she becomes petulant and pouty:

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.

Innocence has been corrupted by experience. Miriam, like any proper Southern spinster, has attempted to set up her own micro-cosmic order in an alien world, replacing her own fecundity with that of the soil. But now, even the garden is rendered sterile, paradoxically so, as it is "raped" by the summer storm. After all, Miriam exists in a profusion of peonies, not in a world of abstraction, and she will never fathom an objective reality that ignores the plight of innocents. G. R. Wasserman notes, "To Miriam, the world is not merely callous; it has become wanton. The deflowering of her lawn by the storm is the deflowering of her innocence by experience."⁸⁰

In the 1963 version of the poem, Ransom excised the line "The principle of the beast was low and masculine," but he reinstated it in his final edition of Selected Poems. Clearly, the masculine

⁸⁰"The Irony of John Crowe Ransom," University of Kansas City Review, XXIII (Winter, 1956); rpt. in John Crowe Ransom, ed. Young, p. 151.

principle is a significant element in the poem, for only the male world plunders Miriam's virginal sphere; the polarization of male and female provides pathos and ironic tension, but its real intent is philosophical. Even the sun joins the masculine, ordered world at the expense of Miriam's ideal, illusory world. Abstraction conspires with nature and defeats Miriam's First Moment experience. There may be no flowers that spring, but the real tragedy lies in Miriam's never "flowering" again.

Miriam is clearly not in the mainstream of normal human experience; she is ill-equipped to weather the give-and-take of real involvement in human love or passion. She will retreat, one might predict, into her emotional fortress and live the rest of her sterile life like Faulkner's Miss Emily Grierson, walled up, physically and spiritually, mourning the babes she never had. Curiously, Emily Hardcastle, another of Ransom's suffering old maids, is quite a faithful analogue to Emily Grierson of "A Rose for Emily."⁸¹ In "Emily Hardcastle, Spinster" (SP, p. 20) Ransom returns to the marriage motif of "Piazza Piece," as the gallant gentlemen gather round to watch the wedding of Emily Hardcastle, that pristine fortress that her name suggests, and her final suitor, death. The gentlemen who would have courted Emily, like those of Faulkner's story, respect her blind devotion to a noble (but futile) cause, that

⁸¹Paul Levitt, "An Analogue for Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily,'" Papers on Language and Literature, IX (1973), 91-94, suggests that Faulkner derived the germ for his story (1930) from having read Ransom's poem (1923).

she has remained untainted by the logical, the pragmatic, the abstract, the modern:

We shall come tomorrow morning, who were not to have her love,
We shall bring no face of envy but a gift of praise and lilies
To the stately ceremonial we are not the heroes of.

Let the sisters now attend her, who are red-eyed, who are wroth;
They were younger, she was finer, for they wearied of the waiting
And they married them to merchants, being unbelievers both.

Her sisters, "unbelievers," have demeaned themselves, compromising their oneness for materialism, but Emily remains pure being, defeated in her valiant attempt to remain united in a fragmented world. The "gentleman in a dustcoat" has now donned his frock coat to await his bride:

But right across the threshold has her grizzled Baron come;
Let them robe her, Bride and Princess, who'll go down a
leafy archway
And seal her to the Stranger for his castle in the gloom.

Like Marvell's coy mistress, the "grizzled Baron" will now "try" her "long preserved virginity." Emily joins the ranks of Ransom's other defeated females. But even the narrator and his fellow mourners can view this death ambivalently. Jane Marston concedes,

Ransom uses virginity as a symbol for all human ideals, especially moral ideals that deny the dualistic nature of the individual. As part of the society, the narrator can appreciate the decorum that Emily Hardcastle has preserved. His own respect for decorum emerges through his participation in the burial ritual and in the ritual of courtship. As observer of the ironic outcome of her life, he can perceive her failure to balance decorum with a realistic awareness of natural processes.⁸²

Retrospectively, the narrator respects Emily's tenacity, even a tenacity that has rendered her celibate. She, like Miriam Tazewell,

⁸² Marston, p. 63.

cannot fathom the natural order of things, but that limitation fails to tarnish the magnificence of her defense of an ideal.

Ransom's best testimony to that magnificent failure occurs in "Of Margaret" (SP, p. 143; revision, p. 145), where Margaret observes the first leaf fall and mourns the passing of the only children she will ever know, the flowers and foliage. Ransom's poem, with obvious debt to Hopkins, treats its subject reverentially, but the poem ends one step short of admonishing Margaret that it is she that she mourns for. Instead, there is a spirituality in the speaker's attitude, almost an apotheosis of this sadly disillusioned spinster. In the 1945 version, which has far more poetic vitality than the 1969 version, Ransom marks the autumn of Margaret's barren life while Margaret notes, not the passing of time but the death of her offspring:

With the fall of the first leaf that winds rend
 She and the boughs trembled, and she would mourn
 The wafer body as an own first born,
 But with louder destruction sang the wind.

Soon must they all descend, there where they hung
 In gelid air, and the blind land be filled
 With dead, and a mere windiness unchild
 Her of the sons of all her mothering.

No mother sorrow is but follows birth,
 And, beyond that, conception; hers was large,
 And so immoderate love must be a scourge,
 Needing the whole ecstasy of substant earth.

The eucharistic suggestion of the "wafer body" of her children is furthered by her comparison to that first Virgin Mother, for her conceptions, too, lack physicality; they are, for Margaret, only her imaginings, a sad attempt to order a hostile world. Unlike the

sullenness that ends Miriam Tazewell's days, Margaret's tireless tributes to her yearly "unchildings" beatify her:

But no evil shall spot this, Margaret's page,
For her generations were of the head,
The eyes, the tender fingers, not the blood,
And the issue was all flowers and foliage.

Virgin, whose image bent to the small grass
I keep against this tide of wayfaring,
O hear the maiden pageant ever sing
Of that far away time of gentleness.

In no other poem is Ransom as blatant about his empathy for defeated innocence. He says, in his explanation of his revisions of the poem,

. . . in my limited repertory I could never find a lovelier conclusion than the stanza five which finishes this poem. Nor a more moving one; it is pure elegy, uttered by an old "wayfaring" fellow, who addresses the lost virgin of his younger days. What he asks of her is wonderful but impossible. (SP, p. 146)

And what he asks of her is to attune herself to the "maiden pageant," to hold fast to that time of "gentleness" far beyond the grasp of mortal men. Her generations may have been "of the head," but her heart has been in the right place. Ransom seems to have written this poem to counterpoint Hopkins' poem: Hopkins' Margaret must learn that she mourns for herself; Ransom's narrator finally understands that he mourns for Margaret--she is the synthesis of all of his dreadfully deluded, uninstructed innocents. She is the First Moment.

Ransom felt quite at home writing about the Margarets and Miriam Tazewells of this world, for the province of the old maid is indigenous to Ransom's Southern heritage. Indeed, he grew up in a household with two sisters who never married, who had never "lived [life] to its fullest . . . [who] though . . . always on the

verge of things, had never plunged into life wholeheartedly."⁸³

The ambiance of the South gave Ransom a successful backdrop for his tormented innocents and his gallant narrators, for such gallantry is "possible only in a society where chivalric values toward women still have some sanction."⁸⁴ But that gallant persona had trouble coming to terms with the other aspect of adult innocents, those who order their worlds not through flower gardens but through their sexuality. Ransom appears ill at ease with his poems about temptresses and seduction.

Innocent turned temptress seems to be the other side of the first experience coin. Those innocents who choose not to camouflage their sexuality and oneness tend to exploit it. But this is not seductiveness in the traditional sense, a deliberately perpetrated enticement. Rather, it becomes a blind passion, an enchantment, as much the burden of the one enthralled as the one who enthralls. Indeed, there is a "La belle dame sans merci" mood to Ransom's better poems of seduction, a sense of a yearning for females as much philosophically as physically. As early as Poems About God, Ransom's narrators were aware of the allurements of females. In "The Cloak Model," the "daffy" narrator warns a young man of the "bosom's rhythm" and the innocence of "fresh young skin."⁸⁵ Women are

⁸³Robb Forman Dew, "Summer's End," Mississippi Quarterly, XXX (Winter, 1976/1977), 141.

⁸⁴Koch, p. 132.

⁸⁵Poems About God, pp. 41-42.

superficial, the poem intimates, and Ransom leaves it at that. In "Fresco"⁸⁶ from Two Gentlemen in Bonds, the Last Judgment is marked as famous temptresses who have brought the fall of men, notably Luisa, Jezebel, and Cleopatra, wend their way to become the brides of Hell. Only in "The Miller's Daughter"⁸⁷ from the same volume does Ransom begin to develop the subtlety of the temptress. The narrator has observed the "blue stillwater" eyes of the miller's daughter and fantasizes about her sensuousness:

At candlelight I hear she goes
And on a bed of snow like snow she lies
Yet warmer much and lids her sleepy eyes.
Long lies the tall white tower which uprose.

She awakens and descends the stair "Coiling her hair as queens would coil a crown." Though entranced, the narrator is only a "poor bookish hind" with "too much pudding in [his] head / Of learned characters and scraps of love." His intellectual dissociation prevents his union, physically or spiritually, with her exoticism. The insufficiency of his attitude is reflected in his fragmented, scientific view of the girl: the "primary chrome of hair," the "Astronomied Oes of eyes." The miller's daughter, on the other hand, is not aware of this enchantment nor of the narrator's existence. In Ransom's poems this is the proper relationship between enchantress and enchanted: she is mere passive participant in his fantasy; no

⁸⁶Two Gentlemen in Bonds (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927), pp. 59-61.

⁸⁷Two Gentlemen in Bonds, pp. 11-12.

need for seduction, her very existence is temptation enough to lure him away from his Third Moment world.

Ransom chose not to include "Cloak Model," "Fresco," and "The Miller's Daughter" in his Selected Poems, and rightly so, for they are decidedly inferior to his mature work. A curious poem of temptation that he did include, "First Travels of Max" (SP, pp. 39-41), has escaped successful exegesis. In the poem the child Max Van Vrooman, tawny curled and all, tires of his usual childhood games and wanders into Fool's Forest, inhabited by lizards and black tarns and rotten trees. He comes upon a very different--a very supernatural--temptress, the Red Witch, with a bosom "wide and yellow as butter" who combs "obscene things / From her black hair into her scarlet lap." She greets him,

"Littlest and last Van Vrooman, do you come too?"
She knew him, it appeared, would know him better,
The scarlet hulk of hell with a fat bosom
Pirouetting at the bottom of the forest.

He returns home, "curls unsmoothed," vowing to return as a grown man to cut her head off. But the memory of the encounter lingers:

. . . and nothing chilled him more
Than the company kept him by the witch's laugh
And the witch's song, and the creeping of his flesh.

Most critics have summed up the poem as innocence's first confrontation with evil.⁸⁸ Miller Williams sees Max as a "sojourner through the inferno, with no guide" and feels that his journey is

⁸⁸See Thornton H. Parsons, "Ransom the Revisionist," The Southern Review, II, New Series (Spring, 1966), 456-57; Buffington, pp. 75-76; Williams, pp. 67-69; Koch, p. 123.

both intellectual and sexual, that Max has stepped into "an Eden ruined, decayed."⁸⁹ But Max's confrontation is evil only in the sense that his blissful ignorance is forever shattered. The Red Witch, with that ambiguous image of her yellow bosom, initiates Max into a different kind of experience, for he must learn what it means to become a man (significantly, the poem appears in "The Manliness of Men" section of Selected Poems rather than "The Innocent Doves"). Max's loss of innocence is a knowledge of the abstract, dissociated world of men made more painful by the associated world of women. When the Red Witch utters "last Van Vrooman, do you come too?" Max receives intimations that he is merely following the bitter order of experience, that he is merely the last of his line to come to awareness. With that fragment of knowledge comes the flood of recognition: she will, indeed, "know him better" before his life is through; it is his fate to recognize--and live with--the duality of human experience. Max sojourns not into evil but into the Second Moment; he now knows that he does not know. Ransom attempts to rescue the fairy-tale quality of this poem by returning Max to his play upon the lawn, but the ending is ineffectual. Max is forever changed; he is now thoroughly "a man" in the most pejorative sense of that term.

Ransom's most successful temptress by far is "Judith of Bethulia" (SP, pp. 30-31), who actively uses her innocence and beauty to defeat her enemy. Based upon the Apocryphal Judith, the incident (in which Judith beheads Holofernes with his scimitar,

⁸⁹Williams, pp. 67-68.

initiating the Israelite defeat of the Assyrians and the elevation of Judith to the status of heroine) is translated in Ransom to a comment upon the special relationship between men and women. Judith in the Bible is a widow who enters public life only to save her people. Ransom transforms her into a beautiful, virginal wild animal, desirous and exotic:

Beautiful as the flying legend of some leopard
 She had not chosen yet her captain, nor Prince
 Depositary to her flesh, and our defense;
 A wandering beauty is a blade out of its scabbard.
 You know how dangerous, gentlemen of threescore?
 May you know it yet ten more.

Nor by process of veiling she grew less fabulous.
 Grey or blue veils, we were desperate to study
 The invincible emanations of her white body,
 And the winds at her ordered raiment were ominous.
 Might she walk in the market, sit in the council of soldiers?
 Only of the extreme elders.

Relentlessly Judith uses her wiles to seduce the malevolent Holofernes. With due respect to the technique of Salome, she enters the tent of her enemy and methodically plots his undoing:

He was lapped with bay-leaves, and grass and fumiter weed,
 And from under the wine-film encountered his mortal vision,
 For even within his tent she accomplished his derision,
 Loosing one veil and another, she stood unafraid;
 So he perished. Nor brushed her with even so much as a daisy?
 She found his destruction easy.

Steeled by her own feminine power, Judith enjoys the spoils of war:

. . . the chieftain's head, with grinning sockets, and
 varnished--
 Is it hung on the sky with a hideous epitaphy?
 No, the woman keeps the trophy.

But the real significance of Ransom's version, which, to this point, is basically true to the biblical version, is Judith's effect on her own men who long to have been Holofernes having been seduced by this

sensuous being. D. C. Carne-Ross observes, "Clearly she is a kind of Helen figure, possessing the dangerous sort of beauty which destroys everything within reach. Helen caused the ruin of Troy; is Judith going to do the same for Bethulia?"⁹⁰ Thornton Parsons notes that the young men, fevered by madness, are simultaneously aware that "accompanying the extraordinary beauty of Judith is an incongruous brutality"⁹¹:

May God send unto our virtuous lady her Prince!
It is stated she went reluctant to that orgy,
Yet a madness fevers our young men, and not the clergy
Nor the elders have turned them unto modesty since.
Inflamed by the thought of her nakedness with desire?
Yes, and chilled with fear and despair.

"Judith the enticing beauty must be permanently associated in their imaginations with Judith the cool murderer who keeps the varnished head of her victim."⁹² Men are drawn to her, but they fear her immanent destructiveness. They see her "not as an 'innocent dove,' but as the daughter of Eve."⁹³ Unity of being renders women beautiful and desirous, but theirs is a two-edged sword, for such beauty undermines the male rationality. Judith beheads Holofernes, and she is in the process of beheading (i.e. undoing the intellect of) the fevered young men. They still have the presence of mind to know that they can no more exist in Judith's sensuous realm than she can exist

⁹⁰"Ransom's 'Judith of Bethulia,'" Nine, II (Spring, 1949), 91.

⁹¹Parsons, John Crowe Ransom, p. 114.

⁹²Parsons, John Crowe Ransom, p. 114.

⁹³Buffington, p. 73.

in theirs. They are dualists who prefer their dissociation to the void of being consumed with desire for something they can never have. They are "chilled with fear and despair," as well they should be. Theirs is the despair of every narrator and every other man in Ransom's poems who mourns the futility of the male experience.

With the exception of one. There is in Ransom's poetry a marvelous aberration, a male who adopts the feminine principle, throws caution to the wind, and fights against overwhelming odds for a lost cause; that gentleman, of course, is Captain Carpenter. No other poem in Ransom's canon places a male in quite this position, a position he shares with Miriam Tazewell, Emily Hardcastle, even Janet and the blue girls. But, unlike Ransom's idealistic women, he does not remain passive: he attempts to act, bringing havoc upon himself. In "Captain Carpenter" (SP, pp. 44-46) the quixotic captain challenges all forces, being slowly dismembered, and eventually parting with his heart. Ransom dismisses Carpenter as "an old hero who dies with his boots on."⁹⁴ Louis Rubin more accurately describes him as "the agrarian gentleman of the old school, courteous, traditional, chivalric and true, who rides out to confront the modern world, with lamentable results."⁹⁵ Despite his loss of arms to Satan's bitch, his nose to a "pretty lady and all her train," and his heart to the "rogue in scarlet and grey," the absurd, almost surrealistic figure gains tragic stature. Unlike the young men in "Judith of

⁹⁴Ransom Reads His Works.

⁹⁵"Poetry of Agrarianism," p. 167.

Bethulia" or the Carmelite friar in "Necrological," he meets life head on, no matter what the consequences. His participation in the vitality of life, at the expense of his own life, marks him as Ransom's greatest hero, albeit a hero of strange amalgam: he has all the lustiness of the bawdy heroes of Southwest humor and, simultaneously, the majestic selflessness of a Christ-figure, which his name Carpenter might suggest. He is no dualist, but he, like Ransom's women, cannot survive. Parsons contends,

Captain Carpenter is the splendid and ridiculous victim of outrages suffered because of his committed participation in life. He is an absurd figure precisely because he does not despair when the number and extent of his defeats should overwhelm him. . . . the captain preserves his spiritual essence--his faith and hope--in spite of the gradual loss of important parts of his anatomy; and, before each new encounter with an adversary, he behaves not like a man whose crushing defeats and physical losses have made him tentative and wary but like a man whose whole experience has been with victory and fulfillment. His nobility consists of his immunity to despair, his utter imperviousness to the dreadful humiliations that he keeps asking for.⁹⁶

Ransom believes in Captain Carpenter and the other defeated innocents, even though their decisions must inevitably be wrong, even though they must "always go with a spiritual limp."⁹⁷ Ransom's personae may view the absurdity of innocents' delusions, but that view is always mitigated by a qualifying irony. Perhaps Randall Jarrell best captures the flavor of Ransom's misguided ingenuities:

On one side are Church and State, Authority, the Business World, the Practical World, men of action, men of affairs, generals and moralists and applied mathematicians and

⁹⁶Parsons, John Crowe Ransom, p. 128.

⁹⁷Knight, p. 112.

philosophers you set your watch by--efficient followers of abstraction and ideals But Ransom's affection goes out to that other army defeated every day and victorious every night, of so-lightly-armed, so-easily-vanquished skirmishers, in their rags and tags and trailing clouds, who run around and around the iron hoplites pelting them with gravel and rosemary, getting killed miserably, and--half the time, in the pure pleasure or pain of being--forgetting even that they are fighting and wandering off into the flowers at the edge of the terrible field. . . . His poetry is constantly insisting that we can live only by trading with the enemy--that the heart has its reasons, a mighty poor grade of them too--that the poet himself is an existence away from the Innocent Doves he mourns for.⁹⁸

And it is that "existence away" that marks the essence of Ransom's poetry. Beneath that thin veneer of gallantry and decorum and quaint diction lies a painfully vacuous world in which extremes can never be reconciled and human dissociation can never be resolved. Only Judith and Captain Carpenter leave this world having challenged it, however futilely, to the full measure of their beings. The most a person can hope for--innocent and experienced alike--is a tenuous equilibrium, a trade-off with a world in which no one truly belongs. It is that substitution of equilibrium for life that looms over Ransom's lovers, ironically divorcing them from the very vitality that would make life meaningful. Survival--in a philosophical void--is the best choice, but not without a constant yearning for a world that should be, a world where innocence regenerates the human spirit and restores to God the thunder and the soul to man.

⁹⁸Jarrell, pp. 87-89.

CHAPTER IV

WOMEN AS LOVERS: THE EQUILIBRISTS

If women are the First Moment, full of prescience and innocence and oneness, and men are the Second and Third Moment, taunted by their abstraction of the world's body and then yearning to return to the "fugitive first moment," then Ransom's greatest metaphor for dissociation must surface in those poems where experience and innocence, sense and sensibility, meet--or attempt to meet. It is in his poems about lovers that the dialectical opposites are most discernible. His lovers, as Randall Jarrell aptly observes, embrace "like acrobats on a tight-rope,"⁹⁹ attempting to balance the two extremes of experience while struggling to show genuine passion. In typical Ransom irony, these lovers rarely love: they share Prufrock's "love song," spending their hours discoursing on the nature of their dissociation without ever forcing "the moment to its crisis." Women are still women--intuitive, tender-hearted, complete--but the thrust of these poems is clearly in another direction: women are no longer as idealized or desired; instead, the emphasis shifts to the male who suffers from his knowledge of the unknowableness of ultimate reality. In the poems of lovers, the focus is on the male's heroics in his momentous attempt at unity. The tension here is not created by small girls with dead hens or old maids with ruined gardens; the tension in

⁹⁹Jarrell, p. 100.

these poems derives from the disparity of the narrator's wavering between his own sphere of abstraction and his longing for that primal, elusive first experience. The presence of women unintentionally mocks that disparity, heightening the male's awareness of his own alienation from unity of being.

Even in his critical works, Ransom counterpoints the realms of women and men, using the female principle as the standard against which the male is judged. In The World's Body Ransom uses the concept of woman, attached to hearth and home, as that idealized being in which true unity can blossom:

It will probably be agreed that women have much more aptitude for the cultivation of sentiments than men do; and this would be because women have been exempted from the binding obligations of economic production and planning. A good housewife, unless she is enslaved by excessive drudgery, finds even in her tasks an interest that is always changing yet needs never fail; for she makes it a point or allows her own nature unconsciously to make it--not to have merely useful or abstract relations with the things and persons of her ménage, but to seek in addition a delicious knowledge of objects. She likes to "treat" them in such a way as to subordinate their utility and bring out their individual quality. . . . Her moments, if I can imagine them, are not likely to have the poverty to which the processes of males are characteristically bound.¹⁰⁰

Ransom places his female lovers in just such domestic situations. They smoothe the heads of their children, warn husbands against the night air, grow maudlin over old oak trees, while the males in these poems question, in their "poverty," their own ability to disturb the universe. Robert Lowell writes of the dilemma of men and women,

¹⁰⁰The World's Body, pp. 228-29.

[Ransom's] women cannot be spoiled by abstraction, or impressed into drudgery. They are supporting figures; man stands in the middle, one unchangeable man wherever he is--troubled, gaunt, conscientious, philosophising to no good, Quixote, Prufrock, too serious to see his own shadow or children ¹⁰¹

Males must reflect on masculine disparity; they must come to terms with the image of femaleness, that metaphor of First Moment experience submerged deep within the male collective unconscious.

But there is more to the symbolism of women than mere oneness with the domestic environment. Women are metaphysically "pure" beings, perfection in human form. Men are so long divorced from such fusion that they must struggle to reconstitute that oneness. In a study of the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay, Ransom turns the male/female experience into a philosophical schism:

A woman lives for love, if we will but project that term to cover all her tender fixations upon natural objects of sense, some of them more innocent and far less reciprocal than men. Her devotion to them is more than gallant, it is fierce and importunate, and cannot but be exemplary to the hardened male observer. He understands it, from his "recollections of early childhood," or at least of youth, but he has lapsed from it; or rather, in the best case, he has pursued another line of development. The minds of man and woman grow apart, and how shall we express their differentiation? In this way, I think: man, at best, is an intellectualized woman. Or, man distinguishes himself from woman by intellect, but he should keep it feminized. He knows he should not abandon sensibility and tenderness, though perhaps he has generally done so. But now that he is so far removed from the world of the simple senses, he does not like to impeach his own integrity and leave his business in order to recover it; going back, as he is often directed, to first objects, the true and tried, like the moon, or the grass, or the dead girl. He would much prefer if it is possible to find poetry

¹⁰¹Robert Lowell, with Denis Donoghue, Richard Ellmann, Roy Fuller, "John Crowe Ransom: Four Tributes," The New Republic, I (August, 1974), 5.

in his study, or even in his office, and not have to sit under the syringa bush. Sensibility and tenderness might qualify the general content of his mind if he but knew the technique, however "mental" or self-constructed some of that content looks. But the problem does not arise for a woman. Less pliant, safer as a biological organism, she remains fixed in her famous attitudes, and is indifferent to intellectuality.¹⁰²

In the language of God Without Thunder, the masculine mode is Occidental, Platonic: scientific, devouring, rational; the feminine mode is Oriental: contingent, substantial, irrational. Can there be, Ransom says in his poetry, a reconciliation of the two? Can mind and body, conception and perception meet on equal ground to effect genuine love? No, the poems answer, such union is impossible; no physical or spiritual union can regenerate the dissociated. Love, then, or the absence of love, becomes the crucible for dissociation. As Karl Knight reveals,

Love, the predominant symbol in Ransom's poetry, is the supreme symbolic test the symbolic act which indicates the fullness or coherence of man's grasp of his world; it is the attitude which results from the pleasurable contemplation which is never completed but which continually desires to move toward completion. It is significantly the reverse of mere passion, which desires only to use an object and thus obliterate all feeling which is generated by the object ¹⁰³

"The failure of love," Knight believes, "symbolizes the fragmented personality. The mere fact of physical union does not in itself correct the malady of dissociation."¹⁰⁴ Indeed, Ransom's lovers

¹⁰²The World's Body, pp. 77-78.

¹⁰³Knight, pp. 108-9.

¹⁰⁴Knight, p. 84.

become as insular as his children or old maids; they have no more integration into society than Janet or Emily Hardcastle.

As heroes and heroines, Ransom's lovers cannot reconcile their opposites; they are, to return to Jarrell's metaphor, no more than acrobats juggling their philosophical spheres, failing miserably at love but managing to balance their opposites. Theirs is a seesaw existence: movement is possible only when they remain at extremes. They are forever preserved in equilibrium, moving constantly, like the figures of Keats' urn, but getting nowhere. Thus, there is a certain nihilism to his lovers' existence, for, as G. R. Wasserman suggests, "in resigning themselves to an inadequate reconciliation of both extremes of their predicament, they have in fact ceased to struggle to attain either of them."¹⁰⁵

They must resolve, Ransom insists, to accept the ambiguity. All of Ransom's irony rests on the idea that true fusion is impossible. In its place, the poems imply, man must put the heroism of the struggle, the struggle to maintain the equilibrium, but it is a Pyrrhic victory. "So what a man can hope for," Miller Williams observes, "is not to win, but to make what victory there is out of defeat. What a man can hope for is to lose on his own terms."¹⁰⁶ Ransom's poetry is a poetry of loss, not of mere beauty or mortality, but of human identity, more metaphysical than existential, for his

¹⁰⁵Wasserman, p. 153.

¹⁰⁶Williams, p. 28.

lovers have a standard by which to measure their dilemma, the standard of the First Moment experience that renders man whole again.

But, in the philosophical scheme of things, the First Moment cannot be achieved in mortal terms (witness what happens to Ransom's innocents when they attempt such). Man is back where he started, and his only recourse is a saving irony that makes such a life liveable. Williams explains,

A sense of irony is the abiding realization that every human statement contains its own contradiction and every human act contains the seed of its own defeat. From this comes the realization that there are no pure truths and that there are no pure men or pure women or pure causes or pure motives. There is neither the simply holy nor the simply unholy. John Calvin and Camus alike understand that man's very lot is one of awful irony, as he finds his rational self facing a nonrational universe, his hungering and homesick soul facing an incomprehensible and indifferent God. This is the terrible wisdom which moves perceptibly through Ransom's poems.¹⁰⁷

Ransom's ironic stance bridges the philosophical chasm, giving his men (if not his women) a studied pose that allows them to remain rational in the midst of irrationality--but, always, the void lies just beneath the irony, and his lovers struggle to avoid being drawn into the maelstrom. Theirs is a precarious balance, devoid of life, but necessary for survival.

Possibly because of the need for ironic detachment, possibly because of Ransom's own fear of sentimentality, most of his love poems are civilized rather than passionate, objective rather than personal. Even in the poems where the narrator is the lover,

¹⁰⁷Williams, p. 29.

Vivienne Koch points out, he departs from the narrative technique of Donne or Marvell and remains "outside the experience of love," judging it "like an omniscient spectator."¹⁰⁸ There is even a theatricality to the dialogue of his characters, Williams discovers in his study of Ransom's poems. There is little illusion of actual conversation:

This is not theater-in-the-round. The proscenium arch is elaborately there, and we imagine that Ransom's characters are obliged now and then to step to the footlights and in the manner of Restoration actors declaim a few lines to the audience.¹⁰⁹

Such "declaiming" mars many of Ransom's poems about lovers; indeed, some of these poems could not pass Ransom's own critical test of the balance of structure and texture. These poems become more abstraction than metaphor, eviscerating a subject demanding both pathos and passion.

"Eclogue" (SP, pp. 13-15) is a good example of this deficiency in his love poems. Here Jane Sneed and John Black discuss their past lives together, she by revelling in the joys of childhood, he by constantly tugging her back to a world of mutability. "We are," he says, "sly travelers, keeping good lookout / Against the face whose ravage cries for tears." We are not what we used to be, he continues, "For Time involved us; in his toils / We learned to fear." Jane grows bitter and acquiesces to John's way of thinking:

¹⁰⁸Koch, p. 142.

¹⁰⁹Williams, p. 7.

Love suffereth long, is kind--but not in fear,
 For boys run banded, and simple sweethearts kiss,
 Till in one day the dream of Death appear--
 Then metamorphosis.

.....
 Something, John Black, came flapping out of hell
 And wrought between us, and the chasm is
 Digged, and it digged it well.

But Jane is not totally converted. She remains female enough to be
 able to imagine the idea of unity and perfection:

. . . Yet I can picture happiness
 Perhaps there wander lovers in some lands
 Who when Night comes, when it is fathomless
 Consort their little hands;

 And one flame to the other flame cries Courage,
 When heart to heart slide they, . . .

But John Black, "sly traveler" that he is, gets the final judgment,
 with the only effective stanza of the poem:

. . . O innocent dove,
 This is a dream. We lovers mournfully
 Exchange our bleak despairs. We are one part love
 And nine parts bitter thought. As well might be
 Beneath ground as above.

Despite the mediocrity of the poem and the preciousness of the diction,
 the last stanza captures the essence of all of Ransom's love poems;
 his lovers, indeed, subscribe to the formula of "one part love and nine
 parts bitter thought." Abstraction has robbed them of all vitality.
 Ransom's lovers could empathize with the Ancient Mariner, who pre-
 ferred Death to Life-in-Death, for their daily existence can be no
 more than the exchange of "bleak despairs," exacerbated by each
 other's presence. The joylessness of their earthly lives makes the
 "gentleman in a dustcoat" seem less threatening, if not overtly
 desirable.

Using the same motif far more successfully, "Spectral Lovers" (SP, pp. 4-5) capitalizes on the theme of love abstracted into sterility. His lovers are indeed spectral (literally, because they walk in the April mist; symbolically because they have no sense of corporeality or sexuality), largely due to the restraint of the man:

By night they haunted a thicket of April mist,
 Out of that black ground suddenly come to birth,
 Else angels lost in each other and fallen on earth.
 Lovers they knew they were, but why unclasped, unkissed?
 Why should two lovers be frozen apart in fear?
 And yet they were, they were.

The woman takes the initiative; she suggestively shreds blossoms and touches her love delicately. Her suppressed sexuality almost bursts forth:

The heart was bold that clanged within her bosom,
 The moment perfect, the time stopped for them,
 Still her face turned from him.

Strong were the batteries of the April night
 And the stealthy emanations of the field;
 Should the walls of her prison undefended yield
 And open her treasure to the first clamorous knight?
 "This is the mad moon, and shall I surrender all?
 If he but asks it I shall."

But he does not ask. He abstracts her, seeing her as a "marble fortress not to be conquered" (is she merely a younger Emily Hardcastle?). He answers her eroticism:

And gesturing largely to the moon of Easter,
 Mincing his steps and swishing the jubilant grass,
 Beheading some field-flowers that had come to pass,
 He had reduced his tributaries faster
 Had not considerations pinched his heart
 Unfitly for his art.

He beheads the flowers instead of deflowering the woman. The paralysis of lovers "frozen apart in fear" is complete. She remains desirable, yet forbidden; he remains abstracted and spectral.

The narrator intervenes as a Greek chorus, as he does in Ransom's poems of innocents, to interpret and give credence to the lovers' predicament:

They passed me once in April, in the mist.
No other season is it when one walks and discovers
Two tall and wandering, like spectral lovers,
White in the season's moon-gold and amethyst,
Who touch quick fingers fluttering like a bird
Whose songs shall never be heard.

Vivienne Koch believes that the early stanzas are for the narrator a remembrance of things past, the he is the spectral lover who escapes into his own shadowy past and lets the reader in on an intense moment of pain and yearning.¹¹⁰ Cleanth Brooks disagrees; the narrator is an outsider, imagining the lines lovers would want to speak to each other in this moment of crisis. This accounts for, Brooks feels, the formalized "ritual-like quality of their action."¹¹¹ Such an interpretation supports the philosophical thesis of the poem. As an omniscient observer, the narrator articulates the woman's heightened passion (which she would not consciously realize) and the man's timidity and restraint. The equivocation of both lovers destroys any possibility of true sexual union, thus the poignancy of the final stanza. The lovers have their honor, their abstraction, their desire,

¹¹⁰Koch, p. 126.

¹¹¹"Doric Delicacy," p. 66.

but they, like Jane Sneed and John Black, are without joy and without purpose in life. Only the narrator knows that paralysis of the body leads to paralysis of the spirit: they are closer to death, that is ghostliness, than they care to realize.

The most archetypal of Ransom's lovers imprisoned between honor and passion occurs in his finest "love" poem, "The Equilibrists" (SP, pp. 85-86). Bernard Bergonzi believes they belong in the tradition of Eloisa and Abelard, Tristan and Iseult, Aucassin and Nicolette.¹¹² Like "Spectral Lovers" the poem begins in retrospect, as most of his love poems do. Whatever the emotion of the moment, Ransom seems to say, is ironically recollected in tranquility, providing a more reliable philosophical stance (but, sad to say, robbing his poems of a certain spontaneity and "joie de vivre"). In "The Equilibrists" the male, removed--seemingly permanently--from his love, remembers her sensuously:

Full of her long white arms and milky skin
He had a thousand times remembered sin.
Alone in the press of people traveled he,
Minding her jacinth, and myrrh, and ivory.

Mouth he remembered: the quaint orifice
From which came heat that flamed upon the kiss, . . .

Parsons observes, "The emphasis upon arms is reminiscent of Prufrock's sedate and decorous erotic phantasy that shuns the grosser topography of breasts and thighs."¹¹³ And the male reacts like Prufrock,

¹¹²"A Poem about the History of Love: 'The Equilibrists' by John Crowe Ransom," Critical Quarterly, IV (Summer, 1962), 127-37.

¹¹³Parsons, John Crowe Ransom, p. 69.

fearful of moving beyond his imaginings. The "quaint orifice," Parsons continues, "with its double innuendoes, could be written only by a poet who had savored his Donne."¹¹⁴ Indeed, the rest of the poem pivots on two metaphysical conceits, the first of which is his love's body as a battlefield, reminiscent of the "marble fortress" of "Spectral Lovers":

Body: it was a white field ready for love,
On her body's field, with the gaunt tower above,
The lilies grew, beseeching him to take,
If he would pluck and wear them, bruise and break.

Eyes talking: Never mind the cruel words,
Embrace my flowers, but not embrace the swords.
But what they said, the doves came straightway flying
And unsaid: Honor, Honor, they came crying.

The doves fly not from body but from head, "the officious tower," but they make sufficient impact to anesthetize the lovers' passion:

Predicament indeed, which thus discovers
Honor among thieves, Honor between lovers.
O such a little word is Honor, they feel!
But the grey word is between them cold as steel.

The narrator thus intervenes to articulate their irreconcilable dilemma. He gives a lengthy commentary, providing the second conceit of the poem, that of separate stars orbiting separately but magnificently:

At length I saw these lovers fully were come
Into their torture of equilibrium;
Dreadfully had forsworn each other, and yet
They were bound each to each, and they did not forget.

And rigid as two painful stars, and twirled
About the clustered night their prison world,
They burned with fierce love always to come near,
But Honor beat them back and kept them clear.

¹¹⁴Parsons, John Crowe Ransom, p. 70.

Ah, the strict lovers, they are ruined now!
 I cried in anger. But with puddled brow
 Devising for those gibbeted and brave
 Came I descanting: Man, what would you have:

For spin your period out, and draw your breath,
 A kinder saeculum begins with Death.

The "kinder saeculum" of Death echoes John Black's bitter denouncement that he and Jane "as well might be / Beneath ground as above," for those "brave" who suffer will always be "gibbeted"; their equilibrium is more tension than life, a "tug of war," Miller Williams notes, "in which the rope never slacks and never moves one way or another."¹¹⁵

But the narrator even removes the finality of death as the end of the dilemma. Will the lovers choose a spiritual, abstract, non-corporeal Heaven?

In Heaven you have heard no marriage is,
 No white flesh tinder to your lecheries,
 Your male and female tissue sweetly shaped
 Sublimed away, and furious blood escaped.

Or will they be drawn to a physical, concrete, carnal Hell?

Great lovers lie in Hell, the stubborn ones
 Infatuate of the flesh upon the bones;
 Stuprate, they rend each other when they kiss,
 The pieces kiss again, no end to this.

"Sublimed away" joins "vexed" from "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" as one of the moments of flawless diction in Ransom's poetry. The suggestiveness and richness of the phrase, "with connotations of chemistry, alchemy, psychology, and theology"¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵Williams, p. 20

¹¹⁶Parsons, John Crowe Ransom, p. 74.

captures precisely the awesome nihilism that attends "honor."

W. Potter Woodbery notes,

The thin, bodiless existence of the celestial lovers ("sublimed away") in stanza 11 reveals the moral consequences of choosing chastity over passion and calls to mind the icy spinsters and effete young men who populate Ransom's poems and who, through their flight from eros, deceive themselves into thinking that they have found perfection of earth and have successfully escaped the iniquity of flesh.¹¹⁷

A heavenly existence devoid of sexuality robs man of his humanness, yet hell's debauchery leaves humans as mere "pieces." The lovers would "sin" if they denied honor and consummated their love, but here they "sin against the religion of love itself, a concept familiar in medieval literature."¹¹⁸ Clearly, no victory is possible here. Thus the narrator returns to his conceit and proposes a metaphorical epitaph for the spiritually dead:

But still I watched them spinning, orbited nice.
Their flames were not more radiant than their ice.
I dug in the quiet earth and wrought the tomb
And made these lines to memorize their doom:--

EPITAPH

Equilibrists lie here; stranger, tread light;
Close, but untouching in each other's sight;
Mouldered the lips and ashy the tall skull.
Let them lie perilous and beautiful.

The narrator moves from anger that lovers must suffer to respect for their willingness to continue to suffer: "Their flames were not more radiant than their ice"; the magnificence of their self-imposed

¹¹⁷"The Sword Between Them: Love and Death in Ransom's 'The Equilibrists,'" Southern Literary Journal, IX (Spring, 1977), 58-59.

¹¹⁸Bergonzi, p. 129.

celibacy surely rivals the heat of their sensuality. The poem has the structure of an elegy, moving, as it does, from anger to consolation: "Let them lie perilous and beautiful" is Ransom's greatest tribute to any of his star-crossed lovers. This perilous "reconciliation-in-irreconcilment,"¹¹⁹ as Louis Rubin calls it, is the very crux of Ransom's dualistic theme.

"The Equilibrists," as archetypes, suggest both the lovers of Donne and Marvell and those of the Provencal lyrics of medieval literature. Ransom purposely allows his metaphysical symbolism of women to span the centuries. Trained in the classics, Ransom was fully aware of the position of women throughout literature and therefore, Woodbery points out, was fully cognizant of the medieval conception of "lady":

The idealized lady of the lyrics is a poetic symbol of the Absolute and the perpetual yearning for her represents the longing of a soul for union with that Absolute that is possible only in death. The exclusive command that she holds over the affections serves to protect the soul from unworthy attachments. . . . the stasis of the lover in his state of perpetual desire, forever frozen as he is on the near side of active consummation, anticipates the final stillness of death.¹²⁰

In speaking of "The Equilibrists" Ransom revealed that his impetus for the poem was that the great theme of love poems was usually consummated love but far "more intense" was that of unconsummated love.¹²¹ Ransom thus shares in "The Equilibrists" a philosophical

¹¹⁹Wary Fugitives, p. 36.

¹²⁰Woodbery, p. 55.

¹²¹Ransom Reads His Works.

kinship with his medieval counterpart, even couching his ideas in archaic diction to further the allusion. Woodbery concludes that Ransom's heroes must, like the medieval hero, come to terms with

the earthly realization that no earthly woman can satisfy the yearning for the Absolute, that the union of this man and that woman is only a ludicrous caricature of the perfect union with the luminous Beyond. . . . The perpetually unconsummated passion for the lady of the Provencal lyrics keeps alive that nostalgia for the Transcendent which guarantees our disenchantment with all earthly fulfillments, whether fleshly or spiritual.¹²²

Nothing ever changes, Ransom suggests; the same "torture of equilibrium" that plagues modern man imperiled Tristan and Iseult, even Donne's "canonized" lovers. The human condition is to recognize a First Moment world, yearn for it, spin for a while in our pained orbits, but ultimately "lie perilous and beautiful." Women must remain intuitive and sensual; men are driven to desire them, but they both will settle for equilibrium, for the alternative is nothing at all.

"The Equibrists" works so beautifully because it strains its metaphysical theme through a seventeenth-century structure. Even Thornton Parsons, frequently critical of the sterility of Ransom's poetry, sees this poem as "one of the best monuments of this century's debt to the tradition of Donne, to a poetry of passionate intellectual agility and inspired technical audacity."¹²³ Other Ransom poems about lovers do not fare so well. "Vaunting Oak" (SP,

¹²²Woodbery, pp. 59 and 61.

¹²³Parsons, John Crowe Ransom, p. 75.

pp. 16-17) is just such a poem. The premise is rather a good one: the young woman "exulted, wrapped in a phantasy of good" comes upon a "great oak" that she chooses to be a symbol of the love between herself and her lover. The man realizes all too well that the oak, indeed, does represent that love, for the tree, seemingly impervious to all things from without, is hollow within. He "knocks" upon the tree producing the great hollow tone that is echoed by the sobs of the weeping girl. She has become instructed in the painful gulf between appearance and reality. The pomposity of the diction ("Then the patient oak, delivered of his pangs, / Put forth profuse his green banners of peace / And testified to her with innumerable tongues") and the ambiguity of the tone all but ruin Ransom's statement of their tortuous equilibrium. Cleanth Brooks sees the poem as a parody of "the grand manner,"¹²⁴ but parody or no, it cannot rival the majesty of "The Equilibrists."

"Good Ships" (SP, p. 25), a sonnet, successfully uses the conceit of man and woman as two "fleet ships encountering on the high seas" with "Beautiful timbers fit for storm and sport" who succumb to "one of Mrs. Grundy's Tuesday teas" where there is no talk of Michelangelo but well there should be, for the mood is very Prufrockian: a macaroon absorbs the attention of the woman, and they eventually degenerate into exchanging pleasantries, the "nautical technicalities." The promise of the fleet ships is converted to

¹²⁴"Doric Delicacy," p. 63.

"miserly merchant hulks." They submit to the doom of dissociation that traps all lovers.

In another sonnet, "Parting at Dawn" (SP, p. 24), lovers must awaken from their passion and take on a more ascetic and honorable guise:

Stoics are born on the cold glitter of light
And with the morning star lovers take flight.
Say then your parting; and most dry should you drain
Your lips of the wine, your eyes of the frantic rain
Till these be as the barren anchorite.

If, the narrator says in the sestet, you as lovers can survive your parting, if you, "dear Sir," can surmount your "wars and wounds," and you, "Madam," have "no Lethe" to flow "beneath your casement," then, just perhaps, "Philosophy was wrong, and you may meet." But there is no discernible positive thrust to the poem, and the narrator knows that philosophy is not wrong and that honor will always be a sword between them. The lack of a clearly defined tone, however, prevents the reader from deciding where the narrator's sympathies lie, initiating little sympathy for the lovers' plight.

"Parting, without a Sequel" (SP, p. 33), on the other hand, succeeds largely because Ransom returns to a female-dominated poem: the tension, the torture of equilibrium, is all here, as the woman of the poem lashes out indignantly at her love, receiving catharsis only by writing him a "venemous" letter ending the affair:

She has finished and sealed the letter
At last, which he so richly has deserved,
With characters venomous and hatefully curved,
And nothing could be better.

But even as she hands the letter to the messenger, she hopes he "Might somewhere lose and leave it," suggesting her ambivalence, her wavering between passion and honor. To reflect on her momentary anger and impetuous gesture, she goes to stand under her father's "vaunting oak" and begins to comprehend the full measure of her actions: she has perhaps consigned herself to the sterile world of Miriam Tazewell and Emily Hardcastle. Her petulance may irrevocably cancel any chance of reaching her full feminine potential. The final stanza advances the serpent motif of her "curved" and "venomous" characters of the opening lines, with the subtle suggestion that she has forever left her Eden:

Away went the messenger's bicycle
His serpent's track went up the hill forever,
And all the time she stood there hot as fever
And cold as any icicle.

Unlike the other innocents who vacillate blindly between chills and fever, she knows too well what the two extremes mean. She is perhaps Ransom's only woman to come to realize the consequence of her commitment to an ideal.

Edith, the lover of the sonnet sequence "Two Gentlemen in Bonds" (SP, pp. 95-106), is also more knowing than most of Ransom's women. She must select between two brothers, Paul and Abbott, who represent the Renaissance dichotomy of the man of action and the man of contemplation. Abbott is cerebral and meditative and retreats to a tower to spend the rest of his days; Paul is lusty and sensual and cunning enough to get his father's blessings for his marriage to

Edith. With the exception of two, the sonnets are largely failures. One that succeeds is the last where the father laments the malady of dissociation:

"Now I remember life: and out of me
Lawfully leaping, the twin seed of my time,
Brethren, whom no split fatherhood disjoins.
But in the woman-house how hatefully
They trod upon each other! till now I see
My manhood halved and squandered, one head, one heart,
Each partial son despising the other's part.
But so it is; so all their lives 'twill be."

In the other effective sonnet the only physical consummation in Ransom's poetry takes place. But, true to Ransom's irony, this is not the consummation of Paul's and Edith's marriage, but of insatiable Paul's consuming of a peach. The conceit, including the title ("Epithalamion of a Peach"), works well:

She was round, full, ripe, a maid immaculate,
Saving her cheeks. Now Paul the hot bridegroom
Acclaims his treasure, his hand has led her home;
Nor did he pull her gently through the gate
As would a lover more dainty and delicate:
The two-and-thirty cut-throats doing his will
Tore off her robes and stripped her down until
He looked upon her bare. Then turned and ate.

Shame on him, juice is drooling from his tongue
Where he has absorbed the admirable peach
Who nested high but not beyond his reach!
It was unloverly work, and brought the wry
To squeamish Abbott's face; not noted by
The oblivious gelding stamping in his dung.

Ransom is rarely capable of such mischief and virtuosity, and the reader delights in the fancy. Only in retrospect does the pervasive sadness of this poem become apparent. Ransom's hapless males move literally from the momentous dilemma "Do I dare disturb the universe?" to the mundane "Do I dare to eat a peach?" The father

realizes the tragic mood that undercuts the frivolity of these sonnets, and his final statement dismisses sons and dilemma alike: "O Lord defend my poor old fragile tissue! / But I'll not risk it. I will turn and sleep." Death may not solve problems, but it does end them.

In those poems where lovers marry, there is the same chasm between thought and feeling as there is between those unmarrieds who feel honor-bound and insular. Love cannot be sustained, Ransom reiterates, because man cannot be reconciled and made whole again. In "Two in August" (SP, pp. 18-19) the couple first recognize the depth of their dissociation on an August night:

Two that could not have lived their single lives
As can some husbands and wives
Did something strange: they tensed their vocal cords
And attacked each other with silences and words
Like catapulted stones and arrowed knives.

They are frightened by the intensity of their feelings:

. . . he of the wide brows that were used to laurel
And she, the famed for gentleness, must quarrel.
Furious both of them, and scared, and weeping.

She, in her fear of the unknown, hides in the darkness seeking to preserve her innocence:

She in terror fled from the marriage chamber
Circuiting the dark rooms like a string of amber
Round and round and back,
And would not light one lamp against the black. . . .

He, only too well-versed in the nature of dissociation, escapes barefoot into the night, but nature does not commune with him and his abstraction. His alienation is insurmountable:

In the long ditch of darkness the man walked
Under the hackberry trees where the birds talked
With words too sad and strange to syllable.

Similarly, the "Man without Sense of Direction" (SP, pp. 81-82), whom Robert Penn Warren calls the "most disordered of all the heroes and heroines"¹²⁵ in Ransom's poetry, finds little solace in his relationship with his wife. He "who cannot fathom nor perform his nature" is driven to action of any kind that will give credence to his existence. Perhaps a consuming passion for his love will cure his alienation.

Yet scarcely he issues from the warm chamber,
Flushed with her passion, when cold as dead
Once more he walks where waves past number
Of sorrow buffet his curse-hung head.

.....
And he writhes like an antique man of bronze
That is beaten by furies visible, . . .

Love, or at least passion, has failed him; he cannot achieve unity of being, yet he, like a man possessed, returns to her with renewed hope that physical union will initiate philosophical wholeness:

So he stands muttering; and rushes
Back to the tender thing in his charge
With clamoring tongue and taste of ashes
And a small passion to feign large.

But let his cold lips be her omen,
She shall not kiss that harried one
To peace, as men are served by women
Who comfort them in darkness and in sun.

The woman's mere presence torments the man psychologically and spiritually, and she becomes unwitting victim to his frenzied attempts at unity. She, too, cannot "fathom" her nature, but she

¹²⁵ Warren, "John Crowe Ransom: A Study in Irony," p. 37.

is not driven by abstraction and thus enjoys a certain protective naiveté. She functions, as most women do in the love poems, as dramatic foil to show the depth of the dissociation and the degree of pain that Ransom's tortured heroes suffer.

The wife Jane in "Morning" (SP, p. 74) also functions in this capacity. Jane becomes part of the symbolic scenery of the poem, for it is clearly the husband's, Ralph's, predicament. Ralph awakens one morning, or rather his body awakens before his mind is muddled with abstraction. He momentarily envisions a First Moment world and wants to join Jane in her elusive state of perfection:

Jane awoke Ralph so gently on one morning
That first, before the true householder Learning
Came back to tenant in the haunted head,
He lay upon his back and let his stare
Penetrate dazedly into the blue air
That swam all round his bed,
And in the blessed silence nothing was said.

Then his eyes travelled through the window
And lit, enchantedly, on such a meadow
Of wings and light and clover,
He would propose to Jane then to go walking
Through the green waves, and to be singing not talking;
Such imps were pranking over
Him helpless lying in bed beneath a cover.

But Ralph, because he is male, is jolted back from pure experience to the abstract world of "Learning:"

Suddenly he remembered about himself,
His manliness returned entire to Ralph;
The dutiful mills of the brain
Began to whirl with their smooth-grinding wheels
And the sly visitors wriggled off like eels;
He rose and was himself again.
Simply another morning, and simply Jane.

Romantic spontaneity yields to the "cold tyranny of reason,"¹²⁶ and Ralph leaves the world of clover and blue air--and of Jane. No scream issues forth as in the epiphany scene of "Visions by Sweet-water"; Ralph is resigned to, defeated by, his dissociation.

The role of the wife in "Conrad Sits in Twilight" (SP, p. 118), revised as "Master's in the Garden Again" (SP, pp. 120-21), changes considerably from that of other domestic poems. Here, the wife cajoles and nags Conrad to come in from the cold autumn air, to remember his neuralgia and asthma. In the revised version, Conrad grows irritated with her protestations and tells his "loony" that if she be lonely, to return to the house and await his return. She exits the stage. The long second and third sections of the poem are given over to Conrad's contemplation of transience and his futile but heroic gesture, or, as Ransom said of the poem, his "brood[ing] a while and finally in his solitary rage [making] his play against the Immanent Will."¹²⁷ In one of Ransom's most unashamedly lyrical passages, frail, aging Conrad sees his own mortality in the autumn scene around him:

Autumn days in our section
Are the most used-up thing on earth
(Or in the waters under the earth)
Having no more color nor predilection
Than a man's face as weathered as straw
By summer's flare and autumn's flaw,

¹²⁶Williams, p. 70

¹²⁷"On 'Master's in the Garden Again,'" in The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic, ed. Anthony Ostroff (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1964), p. 136.

Or cornstalks too wet for the fire,
Or rain of leaves that writhe in the mire.

The leaves are all dead. There is no defection.

He cannot rail against "the Power," so his one puny and defiant gesture is to "heave a hard blow," "a pantomime blow," against that force that renders him so insignificant. He does not feel vindicated; he has not annihilated despair, but it suffices: "Here is a man who has done what he can, / Now he will defer to the house and to her."

What happens, then, in this poem is that Conrad, as he ages, needs to be abstract, needs to order his experience to the extent that is humanly possible. The woman, whose concerns are ephemeral and mindless, interferes with Conrad's intellectualizing. Leonie Adams notes,

Woman is not here, as in other of [Ransom's] poems, the tenderly deluded, innocently wounded sensibility. As the underside of solicitude she embodies rather petty, greedily limited, practical reason. The action is to banish her temporarily so that a superior reason may find itself.¹²⁸

Conrad has aged past the yearning for his wife's sphere; he now merely wants to come to terms with his own. He can reconcile himself to nature, become master of his own garden, and let the insufficiency of his small gestures satisfy. That the poem was revised late in Ransom's poetic career is not surprising, for it bears the mark of a poet who has begun to reconcile himself to the irreconcilable.

¹²⁸"On John Crowe Ransom's 'Master's in the Garden Again,'" in The Contemporary Poet, p. 125.

There is a note of compromise in Conrad's encounter with the Almighty and a subtle hint of compromise in his relationship with his wife.

Ransom reflects,

Thinking of the rowdy persiflage of my conjugate lovers as a sporting and comic feature, I have the sense that their life together is good. I like to think of their marriage as still real, in the lawyer's sense of the word, meaning physical. Yet all will not be lost as they grow old. The diminishing desires of the flesh will be compensated by bonuses of extra companionship and affection. When they are not together, the garden and the house will be their respective spheres. But after the man's turn in the garden his appointment will be in the house.¹²⁹

Age has tempered Conrad's dilemma; he has moved past the torture of equilibrium to an easygoing, perhaps chiding, marriage devoid of the absolutes of honor and of passion.

But not all of Ransom's heroes, to quote Yeats, wither into the truth: the lure of passion and the stigma of the divided sensibility haunts most of them all of their lives. In "Winter Remembered" (SP, p. 37) the male narrator longs for his lost love; indeed, this is Ransom's most successful love poem (even though, ironically, no woman is present). This is his only poem that abandons itself to a genuine, unaffected expression of love: gone are the dainty archaisms, the obliquity of distancing irony, and the multiplicities of tone. Instead, Ransom creates a hero who has the characteristic introspectiveness of his other males, yet he differs from all that precede him. This narrator has known love and passion: his earlier ability to love has rounded off the edges; he has not

¹²⁹ "On 'Master's in the Garden Again,'" p. 138.

been totally cuckolded by his own intellect. The resulting poem is one of Ransom's few artistic masterpieces.

The poem's thesis rests on the conceit that warmth of body in no way effects warmth of spirit; a warm hearth in cold surroundings merely mocks his own coldness caused by his love's absence. The images are concrete and vibrant:

Two evils, monstrous either one apart,
Possessed me, and were long and loath at going:
A cry of Absence, Absence, in the heart,
And in the wood the furious winter blowing.

Think not, when fire was bright upon my bricks,
And past the tight boards hardly a wind could enter,
I glowed like them, the simple burning sticks,
Far from my cause, my proper heat and center.

She is his "proper heat and center," the passion of his life and his reason for being. Would he not be better off, he continues, if inward cold paralleled outward cold? Would it not be less painful to be benumbed, inside and out?

Better to walk forth in the frozen air
And wash my wound in the snows; that would be healing;
Because my heart would throb less painful there,
Being caked with cold, and past the smart of feeling.

And where I walked, the murderous winter blast
Would have this body bowed, these eyeballs streaming,
And though I think this heart's blood froze not fast
It ran too small to spare one drop for dreaming.

Typical of seventeenth-century paradox, the cold would initiate healing, exposure would lead to health. Parsons writes, "The emotionally irrelevant weather could yield some relief in a numbness that would lower human consciousness and thus reduce the

susceptibility to the pain of emotional deprivation."¹³⁰ The speaker does not want to annihilate the winter; quite the contrary, he wants to induce a winter of the heart that will subdue the cry of "Absence, Absence."

The final stanza, with its strangely juxtaposed metaphors, is supreme testimony to the depth of his love:

Dear love, these fingers that had known your touch
And tied our separate forces first together,
Were ten poor idiot fingers not worth much,
Ten frozen parsnips hanging in the weather.

The startling image of "frozen parsnips hanging in the weather" rivals any of the conceits of the seventeenth century,¹³¹ and, like metaphysical poetry, the poem calls for a fusion of mind and body, thought and feeling. The speaker triumphs over his ordeal (remember the complex chronology of the poem: winter remembered, past tense, a moment he has survived) and yet is still moved by the emotion of the moment. He has managed to hang on to both sense and sensibility. The deliberate absence of abstraction and the effective particularity of the details fuse philosophy and metaphor with more success than in any of Ransom's other love poems.

¹³⁰Parsons, John Crowe Ransom, p. 81.

¹³¹Sona Raiziss, in The Metaphysical Passion: Seven Modern American Poets and the Seventeenth-Century Tradition (Philadelphia: Univ. of Penn. Press, 1952), p. 217, sees Ransom's "frozen parsnips" as a derivative of lines from Donne's "The Comparison":

And like a bunch of ragged carrets stand
The short swolne fingers of thy gouty hand.
Then like the Chymicks masculine equall fire,
Which in the Lymbecks warme wombe dothe inspire
Into th' earths worthless durt a soule of gold,
Such cherishing heat her best lov'd part doth hold.

Ransom's most celebrated lover, however, occurs not in "Winter Remembered" but in the frequently anthologized "Prelude to an Evening" (SP, pp. 147-48; revision, pp. 149-50). Here the consummate intellectual, tired and beaten down, must return home and either mask himself as content and well-adjusted or else share his evil, his knowledge of dissociation, with his wife. His soliloquy pleads that he cannot make the transition from abstraction to domesticity:

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

And he realizes that, in her limited command of the analytical, his wife cannot fathom the depth of his despair; she can only suffer his "infection" blindly, vicariously:

The images of the invaded mind
 Being as monsters in the dreams
 Of your most brief enchanted headful,
 Suppose a miracle of confusion:

That dreamed and undreamt become each other
 And mix the night and day of your mind;
 And it does not matter your twice crying
 From mouth unbeautied against the pillow. . . .

He imagines how such knowledge will invade even her tender, feminine routine:

But now, by our perverse supposal,
 There is a drift of fog on your mornings;
 You in your peignoir, dainty at your orange-cup,
 Feel poisoning round the sunny room

Invisible evil, deprived, and bold.
 All day the clock will metronome
 Your gallant fear; the needles clicking,
 The heels detonating the stair's 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.

Here, with obvious debt to Stevens' "Sunday Morning,"¹³² Ransom creates a dignity for the woman who cannot comprehend the phantoms that haunt her husband's daily existence. Ransom in later years would refer to her as "a heroine almost after the pattern of some diminutive classical tragedy" (*SP*, p. 152). The husband finally realizes that she cannot fully participate in his despair:

You like a waning moon, and I accusing
 Our too banded Eumenides,
 You shall make Noes but wanderingly,
 Smoothing the heads of the hungry children.

She will make "Noes but wanderingly," oblivious to the full import of the "too banded Eumenides"; she will mix the "dreamed and undreamt," "the night and day," unaware of the subtle distinctions between good and evil, innocence and experience, appearance and reality. She will merely, absent-mindedly, smoothe the heads of the children: she cannot assuage his torture of equilibrium, and, the mood of the poem suggests, he will not ask her to do so. His is a passive heroism as he chooses to bear, alone, the brunt of the alienation and evil that pervades his world.

Lamentably, Ransom, in his last years, could not leave this almost flawless poem alone. His revisions of "Prelude," like those

¹³²In a speech at Vanderbilt University in 1961, Ransom admired "Sunday Morning" as "one of the most elegant poems in the language. Easily the most elegant poem--unless it'd be another by Stevens--to appear in America." In Buffington, p. 115.

of his other poems, all but destroyed the poetic vitality of the piece. After his death, Allen Tate confessed, "Now we may ignore, as we see fit, the destructive revisions which this great elegiac poet inflicted upon many of his finest poems."¹³³ William Pratt agrees:

A poem is never finished--it is abandoned, said Paul Valery. John Crowe Ransom was one of the least abandoning of modern poets, and we may as well admit that he sometimes husbanded his creations too long for their own good. These poems should have been abandoned at an early age, instead of being kept around to accumulate the strained diction and even downright doggerel of the final versions printed in Selected Poems, 1969.¹³⁴

Robert Buffington believes Ransom reached the "manic level"¹³⁵ with his revision of "Prelude" in 1963.

The impetus behind Ransom's revision of his poem seems to have been a rather insignificant 1962 article in the Explicator by Virginia Peck, who chides Ransom's narrator for not wanting to come home to sit with "sticky children climbing over him coaxing him to read them stories from their picture-books."¹³⁶ Ransom decided to "patch up the poem and save it; by saving the woman and the children from their distress" (SP, p. 152), so he attempted a "conversion" of his hero.

¹³³"Reflections on the Death of John Crowe Ransom," Sewanee Review, LXXXII (October, 1974), 546.

¹³⁴"Metamorphosis of a Poem," Mississippi Quarterly, XXX (Winter 1976/1977), 29.

¹³⁵"Overlooking the Last Infirmity," Mississippi Quarterly, XXX (Winter 1976/1977), 6.

¹³⁶"Ransom's 'Prelude to an Evening,'" Explicator, XX (January, 1962), Item 41.

He bases that conversion, he writes in a long explanation of his revision, on the writings of Charles Coffin who, in his studies of the theology of Paradise Lost, systematized Milton's treatment of Adam and Eve. Ransom takes that Adam and Eve as his prototype for the hero and heroine of "Prelude": Adam is created "half-free," encumbered by a body he cannot understand; Eve is created less intellectual than Adam--she steals away when Adam holds lengthy conversations with Raphael. Eve is

freer than Adam in some respects . . . she is more natural, confirmed in her direction already, therefore more spontaneous in her responses; she is less reflective. Her deficiency is in the freedom of those adventurous behaviors which go with rational discourse and the metaphysical imagination. (SP, p. 156)

Eve compensates for her limited rationality by bearing children which evoke her maternal instincts and her "natural goodness." The children now occupy her mind and her deepest affection. Can Adam, knowing this, invoke in her his "vision of evil"? No, the revised poem says in the five added stanzas; he will make no such demands; he will learn to appreciate her more:

I would have us magnificent at my coming,
Two souls tight-clasped, in a swamp of horrors,
But you shall be handsome and brave at fearing.
Now my step quickens--and meets a huge No!

Whose No was it, like the hoarse policeman's,
Clopping on stage in the Name of the Law?
That was me, forbidding tricks at homecoming
Just as I'm nearing the white threshold.

.
I am here; and to balk my ruffian I bite
The tongue rehearsing all that treason;
Then stride in my wounds to the sovereign flare
Of the room where you shine on the good children.

The subtle movement of the poem is completely halted by the vaudeville atmosphere of the "clopping" of the "hoarse policeman" and by the triteness of the final stanza. Further injury is thrust on the poem in his revision of the lyrical "peignoir" section of the earlier work:

And now? To confirm our strange supposal,
Your monsters wait upon sunniest mornings;
You in your peignoir put marvels of oranges
Gold on the platter for cheeky children

But freeze at the turbulence under the floor
Where unclean spirits yawn and thrash;
The day-long clock will strike your fears;
The heels detonating the stair's cavern.

Freshening the water in the blue bowls
For the buckberries with not all your love
You listen for another wind to waken
The sibilant warning of sentinel pines.

There is little salvageable from the original piece. In Ransom's attempt to make the world a better place for its Eves, to preserve their delicate First Moment perfection, he does just the opposite: he strips them of the nobility their innocent suffering deserves. In his effort to appease the modern woman, he cancels her out entirely, subjecting her to the maudlin, giving her no credit to survive the agony of her husband's Furies. This is the most regrettable of Ransom's revisions, done in the name of fairness to the feminine image, but virtually undermining that image by killing it with kindness.

Ransom's timorous attitude in "Prelude" infects many of his poems; only a handful of his total creative output rank as superior work. Perhaps his Southern courtliness and fear of sentimentality

impede his poems with, in Rubin's words, "too much linguistic caution and a too-inhibiting self-consciousness."¹³⁷ In Ransom's attempt to avoid an excess of emotionalism, he frequently shows no emotion at all. The ultimate irony of his poetry may be that in a man who abhors the tyranny of abstraction, his poems are frequently emasculated by the abstract, a deliberate studied pose stiffened by irony but rarely softened by life. Thornton Parsons believes we must meet Ransom's poetry on its terms:

A proper appreciation of Ransom's poetry calls for a modest cultivation of literary asceticism. The reader must accustom himself to the idea that he will encounter no portrayal of strong personalities, no mighty emotional drama, and (except very faintly and indirectly) little sense of a poet's dreadful self-discovery. He must tune himself to register elusive subtleties of perception and elegance of rhyme, wit, and rhetoric. He must be somewhat willing to forgive Ransom for the acute esthetic self-consciousness that made him habitually subordinate passion to tonal control. He must be indulgent of Ransom's addictions to pale or paralyzing irony and to refined whimsicality. In brief, he should accept the limitations inherent in a¹³⁸ civilized poetry and try to savor the fragile excellences.

And there are many "fragile excellences" to savor. Ransom's poetry takes us, in Tate's expression, to the "shadowy back room of the human condition"¹³⁹ where the irreconcilable incongruities of human experience lurk. Ransom's essay "The Third Moment" calls for no more than an integrated realm where agrarians and scientists and

¹³⁷ Wary Fugitives, p. 25.

¹³⁸ Parsons, John Crowe Ransom, p. 129.

¹³⁹ "Gentleman in a Dustcoat: Honors Day Address at Kenyon College in Celebration of John Crowe Ransom's Eightieth Birthday, April 30, 1968," Sewanee Review, LXXVI (Summer, 1968), 376.

Janets and Captain Carpenters can live the full life, where blue girls can twirl their skirts and Miriam Tazewells tend their gardens ad infinitum. But Ransom, supreme ironist that he is, knows that "our too banded Eumenides" hover ominously at every turn. Innocence will be defeated, old maids will become embittered, men and women will "orbit" tortured and dissociated. But they, like Faulkner's Dilsey, endure. They lie "perilous and beautiful," ludicrous and sublime, if not immune to the expanse of the divided sensibility, at least impervious to its void.

LIST OF REFERENCES

LIST OF REFERENCES

Primary

- Ransom, John Crowe. "Art and the Human Economy." Kenyon Review, VII (Autumn, 1945), 683-88. Reprinted in Beating the Bushes. New York: New Directions, 1972, pp. 128-35.
- . "Criticism as Pure Speculation." In The Intent of the Critic. Edited by Donald A. Stauffer. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941, pp. 91-124. Reprinted in Essays in Modern Criticism. Edited by Ray Benedict West. New York: Rinehart and Company, 1952, pp. 228-45. Reprinted in Literary Opinion in America. Edited by Morton Dauwen Zabel. Revised Edition. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951, pp. 639-54.
- . God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1930. Reprinted by Archon Books, Hamden, Connecticut, 1965.
- . "Janet Waking." The Fugitive, IV (September, 1925), 86.
- . John Crowe Ransom Reads His Works. Carillon Records, YP 306, 1961.
- . Letter to Allen Tate. 5 September 1926. Firestone Library, Princeton University. Quoted in Louise Cowan. The Fugitive Group: A Literary History. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959. Quoted in Thomas Daniel Young. Gentleman in a Dustcoat: A Biography of John Crowe Ransom. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976, pp. 175-77.
- . Letter to Allen Tate. March, 1927. Firestone Library, Princeton University. Quoted in Louise Cowan. The Fugitive Group: A Literary History. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959, p. 214.
- . The New Criticism. Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1941.
- . "On 'Master's in the Garden Again.'" In The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic. Edited by Anthony Ostroff. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1964, pp. 134-40.
- . Poems About God. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1919.

- . Selected Poems. Third Edition, Revised and Enlarged.
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969.
- . Two Gentlemen in Bonds. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927.
- . The World's Body. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons,
1938. Reprinted by Louisiana State University Press, Baton
Rouge, 1968.

Secondary

- Adams, Leonie. "On John Crowe Ransom's 'Master's in the Garden Again.'" In The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic. Edited by Anthony Ostroff. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1964, pp. 121-27.
- Beatty, Richmond Croom. "John Crowe Ransom as Poet." Sewanee Review, LII (Summer, 1944), 344-66.
- Bergonzi, Bernard. "A Poem About the History of Love: 'The Equilibrists' by John Crowe Ransom." Critical Quarterly, IV (Summer, 1962), 127-37.
- Bradbury, John M. "Ransom as Poet." Accent, XI (Winter, 1951), 45-57.
- Bradford, M. E. "A Modern Elegy: Ransom's 'Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter.'" Mississippi Quarterly, XXI (Winter, 1967/1968), 43-47.
- Brooks, Cleanth. "The Doric Delicacy." Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), 402-15. Reprinted in John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography. Edited by Thomas Daniel Young. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968, pp. 58-68.
- . "The Modern Southern Poet and Tradition." Virginia Quarterly Review, XX (April, 1935), 305-20.
- Buffington, Robert. The Equilibrist: A Study of John Crowe Ransom's Poems, 1916-1963. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967.
- . "Overlooking the Last Infirmary." Mississippi Quarterly, XXX (Winter, 1976/1977), 5-27.
- Carne-Ross, D. C. "Ransom's 'Judith of Bethulia.'" Nine, II (Spring, 1949), 91-95.

- Cowan, Louise. The Fugitive Group: A Literary History. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959.
- Dew, Robb Forman. "Summer's End." Mississippi Quarterly, XXX (Winter, 1976/1977), 137-53.
- England, Kenneth. "They Came Home Again: Fugitives Return." Georgia Review, XIV (Spring, 1960), 80-89.
- Fiedler, Leslie. "A Kind of Solution: The Situation of Poetry Now." Kenyon Review, XXVI (Winter, 1964), 54-79.
- Handy, William J. Kant and the Southern New Critics. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963.
- Hough, Graham. "John Crowe Ransom: The Poet and the Critic." Southern Review, I, New Series (January, 1965), 1-21. Reprinted in John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography. Edited by Thomas Daniel Young. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968, pp. 186-205.
- Janet, Sister Mary. "Poetry as Knowledge in the New Criticism." Western Humanities Review, XVI (Summer, 1962), 199-210.
- Jarrell, Randall. "John Ransom's Poetry." Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), 378-90. Reprinted in Poetry and the Age. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953, pp. 96-111; New York: Vintage, 1955, pp. 87-100.
- Jarvis, F. P. "F. H. Bradley's Appearance and Reality and the Critical Theory of John Crowe Ransom." Papers on English Language and Literature, I (Spring, 1965), 187-91. Reprinted in John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography. Edited by Thomas Daniel Young. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968, pp. 206-209.
- Kazin, Alfred. "Criticism at the Poles." In On Native Grounds. New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1942, pp. 400-52. Also printed in New Republic, CVII (19 October 1942), 492-99.
- Knight, Karl Frederick. The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom: A Study of Diction, Metaphor, and Symbol. London: Mouton and Company, 1964.
- Koch, Vivienne. "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom." Sewanee Review, LXVIII (Spring, 1950), 227-61. Reprinted in Modern American Poetry. Edited by B. Rajan. New York: Roy Publishers, 1952, pp. 33-65. Reprinted in John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography. Edited by Thomas Daniel Young. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968, pp. 115-42.

- Levitt, Paul. "An Analogue for Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily.'" Papers on Language and Literature, IX (1973), 91-94.
- Lowell, Robert. With Denis Donoghue, Richard Ellmann, Roy Fuller. "John Crowe Ransom: Four Tributes." The New Review, I (August, 1974), 3-8.
- Ludwig, Richard M., editor. Bibliography Supplement, Literary History of the United States. New York: Macmillan Company, 1959, pp. 225-27.
- Magner, James Edmund. John Crowe Ransom: Critical Principles and Preoccupations. The Hague: Mouton and Company, 1971.
- Marston, Jane. "Persona and Perspective in John Crowe Ransom's Poetry." Mississippi Quarterly, XXX (Winter, 1976/1977), 59-70.
- Nemerov, Howard. "Summer's Flare and Winter's Flaw." Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), 416-25.
- O'Connor, William Van. "The World as Body." Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), 435-41.
- Parsons, Thornton H. John Crowe Ransom. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969.
- ". "Ransom the Revisionist." The Southern Review, II, New Series (Spring, 1966), 453-63.
- Peck, Virginia L. "Ransom's 'Prelude to an Evening.'" Explicator, XX (January, 1962), Item 41.
- Peters, Mildred Brooks. "Bibliography." In John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography. Edited by Thomas Daniel Young. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968, pp. 221-81.
- Pratt, William. The Fugitive Poets: Modern Southern Poetry in Perspective. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1965.
- ". "Metamorphosis of a Poem." Mississippi Quarterly, XXX (Winter, 1976/1977), 29-58.
- Raiziss, Sona. The Metaphysical Passion: Seven Modern American Poets and the Seventeenth-Century Tradition. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1952, pp. 184-211.
- Rubin, Louis D., Jr. "The Poetry of Agrarianism." In The Faraway Country: Writers of the Modern South. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963, pp. 155-84.

- . The Wary Fugitives: Four Poets and the South. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978.
- Stallman, Robert Wooster. "John Crowe Ransom: A Checklist." Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), 442-76.
- Stauffer, Donald A. "Portrait of the Critic-Poet as Equilibrist." Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), 426-34. Reprinted in John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography. Edited by Thomas Daniel Young. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968, pp. 89-95.
- Stevens, Wallace. "John Crowe Ransom: Tennessean." Sewanee Review, LVI (Summer, 1948), 367-69.
- Stewart, John Lincoln. The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965.
- . John Crowe Ransom. University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, Number 18. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962.
- Tate, Allen. "Gentleman in a Dustcoat: Honors Day Address at Kenyon College in Celebration of John Crowe Ransom's Eightieth Birthday, April 30, 1968." Sewanee Review, LXXVI (Summer, 1968), 375-82.
- . "Reflections on the Death of John Crowe Ransom." Sewanee Review, LXXXII (October, 1974), 545-51.
- Warren, Robert Penn. "John Crowe Ransom: A Study in Irony." Virginia Quarterly Review, XI (January, 1935), 93-112. Reprinted in John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography. Edited by Thomas Daniel Young. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968, pp. 24-40.
- . "Notes on the Poetry of John Crowe Ransom at His Eightieth Birthday." Kenyon Review, XXX (Spring, 1968), 319-49.
- . "Pure and Impure Poetry." Kenyon Review, V (Spring, 1943), 228-54.
- Wasserman, G. R. "The Irony of John Crowe Ransom." University of Kansas City Review, XXIII (Winter, 1956), 151-60. Reprinted in John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography. Edited by Thomas Daniel Young. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968, pp. 143-55.
- Williams, Miller. The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1972.

- Winters, Yvor. "John Crowe Ransom; or, Thunder Without God." In In Defense of Reason. New York: Swallow Press and William Morrow and Company, 1947, pp. 502-55.
- Woodbery, W. Potter. "The Sword Between Them: Love and Death in Ransom's 'The Equilibrists.'" Southern Literary Journal, IX (Spring, 1977), 51-65.
- Yeats, William Butler. The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats. New York: Macmillan, 1956.
- Young, Thomas Daniel. Gentleman in a Dustcoat: A Biography of John Crowe Ransom. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976.
- , "John Crowe Ransom: A Checklist, 1967-1976." Mississippi Quarterly, XXX (Winter, 1976/1977), 155-68.
- , editor. John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968.
- , "A Little Divergence: The Critical Theories of John Crowe Ransom and Cleanth Brooks." In The Possibilities of Order: Cleanth Brooks and His Work. Edited by Louis P. Simpson. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976, pp. 168-95.

VITA

Sandra Crawford Nesbitt was born in Memphis, Tennessee, on June 30, 1944, and attended schools in Memphis, Jackson, and Nashville, graduating from Glenclyff High School in Nashville in 1962. That year she entered Vanderbilt University and, in 1966, received a Bachelor of Arts degree.

She accepted a position as a teacher in the Memphis City Schools and taught English there for two years, followed by a year of teaching in Houston, Texas. She currently teaches in the Knox County Schools.

Ms. Nesbitt is married to Paul Nesbitt and has two children, Laurel and John. She is a member of the Modern Language Association, the South Atlantic Modern Language Association, and the National Council of Teachers of English.