

POETIC SITUATION IN THE POETRY OF  
JOHN CROWE RANSOM

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## NOTE ON STYLE

Throughout this thesis, I have followed the stylistic conventions set down by the MLA Style Sheet (rev. ed.) with the necessary emendations to accord with British methods of punctuation. I have also derived much guidance from George Watson's The Literary Thesis: A Guide to Research (London: Longman, 1970).

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## INTRODUCTION

### RANSOM AS POET, TEACHER AND CRITIC

John Crowe Ransom died in July, 1974, at the age of eighty-seven. A tribute paid to him ten years earlier, "Gentleman, Teacher, Poet, Editor, Founder of The Kenyon Review",<sup>1</sup> tells of the range of activities that assures him a place in literary history (though one would add that he was also a critic of considerable stature) and of the esteem in which he is held.

Two generations of distinguished novelists, poets and critics were once taught by Ransom: Allen Tate (who has recently boasted of being his oldest living student),<sup>2</sup> Robert Penn Warren, Donald Davidson, Cleanth Brooks, Randall Jarrell, Andrew Lytle, Peter Taylor, Robert Lowell, Robie Macauley. Lowell says of him; "He was known throughout the English departments of America; in Southern universities he is a cult, everyone has studied under him or under someone who has."<sup>3</sup>

The deference with which such men as Tate, Warren and Brooks speak of Ransom, men who have been more prolific, even more highly regarded as critics than Ransom has been, suggests both the direction given them by Ransom in their early days as writers and critics, and also their awareness of Ransom's central position in American literature and literary criticism. Furthermore, that many of these men, once



students, became close friends of Ransom's, tells us of something beyond that deference.

Ransom had been an instructor at Vanderbilt University for about a year when one of his students, Donald Davidson, invited him to join the circle of discussion that would later turn into the Fugitive Group. Ransom soon became the leader of discussion, "charming, poised, sure of himself, scrupulously courteous".<sup>4</sup> Tate once said of him that he "has always treated his younger friends as if we were his equals; we had to accept equality even though we knew we did not deserve it."<sup>5</sup> And Cleanth Brooks (one of the last to join the Fugitive Group), who found in Ransom the embodiment of the "literary life", without the usual "literary airs and posturing", says that Ransom "unwittingly changed the course of my college career, and with it the direction of my later life".<sup>6</sup>

When Ransom joined the staff of Kenyon College in 1937, his influence continued. Howard Nemerov, whose poetry was first published in the Kenyon Review (founded by Ransom in 1939 and edited by him until 1959), has spoken of his gratitude to Ransom for the "detailed critical attention" given even work rejected by him, and of the special effort a contributor to the Kenyon Review would make, because of "the thought that what he wrote must first be read by one for whom he felt so much affection and so much respect".<sup>7</sup> Robert Lowell, who, as a student at Kenyon, was even closer to Ransom, writes:

We used to endlessly memorize and repeat and mimic Ransom sentences. We learned something from that. Somehow we left him with something inside us moving toward articulation, logic, directness and complexity--one's intuitions were more adroit and tougher, after one had contemplated the stamina and wit that his writings had required of him.<sup>8</sup>

Ransom is not remembered only as a literary figure. He contributed the essays, "Statement of Principles" and "Reconstructed but Unregenerate", to an Agrarian symposium, I'll Take My Stand (1930),<sup>9</sup> with which T.S. Eliot, referring particularly to Ransom and Tate, stated his basic agreement.<sup>10</sup> I'll Take My Stand was a statement made by the Nashville Group (Davidson, Ransom, Tate, Warren, James Gould Fletcher, Stark Young and others) offering Southern Agrarianism as a way of life that would avoid American industrialism and "industrial disorder".<sup>11</sup> And in God Without Thunder,<sup>12</sup> published the same year, Ransom gave an ethical and metaphysical basis to his aesthetics.

Within a few years, Ransom had become recognized as one of America's leading twentieth-century critics and literary theorists, a position which was established through the two volumes of essays, The World's Body (1938)<sup>13</sup> and The New Criticism (1941),<sup>14</sup> together with the numerous articles published in such journals as Yale Review, American Review, Virginia Quarterly Review, New Republic, Southern Review, Sewanee Review and, of course, Kenyon Review. So secure a reputation did Ransom achieve for himself that, as one bibliographer points out, "almost every work published since 1935 dealing in any way with literary criticism contains reference to Ransom".<sup>15</sup>

Ransom's growing concern with literary theory involved an almost complete withdrawal from poetic activity. After 1930, when God Without Thunder was published, Ransom was to submit only four new poems for publication.<sup>16</sup> He once explained this virtual retirement: "I never tried to write and found I couldn't. I just got involved in some of these theoretical questions--philosophical questions--and they just engage my whole mind."<sup>17</sup>

It was in 1916, when Ransom was twenty-eight, that he showed his first poem, "Sunset", to Donald Davidson. After writing three

or four poems that year, Ransom "was . . . duly surprised to notice that each of them made considerable use of the term God".<sup>18</sup> Ransom picked up the term--"the most poetic of all terms possible"<sup>19</sup>--and fashioned more poems accordingly; he "simply likened [himself] to a diligent apprentice and went to work to treat rather systematically a number of the occasions on which the term was in use with common American men".<sup>20</sup>

Ransom sent the thirty-three poems to Christopher Morley, who ran a column in the Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger, and who, through his literary club at Oxford, called The Midwives, had given Ransom his first contact with nineteenth-century and contemporary English literature. (Ransom, a Rhodes Scholar, studied Literary Humanities at Oxford from 1910 to 1913.) Morley asked the advice of Robert Frost, who recommended the poems to the publisher, Henry Holt. Frost has since said, "John has repudiated those first poems, I believe; he doesn't think so much of them. . . . But he had the art, and he had the tune."<sup>21</sup>

That Ransom had always been a severe self-critic is demonstrated by his careful paring of his corpus of poetry and by his revisions--some extensive, some minute--as well as by his virtual exclusion, in his selected works, of Poems About God. Despite his promise "never to republish any of its contents, by reason of the general poverty of its style, and its blatant and inconsistent theologizing",<sup>22</sup> two of these early poems are reprinted, for the first time since 1919, in the final edition of Selected Poems.<sup>23</sup> One, "Overtures", is reproduced in its original version alongside an extensive revision with a new title, "Two Gentlemen Scholars"; the other, "The Rose", which first appeared under the title "Roses", stands on its own, and has relatively minor revisions. The choice

was a happy one; it would have been even happier, perhaps, had "Overtures" not appeared simply as a comparative study, for both poems exhibit characteristics of Ransom's mature art to a greater extent than do the other early poems.

A general feature of Poems About God which is characteristic of Ransom's later verse is the tendency to complicate lyric expression by incorporating narrative and dramatic threads. Louise Cowan writes: "His preference at the time for Shakespeare and Browning tied in with his conviction that the poet should deal with experience dramatically rather than discursively."<sup>24</sup> Ransom had left Oxford with what he has called a "fury against abstractions",<sup>25</sup> a concern with the specific, concrete details of actual human situations rather than with abstract generalizations. This preference seemed to require, for Ransom, the use of two voices, the narrative and the reflexive. Yet it would be four years before he learnt to control these two voices, in their shifting and blending. He came to adopt new and more ambitious techniques, and he also became more fluent with ones already tried. The result was a masterly handling of complex and contradictory human impulses and a firm control of poetic stance. The Ransomic speaker of the mature poems tends to view both himself and the presented situation ironically, making apparent his hesitancy in forming judgements and developing more complexly his dualistic attitude.

If critics are agreed on the presence, in Poems About God, of a number of Ransom's later themes and concerns, they disagree on the relationships between poet and speaker, and between speaker and subject matter. While one says that Ransom managed to "escape from the subjective and innocent exploitation of his own personality. There is not a trace of sentimentality in the book",<sup>26</sup> another finds that, in most of the poems, Ransom's "rustic observations . . . savored of a naïve identification with his materials",<sup>27</sup> or yet another that some poems are

"more-than-embarrassing examples of the direct treatment of sentimental subjects".<sup>28</sup> The clearest and most adequate statement comes from Robert Penn Warren: "What a farm boy might say is not what we will permit the twenty-eight-year-old scholar to say, and we don't quite know who is talking. To state matters another way, the trouble is that the poems have no style, no 'voice.'"<sup>29</sup>

By the time Ransom wrote the introduction to Poems About God in May, 1918, all the poems had been completed. Within four years of that date, he had written poems which are considered among his best. During this time he had spent four months, towards the close of the First World War, in France as an artillery officer; he had also reestablished contact with his old Nashville friends, who, with additional members, came to formalize their fortnightly meetings and started the magazine, The Fugitive. Discussion soon moved from general philosophical questions towards specifically literary ones, and with the inclusion of Allen Tate the direction of the group began to be more clearly defined. The Fugitive obviously gave Ransom the impulse and confidence he needed: it was during the period in which the magazine flourished, 1922-1925, that he wrote most of his poems.

Yet, while recognizing these four years as a period of maturation, one must also be aware of the falsity of making a sharp separation between the early and the mature Ransom. After rereading Ransom's first volume, Randall Jarrell says:

One realizes, "Why, it wasn't a mutation--this is Ransom after all"; one has not only seen some of the cruder attitudes, afterwards refined or contradicted, that underlie his later poems, one has wound up among the later poems.<sup>30</sup>

One might add that reading Selected Poems one occasionally winds up



among the early poems.

Of the poets who contributed to The Fugitive over the four years of its existence and who were to continue to write poetry, only Ransom was in his mature period. The others were to find their distinctive voices only as they broke away from the strong influence Ransom asserted. Indeed, so alike was their poetry during this period that some critics apparently considered Ransom the sole author of the first two issues of the magazine, the poems being presented pseudonymously. This gives credence to Jarrell's feeling about Ransom's development: critics recognized, in The Fugitive, something of Poems About God. Yet, given that there were over forty contributions and nine contributors to these first issues, it was an astonishing, and a telling, supposition to make.

The foreword to the first issue of The Fugitive stated:

Official exception having been taken by the sovereign people to the mint julep, a literary phase known rather euphemistically as Southern Literature has expired, like any other stream whose source has stopped up. . . . The Fugitive flees from nothing faster than from the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South.<sup>31</sup>

Initially, common ground was provided by the Fugitives' distaste for the nostalgia and orotundity of Southern verse. Averse, also, to the new industrialism of the North, they drew upon a common heritage-- "the instinctive connection of the Southern imagination with the older wells of medieval and Elizabethan poetry"<sup>32</sup>--which provided them with a code of manners and a sense of ritual, a penchant for an archaic flavour and an air of formality, and a story-telling tradition.

Eventually, the members of the group went their separate ways. Allen Tate was to embrace modernist concerns and techniques which always remained alien to Ransom even as he tried to absorb them in his

later work. Donald Davidson was to revert to a romanticism which lacked the ironic vision that infused the poetry of both Tate and Ransom. Robert Penn Warren, at first heavily influenced by Ransom's dualism, as well as by Eliot and Tate, came to find his own voice as he shed the Ransomic position of ironic observation and adopted a search for patterns of living in a pragmatic present.<sup>33</sup> Yet these three men, with Ransom, for all their differences in aesthetics and in practice, were to account for a significant part in what is generally termed the Southern Literary Renaissance as well as, with the addition of Cleanth Brooks, to be largely responsible for the New Criticism.

In 1924, twenty of Ransom's poems were selected and introduced by Robert Graves for a British publication, Grace After Meat.<sup>34</sup> That year saw the appearance in America of Chills and Fever,<sup>35</sup> which was followed, three years later, by Two Gentlemen in Bonds.<sup>36</sup> This volume marks the virtual end of Ransom's poetic career; he wrote very few poems after that, occupying himself mainly with revising poems already written, in addition, of course to his many other activities. Of the poems published in his second and third volumes--there are one hundred and eight--fewer than half are reprinted in the final edition of his work. He preferred not to have a collected works, with the explanation that "Everyone has bad days."<sup>37</sup>

Ransom's first Selected Poems<sup>38</sup> was published in America in 1945, and in Britain in 1947,<sup>39</sup> followed by Poems and Essays<sup>40</sup> in 1955 and two revised and enlarged editions of Selected Poems in 1963<sup>41</sup> and 1969, the last of which was reprinted in England in 1970.<sup>42</sup> Some critics have been unhappy with the severity of the various selections; many fine Fugitive poems, they feel, have been excluded. But it is the latest edition that poses the greatest problems, since it lays claim to being, finally, the definitive text. Many will regret not only the

exclusions but also a number of the revisions. The lover of Ransom's poetry, experiencing a sense of loss in the later versions of some of his poems, might be justified in choosing for himself the favoured text. Of all Ransom's revisions, perhaps the saddest are the 1969 versions of "Of Margaret" and "Here Lies a Lady". As Randall Jarrell asked, before the revision of this poem, "Who would want to imagine anything different in 'Here Lies a Lady'?"<sup>43</sup>

In answer to a question about his small body of poetry, Ransom said, "My talent was a modest one, and I did the best I could. . . . I don't like to be held to any concept of magnitude or dimension. And every poet is a law to himself in those matters."<sup>44</sup> Ransom's humility about his own verse has not deterred critics, and surely will not deter them, from praising him as one of the truly important poets of the twentieth century. Perhaps, just as Ford Madox Ford is a "writer's writer", so may Ransom be called a poet's poet. Delmore Schwartz has said of his poems that "they have been read again and again by other poets and--purest of all laurels--they have been read by those who are beginning to write poetry, those who want to write poetry, and those who are trying to learn how to write poetry."<sup>45</sup> Robert Frost once called Ransom his "favorite among living American poets".<sup>46</sup> And Jarrell has said, with characteristic insight:

His poems profess their limitations so candidly, almost as a principle of style, that it is hardly necessary to say that they are not poems of the largest scope or of the greatest intensity. But it is only fair to say that Ransom is one of the best, most original, and most sympathetic poets alive.<sup>47</sup>

It is surprising, given Ransom's generally agreed status as a poet, that there have been so few book-length studies of his poetry. In their prefatory comments on Ransom in the 1967 edition of



The American Tradition in Literature<sup>48</sup>--a standard anthology of American literature--the editors were unable to cite any book-length studies of his work. Since that time, three books on Ransom's poetry have appeared: Thornton Parsons's John Crowe Ransom,<sup>49</sup> Robert Buffington's The Equilibrist and Miller Williams's The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom.<sup>50</sup> Each of these provides an introductory survey of Ransom's work, identifying various features of his poetry, and giving analyses of some of his poems.

Thanks to the work they have done, it is now possible to move beyond a purely introductory approach; to provide a more carefully focussed examination of his art. Ransom's attempt to fuse lyric and narrative impulses led to his attaching special weight to the rôle of the speaker. The examination in this thesis of his manner of setting up, controlling and manipulating the relationships between poet, speaker, presented world and reader is designed to lay bare Ransom's distinctive mode. I have grouped these relationships under a single concept which is called here "poetic situation" and which is defined and given a preliminary and general analysis in the following chapter.

## NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup>John Crowe Ransom: Gentleman, Teacher, Poet, Editor, Founder of The Kenyon Review--A Tribute from the Community of Letters, ed. D. David Long and Michael R. Burr, A Supplement to The Kenyon Collegian, Vol. LXXXX, No. 7, Gambier, Ohio, 1964.

<sup>2</sup>Mentioned by Robert Lowell, "John Crowe Ransom 1888-1974: Four Tributes", New Review, 1, No. 5 (1974), 4.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Louise Cowan, The Fugitive Group: A Literary History (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1959), p. 42. I am indebted to this definitive history of the Fugitive Group for much of the information in this introduction, as well as to John M. Bradbury, The Fugitives: A Critical Account (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1958) and to John L. Stewart, The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1965). For a fascinating biographical sketch of the period 1912-1914, during which time Ransom decided to make teaching English literature his career, see Thomas Daniel Young, "A Slow Fire", Sewanee Review, LXXXI (1973), 667-90.

<sup>5</sup>"Postscript by the Guest Editor", in T.S. Eliot: The Man and His Work, ed. Allen Tate (1966; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 388.

<sup>6</sup>Untitled comments in Long and Burr, p. 27.

<sup>7</sup>Untitled comments in Long and Burr, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup>"John Ransom's Conversation", Sewanee Review, LVI (1948), 375.

<sup>9</sup>I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition, by Twelve Southerners (New York: Harper, 1930). Ransom's essays appear on pp. ix-xxi and pp. 1-27.

<sup>10</sup>After Strange Gods. Mentioned by George Watson, The Literary Critics: A Study of English Descriptive Criticism (1962; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 194.

<sup>11</sup>Donald Davidson, "I'll Take My Stand: A History", American Review, V (1935), 307.

<sup>12</sup>God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy (1930; rpt. London: Gerald Howe, 1931).

<sup>13</sup>The World's Body. (1938; rpt. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1968).

<sup>14</sup>The New Criticism (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1941).

<sup>15</sup>Mildred Brooks Peters, "Bibliography", in John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography, ed. Thomas Daniel Young (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1968), p. 224. For the bibliographical details above and for most of those that follow, I am indebted to this excellent and comprehensive bibliography.

<sup>16</sup>The poems are: "Prelude to an Evening", first printed in American Review, III (1934), 262-63; "Painted Head", first printed New Republic, 26 Dec. 1934, p. 185; "Autumn Grief of Margaret", first printed in Saturday Review of Literature, 29 Sept. 1934, p. 137; and "Address to the Scholars of New England", first printed in Kenyon Review, I (1939), 406-408. One might also consider as new poems the revisions of "Overtures", originally in Poems About God (New York: Henry Holt, 1919), pp. 35-36, now titled "Two Gentlemen Scholars", and "Conrad at Twilight", originally in The Fugitive, II, No. 5 (1923), 27, now titled "Master's in the Garden Again". It is necessary to say at this point that, unless specified otherwise, all poems referred to appear in the final edition of Ransom's work, Selected Poems, 3rd ed., rev. and enlarged (New York: Knopf, 1969).

<sup>17</sup>Cited by Robert Buffington, The Equilibrist: A Study of John Crowe Ransom's Poems, 1916-1963 (Nashville: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 1967), p. 15; from Fugitives' Reunion: Conversations at Vanderbilt, May 3-5, 1956, ed. Rob Roy Purdy.

<sup>18</sup>Poems About God, p. vi.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. vii.

<sup>21</sup>Cited by Buffington, The Equilibrist, p. 19; from Cleanth Brooks et al., Conversations on the Craft of Poetry.

<sup>22</sup>Selected Poems, (1969), p. 12.

<sup>23</sup>All further reference to Selected Poems will be to the 1969 edition, unless indicated otherwise. It is necessary to remark at this point that, at the end of Selected Poems, there is a section entitled "Sixteen Poems in Eight Pairings (with original and final versions studied comparatively)".

<sup>24</sup>Cowan, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup>Cited by Stewart, The Burden of Time, p. 206.

<sup>26</sup>Richmond Croom Beatty, "John Crowe Ransom as Poet", Sewanee Review, LII (1944), 350.

<sup>27</sup>Vivienne Koch, "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom", Sewanee Review, LVIII (1950), 234.

<sup>28</sup>Randall Jarrell, "John Ransom's Poetry", in Poetry and The Age (1953; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 90.

<sup>29</sup>"Notes on the Poetry of John Crowe Ransom at his Eightieth Birthday", Kenyon Review, XXX (1968), 327.

<sup>30</sup>Jarrell, p. 97.

<sup>31</sup>The Fugitive, 1, No. 1 (1922), 2. The foreword appears in italics throughout, with the title of the magazine, The Fugitive, in capital letters.

<sup>32</sup>Henry W. Wells, The American Way of Poetry (1943; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), p. 170.

<sup>33</sup>A few years ago, Warren wrote: "as I blundered into my own poetry I had to fight off, not always successfully, what William Yandell Elliot, one of the Fugitives, had called 'Johnny's bag of tricks'". "Notes", p. 319.

<sup>34</sup>Grace After Meat, ed. Robert Graves (London: Hogarth, 1924).

<sup>35</sup>Chills and Fever (New York: Knopf, 1924).

<sup>36</sup>Two Gentlemen in Bonds (New York: Knopf, 1927).

<sup>37</sup>Long and Burr, p. 8.

<sup>38</sup>Selected Poems (New York: Knopf, 1945).

<sup>39</sup>Selected Poems (1945; rpt. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1947).

<sup>40</sup>Poems and Essays (New York: Vintage Books, 1955).

<sup>41</sup>Selected Poems, 2nd ed., rev. and enlarged (New York: Knopf, 1963).

<sup>42</sup>Selected Poems, 3rd ed., rev. and enlarged (1969; rpt. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1970).

<sup>43</sup>Jarrell, p. 92. Vladimir Nabakov has also expressed dismay at Ransom's revisions. According to a Time cover story, "Prospero's Progress", 23 May, 1969, p. 83, Nabakov heard that Ransom, "whose

poetry he greatly admires, was rewriting many of his old poems at the age of 80 and dismantling their classic beauty. Vladimir turned to Véra and said quietly, 'Never let me do that.'"

<sup>44</sup>Cited by Buffington, The Equilibrist, p. 15; from Fugitives' Reunion.

<sup>45</sup>"Instructed of Much Mortality: A Note on the Poetry of John Crowe Ransom", Sewanee Review, LIV (1946), 439-40.

<sup>46</sup>Cited by Stewart, The Burden of Time, p. 250.

<sup>47</sup>Jarrell, p. 98.

<sup>48</sup>Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty and E. Hudson Long, eds., The American Tradition in Literature (New York: Norton, 1967), II, 1566. Bradley, Beatty and Long cite Karl F. Knight, The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom: A Study of Diction, Metaphor, and Symbol (The Hague: Mouton, 1964) but do not regard the work as book-length. They do not cite John L. Stewart, John Crowe Ransom, Univ. of Minnesota Pamphlets, No. 18 (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1962). Both these works are brief surveys of Ransom's poetry.

<sup>49</sup>John Crowe Ransom (New York: Twayne, 1969).

<sup>50</sup>The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1972).



## CHAPTER ONE

### POETIC SITUATION: TERM AND CONCEPT

The term and concept "poetic situation" refers to the relationships developed in a poem between poet, speaker, presented world and reader. As a critical term, it does not occur in Anglo-American criticism (at least as I am using it); as a concept, it underlies the now commonplace distinction between poet as man and poet as speaker, besides being fundamental to critical statements relating to point of view, persona, distancing devices and empathy.

An analysis of poetry through this particular lens has some striking advantages. First, it allows one to take into account both the larger and the smaller structural features of a poem and to focus on the interrelationships of part to part and part to whole. Secondly, it invites one, as do few other approaches, to attend to the temporal unfolding of a poem, to see a poem as a process of experience, for it enables one to trace in detail the changes in the character of the speaker, and the shifts in his attitude towards the presented world, the implied audience and himself. Furthermore, with this degree of attention turned upon the devices that shape his response, the reader would retain the impression that a poem makes on first reading, while having access to that "hindsight" that renders even the first word of the poem significant.

Because of the second point, I would stress the value of poetic situation as a pedagogic tool. Too often the analysis of poetry leaps from individual details to statements about final significance, a method that tends to lose sight of the finely controlled relationships as they emerge, of the craftsmanship that makes the poem unfold in its unique way. The teacher who does not refer to these subtleties very easily abandons and alienates his student, who often has no option but to construe the teacher's method as an intuitive leap into the metaphysical significance of the poem. In addition, the ideal of intersubjectivity in critical analysis is approachable only through close and explicit attention to the features which shape the reader's response. Analysis in terms of poetic situation provides an initial way of approaching a poem; it also provides a useful check on analysis differently conducted.

Moreover, the study of poetic situation demands a certain fairly stable set of questions, ones that are often asked, such as "Who is the speaker? Who is being spoken to?" as well as others that are not so common, such as "What kind of relationship is set up between the self that speaks and the self, or selves, spoken to? Is there any distance suggested between the speaker and the poet, the speaker and the presented world?" It is through questions of this kind, and especially through the recognition that these questions are causally connected and are intended in a significant order, that the reader comes to terms with the various interrelationships, as they are established, in the poem. And, as the teacher of literature would know, once a student learns the kinds of questions to ask, his critical ability is immensely developed.<sup>1</sup>

There are, obviously, many poems in which poetic situation is not foregrounded. In Ransom's poetry, however, where there is a characteristic fusion of lyric, narrative and dramatic impulses, poetic situation is foregrounded to such a significant degree that it



provides a particularly fertile vantage point from which to view his poetic practice. Above all, Ransom is a poet remembered for his mastery of tone, tone which emerges in a particularly complex manner through the various shifts in perspective and the modulations of distance-- both spatio-temporal and psychological. And it is in the analysis of such features that the overriding value of the concept poetic situation is discerned.

Since there is a great number of poems in which poetic situation is not a foregrounded aspect, the term is not suggested as providing the sole, or even a superior, approach to the analysis of poetry. One poem may invite analysis through its dominant imagery, another through its rendering of space. Nor is the term intended to suggest a totally original approach to the analysis of poetry. Although the use of the term allows one to approach a poem from a higher level of abstraction than is frequently employed, it is indebted to a number of traditionally used critical concepts. However, as an "umbrella" concept, it enables one to extend the usefulness of these traditional tools by pointing to local or single elements as they relate to one another. The term poetic situation is offered, then, as a contribution to critical vocabulary. In many respects, the examination of poetic situation follows the example set by the New Criticism, since close attention to intrinsic features is of primary importance in defining the various relationships set up in the term. Finally, while the term, as it has been defined here, has not yet been used in Anglo-American criticism, the terminology employed in the analysis of the "rhetoric" of the novel provides useful analogous terms for the analysis of poetic situation.<sup>2</sup>

The most useful way to illustrate the general value and validity of the concept poetic situation and at the same time to clarify some of the concepts subordinate to it seems to be, first, through reference to

some critical works that have made use of these concepts and, further, through the analysis of aspects of poems which have foregrounded poetic situation in different ways. My selection of critical works is necessarily limited; the intention here is not to review existing criticism that deals in any way with poetic situation. My aim is both more modest and more expedient: to acquaint the reader only with certain dominant aspects of poetic situation. Later chapters will introduce and clarify additional terminology; of concern here are some of the ways in which the reader's response is shaped and some aspects regarding the nature of the speaker.

Robert Langbaum's The Poetry of Experience<sup>3</sup> is considered especially valuable, dealing as it does with various aspects of poetic situation and clarifying some of the exigencies of a study of this kind. Concerned with the generic characteristics of the poetry of experience and its mode of meaning, Langbaum focuses on the peculiar relations between speaker, presented world and reader, in the dramatic lyric, the dramatic monologue, and related poetry. His analysis of the development of perception in the dramatic lyric demands an awareness of the speaker's rôle, the nature of his address and his relationship with the presented world. Langbaum points out that the essential characteristic of the dramatic lyric is its "located quality", by which both the speaker and the landscape are made concrete: "thus keeping the dramatic situation intact as an exchange between two real identities".<sup>4</sup> However, his comments on the spatial and temporal perspectives of the speaker are, unfortunately, brief and fragmented.

This aspect, the spatial and temporal distance effected in a poem, has been elaborated, to take a recent instance, in an article on parts of The Prelude by John T. Ogden.<sup>5</sup> His analysis illustrates the necessity of tracing in detail the shifts of distance, either spatio-temporal or emotional and philosophical, between the observer and his

presented world in order to understand fully the development and ultimate import of the poem.

Leo Spitzer's well-known article on "Ode on a Grecian Urn"<sup>6</sup> provides an analogous methodology: that of defining the relationship between the observer and the observed in order to discover "the symbolic or metaphysical inferences drawn by the poet from the visual elements he has apperceived".<sup>6</sup> An important contribution of his thesis is its preservation of the artistic unity of the poem: it supports the view that the final statement of the poem, "that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know", does not involve the speaker's turning away from the urn to give a didactic address to the reader. Spitzer attributes the last two lines, not just the aphorism, to the urn, a decision based not simply on the obvious source of the word "Ye" and on the epigrammatic form of the last two lines but, more especially, on an analysis of the developing relationship between the speaker and the urn:

It must be the urn which formulates for Keats the lesson which he as well as mankind needs, and which both will be grateful to hear. The urn, which has in the last stanza grown in power of presence and has come to speak, must have the last word and this last word must be one of friendship and consolation for the community of man. Keats's own "numinous" experience with the urn had been a supra-personal one and its exemplary value can be communicated to mankind only by the friendly numen itself to which he owes his experience and which, in a kind of reversed Ovidian metamorphosis, finds a human voice to speak warm human words from the marble of art and the silence of history.<sup>7</sup>

Analysis of the details and variations of the spatio-temporal relation of the speaker to the presented world is necessary to an understanding of the mode of meaning of a poem. The reader's awareness of the effects that the speaker's spatio-temporal perspective has on his own experience of the poem, that is, his

awareness of the ways in which his response is formed, leads to an appreciation not only of the poem's significance but also of the techniques that make up poetic craft. The kinds and degrees of the speaker's spatio-temporal involvement with and detachment from the presented world are numerous and complex; it is not my intention to define or tabulate them here. However, a few generalized statements will serve to show the necessity, for the student of literature, of understanding the concept of perspective.

In the reflexive lyric (to be dealt with in Chapters II and III), which presents in full immediacy the interiority of the speaker, the high degree of internalization does not allow one to separate the speaker, either spatially or temporally, from what he presents. In narrative poetry, or in the lyric with narrative tendencies, a genre of particular concern to the student of Ransom, the reader will be placed in a close relationship with the presented world in those cases where the speaker is entirely withdrawn from it; yet, where the reader is conscious of the mediative process, he, in adopting the speaker's perspective, will receive the presented world from one remove, as it were. Where the speaker presents himself as one of the presented characters, the reader's perspective is correspondingly different. His relationship is, in this case, one of involvement: he tends to adopt the spatio-temporal perspective of the speaker-character, thus having a more direct or immediate contact with the presented world. Where the speaker is addressing an audience incorporated into the poem, an "ear" which heightens the reader's willingness to attend, the reader tends to adopt the perspective of that audience. The more appealing the character of the incorporated audience, the more readily the reader will assume his perspective. And, paradoxically, when that listener is simply a cipher in the poem, the reader will also tend to fill that position.<sup>8</sup>

Before examining the reading experience as illustrated by specific poems, it is useful to map some of the more easily recognizable responses possible to the reader as he is affected by spatio-temporal signals. The adoption of a figure's perspective is, potentially, a morally seductive position. In the absence of any psychological barriers, the reader, spatio-temporally oriented with a particular figure, will move into a response that may be termed "empathy", a total participation in or identification with the figure's presented feelings or ideas.<sup>9</sup> If there exist positive psychological aspects, that is, if the speaker has moral traits that appeal to the reader, the spatio-temporal orientation will be transformed even more easily into empathy.

Where the process becomes complex and especially interesting is in the presence of psychological distancing devices. But, before discussing these, it would be helpful to reveal a relatively simple instance of the reader's movement from adoption of a figure's perspective to an identification or an empathetic involvement with him.

In The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,<sup>10</sup> the speaker who is the initial story-teller is spatially and temporally removed from the world which the Mariner presents. The Mariner, as second speaker, is, or was, involved in that presented world. The mediative process is concretized at the outset, where the reader is conscious of a story-telling situation, and with the objectification of the Wedding-Guest--the fictive recipient of the story--the reader would probably adapt himself to the Wedding-Guest's spatio-temporal orientation. But just as the Wedding-Guest "cannot choose but hear" (l. 18) and builds up an intense involvement in the Mariner's story, so does the reader's perspective shift as the Mariner moves further into his narrative. Instead now of experiencing a detachment, the reader



feels himself as an observer on the scene presented by the Mariner, seeing even through his eyes as that figure evokes the details of the seascape.

The ballad ends with the removal of the Mariner:

The Mariner, whose eye is bright,  
Whose beard with age is hoar,  
Is gone: and now the Wedding-Guest  
Turned from the bridegroom's door.

He went like one that hath been stunned,  
And is of sense forlorn:  
A sadder and a wiser man,  
He rose the morrow morn.

(ll. 618-25)

But the reader does not immediately shift back to the perspective of the Wedding-Guest. As at the opening of the ballad, he is aware of the mediative process and regains a measure of detachment from the scene.

Here it is necessary to refer specifically to the temporal signals. The use of the past tense intensifies this sense of detachment, while the reader is also drawn, through the use of the words "now", "hath" and "is", towards the perspective of the fictive listener. The fact of spatio-temporal orientation has been complicated; now the reader does not simply "see through the eyes of" the Wedding-Guest, but accepts as his own the emotional and intellectual effect that the story, as experience, has had on the Wedding-Guest. The experience is, through this device, generalized: mankind as a whole is affected.

Coleridge's control of the perspectives is remarkable. The initial and final concretizations of the story-telling situation provide a frame for the improbable world into which the reader is gently eased. The predominant orientation with the Mariner allows the

reader to follow his process of experience, in which the full horror of the killing of the albatross is only gradually realized. As the reader shifts his stance, in the body of the poem, from the Wedding-Guest to the Mariner and back again, he is given insight into each one's feelings and also into the interaction between them. Through this device, one has access to the interpenetration of two kinds of vision: one, perceived through the Wedding-Guest, pertaining to the everyday world of human affairs, the other, perceived through the Mariner, to the world of Gothic horror.

As is seen in the above analysis, a problem that is bound up with the concept of distance between speaker and presented world is that relating to the relationship between reader and speaker. While neither Spitzer nor Ogden mention this correlative aspect, it is important to The Poetry of Experience and, since there is some confusion in Langbaum's analysis of the general nature of the reader's attitude toward the speaker, it is best to clarify the relevant terminology before investigating some of the various effects of the use of perspective in poetry.

Langbaum points out that, in the dramatic lyric, the reader adopts the speaker's perspective: "We must stand where the poet stands and borrow his eyes [thus borrowing] also the past experience behind them."<sup>11</sup> As suggested earlier, the situation is very different in the dramatic monologue in which a silent auditor is present. Where the incorporated audience is clearly objectified and structured into the poem, it would seem that the reader assumes the spatio-temporal perspective of that audience. While Langbaum implies that this is so in the case of "My Last Duchess",<sup>12</sup> the issue is confused through his frequent assertion that we, as readers, suspending our moral judgement of the duke, feel sympathy for and "even identify ourselves with"<sup>13</sup> him.

The problem here is one of terminology. In Langbaum's suggestions that the reader identifies with both the duke and the envoy, we see a confusion of terms. And Langbaum's use of the term "sympathy" is misleading. Looking carefully at the complex shifts in the relationship between reader and poem (calculable through the devices of opening and closing distance between the duke and the emissary) in "My Last Duchess",<sup>14</sup> one is aware of the importance of precision in the use of the terms "identification" and "sympathy". For the moment I should like to focus on the first thirteen lines of the poem in order to clarify the reader's response in its very shaping--remembering, of course, the importance of unfolding in the dramatic monologue:

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,  
Looking as if she were alive. I call  
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands  
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.  
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said  
"Frà Pandolf" by design, for never read  
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,  
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,  
But to myself they turned (since none puts by  
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)  
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,  
How such a glance came there; so, not the first  
Are you to turn and ask thus. . . .

At first, the reader would adopt the spatio-temporal orientation of the duke; the presence of "That's" and the duke's invitation to look, from his perspective, into the past ensure this. Yet the use of the term identification would probably be misleading here. The reader would rather suspend identification; that is, he would not have any access at this stage to the duke's psychological demeanour and so would not be invited to identify his own state of mind with that of the duke, nor to adopt as his own the opinions and values of the duke. In other words, the reader would not move from a spatio-temporal perspective to a psychological perspective similar to the duke's.



One can now see the beginnings of a link and also of a distinction, as they appear within this poem, between spatio-temporal orientation and identification or empathy. The duke has invited the reader to adopt his perspective, an invitation which the reader accepts. But other things are happening. The duke is becoming more and more knowable as a personality. The reader notices his charm, his grandeur, and he also notices something else that is vaguely threatening, something not yet quite distinct. At the same time, the reader becomes more conscious of the presence of an "ear". And a tension begins to be built up between the duke's presence and the emissary's presence.

It is in lines seven to thirteen that the reader's attitude towards the duke becomes more complex. If the duke's confiding air is compelling, his tone is also alienating. The phrase, "Strangers like you", contains the seeds of a fluctuating psychological distance: one is both shunned by being put in this category and welcomed by being made especial in it. Moreover, this special treatment within this special category discloses a threat: strangers only inquired "if they durst". Even as the duke attempts to draw the listener close, to persuade him into an identification, the listener feels he must draw away.

Now the reader has already become aware of an audience within the poem. In line five, the audience is objectified and the subsequent repetition of the second-person pronoun, often in significant juxtaposition with the first-person pronoun (as in line ten), would reveal to the reader the presence of a spatial position that remains to be filled. With relief, the reader may shift his perspective: he may stand where the envoy stands, spatially distanced from the duke, and lose that awkwardness of a morally ambiguous position. The reader would take it that the emissary responds to the duke in much the way that he himself responds to him, that the emissary is also simultaneously

attracted to and repelled by the duke. Because the emissary is merely a cipher, however, there is only a putative identification.

The complexity of this response is structured into the remainder of the poem. For instance, the duke's invitation to the envoy to look into past events with him would suggest an attempt at reorganizing his spatio-temporal orientation, while the duke's judgement of these past events would force a moral separation.

While Langbaum's suggestion that this poem establishes as its special effect "the tension between sympathy and moral judgment"<sup>15</sup> is an appealing one, he means it in a way that is not quite accurate. Although the reader is given an insight into the nature of the duke, the ensuing complexity of response is far from the sympathetic attitude that one may gradually develop for Macbeth, for example. Wayne C. Booth points out that the reader's sustained inside view of a character leads to sympathy if, seeing below the surface, as one does by means of the dramatization of conscience, for instance, one finds some degree of self-questioning or some growth of self-awareness.<sup>16</sup> The view into the duke's consciousness is hardly comparable. It gives us a look beyond the superficial, but a look that does not, as it does with Macbeth, disclose qualifications of the character's villainy. The duke is villainous in the extreme. That he is an aesthete, charming, confiding, flattering, increases the danger of his villainy. There is no room in the reader's response for either exoneration, pity or sympathy.<sup>17</sup>

So far, emphasis has been on the spatial perspective as it functions in the evolution of the poem's meaning and as it shapes the relationship between reader and poem. The temporal perspective has an analogous function.

This perspective is perhaps most interesting where the speaker relates a past experience and, at the same time, discloses his present

feelings about that experience. To return for a moment to "My Last Duchess"; here the speaker is involved in a world temporally coexistent with himself, and he also makes frequent references to the past. These references are made, however, with a firm hold of the present: his understanding of the past has not been modified by present circumstance or new awareness. The reader's judgement of the duke is radically affected by his realization that the duke has undergone no broadening process of moral awareness. In the very different "Tintern Abbey", on the other hand, as the speaker moves back in time to regain earlier perceptions, the reader becomes involved in the process of the speaker's growing awareness.

A set of terms that is most useful for this differentiation of selves is one adapted from structuralist theory of the novel: the speaking self and the experiencing self.<sup>18</sup> In "Tintern Abbey", there is initially no separation of selves: the self that is undergoing experience is at the same time relating it. However, when the speaker moves into the past, the speaking and experiencing selves are temporally distinct. Both at the beginning, then, and at the conclusion of the poem, the speaking and experiencing selves are one. An analysis of the difference in the psychological make-up of this speaker before and after the various intervening separations of the two selves might, one could argue, be more precise and competent if the terms suggested were drawn upon.

While the psychological relation of the speaker to the presented world is often best discussed in terms of his spatio-temporal perspective, which, as shown, provides a precise point of departure for analysis of attitude, the speaker's involvement with the presented world may emerge in a different kind of existential relationship.

In the poetry of Emily Dickinson, the nature of the self is a foregrounded quality and is of primary importance in any discussion

of her work. The self may be either the mind, or the body, or the soul, or all three at once, as in the poem beginning "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain". Or the self may be less explicitly divided, as in the lines from the poem beginning "Me from Myself--to banish--":<sup>19</sup>

But since Myself--assault Me--  
How have I peace  
Except by subjugating  
Consciousness?

(ll. 5-8)

An even more complex use of the speaker by Emily Dickinson underscores the importance of understanding and defining the presenting and the presented selves, as an aspect crucial to the concept of poetic situation. The initial problem in the poem beginning "'Tis so appalling--it exhilarates--"<sup>20</sup> is that relating to ownership of voice. As we move through the poem, we see that there is a duality: the involvement of both the watching self and the dead or dying self, which may or may not be attributable to the same speaker. In the first stanza,

'Tis so appalling--it exhilarates--  
So over Horror, it half Captivates--  
The Soul stares after it, secure--  
A Sepulchre, fears frost, no more--

the voice seems to be that of the watching self, during and after the death that is observed. Yet it seems also to belong to the self that directly experiences the death.

In the second stanza, there is the same duality:

To scan a Ghost, is faint--  
But grappling, conquers it--  
How easy, Torment, now--  
Suspense kept sawing so--

In both these stanzas, the temporal movement is especially interesting: the watching self is speaking about the death event as it is seen to occur, or the dying self is recounting its own experiences through the death and even after it. There is, however, no temporal disjunction between the dying self and the dead self.

In the third stanza,

The Truth, is Bald, and Cold--  
But that will hold--  
If any are not sure--  
We show them--prayer--  
But we, who know,  
Stop hoping, now--

the use of the first-person plural suggests the merging of the watching and the dying or dead selves. The fourth stanza,

Looking at Death, is Dying--  
Just let go the Breath--  
And not the pillow at your Cheek  
So Slumbereth--

is an instruction from the watching self to the dying self, which suggests a movement back in time, as in the beginnings of the first and second stanzas. It is also the watching self's own reminder that there is a way out of consciousness, learnt by its watching the death event.

The final stanza negates the existence of the dying self:

Others, Can wrestle--  
Yours, is done--  
And so of Woe, bleak dreaded--come,  
It sets the Fright at liberty--  
And Terror's free--  
Gay, Ghastly, Holiday!

It seems to be at this point that the death has finally been realized by



the watching self. The speaker, the watching self, first addresses the dead self directly, and then, in a self-address, welcomes the final terrible freedom.

Two contexts are suggested. A particular incident is being described as it occurs: the speaker is watching a death and speaking about it as part of her own experience and also on behalf of the dying person. Secondly, the speaker is describing an encounter, objectified as death, with grief or pain, an encounter that involves enlightenment. The use of the two, or three, speakers makes the attempt to pin the poem down to either one of these inferred contexts idle; it in no way detracts from the reading experience to take into account the simultaneous existence of these two contexts.

The coexistence of the two voices, that of the watching self and that of the dying self, implies, in the first stanza, an empathetic involvement of the watching self in the death event. The subsequent movement from the voice of the dying self to that of the dead self suggests the watching self's own process of experience. Through an imaginative exercise the watching self is able to see beyond the orthodox attitudes towards death and gain an esoteric knowledge: "The Truth, is Bald, and Cold--".

The watching self, a single voice now, invites the reader to understand her experience of death and the process by which this experience is obtained: "Looking at Death, is Dying--". The speaker has undergone an intense experience that further develops in the exorcism of the dying or dead self:

Others, Can wrestle--  
Yours, is done--

In these lines, the unique, lonely position of the watching self is

put forward. While the struggle of the dead self is over and that of other people still to come, the watching self has been led into a new experience, one which is spoken of in tones of humour and of the appalled. A process of circularity and reversal is set in motion: fear at first expels grief, which, in turn, expels fear; more horrifyingly, the speaker's "Holiday" from fright and terror involves also the fact that fright and terror are free, on a "Gay, Ghastly, Holiday!" While this analysis is by no means exhaustive, it does seem that the crucial aspects of the poem have been clarified. It is the interplay between these different voices that gives the poem its authority, its sense of authentic experience.

The poems discussed in this chapter show a few of the ways in which a poet may shape the relationships between speaker and self, speaker and world. Since Ransom's poetry exhibits such a variety of relationships, such a complex handling of the speaker's perspective, the concept poetic situation will have to be progressively clarified and refined into its different features throughout the following chapters.

The variety and complexity of Ransom's use of poetic situation may be attributed largely to his masterly fusion of lyric, narrative and dramatic impulses. These three modes are briefly and adequately defined by Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg:

By narrative we mean all those literary works which are distinguished by two characteristics: the presence of a story and a story-teller. A drama is a story without a story-teller; in it characters act out directly what Aristotle called an "imitation" of such action as we find in life. A lyric, like a drama, is a direct presentation, in which a single actor, the poet or his surrogate, sings, or muses, or speaks for us to hear or overhear. Add a second speaker, as Robert Frost does in "The Death of the Hired Man," and we move toward drama. Let the speaker begin to tell of an event, as Frost does in "The Vanishing Red," and we move toward narrative. For writing to be narrative no more and no less than a teller and a tale are required.<sup>21</sup>

Ransom's awareness of the flexibility of the lyric mode, of its capacity to absorb and be enriched by both narrative and dramatic tendencies, characterizes most thoroughly his craftsmanship. The lyric "I" who confronts his past self, the narrator who chides his creations, the supernatural world that the baffled story-teller suddenly finds himself part of, the dialogue between Death and the young maiden--these are some of the poetic possibilities that Ransom explores. It is this special combination, this fusion of modes, that provides the focal point of the following chapters.

In an attempt not to do violence to the individuality of his poems, my discussion of his work involves a number of detailed critical analyses. While there is no reason to feel equal responsibility to all of his poems, and although I am inevitably (and unashamedly) drawn to those poems for which I have a personal preference, I have tried to give an adequate reflection of the diversity of his work. For the most part, my selection is based on the one made by Ransom himself for the latest edition of his work; there is also an attempt to show, where relevant to poetic situation, some of the ways in which Ransom developed as a poet.

While no apology should be necessary for the approach taken here, it is worth stressing that an analysis of Ransom's poetry in terms of poetic situation provides something more than merely a viable or even a fertile approach. It is essential if one is to grasp, and pay tribute to, Ransom's special contribution to twentieth-century poetry.



## NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

<sup>1</sup>Norman Friedman and Charles A. McLaughlin suggest a set of questions that move in the direction of what I term poetic situation. The questions that relate to the "dramatic context" of the poem attempt to lay bare the protagonist's response to his situation (either internal or external) and the relation of the poet's choice of point of view and of the protagonist's character to the kind of experience that is presented. Poetry: An Introduction to Its Form and Art (New York: Harper, 1961), pp. 48-53 et passim. Friedman, of course, was one of the earliest exponents of the usefulness of defining point of view in the novel.

<sup>2</sup>The work to which I am most indebted is Franz Stanzel's Narrative Situations in the Novel, trans. James P. Pusack (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971). As a critical tool, narrative situation is intended to clarify all the elements of the "rhetoric" of fiction in their interaction and interdependence. Poetic situation has, mutatis mutandis, a similar aim. Many of the concepts used in the present study are adapted from Stanzel; in particular, the concept of mediation, as well as aspects of the typology of poetic situations which derives from the mediative process.

Among the works which apply to poetry terminology traditionally employed in the analysis of the novel, two are particularly interesting. One is Alwyn Berland's article on Pope and Eliot, "Some Techniques of Fiction in Poetry", Essays in Criticism, IV (1954), 372-85; the other is Rodney Delasanta's valuable study, The Epic Voice (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), in which he examines the in medias res tradition from Homer to Milton, using such concepts as voice (meaning point of view), omniscient and restricted narration, and delegated narration.

<sup>3</sup>The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition (1957; rpt. and rev. Harmondsworth: Penguin,

1974). Other works which have proved useful will be cited at relevant points during the chapters on Ransom's poetry.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 40-41.

<sup>5</sup>"The Power of Distance in Wordsworth's Prelude", PMLA, LXXXVIII (1973), 246-59.

<sup>6</sup>"The Ode on a Grecian Urn, or Content vs. Metagrammar", in Essays on English and American Literature, ed. Anna Hatcher (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962), p. 73.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 90

<sup>8</sup>Earl Wasserman's comments on the traditional ballad technique in the opening stanzas of Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" support this thesis. Wasserman says that these three stanzas, "addressed by an anonymous someone. . . . serve to set the story of the knight's adventures in an additional narrative framework, a dialogue between the knight and the stranger, with whom the reader tends to identify himself; and thus the reader is drawn more intimately into the knight's experiences, for he feels himself to be present as the knight speaks in his own person". "'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'", in English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. M.H. Abrams (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960), p. 366.

<sup>9</sup>W.J.M. Bronzwaer, in his book Tense in the Novel: An Investigation of Some Potentialities of Linguistic Criticism (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1970), p. 48, uses the term empathy in much the same way: "Empathy seems a good term to denote this kind of involvement, which always works through identification with and adopting the perspective of an 'Aussagesubjekt' that is not identical with the narrator, author or speaker of the text concerned." Bronzwaer seems to isolate three stages (where I isolate only two): adoption of perspective, identification, empathy; the last dependant on the first two. This is reasonable, reminding one that identification is possible as a response separate from adoption of perspective. One may identify with a character in a play, for instance.

<sup>10</sup>The Poetical Works of Coleridge, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 186-209.

<sup>11</sup>Langbaum, p. 41.

<sup>12</sup>This implication can be seen when Langbaum comments on "a relation between the duke on the one hand, and the portrait and the envoy on the other, which determines the reader's relation to the duke and therefore to the poem--which determines, in other words, the poem's meaning", and also where he states that "these qualities overwhelm the envoy, causing him apparently to suspend judgment of the duke, for he raises no demur. The reader is no less overwhelmed." ibid., p. 77.

<sup>13</sup>ibid., p. 76. See also p. 72, where Langbaum writes: "the fact that a poem is a monologue helps to determine our sympathy for the speaker, since we must adopt his viewpoint as our entry into the poem", and p. 80: "This willingness of the reader to understand the duke, even to sympathize with him as a necessary condition of reading the poem, is the key to the poem's form."

There is an interesting history to Langbaum's analysis of the dramatic monologue. His use of the term sympathy in the earlier edition of The Poetry of Experience led to certain objections, which he has mentioned in his preface to the revised edition and which, he says, have been taken into account in his revisions. Langbaum defines sympathy as Einfühlung or empathy, a "romantic projectiveness". Unfortunately, the term is not, either here or in the text, defined more clearly; and what Langbaum means by the notion that "we split off our sympathy from our moral judgment" (p. vii) is particularly vague. That Langbaum does not succeed in his attempt to clarify his meanings is illustrated by the phrases quoted above, all of which appear in the original edition.

<sup>14</sup>The New Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250-1950, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), pp. 658-59.

<sup>15</sup>Langbaum, p. 80.

<sup>16</sup>The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 115-16. See also Booth's comments on Emma, pp. 245-47.

<sup>17</sup>Booth's comment (p. 250 n.) on The Poetry of Experience (a comment made before the revision) tends towards this view.

Disagreeing with Langbaum's underplaying of the part played by the reader's moral judgement of the duke, he stresses the "psychological vividness" with which the duke is presented, and implies that the revelation of the duke's power, freedom, and loyalty to his own character does not effect a sympathetic response, but rather increases our moral separation from him. Langbaum's revisions do, in fact, emphasize that the reader will condemn the duke, yet, as the passages quoted earlier demonstrate, he still equivocates.

<sup>18</sup>Stanzel, pp. 65-67 et passim. In his theory of the novel, the term "narrating self" is used.

<sup>19</sup>Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1961), p. 165. Johnson numbers the poem 642.

<sup>20</sup>Final Harvest, pp. 43-44. Johnson numbers the poem 281.

<sup>21</sup>The Nature of Narrative (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 4.

## CHAPTER TWO

### SPEAKERS AND WORLDS

#### 1. The Presented World and the Mediative Process

Randall Jarrell, in an apparently simple but, in fact, very revealing comment on Ransom, says that he is a poet who tells stories.<sup>1</sup> As a story-teller, Ransom creates figures--one, two, even a group within one poem--who are shown in a particular setting, a setting that is rendered concrete, or, as Langbaum says of the presented landscape in the dramatic lyric, "looked upon".<sup>2</sup> The figures are involved in action, which presupposes the dimensions of time and space. These dimensions are the constituents of the "world within the poem",<sup>3</sup> which is the presented world. The poet's creation of a presented world is a literary enactment of Descartes's claim, "Qu'on me donne l'étendue et le mouvement et je vais refaire le monde";<sup>4</sup> give me extension and motion and I will recreate the universe.

The poet creates not only the world, but also a speaker to present that world. In addition, therefore, to analysing the world that the speaker presents, we must come to terms with the way in which the world is presented and the nature of the speaker who presents it. In a very few of Ransom's mature poems, the existence of a speaker is merely inferred.



Usually, the speaker draws attention to himself as the story-teller who stands between the presented world and the reader. The speaker's activity in presenting this world is the mediative process.

The two terms introduced so far, "mediative process" and "presented world" (both of which are to be further clarified in this section), will be used to organize Ransom's poems into manageable groups for discussion. The following two sections will deal with the attribution of voice and the identity of the speaker, both crucial to an appreciation of Ransom's distinctive handling of the relationships between poet, speaker and presented world. The remaining chapters will consist of analyses of a selection of Ransom's poems, focussing on the choice of perspective, the mediative process and the kinds and extent of interaction between the speaker and the presented world.

A confusion that arises in Susanne Langer's theoretical statements on the nature of lyric poetry shows the need for distinguishing between the world within the poem, or the presented world, and the world that is the poem, or the work of art as literary microcosm. Professor Langer describes a poem as a "semblance of events lived and felt . . . a piece of virtual life"<sup>5</sup> and refers to the "world of the poem".<sup>6</sup> While her insights into the ontological status of a work of art are valuable, there is some ambiguity in the status of the "world" of a poem as she defines it. Although she usually means that the "world" is the total experience rendered by the poem, at one point, when she discusses the problem of "orientation in the world", she implies that the "world" may be seen as separate from the speaker:

In a literary framework, the *dramatis personae* may be disoriented, but the reader is not; even T.S. Eliot's world of sham and futility, that disconcerts J. Alfred Prufrock, has a perfectly definite character--distressing perhaps, but not confusing--for the reader. If the reader cannot grasp the presented "world," something is wrong with the poem or with his literary comprehension.<sup>7</sup>

Here, in referring to the relationship of the protagonist with the "presented 'world'" and to the reader's relationship with it, she no longer means a "piece of virtual life", the poem as microcosm; for the concept of the literary microcosm points to the poem as a whole. Instead, she means the world that is presented by the speaker, J. Alfred Prufrock; the world in which he exists, certainly, but which cannot be considered as the poem as a whole once he is said to be observing it and attempting to orient himself in it.

The presentation of a world in lyric poetry introduces an element of narration--Jarrell's story-telling. While this element is by no means foreign to the lyric, it is often not present. It is only in some lyrics, then, that we may speak of a world within; in all lyrics, of course, we may speak of a world that is the poem. For this reason, the term presented world must be applied with some caution. In many lyrics, there is either no presented world or, if one is invoked, it is so lacking in density and particularity, or of so little relevance to the main themes or concerns of the poem, that discussion of it is not particularly fertile. But in some lyrics, and in most of Ransom's, the presented world is foregrounded in such a way that discussion of it provides a useful starting point for analysis. The term "world" is particularly apt for Ransom's poetry; for it takes into account the creation not only of figures and events, but also of an environment and a social order which accommodates them.

Of course, those poets who foreground a presented world will create worlds of very different kinds and in very different ways. To say this is to do little more than reiterate the obvious: Keats's presented world in a particular poem is very different from Ransom's in another. The concept of a presented world remains valid, while the application of it will vary from poet to poet, from poem to poem.

The mediative process is the process whereby the world within the poem is presented to the reader, whose orientation is controlled largely

by the variable spatio-temporal standpoint of the speaker. The speaker may present the contents of his consciousness as memory--that is, he mediates the experience of his earlier self--or he may present, as mediator, the consciousness and actions of figures in his own spatio-temporal realm or in a realm distinct from his own. In most of Ransom's mature poems, the presented world is made up of more than one consciousness: either the consciousnesses of the speaking and experiencing selves, or those of the speaker and one or more of the presented figures. In some poems, the mediative process seems to disappear entirely, providing a sense of immediacy, as the reader feels himself to be in direct contact with the presented world. The central importance of the mediative process in Ransom's poetry lies particularly in the shifts of point of view and in the modulation of distance--spatio-temporal and psychological--between speaker and presented world.

While much of Ransom's poetry presents a world that is strongly mediated, there are several poems in which the mediative process appears, if at all, in a strictly attenuated form. Examples would be the "dramatic" poems, which consist of a dialogue of two or more voices, heard directly, and those poems in the third person where much or all of the discourse or thought-process, indirectly rendered, seems to emanate from a single figure, as in "Necrological". These third-person poems use a device which in prose fiction is called, following the practice of Henry James, the central intelligence. In some of these poems, the speaker's consciousness is intermittently seen to overlay the consciousness of his presented figure.

In other poems, although the mediative process is present, it is not foregrounded. In "Blackberry Winter", "Old Man Playing With Children" and "Good Ships", the speaker only introduces, propels, or tentatively comments on the presented events. Here the speaker seems to reveal himself as a poet, as the creator of his world. These poems employ a

mode of rendering which in some respects corresponds to the narrative situation of the traditional third-person novel, where the speaker is outside the realm of the presented world. In some of Ransom's third-person poems, such as "Captain Carpenter", the speaker, rather than remain purely a reporter-commentator, emerges more fully, displaying a discoverable personality--including gestures, personal traits and an explicit attitude to the presented world.

In third-person poems, the speaker is both spatially and temporally removed from the presented world; in first-person poems, he exists within the presented world. He may be a peripheral figure, as in "Janet Waking", "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" and "Dead Boy"; or he may be the central figure, as in "Winter Remembered" and "Vision by Sweetwater". In many of the poems which employ a central first-person speaker, the reader becomes aware of the mediative process through the recognition of a temporal gap between the speaking and experiencing selves. As in Wordsworth's The Prelude, the speaker mediates, retrospectively, his own experiences. At times, the consciousness of the experiencing self may gain primacy in the reader's mind when the speaking self forfeits his superior position and presents directly that earlier consciousness, which then appears unmediated. The subtle handling of the temporal gap gives many of Ransom's first-person poems their special quality. It is an aspect of Ransom's genius that he has learnt not only how to control the voices of the speaking and experiencing selves but that he has also recognized that this is an area in which his particular strength lies. As mentioned earlier, "The Rose" is the only one of the poems from Poems About God which Ransom included without qualification, though with some revision, in the final edition of Selected Poems. The poetic situation of this poem involves a merging, at the end of the poem, of the speaking present and the experienced past. Since this is one of the rare poems in Poems About God in which poetic situation is foregrounded, its similarity to examples



of Ransom's mature manner might well account for his decision to reprint it after so many years.

## 2. The Attribution of Voice

As in any work of literature, excepting, in this context, drama, the proper attribution of voice is one of the first steps towards a critical analysis. Because Ransom's poetry typically involves a distinction, either spatial, or temporal, or both, between the realms of the speaker and the presented world, and because there is so often a complex interaction between these realms, attribution of voice is crucial and may at times be difficult, as in such poems as "Janet Waking", "Parting, without a Sequel", "Two in August" and "Vision by Sweetwater".

In "Two in August", the speaker is not designated by the first-person pronoun but is nevertheless to be heard as mediating the presented action:

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.

Dawn was not yet; night is for loving or sleeping,  
Sweet dreams or safekeeping;  
Yet 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.

How sleepers groan, twitch, wake to such a mood  
Is not well understood,  
Nor why two entities grown almost one  
Should rend and murder trying to get undone,  
With individual tigers in their blood.

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,  
And heard the clock that clanged: Remember, Remember.



And he must tread barefooted the dim lawn,  
 Soon he was up and gone;  
 High in the trees the night-mastered birds were crying  
 With fear upon their tongues, no singing nor flying  
 Which are their lovely attitudes by dawn.

Whether those bird-cries were of heaven or hell  
 There is no way to tell;  
 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.

Robert Buffington's comments on the poem illustrate the confusion that arises when the realms of speaker and presented world are not distinguished and voice is not properly attributed. He takes the first two lines of the last stanza as a direct question, and is in no doubt of the answer implied by the poem: "Clearly, we are meant to answer: hell."<sup>8</sup> Apparently he reads the images in the last two stanzas as signifying hell, finding enough evidence there to assume one of two things: either that the speaker, really knowing "Whether those bird-cries were of heaven or hell", is expressing a mock-bewilderment; or that the speaker is unaware of the answer that Buffington is able to provide.

Authority to give an answer is, in turn, based on two premises: first, that the lines, "Whether those bird-cries were of heaven or hell/There is no way to tell", form a direct question, and second, that they are attributed to the man. While the validity of Buffington's comment may be denied on the grounds of the manifest inaccuracy of the first premise (syntax and punctuation are enough to undermine his assertion), it is that of the second that reveals most clearly his confusion.

Whereas in "The Equilibrists", for instance, the reader's orientation shifts from the speaker to the presented figures, in "Two in August", the sense of mediation remains more emphatically present. The speaker introduces the action, keeping a firm hold on it and on the figures, even leaving them on occasion to discuss the general predicament of which they are representative. The speaker's realm is denoted by the present tense,

that of the figures by the past. Just as there is a movement towards the spatio-temporal realm of the woman in the fourth stanza, so there is towards that of the man in the last two stanzas. Yet the reader is kept distanced from him by the subsequent spatial reference--"High in the trees" (l. 23)--and by the re-securing of the mediative process with the use of the present tense. The line, "Which are their lovely attitudes by dawn", emanates from the speaker and prepares the reader for the speaker's voice, not the man's, in the next and final stanza.

The poetic situation does not provide a voice for the man. What we hear throughout is the speaker's voice; the statement in question is clearly attributed to the speaker, then, and not to the man, as Buffington implies. There is no suggestion of self-mockery or unreliability, moreover, which would invite one to treat the speaker's statement as problematic. The speaker stands detached and does not know--nor does the man--what regions the man has entered. The implication is that having a name for the region, or state of mind, entered would control the misery and feeling of disorientation. But the "words" are "too sad and strange to syllable".

In all fairness to Buffington, one should note that he does not intend a full critical analysis of "Two in August", yet his comments do point to certain misconceptions about its tonal shaping, and, had he attempted a full analysis, this initial confusion would probably have resulted in a misreading of the entire poem. As will become clear in Chapters III and IV, Ransom's poetry sometimes involves sudden shifts of point of view and even the use of a dual perspective; and it is of the utmost importance that the reader is at all times aware of the problem of ownership of voice:

### 3. The Identity of the Speaker

A problem often encountered in discussion of poetry concerns the degree to which the reader may equate the speaker with the poet's empirical self. There was a time when such identification might be taken for granted; more recent critics approach the problem with scepticism and, in general, rule out the possibility of any simple identification of speaker with poet. At times, modern criticism has seemed almost obsessed by the desire to avoid identifying the speaker with the poet himself; with reference to which Käthe Hamburger makes a refreshing comment:

To begin with, from our poetological perspective we have to answer that it is just as inadmissible a biographism to say that this I is not Goethe, and this Thou not Friederike, as it is to maintain that they are. . . . We possess neither the possibility, nor therefore the right to maintain that the poet meant the statements in the poem--regardless of whether or not they have the first-person form--as those of his own experience; nor can we maintain that he does not mean "himself."<sup>9</sup>

John L. Stewart asserts that in only two poems of Selected Poems (1945), "Winter Remembered" and "Prelude to an Evening", is the "poet present in his own person", adding that "Ransom is quite insistent that 'Agitato ma non troppo' . . . is not about himself, though the Fugitives who first heard it thought it was."<sup>10</sup> Perhaps Ransom was not satisfied with his private insistence, since he revised "Agitato ma non Troppo" to incorporate a persona, made distinct from the speaker by the addition of a preliminary stanza:

This is what the man said,  
Insisting, standing on his head.

Stewart does not give reasons for finding the presence of Ransom in "Winter Remembered" and "Prelude to an Evening". His choice is the

more surprising when one compares these poems, in which there is no apparent autobiographical foundation (and if there is, it is of the extremely private kind inaccessible to the ordinary reader), to such an occasional poem as "To the Scholars of Harvard", in which one cannot but identify the speaker with the poet, and to "Philomela", in which the autobiographical links are common knowledge to those who are at all familiar with Ransom's life.

In those poems of Ransom's in which the speaker sets out, in the present tense, an aesthetic belief--examples would be "Survey of Literature" and "Painted Head"--there is no reason to believe that the speaker is any other than a selected or formalized version of the poet himself. This can be argued partly because similar aesthetic principles are expressed in Ransom's prose works; and, more significantly, because of the way in which the speaker is presented. As suggested in the first section of this chapter, the speaker of these purely "reflexive" poems does not call attention to himself as a figure existing within any presented world, but is simply the origin of the thoughts expressed.

The autobiographical underpinning in "Old Mansion" is suggested in stanzas two and nine, which contain references to Ransom's war years in the Loire district and to his Oxford experience, respectively. However, with the knowledge that Henry James's The American Scene is the acknowledged source for the poem, and that it supplies many of the details of characterization and scene, one might speculate that Ransom is presenting not himself, but James, as the speaker.

Ashley Brown, who has examined Ransom's use of the source, writes:

Throughout The American Scene James refers to himself as a "restless analyst", who is on a "quest". Ransom wittily has his speaker think of himself as an "annalist", and a "tired historian" at that. . . . James's "sedative cigarette" becomes a "foreign weed"--a curious phrase that is repeated from the first stanza of the poem and that somehow makes Ransom's

speaker seem more alien than James. He "retreats" where James withdraws "as on the completion of a mystic process". The Southerner, that is, is more ironic about the house and himself, less sure of its present value, than James, who is grateful for anything.<sup>11</sup>

The ironic effect that inheres in these transformations points not only towards James, but also towards the speaker. Similarly, it seems that the first stanza, which shows a witty insight into James's character, is not necessarily solely a case of impersonation of James:

As an intruder I trudged with careful innocence  
To mask in decency a meddlesome stare,  
Passing the old house often on its eminence,  
Exhaling my foreign weed on its weighted air.

Since the Jamesian manner and the Ransomic manner are, in some essentials, so similar (for instance, the ironic vision that is directed both outwards and inwards, as well as the self-effacement), there is a sense here in which Ransom seems to be mocking himself, in that he knows the extent to which he resembles James in manner, style, and predilections, and in that the irony with which he treats James is very close to that with which he treats himself.

There is, then, both an obvious autobiographical link and a more subtle suggestion of autobiography in the sense that the element of self-mockery, given its special nature, points to the Ransomic manner. The speaker is, to some degree, recognizable as Ransom the man. Yet, because of the element of impersonation and the fictiveness of the presented world, the reader does not entirely equate the speaker with Ransom. There is, instead, a sense of the speaker's fictive existence.

A brief comparison of the manner of self-characterization in Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence"<sup>12</sup> with that in "Old Mansion" should clarify this sense of the speaker's fictiveness. After the speaker



in "Resolution and Independence" has heard the leech-gatherer's account of his "honest maintenance" (l. 105), he re-focuses attention on himself:

My former thoughts returned: the fear that kills;  
 And hope that is unwilling to be fed;  
 Cold, pain, and labour, and all fleshly ills;  
 And mighty Poets in their misery dead.  
 --Perplexed, and longing to be comforted,  
 My question eagerly did I renew,  
 "How is it that you live, and what is it you do?"  
 (ll. 113-19)

Beyond the obvious difference in the basic attitudes of the speakers-- Wordsworth's speaker longs for comfort and is, finally, comforted, Ransom's speaker neither demands so much nor demands so vehemently as to endanger his guard against disappointment--there is a marked difference in presentation of attitude. Wordsworth's speaker regards his own attitude in a simple, non-problematic way. Throughout the poem, the stages in his thought are presented distinctly and chronologically, in a straightforward progression from joy to dejection to a feeling of scorn for that dejection. The speaker of "Old Mansion", both because of his desire for self-protection against excessive disappointment and because of his feeling of alienation from the past, masks his curiosity and optimism. The comprehension manifest in Ransom's speaker of the contrast between his genuine feelings and his affected attitude reveals a kind of self-consciousness that distinguishes him from the speaker of "Resolution and Independence". From the start, he is possessed of an ironic view of himself, and the reader's privileged glimpse into the speaker's mind heightens the final pathos of his prevision of his own mortality:

But on retreating I saw myself in the token,  
 How loving from my dying weed the feather curled  
 On the languid air; and I went with courage shaken  
 To dip, alas, into some unseemlier world.  
 (ll. 41-44)

An effect of this profound inside view is to suppress the reader's awareness of the speaker as Ransom himself. A curious paradox emerges here. It would seem that, in Ransom's poetry at least, the more attention is given to characterizing the speaker and the deeper and more confidential the permitted inside view is, the less one is invited to think of the speaker as an autobiographical figure. Even where there exist autobiographical underpinnings to the poem, these are of less significance than is the sense, not merely of a formalized version of the poet, but of an invented figure with discoverable characteristics who appears to "live spontaneously of itself"<sup>13</sup> and, one might add, to live entirely within the poetic structure.

The speaker's relationship with the presented world seems to be another factor in "Old Mansion" that helps render the speaker fictive. Vivienne Koch, examining Ransom's development from the "naïve identification with his materials"<sup>14</sup> of Poems About God, makes a very suggestive comment: "In Ransom's best poems . . . the objective fable is less transparent, and this tighter logical structure enriches meaning."<sup>15</sup> The narrative framework of his later poems provides for "this tighter logical structure"; and what Professor Koch implies here is that the element of narration or fictionality detaches Ransom the poet from his speaker.

This is a fascinating point, although one rather difficult to substantiate. There is a sense of the separation of the presented world of "Old Mansion" from external reality, so that the speaker, set in a fictive context, is established as fictive himself. The metaphorical use of the autobiographical details is significant here; they are used to contrast the world grounded in autobiographical reality with the world that inheres in the poem. The presented world is not only made autonomous but differentiated from external reality so sharply that the presented world is rendered emphatically fictive. Just as the reader recognizes the separation of the presented world from external or autobiographical reality, so is his awareness of

the speaker's presumably genuine past now subordinated to his awareness of him as a fictive figure.

To a rather different degree, the speaker in "Spectral Lovers" appears fictive, not as a result of any explicit self-characterization but through the nature of the presented world and his relationship with it.

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, unknissed?  
 Why should two lovers be frozen apart in fear?  
 And yet they were, they were.

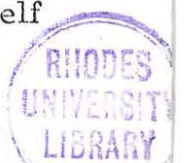
(ll. 1-6)

In the first stanza, the speaker introduces the story to which he provides the frame. This, in conjunction with the direct address in lines four to six, characterizes him not as endowed with the traditional omniscience of the third-person speaker but as a man in a world of limited mortals. Although he stands outside the realm of the presented world, he remains attached to it in forms of sympathy. He knows that he is faced with a predicament illustrating the duality of the world, the opposition of man and nature, but he is unable to determine how it comes about.

In the final stanza, however, the speaker presents himself as existing within the spatio-temporal framework of the two lovers:

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.

The nature of the lovers is mysterious and fantastic. Earlier, in the opening stanza, the speaker has attested to the marvellous quality of the story he is telling, and, since he stood then outside its realm, he himself





seemed to be grounded in reality. Now this is no longer the case. He has himself taken on the fictiveness of the story told as he moves into its realm.

In "Philomela", the identity of the speaker is particularly complex, drawing as it does on the kind of autobiographical and fictive elements present in "Old Mansion" as well as on the presence of a poet-figure:

Procne, Philomela, and Itylus,  
Your names are liquid, your improbable tale  
Is recited in the classic numbers of the nightingale.  
Ah, but our numbers are not felicitous,  
It goes not liquidly for us.

Perched on a Roman ilex, and duly apostrophized,  
The nightingale descanted unto Ovid;  
She has even appeared to the Teutons, the swilled and gravid;  
At Fontainebleau it may be the bird was gallicized;  
Never was she baptized.

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

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

I pernoctated with the Oxford students once,  
And in the quadrangles, in the cloisters, on the Cher,  
Precociously knocked at antique doors ajar,  
Fatuously touched the hems of the hierophants,  
Sick of my dissonance.

I went out to Bagley Wood, I climbed the hill;  
Even the moon had slanted off in a twinkling,  
I heard the sepulchral owl and a few bells tinkling,  
There was no more villainous day to unfulfil,  
The diuturnity was still.

Out of the darkness where Philomela sat,  
Her fairy numbers issued. What then ailed me?  
My ears are called capacious but they failed me,  
Her classics registered a little flat!  
I rose, and venomously spat.

Philomela, Philomela, lover of song,  
 I am in despair if we may make us worthy,  
 A bantering breed sophisticated and swarthy;  
 Unto more beautiful, persistently more young,  
 Thy fabulous provinces belong.

On one level, there is no apparent distinction between the speaker and Ransom's empirical self. America provides the culture in which the poet is born, Oxford provides the setting. At the same time, the speaker is not simply the Ransom that leaves America to study at Oxford, but is representative of the American race, the "bantering breed sophisticated and swarthy". That his identification with it is qualified is apparent in his use of irony, the disenchantment with America's politics, and also in his recognition, presented in lines thirty-one to thirty-five, that the inability to hear the nightingale's song is clearly the fault of the speaker and not of the song. In these lines, the speaker temporarily detaches himself from the community "I" which he initially represents. And again, the kind of self-characterization employed in these lines momentarily removes the speaker from the realm of autobiographical self. He observes, as in "Old Mansion", his character; he is the subject of his mind.

Working in conjunction with the autobiographical and community selves is the fact that the voice belongs to a poet-figure. The speaker is making a plea for poetry, on behalf of modern poets not quite "worthy" to hear the song. As already suggested, there is an autobiographical tendency in the narrative that begins in stanza five. But, if one treats these stanzas as part of a continuous process that begins in the second stanza, the narrative may be viewed slightly differently.

The poet-speaker moves through cultures and times, from the classical Rome of Ovid to modern times. "Philomela" is a highly allusive poem, and it is through these allusions that the reader may understand most profoundly the speaker's identification with all poets, in the sense that he speaks for them. The impression of allusiveness is difficult to document with any accuracy; however, a few suggestions of possible allusions to



English poetry may be helpful here, provided that they are understood as echoes and not as actual debts.

While the language of the fifth stanza seems to give a flavour of seventeenth-century literary England,<sup>16</sup> the language changes radically in the sixth stanza, now becoming reminiscent of Gray's "drowsy tinklings" and "moping owl".<sup>17</sup> Perhaps, with the reference to Bagley Wood, it alludes even more strongly to Matthew Arnold, particularly to his "The Scholar Gipsy", although his "Philomela" is another possible echo. The recognition of the possibilities of hearing the nightingale's song at night, in lines twenty-nine to thirty-two, might be read as an echo of Robert Bridges's "Nightingales",<sup>18</sup>

Alone, aloud in the raptured ear of men  
We pour our dark nocturnal secret . . .  
(ll. 13-14)

The point to be made here has less to do with tracing the allusions than it has with the fact that the speaker is chronicling the poet's growing sense of a temporal and spatial dislocation that makes it impossible for him to lose his sophistication and achieve again the "persistently more young" Greek culture. The impression of a temporal dislocation is made the more alarming through the paradox within the poem: the poet-speaker knocks "Precociously", having not yet achieved the maturity that inheres in "perennial youth", as Arnold puts it.<sup>19</sup> Since the speaker presents himself as a poet, in main concerns and rôle, one is invited, remembering the discovered autobiographical connections, to conflate the poet-speaker with Ransom as empirical, historical figure. This is an accurate enough equation, provided that one remembers that here it is Ransom speaking for all modern poets about a concern with poetry, and not simply for his himself.

The discussion of the speaker in terms of characterization requires a further clarification. Buffington has expressed a justifiable concern that relates very closely to the approach taken in the present study, and it is worth quoting him at length:

Because Ransom's poems are based often on a kind of narrative situation--that is, on the kind of situation that the prose fictionist could work with too--the reader may be led . . . to compare the poet to the novelists and come away complaining that his people are only types. . . . With many poems, in fact, we needlessly confuse ourselves by thinking in terms of character at all, especially when we mean the character of the "narrator," or "speaker," or "persona." The vagueness about the narrator of which [one] critic complains in "Here Lies a Lady" is due really to the fact that there is no narrator at all--that is, no speaker distinct from the poet, as long as we understand that by poet we do not mean the historical John Crowe Ransom. The I of "Here Lies a Lady" is no different from the I of "The Equilibrists," of "Spectral Lovers," or "Good Ships"; in these poems there is no intention to make the I a distinct character, with a distinct relation to other distinct characters, as the term "narrator" or "speaker" might imply.<sup>20</sup>

Buffington's caveat must be seriously considered. While no argument is offered against his valid objection to generic confusion concerning characterization of the figures within the presented world, it is necessary to treat the comments about the speaker with some caution. In "Here Lies a Lady",<sup>21</sup> the speaker, while he does conform to the poet-figure in his direct address, also presents himself as a distinct figure at the woman's death-bed, through the use of the pronoun "we" that identifies him as one of the group specified earlier:

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.

(ll. 13-16)

In "Good Ships", the speaker's function seems simply to provide a hesitant valuation of the figures presented. Here, of course, one would

not consider him as a fictive figure, in the sense in which I have used the term. In "The Equilibrists", the speaker's character emerges in a peculiar way. He is presented initially, that is, in stanza six, as outside the compass of the presented world, into which he moves in the next stanza: "At length I saw these lovers fully were come/Into their torture of equilibrium" (ll. 25-26). After moving back into the rôle of speaker external to the presented world, to address mankind in general, he returns to the spatio-temporal realm of the presented world, even becoming the central character in the enacted drama. For the poem concerns not only the lovers but also the speaker's attitude to them which he defines as he progressively comes to terms with their predicament. In fact, contrary to what Buffington has said, the speaker in this poem differs radically from the speaker in "Good Ships".

What one must grant Buffington is that the devices of characterization and the depth of characterization, both of speaker and of presented figures, are not the same in lyric poetry as in the novel. One may only draw analogies, and that only with great care. In some of Ransom's poetry, the speaker is purely the organizing principle, giving a frame to the story told. In other poems, he is more than this: he becomes an important dramatic character in the poem, with his identity, his actions and his attitudes providing the main key to an understanding of the work.

In many lyrics, as in Shakespeare's sonnets, say, or in Wordsworth's poetry, there is a tendency on the part of the reader to conflate the speaker with the poet. In Ransom's verse, as in so much of the modern period, there is often a removal of speaker from poet, an ironic distance, although Ransom is undoubtedly less concerned with the variety of masks and the tendency toward unreliability that is associated with much modern poetry.<sup>22</sup> In Ransom's poetry, the distinction between the speaker and the poet's empirical self is effected primarily through the care that Ransom takes to emphasize not only the speaker's relation to a fictive world, his depth of character and his high degree of self-consciousness, but also

his peculiar freedom of perspective. At times Ransom's "I" is detached in time and space, at times he is firmly located in time and space. That such movement of perspective can occur within any one poem likens Ransom's work especially to Chaucer's, where the fluidity of the narrator is particularly evident. Whatever links the reader may draw between Ransom's speaker and Ransom himself and however much he may recognize that a distinctive voice undoubtedly runs through his poetry, he must also appreciate that the speaker is a figure in his own right and that he serves to convey a dramatic gesture, not to express autobiographical feelings.

It was only during his Fugitive days that Ransom learnt to control his poetic stance. Apart from his marked development in terms of stanza forms, there is a difference in the nature of his speaker and in that speaker's attitude toward himself. Poems About God contains hints of self-mockery which tend to render the speaker naïve, and even unreliable, not in the richly interpretative sense in which Browning's speakers may be unreliable but in a rather more uncertain way. It is only in later verse that Ransom achieved a fine balance between authority and hesitancy.

Occasionally in Poems About God, however, we come across Ransom's typical speaker as we now know him, as in "Moonlight":<sup>23</sup>  
 "And I the chief of sinners, I/The middlemost Victorian!" (ll. 11-12).  
 And in "The School",<sup>24</sup> a poem thematically reminiscent of both "Philomela" and "Antique Harvesters" (the speaker first yearns for a classical tradition and then turns greedily towards money and power), there is even more than the expansive gesture noted above:

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

(ll. 10-18)

Here is the kind of characterization and something of the complexity of attitude that vouchsafes the speaker the status of a fictive figure.

Later, of course, the ironic nuances would be more subtle, the self-appraisal more detached.



## NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

<sup>1</sup>Jarrell, p. 91.

<sup>2</sup>Langbaum, p. 41.

<sup>3</sup>This phrase is taken from Geoffrey N. Leech, A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry (London: Longman, 1969), p. 189.

<sup>4</sup>Cited by S.V. Keeling, Descartes (London: Ernest Benn, 1934), p. 119.

<sup>5</sup>Feeling and Form (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), p. 212.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 228.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 217.

<sup>8</sup>Buffington, The Equilibrist, p.78.

<sup>9</sup>The Logic of Literature, trans. Marilyn J. Rose (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1973), p. 30.

<sup>10</sup>John Crowe Ransom, p. 30.

<sup>11</sup>"Landscape into Art: Henry James and John Crowe Ransom", Sewanee Review, LXXIX (1971), 209-10. Brown refers to the earlier version of "Old Mansion" (Poems and Essays, pp. 36-37). In the 1963 and 1969 versions, "foreign weed" appears as "dying weed", in the last stanza. It is interesting to note that stanza nine was also revised, with the result that the autobiographical connection is stronger than in earlier versions.

<sup>12</sup>The Poetical Works of Wordsworth, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, rev. Ernest de Selincourt (1904; rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1939), pp. 195-97.

<sup>13</sup>Käte Hamburger, p. 298.

<sup>14</sup>Koch, p. 236.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 234.

<sup>16</sup>Even the word "fatuously", which has a distinctly modern ring, takes one back to the seventeenth century. The hint of dementia contained in its meaning is viable in Ransom's line.

<sup>17</sup>The Poems of Gray, Collins and Goldsmith, ed. Roger Lonsdale (London: Longman, 1969), pp. 117-40. The words quoted are from lines 8 and 10 respectively.

<sup>18</sup>The New Oxford Book of English Verse, pp. 774-75.

<sup>19</sup>The Poems of Matthew Arnold, ed. Kenneth Allott (London: Longman, 1965), pp. 333-44. The words quoted are from The Scholar-Gipsy, l. 229.

<sup>20</sup>Buffington, The Equilibrist, pp. 8-9. Although he does not refer to him by name, Buffington is apparently referring to Parsons.

<sup>21</sup>I have used the "A" version in Selected Poems, not the revised one.

<sup>22</sup>Michael Hamburger, in his book, The Truth of Poetry: Tensions in Modern Poetry from Baudelaire to the 1960s (1969; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), has some very useful comments on the difference between the confessional "I" of Romantic poetry and the dramatic "I" of later poetry.

<sup>23</sup>Poems About God, p. 24.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp. 72-73.

## CHAPTER THREE

### FIRST-PERSON POEMS

#### 1. The Central Speaker

In poems which create a presented world, the distinction between a third-person and a first-person poem is based on the predominant spatio-temporal designation of the speaker and on the degree of attention focussed upon him. In a first-person poem, the speaker takes up a position within the presented world. What he tells us about that world and the figures in it is, in general, limited by what he is able to see, hear or understand from his particular perspective. In "Dead Boy", as in "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter", the speaker is an observer and a participant in the events after the death of a child. The speaker of "Dead Boy" has some access to the feelings and statements of the other figures that make up the world. He is able to speak of the sorrow of the woman and the other relatives, and to repeat what the neighbours and the preacher say. On the other hand, the speaker of a third-person poem speaks from his own spatio-temporal realm, which is distinct from that of the presented figures. The actions and feelings of the figures are mediated by the speaker, who stands between the world and the reader. In "Spectral Lovers", a third-person poem, emphasis rests to a far greater extent upon the presented world than upon the speaker, whose predominant spatio-temporal orientation is outside the world. At the end of the poem, the

speaker says: "They passed me once in April, in the mist." (l. 31) Yet this momentary merging of the realms of speaker and presented world is not sufficient to place the poem in the first-person category, since the two realms remain, for the most part, separate, with the speaker firmly in his rôle of story-teller and only briefly in the rôle of presented figure.

As suggested in the previous chapter, not all of Ransom's poems establish a presented world. In these reflexive poems, there is no narrative thread that implies movement within the temporal realm inhering in the poem, nor a sense of the autonomous existence of figures in the poem. . . All these poems are, by their very nature, first-person poems: the discourse emanates from a single "I" and does not refer to a field of experience of which the speaker is not the origin.<sup>1</sup> The speaker reveals his consciousness in enactment. There is no retrospection and no remembered action; no temporal gap, no earlier and later. Instead of mediation, we get immediate revelation. These poems will be discussed at the end of this chapter, after analysis of the relation of the speaker to the presented world.

Generally, Ransom uses the past tense to denote the temporal level of the experiencing self, with the level of the speaking self kept either implicitly or explicitly distinct. In "Two Sonnets",<sup>2</sup> the protagonist's contact with his beloved is presented as past and the temporal level of the speaking self is merely referred to: "But think how the poor heart waxed, / The chidden wonder of women, the huge I!" (ll. 11-12) In "The Rose", the use of the present tense provides a platform for universalization: the two time levels of speaker and experiencer are drawn together, giving an impression of the world as eternally present. The suffering is never relieved. This kind of temporal congruence is, of course, a common narrative device. Edwin Muir uses it to particular effect in "The Combat", for instance.

In "Philomela", as in "The Rose", the protagonist's development

takes place in the past. The present tense is used for general statements. The speaker has fashioned an earlier experience into a distinct shape that he can apprehend and evaluate. In "Old Mansion", as well as in "Philomela", the speaker, through the special organization that his memory or retrospective vantage point provides, is able to recognize the complexity of his response at the time and also add to that past response his present attitude. Yet the last two lines of "Old Mansion" demonstrate an essential difference between this poem and "Philomela" in terms of poetic situation. The speaker says: "And I went with courage shaken/To dip, alas, into some unseemlier world." His recognition of what is to befall the experiencing self is a move beyond the temporal realm of that self, a move into the future. The speaker does not simply describe his encounter with the old South and his later response, but he provides us with a glimpse of the process of maturation that takes place during the time between his encounter and his final appreciation of that encounter.

The rendering of the psychological development that distinguishes the experiencing self from the speaking self is more explicit in "Hilda" than in "Old Mansion". The first sonnet of "Hilda", in the past tense, presents the realm of the experiencing self, while the second sonnet presents that of the speaking self. The temporal distinction between realms provides for a juxtaposition of the values of the two selves. The final lines of each sonnet correspond: the speaker points to his earthly imperfections in relation to Hilda's presumed perfections. In the first sonnet, the experiencing self "was a clod mumbling, to catch her ear", and, in the second, the speaker says, "But what I wear is flesh; it weighs like stone." Yet, as Buffington points out, the first is said "with the self-deprecation of the rejected suitor" and the second "with the flatness of a definition, of a fact that may only be accepted".<sup>3</sup> In the second sonnet of "Hilda", the emphasis is almost completely on the speaker's present, which provides a sense of intimacy with the speaker as he explores the



implications of his relationship with Hilda. Unlike the poems mentioned so far, this one does not make the reader think of the speaker as having already organized his response.

It is with these two points in mind that "Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son" will be approached: the intimate view that the reader has of both the speaking and the experiencing self, and the development that characteristically distinguishes the speaker from his earlier self. In the last two stanzas of this poem, one is given an intimate glimpse into the consciousnesses of both selves:

But like a King I was subject to a King's condition,  
And I marched on,  
Not testing at eavesdrop the glory of my suspicion,  
And the talkers were gone--

And duly appeared I on the very clock-throb appointed  
In the litten room,  
Nor was hailed with that love that leaps to the Heir Anointed:  
"Hush, hush, he is come!"

In the third line of each stanza, the negative is placed at the beginning of the line. In the line, "Not testing at eavesdrop the glory of my suspicion", the word "glory" is emphasized even though it is denied, so that one is aware of the past emotion as well as of the later insight. Similarly, in the line, "Nor was hailed with that love that leaps to the Heir Anointed", the joy that the experiencing self expected has not materialized yet it is rendered with a sense of immediacy; its attraction remains. The last line, "Hush, hush, he is come!", strengthens this impression of immediacy. The notion of a lost kingdom, of a special destiny, remains to tease the speaker and the reader although both know of its fantasy and its danger. As nowhere else in the poem, one keeps simultaneously in mind both the pathos of the experiencing self's searching for and expecting so ardent a welcome, and the ironic view of the speaking self, who has come to recognize his earlier foolishness and vanity.

Throughout the poem, the degree of maturity that differentiates the two selves is implied in the ironic tone with which the speaker judges his earlier actions and attitudes. The temporal distinction between the selves is suggested primarily by the word "then", in the first line of the sixth stanza. The psychological distinction may be seen particularly in the fourth, fifth and sixth stanzas:

Yet privy to great dreams, and secret in vainglory,  
And hot and proud,  
And poor and bewildered, and longing to hear my own story  
Rehearsed aloud--

How I have passed, involved in these chances and choices,  
By certain trees  
Whose tiny attent auricles receive the true voices  
Of the wordless breeze--

And against me the councils of spirits were not then darkened  
Who thereby house,  
As I set my boots to the path beneath them, and harkened  
To the talking boughs--

The spirits heard in the rustling trees used to predict for the lyric "I" a destiny far brighter than he knows he has attained. From his retrospective vantage point, he is able not only to foreshadow the end, but also to characterize his earlier self as presumptuously and confusedly desiring a different destiny, a different identity. Just as Tom had wanted to change his character, not through his own mental effort but through fantastic changes in external circumstance, he later seems also to fall prey to a pathetic shrugging-off of responsibility: it is the spirits who are held responsible, they are now "darkened" against him. Yet, however great or slight the psychological growth, the speaking self, through his diction, does provide ironical overtones: the word "rehearsed", for instance, suggests the unreality of the experiencing self's "story", insight to which only the mature self has access.

Ransom revised the poem for Selected Poems, titling it "The Vanity of the Bright Boys". Although, in the original version, Tom's ironic

view of his earlier self is a sign of some degree of development, the revision seems to have been made in order to give the protagonist a possibility for greater development, or, as Ransom has put it, a "foreseeable future".<sup>4</sup> In his comments on the revision, Ransom says that he finds the earlier version "a painful one which ends without any resolution of Tom's final despair".<sup>5</sup> Assuming that the "litten room" signifies death, real or metaphorical, it seems that Tom speaks from a state that leads to no future, and, in order to give him one, the poetic situation of the poem was totally reorganized. The final version is in the third person: a speaker outside the presented world mediates the experiences of the presented figure. While discussion of this poem would properly belong to the section on third-person poems, some comments on its use of perspective will show, by comparison, the value of the first-person retrospective vantage point in "Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son". When Ransom changed the perspective from first to third person, he did not compensate for the loss of the relationship between speaking and experiencing selves. Miller Williams, who has much the same response to the revisions as I have, adds an interesting conjecture:

Whether the human concern behind the change in the closing of "The Vanity of the Bright Boys" is consistent with the aesthetic concern, or ought to override it, is something else. I suspect that the poem may suffer for the sake of the boy; I suspect also that Ransom may quite gladly have made that choice.<sup>6</sup>

In "The Vanity of the Bright Boys", there is a strong emphasis throughout on the speaker's mediative presence; very few phrases, if any, seem to emanate from the boy himself. The distance between reader and boy is almost unchanging; one does not have as much insight into this boy as one did into Tom. The envoi to the poem throws further stress on to the speaker as medium. Throughout the poem, the evaluation of the boy is clear: the speaker finds his fantasy pernicious, his maturation welcome.

Yet, in the envoi, the tone is flippant:

Dawn, you've purpled a politic Prince,  
He's done no running and peeking since,  
Thrones are trash, and Kings are dumb,  
Say, would he rather his kingdom come?

One is left with a feeling of confusion. It seems that the speaker is now mocking the boy's development or, if not that, his own valuation of that development. This might, of course, offer an interesting further dimension to the poem; my objection here is simply that the reader is left uncertain as to the speaker's ultimate attitude. Either there could have been a foreshadowing, within the body of the poem, of the speaker's ironic view of the boy's maturation, or the tone could have been more carefully controlled in the envoi.

The lack of success of the revised version is due largely to what appears to be equivocation by the speaker. In many of Ransom's poems, there are contradictory elements in the speaker's attitude, but these are kept distinct and not, as here, confused. Again, Ransom usually achieves a fine balance between the realms of speaker and world, so that both are rendered with some degree of intimacy. In "The Vanity of the Bright Boys", there is an over-emphasis on the speaker, with a concomitant loss of interest in the presented figure, who is generalized, even puppet-like.

In "Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son", the speaker's ability to convey an ironic view of his earlier self gives a sense of development that is rendered clumsily in the revision. Certainly the boy in "The Vanity of the Bright Boys" transcends the self who believed in "castles in the air" (l. 40), and he achieves in reality a special position: the boys "waved a welcome to bright boy returning/As blest for having him there" (ll. 37-38). Yet his development seems too sudden, as unreal as the earlier state: "He awoke, ashamed, absolved of brain-washed ambition/And tired royal .

blood" (ll. 27-28). Perhaps more importantly, the change from first- to third-person discourse involves the loss of the interplay between speaking and experiencing selves. The reader has direct contact with Tom's evaluation and correction of his earlier self's behaviour and values, while, in the revised version, this sense of intimacy is lost on two levels--neither the speaker nor the presented figure is brought very close to the reader.

This is not to suggest that the first-person perspective is generally a more valuable one than the third-person perspective. There are special advantages to both, and Ransom is usually seen to make use of them. But, in this instance, he has lost the advantages of the first-person mode without replacing them with the corresponding third-person advantages. The revision fails in itself, but its failure is even more of a pity since it entails the loss of an entire level of meaning that existed in the original version.

It is precisely through the immediacy of both the past and the present that the intricate tonal qualities of "Winter Remembered" are created. The title of this poem and the recognition that the speaker is looking back over past experience alerts one to a possible disadvantage in the establishing of temporal distance: that the past will forego any sense of emotional force. Donald A. Stauffer, in fact, says that "Ransom's poems, almost without exception, are limited to retrospection. Their subjects do not move; their emotions are over."<sup>7</sup> To a poet who consistently strove to avoid sentimentality, temporal distance is, of course, particularly appealing. Yet Ransom, contrary to what Stauffer suggests, usually renders both the present and the past with a sense of immediacy so that, in "Winter Remembered", the horror of the past still remains. At the same time, and this illustrates Ransom's ability, the speaker retains the capacity to view his past with a measure of detachment.



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.

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.

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 poetic situation of "Winter Remembered" follows a clear symmetrical pattern. The first two stanzas develop a movement from the past to the present and back to the past. This pattern is repeated in the last two stanzas. In both pairs, the mediative process is retained: the speaker looks back over the past from a fixed temporal position. In the central stanza, the past is presented without any mediation, as the centre of orientation shifts back in time. Now the voice is that of the experiencing self, with the demonstrative adjectives "that" and "there" pointing to his future. This shift into the past suggests, I think, the speaker's acceptance of his earlier decisions; suggests, that is, the reasons for his not providing any apology or excuse for an inevitable situation. He believed then, and still believes, that the numbing of one's senses in response to extreme misery offers the only hope of survival.

What the speaker is, in fact, telling his beloved is that he once forgot her--once had to forget her--and that he is not sorry for it. How is it, one must ask, that Ransom is able to turn this confession of neglect into an affirmation of love? To answer this, it is important to recognize

an additional time level in the poem: besides the speaking present and the experienced past, we have a past beyond that past, an implied pre-history. The sense of present address is maintained throughout the poem in such phrases as "Think not" and "Dear love", but it is rather in such phrases as "A cry of Absence, Absence, in the heart" and "Far from my cause, my proper heat and center", as well as in the references to his throbbing heart, his fierce "heart's blood", that the speaker pays tribute to his lady. Here, the speaker, in ranging back to the feelings he used to have for his beloved, seems to link his present attitude with that earlier one; we assume that the winter has simply been an interlude and is not to be taken as signifying an end to love. The demonstrative adjectives throughout the fourth and fifth stanzas serve to stress the linking of pre-history and present and also to communicate a feeling of wonder, mingled with dismay, that so loving a body would fail to recall, even fail to honour, his love.

Critics have often pointed out that the metaphor of the fingers as "ten frozen parsnips hanging in the weather" is a metaphysical conceit. Joseph E. Duncan has compared it to Donne's conceit in "The Comparison": "And like a bunch of ragged carrots stand/The short swoll'n fingers of thy gouty hand" (ll. 33-34).<sup>8</sup> Donne's speaker uses the comparison to satirize the mistress of his "friend". Ransom's comparison, on the other hand, creates for the speaker a "self-satiric plaint".<sup>9</sup> There is no imitation here by Ransom, but rather a metamorphosis of, even a conscious improvement on, Donne's conceit. The pale colour of parsnips, their need for frost to be properly flavoursome, and even the proverb, "Fine words butter no parsnips", are possibly the allusions Ransom is building on, making parsnips, shaped so like carrots, more appropriate here. Indeed, the appropriateness of this metaphor impresses Thornton Parsons:

This concluding image centripetally pulls in all the motifs of the poem: the atmosphere of cold weather, the hyperbolic metaphor of psychic numbness induced by gradual exposure to the cold, the theme of loneliness, the consistently indirect celebration of the absent lover.<sup>10</sup>

Laura Ridng and Robert Graves, on the other hand, object to the "formal clownishness"<sup>11</sup> of the conceit, saying that it "adds a pathetic element, a tearfulness, which rarely is entirely sincere",<sup>12</sup> Robert Buffington, more adequately, finds that the wit of this imagery "works against the pathetic".<sup>13</sup> Although the wit is a means of detachment, of stressing that the loss of feeling is now past and of suggesting the speaker's rather rueful self-deprecation, it by no means invalidates the strength of the past experience. It serves, among other things, to disengage the past from the present. The past attitude alluded to here is not to be taken by his beloved as a threat since the experience has now been transcended. Yet, although the speaker does maintain some distance from his earlier experience, in terms of tone and the treatment of time, there is also a sense of candour, of directness, that cuts across this distance.

Ransom, who once deplored the poet's "brashly speaking in his own person to his own love",<sup>14</sup> has managed to create the sense of a fictive, objectified speaker in "Winter Remembered" by allowing him some detachment from his past self. As Vivienne Koch says of this poem, "the dramatic necessities involve the poet at once as narrator, subject, and protagonist."<sup>15</sup> The peculiar balance of detachment and involvement, so typical of the Ransomic speaker, defends him against the charge of giving false value to that earlier experience. He maintains his authority in much the same way as the speaker of "Dead Boy", through the combined involvement with and distance from the presented events, avoids a sentimental view.

"Vision by Sweetwater" offers itself as a comparable, though an even more complex, instance of the first-person perspective. The problems that some critics have had in analysing this poem suggest that it is a difficult work; however, since these problems stem largely from the critics' failure to come to terms with the particular poetic situation, it seems that careful attention to the ownership of voice and the speaker's changing identity will remove some of these difficulties.

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.

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?

Failure to grasp the shifting perspective from which the presented experience is being viewed leads one critic into confusion about the poem. Thornton Parsons, speaking particularly about the line, "If there were a little colony all hens", but making an adverse criticism of the entire poem, says: "This quaint drollery has the effect of an author's intrusion. Wry casuistry breaks the precariously created lyric mood."<sup>16</sup> Not only is the term "author's intrusion" both outdated and prescriptive, but it is also misused.<sup>17</sup> "Vision by Sweetwater" is, obviously, a first-person poem. One would not speak of an "author" in this case, and one should certainly not object to the speaker's commenting on his own past experience. It seems that Parsons does not understand the nature of the poem: namely, that the poetic situation is based upon the presentation and interaction of two strands of consciousness, phrases like "The willows, clouds, deep meadowgrass, and river" emanating from one, and "If there were a little colony of hens" from another.

The speaking self mediates his past experience and also focusses on the present. Through the play between the two voices, present self and past self, much of the meaning and value of the poem is revealed. The direct quotation, "Go and ask Robin to bring the girls over/To Sweetwater", places the reader in direct relation with the younger self's



experiences; that is, since there is no sense of mediation, he momentarily adopts the perspective of the experiencing self. The single perspective with which the poem opens changes with the use of the past tense. The phrase, "said my Aunt", points, of course, to retrospective mediation. It is seen as a trigger both to the subsequent action in the realm of the experiencing self and to the subsequent mental activity of that of the speaker. The sentence, "and that was why/It was like a dream of ladies", is more complex. It signals the speaker's attempt to put in order a half-remembered incident, showing the movement in his mind as he tries to resolve the question of the fictiveness or reality of that vague memory.

The reader is quickly drawn back into the realm of the past with the evocative imagery of lines three to six. Nevertheless, the mediative process remains clear, though of diminished emphasis, not only in the use of the past tense, but also in the word "dream", which indicates that the speaker's memory is still obscure. The incident remains in another time, another place.

The two lines which follow and which end the second stanza take one back to the realm of the speaking self. Possibly Parsons, objecting to the speaker's reasoning, which he finds specious, reads these lines as an attempt to clarify the idea that the speaker is referring not to all wrens, but to female wrens only. Buffington also finds these lines slight: they "add nothing to an unremarkable though appropriate metaphor, add only a little to the picture, but are a pleasure".<sup>18</sup> Yet these lines seem to refer, too, to the confusion in the speaker's mind as to the exact nature of the experience. Was there a group of females, in fact, or does his memory play him tricks? The speaker also wonders at the boldness this female group displays in going to a place with a "steep turn". Far from being either specious or even slight, these lines contribute to that sense of confusion which is at the very centre of the meaning of the poem. The exact import of the event is uncertain for the speaker, who conveys



to the reader this very sense of bewilderment.

It is with an increasing feeling of urgency, an urgency strengthened by the quickening of the rhythm, that the speaker calls back to his aunt over the span of time, in order to freeze the remembered scene. Instead of the shifts from the realm of older self to that of younger self, we see the two merging: the experience is no longer a childhood one, which served only to trigger the present thought process, but an adult one. The speaker, having moved now from his earlier half-memory, realises why it is that he has felt the need to explore it. For, although he has been "fishing", it has been in comparatively clear waters. Now he is to explore a correlative incident, not necessarily a real one, but one that has occurred in the "dark" of his mind. The word "dark" severs this part of the poem from the earlier part. It is not what happened to him as a child, but what profound vision this childhood incident has reminded him of, that is now at the centre of his mind. As Miller Williams suggests, "The fancy comes out of the fact."<sup>19</sup> The "ladies" turn into "bright virgins" of a vision, which occurs to the speaker as a present experience that, at the same time, pulls him back into the past.

It is difficult to determine the exact nature of the past to which the speaker returns. Williams, who leaves open the question of whether the speaker is remembering a scream heard in his childhood or whether he is "jerked . . . back from reveries of childhood"<sup>20</sup> by the scream, says:

The "strange quick tongue" of the last stanza lets us know that the recognition, when it comes, will not be of anything local or even English. Then suddenly the speaker knows that what has been haunting him is the sense of the tragic and specifically the tragic as the Greek mind understood it. The scream resolves it, and as he identifies the ghost and gets rid of it in knowledge there is a catharsis of sorts.<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, Buffington finds that the speaker is back in his childhood, and

sees suddenly something Greek in [the ladies'] aspect potential of tragedy, and hears from the future a sound of terror. . . . Where does the child get his sudden insight? The implication, psychologically, is of the collective unconscious: the "dark" of the mind; theologically, of original sin.<sup>22</sup>

Because of the separation of fact from fancy earlier in the poem, one is not here invited to think of the last two lines of the poem as the completion of the memory of real childhood experience. The adult has felt a need to explore a vague memory, which has provided the impetus for the vision. The merging of the adult and the innocent mind has meaning, it would seem, through the fact that it is both the adult and the child who have a relationship with the "scream". The adult becomes a child in that he, so involved in his vision, sees it as freshly as a child would, experiencing, with a shock of newness, the awareness of mortality and fear that precipitates maturity. The child, at this awareness, becomes an adult.

The merging of the two minds is significant in another respect. In the last two stanzas, the speaker has brought the reader very close to his vision, through the use of an archetype and through the rich imagery; and, in order to maintain this sense of immediacy, Ransom cleverly avoids any precise speaker-orientation. The strands of consciousness are brought together: the reader remembers the immediacy of the earlier scene that was rendered through the child's consciousness, while the speaker maintains control of the mediative process. Parsons's objection<sup>23</sup> about the adult's interpolation in a child's realm falls away once one understands the maintenance in the poem of two thought processes. Were the poem mediated solely through a child's consciousness, the implications of the scream would not be accessible; the adult speaker must retain control in order to provide the reader with a mature viewpoint.

Although most of the poems discussed in this section use a retrospective vantage point, they are by no means "limited to retrospection".<sup>24</sup> First of all, the high degree of particularization involved in the presentation of past experience gives the presented world a sense of immediacy. Secondly,

in addition to the speaker's mediating his past experience, there is a constant focus, not only on the speaker's present but, more importantly, on the interaction between his present and his past. Apart from this impression of immediate contact with the presented world, the reader finds in these first-person poems a vitality that stems from the movement of the speaker's mind over his past. The speaker is necessarily distanced in time from this event, yet makes himself sensitive to it in order to put it into perspective and to discover its implications or to correct his earlier response to the event. The reader, then, sees both the final judgement and the process by which the speaker arrives at this judgement.

F.O. Matthiessen says that "we can perceive the central element in Ransom's conception of poetry, how a poem must be an act of knowing."<sup>25</sup> Matthiessen seems to be drawing attention to two aspects of Ransom's art: that his poems are constructed around an act of knowing and that they are about an act of knowing, about how to go back to past experience and reorganize it. This points back to what has been said about Ransom's interest in the retrospective vantage point. If we recall a statement made by Ransom about the writing of poetry, we may extend Matthiessen's comment to mean that some of Ransom's poems, being about an act of knowing, are also about writing poetry:

It is the inexperienced artist who attributes sanctity to some detail of his inspiration. . . . But the competent artist is as sure of his second thoughts as of his first ones. In fact, surer, if anything; second thoughts tend to be the richer, for in order to get them he has to break up the obvious trains of association and explore more widely.<sup>26</sup>

This remark would apply particularly to the speaker's wider exploration of his childhood world in "Vision by Sweetwater". It is also Ransom's third-person poems which so often invite the reader to discover in the Ransomic speaker a "competent artist", one who re-builds his experience, focussing

both on that past experience or observation and on his present attitude to it. As in much modern poetry, Ransom's speaker observes himself critically and ironically. He does not set himself up as an infallible proclaimer of standards and values but as a fallible guide, one who belongs to a world of limited mortals but who is not, however, unreliable.

In most of Ransom's first-person central poems, then, the speaker looks back at an event in his personal history and thereby tells us something about himself. The laying bare of the speaker's innermost self gives many of these poems an extreme sense of privacy, which is sometimes augmented by the speaker's intimate mode of address. While the first-person poems usually read as the revelation of self to self, the speaker occasionally invites his beloved to hear his private experience, as in "Winter Remembered" or, in a slightly different way, "Prelude to an Evening". Although the speaker in "Winter Remembered" addresses his beloved, he maintains the sense of intimate disclosure that one associates with Donne's "The Dreame", for instance. "Prelude to an Evening" is not, strictly speaking, addressed to the speaker's beloved for she is not yet in the speaker's presence; as Ransom himself says in a comment on the revision, the speaker "is rehearsing the speech he will make in her presence in order to persuade her to share his fearful preoccupations and give him her entire allegiance".<sup>27</sup> "The Rose", too, employs this kind of private communication.

## 2. The Peripheral Speaker

Ransom's first-person central poems are to be distinguished from those first-person poems in which the speaker does not reveal a purely personal incident, but, standing on the periphery of a world made up of other figures and events, observes and comments on that world. In these first-person

peripheral poems, of which "Dead Boy" and "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" are examples, the speaker may be physically inactive or he may actively participate in the presented world, often moving to a position of near-centrality.

With many poets, the application of these technical terms, central and peripheral, will be mechanical and superficial; will not, that is, define an approach to the poem as a whole. But, in much of Ransom's poetry, the attempt to define the first-person speaker's stance in terms of these labels will often expose the significance of the stance chosen and, furthermore, reveal its thematic value. In "Hilda", for instance, the speaker's stance shifts from peripheral in the first sonnet to central in the second. At first, the experiencing self is an onlooker: his participation in the action does not go beyond his offering Hilda flowers before death, the "Estranger", comes to take her. It is only in the second sonnet, after her death, that his relationship with her becomes problematic. Now he observes not Hilda, but himself, around whom the ghosts, including Hilda, gather. His centrality in the presented world is apt: he has been touched by death. More than this, his new perspective reveals a different attitude to Hilda and to himself. Now it is more than circumstance that has made the speaker passive; it is his mortal being, his flesh, that weighs him down. Set as he is at the very centre of the world, his failure to follow Hilda is given a different evaluation and a greater poignancy. As in "Lady Lost" and "Vaunting Oak", the speaker's movement from the periphery of the presented world to the centre has thematic significance. The application of the terms, central and peripheral, has, then, more than a purely descriptive value, for it helps point to the themes and to define the speaker's attitude.

There is another way in which the use of these terms is especially helpful in Ransom's poetry. Sometimes, the attempt to label the speaker's stance will disclose an essential paradox: the speaker, technically



designated as peripheral, may, in a rather different sense, hold a central position in the literary work. In Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, while Gatsby is the central character and Nick Carraway the peripheral narrator, the critic must take into account, in addition to Nick's presentation of Gatsby, the growth of Nick's moral character in terms of his developing attitude towards Gatsby, which, in fact, provides the major structural movement of the novel. Similarly, in Conrad's Heart of Darkness, which critics have suggested as the source for Fitzgerald's use of the peripheral narrator, it is Marlow's attempt to unravel the mystery surrounding Kurtz that provides the meaning of the work. With the high degree of compression in poetry, the distinctions between a peripheral and a central stance may often be blurred. And in Ransom's poetry, where the central position is so often taken up by a cluster of figures or an event within the presented world, the peripheral speaker becomes a central figure in that it is in his developing attitude to the presented world that the significance of the poem emerges.

It is the dramatic involvement of the speaker in his narrative that Allen Tate points to as one of the defining features of the modern Southern mode of discourse. In an essay entitled "A Southern Mode of the Imagination",<sup>28</sup> Tate traces the movement from the traditional Southern rhetorical mode, in which a speaker reports "an argument or an action in which he is not dramatically involved", to the modern Southern mode which combines the rhetorical with the dialectical, the "give and take between two minds".

Even in Ransom's third-person poems, where the speaker is generally not involved, in an actual or external sense, in the presented world, he is, through the particular handling of the mediative process, dramatically involved. In the first-person peripheral poems, his psychological involvement is objectified by his actual presence in the presented world. Many of Ransom's first-person peripheral poems are about death. In the elegaic tradition, the speaker focuses not on the occasion of death itself

but on the expression of grief. In Miller Williams's words, "he is concerned not so much with mortality itself as he is concerned with the proper attitude toward mortality."<sup>29</sup> One may say of Ransom's first-person peripheral poems in general that the poet is concerned with attitudes.

In "Dead Boy", the speaker's learning process is comparable to the "act of knowing" of the first-person central poems, an act that depends upon the interaction between the past and the present. The speaker's immediate experience allows him to understand the past more clearly than he had at first and, through this insight, to understand also the present and the future. He constructs for himself an attitude to a specific death, and his access to the family's grief provides a lens through which he is able to recognize the loss of a crucial link in their family tradition. The other figures in the presented world--the Preacher and the neighbours--are locked into a static response: their past reaction to the death remains their present reaction.

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

A boy not beautiful, nor good, nor clever,  
A black cloud full of storms too hot for keeping,  
A sword beneath his mother's heart--yet never  
Woman bewept her babe as this is weeping.

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

The elder men have strode by the box of death  
To the wide flag porch, and muttering low send round  
The bruit of the day. O friendly waste of breath!  
Their hearts are hurt with a deep dynastic wound.

He was pale and little, the foolish neighbours say;  
The first-fruits, saith the Preacher, the Lord hath taken;  
But this was the old tree's late branch wrenched away,  
Grieving the sapless limbs, the shorn and shaken.

After the first stanza, which gives a general view of the present situation and hints at the response to be realized later, there is a temporal shift (by implication only, the tense itself does not change) to the past in the second stanza, and then back to the present. This stanza, with its double temporal reference, reveals the central conflict of the poem; that is, the conflict between the boy's worth as defined in the past, when he was alive, and his worth as defined in the present, once he is dead.

At the end of the second stanza, the speaker sees that "never/Woman bewept her babe as this is weeping", which is a foreshadowing of the speaker's final recognition of the boy's significance. In this fragment, past and present are drawn together as the speaker realizes that, however the boy appeared when alive, his worth to the family only now fully emerges. Through its archaic flavour, the word "bewept" suggests the antiquity of that family line, the rich tradition of that "noble house".

The third and fourth stanzas elucidate the speaker's growing awareness. Having earlier classified the boy as a "pig with a pasty face", the speaker now corrects his attitude, since he has access to the grief of the mother and the older relatives, whose "hearts are hurt with a deep dynastic wound ". The speaker's response is presented as superior to that of the Preacher, whose metaphor "first-fruits" signals his incomprehension of the implications of a line of tradition destroyed; and, again, superior to that of the "foolish neighbours", who maintain the kind of attitude that the speaker has himself transcended. Their sentiments have not been reshaped by an understanding of past tradition and future barrenness: they rest in a limited present.

Henry W. Wells has suggested that this poem provides a vision of the old South: "No briefer lyric gives a sadder or more representative picture of upperclass Southern life clinging to its ancient ties."<sup>30</sup> The limited present in which the Preacher and the neighbours exist would seem to signify the inability of modern scientific man to comprehend the values

inherent in a traditional community. They ignore the ancient ties, the sense of ceremony, the social cohesion. Two aspects of this poem in particular give credence to Wells's quasi-allegorical reading: the fact that the "foolish neighbours" are not, we infer, part of the "county kin", and the "businesslike metaphors"<sup>31</sup> of the words "subtraction" and "transaction". Here we have the impression of domination by an industrialized society that malevolently neighbours the agrarian South. Yet the word "transaction" has, as Miller Williams indicates, a deeper and more compelling meaning: "This [word], especially since it is followed by the 'world of outer dark,' puts us in mind of the River Styx, and we are in a context at once more classical, more distant, and more noble than we were before."<sup>32</sup>

F.O. Matthiessen, referring to "Dead Boy", writes:

By choosing the very kind of theme upon which the Nineteenth Century spilled out its worst sentimental excesses, it is as though [Ransom] deliberately set out to demonstrate his complete break with the Southern romantic past.<sup>33</sup>

Here Matthiessen is alluding to poetic stance rather than to theme, in so far as one may separate them. However inadequate the present reader may find the New Critical interpretation of romantic poetry, it is important to understand the significance of the part played in Ransom's poetry by the attempt to make a "complete break" with the sentimentality contemporary critics felt to be part of romanticism.

One of the ways in which Ransom tried to avoid such a sentimentality was to give the speaker of "Dead Boy" a position of objectivity, even humility, and yet of authority. He might have made his speaker closer to the family, as Robert Bridges did in "On a Dead Child",<sup>34</sup> with a necessarily subjective attitude and one in which the reader might not feel invited to participate. Instead, Ransom's speaker is neither one of the relatives nor one of the neighbours, though he is in the privileged position of acquaintance with the familial and social network. That the speaker is

from "the world of outer dark" even invites the reader to assume his perspective.

Furthermore, the presentation of the boy in Ransom's poem is in sharp contrast to the traditional selection of character traits that informs Bridges's poem:

Perfect little body, without fault or stain on thee,  
 With promise of strength and manhood full and fair!  
 Though cold and stark and bare,  
 The bloom and the charm of life doth awhile remain on thee.

Thy mother's treasure wert thou;--alas! no longer  
 To visit her heart with wondrous joy; to be  
 Thy father's pride;--ah, he  
 Must gather his faith together, and his strength make stronger.  
(ll. 1-8)

Ransom's speaker takes us through the process of his own experience, one that involves conflicts with people who devalue man's worth and even with his own earlier attitude. This procedure reads as an attempt to establish the authority of a story-teller as well as to negate the possibility of unreliability. The balance of wit, understatement and pathos secures the final judgement.

Randall Jarrell has suggested that any of Ransom's poems might be labelled, "With Mixed Feelings".<sup>35</sup> Beyond presenting conflicting viewpoints, the speaker of "Dead Boy" slightly modifies his eulogy of "the forbears' antique lineaments" through his awareness of the waning force of tradition. As Matthiessen says, "this boy would not have measured up to much in the world; the older vitality of this heritage is gone."<sup>36</sup> Characteristically, Ransom succeeds in increasing the poignancy of the poem by complicating the issues; he neither overbalances into callousness, on the one hand, nor into sentimentality, on the other.

The dialectician's perception of what Allen Tate terms "the other possible case"<sup>37</sup> is of extreme importance in Ransom's poetry. It provides for what has generally been termed by the New Critics, both British and



American, an ironic method, a method of inclusion: "the bringing in of the opposite, the complementary impulses".<sup>38</sup> Towards the end of his Fugitive days, and influenced, perhaps, by T. S. Eliot, Ransom stated his discomfort with "the purely romantic position"<sup>39</sup> (Wordsworth, Shelley, Tennyson, Browning, and the early Byron) which involves an attempt by the poet to find a "mystical community"<sup>40</sup> in which he and all of Nature may comfortably coexist. More acceptable to Ransom is the irony of such poets as Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne and Milton, who "turned back to the stubborn fact of dualism [man's separation from an objective, unsympathetic world] with a mellow wisdom which we may call irony":

[Irony] implies first of all an honorable and strenuous period of romantic creation; it implies then a rejection of the romantic forms and formulas; but this rejection is so unwilling, and in its statements there lingers so much of the music and color and romantic mystery which is perhaps the absolute poetry, and this statement is attended by such a disarming rueful comic sense of the poet's own betrayal, that the fruit of it is wisdom and not bitterness, poetry and not prose, health and not suicide. Irony is the rarest of the states of mind, because it is the most inclusive.<sup>41</sup>

Like "Dead Boy", "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" is informed by the ironic method as defined here, as well as by the Southerner's appreciation of ceremony and ritual. In a footnote to his analysis of "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" (an analysis so fine as to make further comment virtually unnecessary),<sup>42</sup> Robert Penn Warren compares this poem to James Russell Lowell's "After the Burial", which, he says, is "a poem without any 'insides' for the hero of the poem is not attempting to do anything about the problem which confronts him--it is a poem without issue, without conflict, a poem of unconditional surrender".<sup>43</sup> Ransom's poem is clearly not so, as Warren so ably points out:

The poem is concerned with modifications and modulations of this brute, basic irony [the irony that inheres in the fact that the child

who was chided for noisiness is now eternally still<sup>7</sup>, modulations and modifications contingent upon an attitude taken toward it by a responsible human being, the speaker of the poem. The savagery is masked, or ameliorated.<sup>44</sup>

Already suggested in this chapter is the idea that Ransom's poems are about an act of knowing and, by extension, about the creative act. It is possible to add to this that in many poems Ransom's speaker adopts a didactic rôle, not only in that he instructs a presented figure (explicitly in "Vaunting Oak", implicitly in "Morning"), but more especially in that he dramatizes the aesthetic approach. With regard to "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter", Warren hints at such a rôle: "we are gathered formally, ritualistically, sternly together to say the word 'vexed'."<sup>45</sup>

That Warren concentrates on the exercise of "will and self-control"<sup>46</sup> involved in the formulation of this response corresponds markedly to Ransom's thesis in The World's Body that the aesthetic object is approachable through an indirect or circuitous process, just as a woman is wooed under the restrictions of a code:

The form actually denies him [the wooer] the privileges of going the straight line between two points, even though this line has an axiomatic logic in its favor and is the shortest possible line. But the woman, contemplated in this manner under restraint, becomes a person and an aesthetic object; therefore a richer object.<sup>47</sup>

It is the controlled contemplation of the little girl's death, translated into a "brown study" (l. 3), of her past behaviour, "transmuted . . . into a kind of fanciful story-book dream-world",<sup>48</sup> and even of the mourners' particular function that provides the special effect of this poem.

"Janet Waking" starts with the speaker's attempt to teach his daughter what he eventually discovers to be the kind of control that denies the sense of ritual through which an aesthetic experience is generated. Over-conscious, perhaps, of that "will and self-control" Warren mentioned, he begins to overbalance into an facetious attitude, from which he just

manages to save himself. In a sense, then, "Janet Waking" is comparable to "Dead Boy". However, in terms of poetic situation, "Janet Waking" is the more complex poem. Not only is there an intricate relationship between speaker and central figure, but the reader also has difficulty in attributing voice.

Although this poem is predominantly first-person, there is a curious sense in which we seem to view the world through two pairs of eyes. This dual vision derives from the speaker's way of mediating the child's perspective and his attempt to provide for her another way of looking at the world. It appears that he must change his view to match Janet's:

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

One kiss she gave her mother.  
Only a small one gave she to her daddy  
Who would have kissed each curl of his shining baby;  
No kiss at all for her brother.

"Old Chucky, old Chucky!" she cried,  
Running across the world upon the grass  
To Chucky's house, and listening. But alas,  
Her Chucky had died.

It was a transmogrifying bee  
Came droning down on Chucky's old bald head  
And sat and put the poison. It scarcely bled,  
But how exceedingly

And purplely did the knot  
Swell with the venom and communicate  
Its rigor! Now the poor comb stood up straight  
But Chucky did not.

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.

At the beginning of the poem, emphasis is on Janet's world, the chief impression being of her preoccupation with her beloved "old Chucky". Her early morning greetings to her family are perfunctory: her mother, father and brother rank as less important than the hen she expects to greet. Finding her pet dead, she is unable to comprehend either the relationship between cause and effect or the finality of death. In the words of William Van O'Connor:

There is a pleasant domesticity which suggests a rationally ordered world, under intelligent control. To it is brought the sudden realization of the chief of all irrational elements, death. . . . The reader is jolted by the sudden shifts from ordered domesticity to the unalterable fact of death. Janet, too, who would not be instructed, may be thought a symbol of all of us who are insufficiently aware that any rational order is subject to the eternally unconscious, which is nature.<sup>49</sup>

Yet Janet is, as the title suggests, in the process of awakening to the harsh realities of mortality, or even to the fact of dualism.

This poem, however, does not only deal with the confrontation of a child with death; it also deals with an adult's attempt to understand the implications, for the child, of this confrontation. The poem opens with the adult trying to teach the child; finally, it is the child who teaches the adult. As in most of Ransom's poems, the educative process involves a reorganization of awareness through sympathy.

Through the poem, there is a tension between sympathy and detachment, which is initially artfully communicated by the auctorial opening of the first stanza. Although the speaker is, in fact, a first-person speaker--Janet's father--he reports her thoughts. Normally, a first-person speaker would not have access to the unarticulated thoughts of another. The auctorial opening has a dual function: to imply both the separation and the bonds of sympathy between the worlds of adult and child. It is these two elements that inform the following stanzas.

In the second stanza, there is a poignant attempt by the father to

reach Janet. His heart going out to her in the line, "Who would have kissed each curl of his shining baby", he ruefully notes Janet's rating of the inhabitants of her world. Again, one understands the word "daddy" as suggesting the parental habit of adopting a child's register in order to close the distance between them. The syntactical arrangement also suggests the father's mediation of a child's ritualistic, and rather careless, morning greeting.

Alive, Chucky stands between them; dead, she provides, initially, a greater barrier. The shifting of distance between father and child is expressed with more complexity in the following three stanzas. Again, it is suggested through the modulation of language, though here the mode of expression is problematic, as are the thematic implications of the language used. In general, the father appears to be trying somehow to communicate with his child: to explain the event to her, to comment on its stages and to give her the words to encompass it. And, in general, the vocabulary is adult, while the syntactical arrangement is childlike.

Such words as "alas", "transmogrifying", "exceedingly", and the phrase, "Swell with its venom and communicate/Its rigor", emanate from a rather pedantic speaker, who stands detached from the child's emotional state. The adjective "transmogrifying", at the beginning of the fourth stanza, describes the bee as grotesquely transforming Janet's innocent view of nature. Because of the pedantic tone, this word separates the realm of the child (with her inability to recognise the fact of death) from the realm of the adult, who accepts death through a pretence at intelligent control, mocking "any emphasis that overestimates the importance of the rational".<sup>50</sup>

On the other hand, there is phrasing which mirrors the child's view: lines fourteen and fifteen, "Came droning down on Chucky's old bald head/And sat and put the poison", and lines nineteen and twenty, "Now the poor comb stood up straight/But Chucky did not." The artful



quality of these lines resides in that very tension between detachment and sympathy noted elsewhere. Were the words spoken by the father simply to describe events seen by him, they would assume a mock-heroic tone, as does so nearly most of stanzas four and five. Certainly the subject--the death of a hen by a bee-sting--is potentially comic, and one way for the father to deal with the situation would be to exploit this element. Instead, the speaker maintains a perilous balance. By giving the impression that he is reporting, in Janet's language, he reveals, with commiseration, the horrifying and bizarre impact that the death of a pet has on her. The syntactical arrangement is reminiscent of a naïve mind confronting a dreadful event which is not fully understood. Imitating the very pattern of Janet's thoughts, the father attempts not simply to convey her growing horror at the erect comb but rather more to take unto himself her response. The father's endeavour to adopt the girl's perspective stems from his desire to move into a psychological identification with her. It is through this striving for empathy that we discern the sympathetic tone.

Overlaying the notes of sympathy, however, there does remain a touch of humour in stanzas four and five. Quite possibly, the father is also engaged in analysing, both clinically and ironically, the events leading up to Chucky's death, so that his daughter may be provided with the words to encompass the disaster. It seems that the speaker is hindered by the fact that the dead hen lends an area of potential humour to the situation. Tempted, it seems, to exploit the comic and to give Janet an "adult" perspective on Chucky's death, the speaker yet recants: this would be a falsely easy way.

It is Janet who bridges the gap. Her ability to express a heartfelt grief, without a need for detachment, re-instructs the speaker. The language of the last two stanzas presents a radical change in the father's

response. He has abandoned his earlier approach, which was beginning to turn into a mockery of itself. Now Janet's grief transcends his own attitude and he comes to meet it, yet remains, in a sense, far from it. Her language, both direct and reported, has religious and adult overtones. For her, Chucky's death is a momentous occasion and she becomes one of a line of traditional mourners. Using the phrase, "the forgetful kingdom of death", the father responds to and imitates the Biblical timbre of his daughter's language. He, too, gives the hen the dignity of a heroic death.

Still, despite the bonds of sympathy that stretch from father to daughter, a gulf between the two remains, a gulf denoted partly by the family grouping--Janet kneeling, expecting from her parents the impossible--and partly by Janet's inability, or unwillingness, to assume knowledge of mortality. A more significant difference between the two is suggested through the implication that the child's view is, in some respects, regarded as superior: she has persuaded her father to drop his trivializing view, to see his earlier wit as out of place, and to discover, through her expression of grief, the dignity of innocence and the elegaic consolation that proceeds from adherence to form. Janet, in her child's wisdom, knows the poverty of her father's approach and she maintains an aesthetic response formed out of her love for Chucky and her uncomplicated anguish.

"Vaunting Oak" seems to continue where "Janet Waking" leaves off. Janet's sentiments cannot survive, of course. She must recognize the fact of death as she gets older. In "Vaunting Oak", the girl is older and she has, for her symbol of eternity, an oak tree. The speaker, whose task is to instruct his beloved in mortality, desymbolizes the tree.

Ransom once suggested that some readers of "Blue Girls" have found the speaker vindictive.<sup>51</sup> That there are tones of regret and compassion even as the speaker points to the blear-eyed old woman that the "blue girls" may turn into will emerge in a later discussion. My

point here is that the speaker of both "Blue Girls" and "Vaunting Oak" is at once brutal and tender. Instructing the girl of "Vaunting Oak" in the finite, as he must, he is himself re-affected by this bitter knowledge. Cleanth Brooks, in a penetrating analysis of the poem's development from a parody to a reassertion of the grand style, emphasizes this point:

The poem achieves a proper climax and a powerful one as the boom from the hollow oak is made to swell into a great cry of lament which smothers every sound in the spring scene--the singing of bees, the calls of the birds and the sobbing of the girl. But if we are to express the poet's strategy in terms of diction, we have to say that the ironic use of the formal and pompous diction of the earlier lines of the poem has guaranteed and made possible the powerful and utterly serious use of "dolorous" and "reverberance" in the closing lines of the poem.<sup>52</sup>

Ransom's presented figures do not stand on their own in the world; the speaker is at their side, unrelentingly pointing to their separation from an indifferent universe but grieving at what they must find.

The Ransomic speaker, standing on the periphery of the presented world and often moving towards its centre, usually draws attention to himself as part of a familial or social group. Sometimes, like Frost's speaker, he stands with a woman, as in "Lady Lost", and in a secure domestic order. In "Janet Waking", he stands at the head of a family. More often, his "we" refers to a group of young men, as in the first sonnet of "Hilda" and in parts of "Moments of Minnie". Most often, however, and even where the first-person singular is used, the speaker is connected by implicit bonds to the Southern community. This is one of Ransom's sharp divergences from Romantic poetry, where the speaker usually stands in solitude or where, if he is with other figures, as in some of Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads, he is of a different social class.

The sense of community is particularly strong in "Bells for John Daughter" and "Here Lies a Lady". Ransom would not be Ransom,

however, if he did not treat these bonds with a measure of irony. In "Crocodile", which may be taken as a tongue-in-cheek autobiography (though in the third person), we are told that "The family religion is good enough for him" (l. 68). The speaker of "Philomela" speaks for an entire culture or, more specifically, for modern American poets, yet with a suggestion of disenchantment at his membership of this community. The speaker of "Dead Boy" is from "the world of outer dark" (l. 4). And, in "Antique Harvesters", the shifting of perspective signals both detachment and involvement; the ending, in particular, dissociates the speaker from unquestioning commitment to the community spirit.

In "Emily Hardcastle, Spinster", the "I" is a community "I" and, more subtly, disengaged from it:

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.

I was dapper when I dangled in my pepper-and-salt;  
We were only local beauties, and we beautifully trusted  
If the proud one had to tarry, one would have her by default.

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.

The speaker, from a fixed temporal position, describes the events that lead up to the "stately ceremonial" which is to take place the following day. In the first stanza, he hints at the nature of this ceremony: the boys will "bring no face of envy" at not being the heroes. The speaker also gives us a hint of the earlier relationship between Emily Hardcastle and the "local beauties". That they "were not to have

her love" suggests, of course, a retrospective vantage point. It is this mature perspective that allows the speaker to express certain evaluations of himself and his group.

In the third stanza, the retrospective vantage point incorporates what seems to be an almost direct rendering of the boys' earlier thoughts. As in "Vision by Sweetwater", one might refer here to a dual vantage point, which provides "Emily Hardcastle, Spinster" with a sudden, rich ambiguity. The speaker reports the boys' thoughts: "and we beautifully trusted/If the proud one had to tarry, one would have her by default." In the absence of either quotation marks or the word "that" prefacing the boys' thoughts, the status of line nine is not quite clear. Excepting the change of tense usual in reported speech, one might reasonably say that the thoughts or the voiced sentiments of the boys are rendered verbatim, and that the line is to be taken as originating from the young boys (if, again, we except the tense change) and also from the maturer speaker. In so far as this sentence emanates from the boys, then, the word "one" would refer to "one of us"; in so far as it emanates from the speaker in his position of superior knowledge, the word refers to the "Baron", who has won his bride "by default". It is worth noting that the earlier version of this poem reads instead: "If the proud one had to tarry we would take her by default."<sup>53</sup> This suggests Ransom's awareness of the import of the substituted "one" and also gives full ironic weight to the phrase, "beautifully trusted".

As a whole, Ransom's poem is reminiscent of Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Leonora":<sup>54</sup>

They have made for Leonora this low dwelling in the ground,  
And with cedar they have woven the four walls round.  
Like a little dryad hiding she'll be wrapped all in green,  
Better kept and longer valued than by ways that would have been.



They will come with many roses in the early afternoon,  
 They will come with pinks and lilies and with Leonora soon;  
 And as long as beauty's garments over beauty's limbs are thrown,  
 There'll be lilies that are liars, and the rose will have its own.

There will be a wondrous quiet in the house that they have made,  
 And tonight will be a darkness in the place where she'll be laid;  
 But the builders, looking forward into time, could only see  
 Darker nights for Leonora than to-night shall ever be.

Indeed, so alike are these two poems--in metre and the deceptive lightness of verse, in diction, modulations of tone, subject matter and even in themes--that one might suggest "Leonora" (first published in 1910) as Ransom's source for "Emily Hardcastle, Spinster" (first published in 1921). One important difference emerges in the choice of point of view. "Leonora" is spoken in the third person; "Emily Hardcastle, Spinster" in the first person. While Ransom allowed his speaker a measure of detachment from the presented world and himself, through the retrospective vantage point, the sense of distance between speaker and world in "Leonora" is more extreme. Ransom's speaker, from his privileged perspective, communicates a sense of intimacy with the presented figures that Robinson does not attempt, perhaps surprisingly when one remembers his speaker's typical stance. Because of the expansion, in "Emily Hardcastle, Spinster", of the presented world's temporal limits and because of the speaker's more active participation in the world's past and future, Ransom's speaker is able to direct his ironic tone both at the past responses of other figures in the world and at his own earlier response.

As in Faulkner's short story, "A Rose for Emily", the speaker of this poem by Ransom is part of a community. In both works, the speaker stands on the extreme periphery of the presented world. (Robinson's poem, "Richard Cory", uses the same perspective and also contains a similar kind of ironic joke.)<sup>55</sup> Again, in both "Emily Hardcastle, Spinster" and "A Rose for Emily", the speaker or

narrator, who typifies the attitudes of a particular social group, presents the community attitudes towards the central figure or character (in each case, named Emily), who is thus placed in society, as well as in her own family. Unlike Faulkner's narrator, the speaker of Ransom's poem does drop the pronoun "we" for an instant. Yet this sentence, "I was dapper when I dangled in my pepper-and-salt", serves to strengthen the sense of the speaker's association with the group of young men who had tried to tempt Emily Hardcastle from her idealism. Yet, through the speaker's overall evaluation and his ironic tone, he separates himself from the other boys, a separation which occurs in neither "A Rose for Emily" nor "Richard Cory".

While a similar separation of group and individual response is established later in the poem, the beginning of Ransom's "Hilda" reveals the speaker's identification with a group of young men: "And stormily we approved the bosom-swell" (l.4). As Buffington says:

We might imagine a gathering of young men talking about the town beauty. In the word approved is a little of the condescension of the young male, who pretends perhaps to have somewhat more choice among the women than he really has. In this case as it turns out he has none. "Stormily" the young men approve: sincerely passionate, no doubt, but in each other's company a little too eager to have full credit for their manhoods.<sup>56</sup>

The point of view in "Antique Harvesters" is one of the poem's most interesting features. It involves, on the one hand, the speaker's identification with a limited social group--the veterans of the old South--and, on the other, a detachment from this particular group. The speaker turns to this identifiable group in order to celebrate a shared attitude; he turns from it in order to treat it with gentle irony. So complete a shift in perspective in a first-person poem is unusual for Ransom. It is, in kind and degree, comparable only to that of "Judith of Bethulia".

The speaker of "Antique Harvesters" presents the decay of the old

South. Ransom has himself called the poem "the appeal of the Old South to the young men to stand by the cause".<sup>57</sup> The speaker's main concern seems not so much with the South's intrinsic value but rather with the urgency of maintaining an act of fealty, of preserving the Southern social group and its attendant forms for the sake of the young men. He hints at the difficulties (made explicit in "Philomela" and "Crocodile") of putting down roots in a time and a place different from one's own.

The appeal is made by one of the "dry, grey, spare" (l. 5) old men who harvest the earth and watch the young men growing discontented. As Matthiessen points out, the speaker uses an "old fashioned country expression" and the "elaborate courtly phrases of an older public speech":<sup>58</sup>

(SCENE: Of the Mississippi the bank sinister,  
and of the Ohio the bank sinister.)

Tawny are the leaves turned but they still hold,  
And it is harvest; what shall this land produce?  
A meager hill of kernels, a runnel of juice;  
Declension looks from our land, it is old.  
Therefore let us assemble, dry, grey, spare,  
And mild as yellow air.

"I hear the croak of a raven's funeral wing."  
The young men would be joying in the song  
Of passionate birds; their memories are not long.  
What is it thus rehearsed in sable? "Nothing."  
Trust not but the old endure, and shall be older  
Than the scornful beholder.

We pluck the spindling ears and gather the corn.  
One spot has special yield? "On this spot stood  
Heroes and drenched it with their only blood."  
And talk meets talk, as echoes from the horn  
Of the hunter--echoes are the old men's arts,  
Ample are the chambers of their hearts.

Here come the hunters, keepers of a rite;  
The horn, the hounds, the lank mares coursing by  
Straddled with archetypes of chivalry;  
And the fox, lovely ritualist, in flight  
Offering his unearthly ghost to quarry;  
And the fields, themselves to harry.

Resume, harvesters. The treasure is full bronze  
Which you will garner for the Lady, and the moon  
Could tinge it no yellower than does this noon;  
But grey will quench it shortly--the field, men, stones.  
Pluck fast, dreamers; prove as you amble slowly  
Not less than men, not wholly.

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,

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."

True, it is said of our Lady, she ageth.  
But see, if you peep shrewdly, she hath not stooped;  
Take no thought of her servitors that have drooped,  
For we are nothing; and if one talk of death--  
Why, the ribs of the earth subsist frail as a breath  
If but God wearieth.

The devotion to the land, bound up as it is with a sense of tradition, is contrasted with that of the young men who are unable to look into the past and so unable to value the richness of the present moment. They look forward only to the material benefits of other lands. The "croak of a raven's funeral wing" is the death cry of the South, a cry which signifies to the young men a void stretching back as well as forwards in time. Since it is only the old men who are capable of harvesting, of reaping from the present moment its fullest implications in terms of the past and the future, it is only they who will endure. For, in the present moment, however "meager" it may appear, the old men can still see the chivalric archetypes that are the bases of Southern life.

Despite the use of the first-person plural pronoun in the first stanza, the speaker does not yet seem to identify himself fully with the veterans, for, although he voices his belief in the old South, he recognizes its decay. Yet, in the second stanza, with the reference to the "scornful

beholder", the speaker seems to move into an identification with the old men. In the third stanza, too, the use of the word "we", at the beginning, is balanced by the third-person reference: "echoes are the old men's arts, / Ample are the chambers of their hearts." While the tone of the fourth stanza would suggest complete identification, this is broken in the fifth stanza, which has the speaker calling the old men "dreamers", mocking them gently for not recognizing, as he does, the impotence of their actions. It is only the detached speaker who knows that "grey will quench" the land. When the speaker addresses the young men in the sixth and seventh stanzas, he refers to the old men as "a dwindled choir" and as "degenerate specters that were men", possibly assuming the attitudes of the young men towards their fathers in order to gain the young men's credence and response. Yet the speaker's advice to them is itself ironic: "Angry as wasp-music be your cry then", the "unheroic simile"<sup>59</sup> pointing to the speaker's wariness about a total commitment to the land.

It is in the final stanza, in which the word "we" is again used, that the tone becomes most complex. Ransom has been undecided about this stanza. After the initial publication of the poem in Southwest Review,<sup>60</sup> the six lines were excluded from Two Gentlemen in Bonds in 1927 and included in later selections. In fact, Buffington has stated his preference for the 1927 version, for he finds that it is this added stanza particularly which establishes the tone as "more than a kind of tempering: it works against any tone of appeal or resolution".<sup>61</sup> He explains: "The diminutive quality of the verb peep tends to cancel any conviction there may be that 'She hath not stooped,' as does the teasing archaism of ageth and hath, with wearieth the only archaic words in the poem."<sup>62</sup> Buffington is probably correct in his interpretation of the tonal quality of this stanza. However, he has not followed the shifts in tone throughout the poem because, it seems, he has not understood the shifts of



perspective,<sup>63</sup> which establish the overall tone. And there is no undercutting or contradiction in the final stanza of the overall tone.

One should not have to defend the last stanza, for the diction alone, or the archaic flavour, or the hint of man's impotence in the hands of God, would more than justify it. Yet the question here is its compatibility with the remainder of the poem.

Throughout the poem, the old men's perseverance in an unrealistic life and the speaker's certainty of the decay of the South have been contraposed. Now the speaker, with humility, recants from his assurance that he can speak of the futility of effort and, equally, of the South's demesne:

. . . and if one talk of death--  
Why, the ribs of the earth subsist frail as a breath  
If but God wearieth.

Here, too, is the sense of vulnerability present throughout the poem; here, too, the sense of perseverance, reiterated in the word "breath", and of the firm, though fine, basic structure, reiterated in the word "ribs". Astonishingly, the very words which suggest strength suggest frailty. It is, after all, the strength only of a man, for Ransom makes a double figure of speech logically cohesive with the idea of the earth as human. The likening of the metaphorical "ribs of the earth" to "breath" overarches the sense of perseverance with the suggestion of man's, and the earth's, subordination to God's whim. The tonal qualities of this stanza, with the reference to an indifferent universe, now seem to colour (though not to work against) the entire poem.<sup>64</sup> The two perspectives, that of the community "I" and that of the poet-speaker, as well as the evaluations that these perspectives have implied, now seem to merge and, in their merging, are transcended.

The combination of an auctorial and a first-person peripheral perspective is a particularly daring one, since its mishandling would suggest that the poet had confused the two and was unaware of the traditional prescriptions pertaining to each. Two poems which combine these perspective in very different ways--George Meredith's "Love in the Valley" and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel"--reveal the extent of Ransom's exploration.

In "Love in the Valley",<sup>65</sup> the speaker watches his beloved--that is, he is a peripheral speaker, epistemologically limited--yet he knows more about her than she herself knows:

All the girls are out with their baskets for the primrose;  
Up lanes, woods through, they troop in joyful bands.  
My sweet leads: she knows not why, but now she loiters,  
Eyes the bent anemones, and hangs her hands.  
Such a look will tell that the violets are peeping,  
Coming the rose: and unaware a cry  
Springs in her bosom for odours and for colour,  
Covert and the nightingale; she knows not why.  
(ll. 65-72)

Meredith does not exploit as fully nor with such assuredness as does Rossetti the differences between the omniscient and the restricted speaker. It is Rossetti who, like Ransom, seems to be aware of the possibilities involved in shifting these perspectives and who harnesses these possibilities to the development of theme.

In "The Blessed Damozel", a poem carefully structured in terms of the two perspectives, Rossetti establishes a poignant relationship between the speaker and his dead beloved. The omniscient speaker describes the activities and thoughts of the "damozel"; the peripheral speaker imagines being with her and strives to communicate with her. The three stanzas and the subsequent pair of half-lines spoken by the peripheral speaker, all in parentheses, provide an increasing feeling that the ontologically and epistemologically limited speaker can see and

hear his beloved. The pathos of the poem, and especially of the final stanza, is achieved largely through the certainty of the peripheral speaker that he sees her smile and hears her tears, so that the reader has in mind both the overall restriction of the speaker as well as the sudden apparent reversal of this restriction.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, the third-person and first-person perspectives cooperate in "Antique Harvesters" to establish the tonal quality: one that blends authority and detachment.

"Antique Harvesters" demonstrates Ransom's interest in tradition and social bonds; it also implies what is made explicit in other poems, that is, Ransom's concern with social forms. In "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter", the speaker and his group are called upon to make certain social responses:

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.

(ll. 17-20)

And, in "Here Lies a Lady", the speaker is surrounded by a group which is bound together by a sense of ceremony. The people around the deathbed act out of a sense of "love and great honor" (l. 15).

The chivalric attitude of a peripheral speaker is perhaps best rendered in "Lady Lost". As Vivienne Koch says, we find in this poem the "tone of a warmly personal, yet almost ritual, gallantry".<sup>67</sup> The poem presents the theme of kinship as regards familial bonds rather than social ones, an idea implied also in such poems as "Janet Waking" and "Dead Boy". The speaker, whose duty it is to care for the lost woman, gives a strong impression of his own domestic security in contrast to her alienation from "her right home and her right passion" (l. 20). Her terror at having lost her home is objectified in the metaphor, "the whole world blazing up like tinder" (l. 8).

A particularly interesting feature of this poem is in the unusual mode of address that opens the third stanza: "So I will go out into the park and say . . .". The speaking present--the point from which the speaker tells of what happened that morning and of what will happen later--is contained in the temporal gap between the first two and the last two stanzas. It is during this time that the speaker becomes aware of the import of the plight of the "lady bird". Ransom's use of the future tense maintains focus on the speaker's mind at the time that he is speaking, at the time that he comes to understand the general importance of kinship, while it avoids any sense of an abstract idea. The speaker's thoughts on kinship are presented in the form of a potential appeal to the people in the park, an appeal that is firmly related to the particular incident with which the poem opens. Just as, in "Antique Harvesters", the voice of the third-person speaker is tempered by humility, so here does Ransom's speaker not have recourse to generalizations, symptomatic of the authoritative voice, but keeps to specifics.

In "Blue Girls", too, we see the characteristic Ransomic tendency to avoid the formulation of abstractions, though here not quite so rigidly as in "Lady Lost". This preference for a dramatic rather than a discursive rendering of ideas can only be fully appreciated if we look at "Blue Girls" in the light of some traditional poems on the carpe diem theme. Particular attention may then be drawn to the nature of the knowledge that the speaker invokes as his authority as well as to the way in which this knowledge is offered to the girls.

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

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.

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.

In the third stanza, the speaker shifts his attention from the presented world, turning inward for an instance. Here, as in "Lady Lost", his thoughts are kept from becoming pure abstraction through the use of the future tense and the suggestion of public address. The fourth stanza re-locates the speaker's consciousness. He does not expand this generalization on the frailty of beauty; instead, he turns to his past, to another world, to take from it an exemplum, and continues in his address to the girls.

There is, of course, a weight of tradition behind such a shift. Like the speakers of Herrick's "A Meditation for his Mistress" and "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time", and of Waller's "Go, Lovely Rose", Ransom's speaker stands between two worlds, bringing knowledge of one to bear upon the other. Yet, despite this basic similarity, there are two significant differences. First, Ransom's speaker uses a specific incident, not general experience, to set against the girls' innocence. Secondly, this incident is related, not to the world of natural decay, but to the distortion of a woman's temperament.

The seventeenth-century poets already invoked derive their knowledge from experience of nature: they use natural images to lead their addressees to awareness of their imminent decay. In Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time", for instance, we are told that the sun must set, that flowers must die. Had Ransom's speaker drawn his exemplum from the world of nature, he would perhaps have introduced an unwelcome element. In these seventeenth-century poems, we are



aware of death, but we are also aware of rebirth. Reference to the natural cycle, for all its implications of immediate and personal anguish, allows one to transcend subjective sorrow and to take consolation in the idea of a regenerative world. It is such ability to move beyond the personal that Miriam Tazewell, one of Ransom's presented figures, seems to lack.

Ransom's emphasis is not, of course, simply on the death of physical beauty. He has adjusted the carpe diem theme to focus upon the horror of an old age in which careless "chattering" has been transformed into a "terrible tongue". As in Yeats's "Easter, 1916", the sweet voice turns to shrillness. The loss of innocence is further stressed by the "blear eyes fallen from blue". This thematic adjustment introduces a note of harshness into the poem, a note that is not softened by any of the consolations we find in the seventeenth-century poets. Certainly, Herrick uses such words as "dried" and "withered",<sup>68</sup> and Marvell writes:<sup>69</sup>

. . . then Worms shall try  
That long preserv'd Virginity:  
And your quaint Honour turn to dust;  
And into ashes all my Lust.  
(ll. 27-30)

Yet the sweetness of life is heightened by the inevitability of decay. In Ransom's poem, it seems that the speaker's first words to the girls are ironic: such carelessness and gaiety, such unconsciousness (though proper to their state) will precipitate a sudden shock into knowledge of mortality, will prohibit gradual adjustment. We may assume, then, that "Blue Girls" presents an ironic treatment of the traditional carpe diem theme.

Related to the different kinds of knowledge that these seventeenth-century speakers bring to bear on the world of youth and beauty are the

methods of gaining and presenting this knowledge. There is a greater tendency in Ransom's poem to keep to the specific situation than in the other poems under discussion. Like Herrick and Marvell, Ransom makes his speaker address particular people; but only in Ransom's poem are the addressees incorporated into the presented world. The ladies of "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" are especially remote, as the use of the definite article in the title would suggest. The comparative reality of Ransom's girls, who act within the presented world and who are particularized, not general, ensures a stronger sense of the poignant. And while it is not to be expected that the addressees of the Herrick and Marvell poems are actually hearing the address, there is additional irony, additional poignancy, in the fact that Ransom's girls seem not to hear the speaker.<sup>70</sup>

Nor do these seventeenth-century poets invoke a particular instance from which they have learnt of mortality; they draw upon public knowledge. Certainly Herrick does use the words, "and this same flower",<sup>71</sup> yet he seems not to be talking of a particular flower so much as of any flower, a representative flower. Ransom's speaker, whose woman is not necessarily representative, is further from abstraction. He does not distil his experience of mortality into a representative object but keeps to a specific incident in his own past, to private experience, which he offers as an exemplum.

It seems central to the meaning of "Blue Girls" that this exemplum provide an instance of what might happen and not of what must happen. Here, perhaps, is the consolation that we missed before. Looked at in another way, however, the exemplum is the more horrifying and dangerous in its very avoidability: that it is not inevitable makes the woman more alarming, and makes of it a kind of threat that an indiscriminating death cannot really hold.

It is difficult to determine both the extent of the speaker's irony

and the lesson offered the girls: are they to "practise [their] beauty", however unthinkingly, because it is "so frail"--which would keep this poem more firmly within the carpe diem tradition--or are they to become aware of the frailty of beauty in the hopes that they will not be taught so sudden and bitter a lesson as the blear-eyed woman was taught? One would imagine, thinking of "Vaunting Oak" and "Janet Waking", for instance, that Ransom's girls become blear-eyed only if their introduction to mortality takes them by surprise. Possibly, because of the word "practise", Ransom's speaker is attempting to endow the girls with a consciousness of the frailty of beauty, which would make the first two stanzas ironic, but the third not.

Yet, even within the irony of stanzas one and two, there are tones of commiseration which deepen, as the carpe diem theme is announced, into regret and pain. The presence of "white fillets" hints at the sacrifice of innocence to time, an innocence that is clearly admired by the speaker. Perhaps there is even a note of envy at the frivolity that is indifferent to the adages of old age. Like the bluebirds "chattering on the air", the girls exist within a magical world without time and death; "under the towers" of their seminary, they are threatened but not yet affected by the intellect.

Thus far, we seem to have two major tonal qualities. One, which is in accordance with the carpe diem theme and which we may call procontextual, is sympathetic to the innocence of the "blue girls"; the other, anticontextual, is ironic: the speaker gives traditional carpe diem commands with sarcasm. These two tones are maintained, though redirected, in stanza three.

The speaker, who is, after all, one of those teachers "old and contrary", views himself with a rather rueful irony. While the girls, who are beautiful, fight unconsciously for the preservation of beauty, he does so consciously, with "loud lips" which provide a strange

parallel to the "chattering", on the one hand, and the "terrible tongue", on the other. There is a startling contrast between his attempt, one that appears to him clumsy, informed as it is by knowledge of mortality, and that of the girls. The sorrow and gravity of the line, "It is so frail", as well as the speaker's recognition of his ineptness, diminishes the sense that the speaker is mocking the girls' carefree qualities, and thus restores the carpe diem context.

In stanza four, however, the ironic or anticontextual tone seems to gain ascendancy, though the procontextual is still present. The reference to the "true" story which the speaker "could tell" foregrounds his rôle as teacher, and the story itself, which provides a poignant contrast to the innocent world of "blue skirts", "grass" and "air", more strongly yields an alarming parallel. Now the speaker tells of the transience of beauty, not with the awe of the final line of stanza three, but more emphatically and even cruelly. One might suggest that procontextual and anticontextual threads are fused: the carpe diem theme takes an unexpected direction. The girls' "twirling" and "travelling the sward" has already found its parallel in the bluebirds' "walking on the grass"; now the speaker finds a new parallel. The "blue skirts", once implicitly likened to the "bluebirds", are now revealed to match the blue eyes of the woman. The "chattering" is transformed into a "terrible tongue".

By characterizing himself as one who sees so clearly the girls' possible future, the speaker leaves behind, it seems, the earlier tones of compassion and admiration, as well as that of self-mockery. The aesthetic pleasure found in the matching of girls to bluebirds fades:

Hell's executioner  
Hath no ears for to hear  
What vain art can reply. 72  
(ll. 31-33)

Personal griefs are pushed aside, and place is made for a more profound propriety in the matching of exemplum to presented world, a propriety that is an aspect of Nature's rules and becomes, for the speaker, occasion for a deep, if brutal,<sup>73</sup> aesthetic pleasure.

In this poem, as in so many of Ransom's, attention is shifted from the specific occasion to the development of the speaker's awareness. Here he has attained a fearful yet admiring understanding of "Hell's executioner", even finding a curious aesthetic pleasure that moves beyond "vain art", a metaphysical finale to the poem that recalls the ending of "Antique Harvesters". It is the speaker's relationship with the ideas that spring from the observed incident--the lost "lady bird", the child's funeral--that gives Ransom's poems their significance. Yet the speaker keeps to the specific incidents almost entirely throughout "Blue Girls", at the same time focussing attention upon his mind as it comes to bear upon these incidents. It is in this avoidance of the purely and explicitly inward look, the abstract speculation or generalization, that we may find many of the clues to the Ransomic manner.

### 3. The Reflexive Mode

René Wellek and Austin Warren point out the "three more-or-less ultimate categories" into which literature may be classified--drama, epic and lyric:

The three major kinds are already, by Plato and Aristotle, distinguished according to "manner of imitation" (or "representation"): lyric poetry is the poet's own persona;



in epic poetry (or the novel) the poet partly speaks in his own person, as narrator, and partly makes his characters speak in direct discourse (mixed narrative); in drama, the poet disappears behind the cast of characters.<sup>74</sup>

These three basic modes may be kept quite distinct or may be combined in different ways by the lyric poet. As has been said elsewhere, Ransom is primarily a story-telling poet. His characteristic mode involves a speaker who narrates an incident in which he himself or other figures are engaged--figures who act, think and speak.

But there are occasions on which Ransom departs from the story-telling mode. There are two possible ways to diverge: in the direction of lyric utterance, in the purest sense of the term lyric (that is, excluding narrative and drama), or in the direction of drama. While it is the first that is the central concern here, it is necessary to clarify that the term dramatic, in its narrowest sense, refers to the direct presentation of a world by two or more speakers who are also figures within that world. There is total withdrawal of the primary speaker. Ransom has only four poems entirely in the dramatic mode. Because of their natural affinity to some of his third-person poems, where dialogue is used to a greater extent than in the first-person poems and where even unspoken thoughts are rendered more or less immediately, these four poems will be discussed at the end of the following chapter.

In a broader, but not necessarily a looser sense, the term dramatic may point to that feeling of immediacy with which the reader of a lyric not entirely dramatic in the purest sense confronts the presented world. This direct relationship may occur when the experiencer's voice is unmediated, as in the third stanza of "Winter Remembered", or when the thoughts of the presented figures are rendered in dialogue. The term may also refer to a set of relationships

within a poem, between figures, between ideas, between observer and observed. Most of Ransom's poetry is dramatic in these various senses.

Since all these meanings, except for the purest one, may easily be accommodated to the term narrative, I should like simply to use the distinction between narrative and pure lyric for the purposes of this section, which is to discuss some of the departures from the narrative mode in Poems About God and to isolate that anomalous group of poems within Ransom's work in which the narrative mode is virtually or entirely abandoned.

In narrative, the teller and the tale are presented. The concept of pure lyric is given by M. H. Abrams as "any fairly short, nonnarrative poem presenting a single speaker who expresses a state of mind or a process of thought and feeling".<sup>75</sup> It is possible to discern two primary potentialities within the pure lyric: the conceptual and the perceptual. William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow" is perceptual; Herrick's "Delight in Disorder" is conceptual. Those of Ransom's poems which are perceptual also involve narrative. It is that group of poems which renders conceptually, his reflexive poems, as well as the reflexive mode as it is incorporated into narrative, that is to be discussed in this section.

The reflexive mode has already been pointed to in relation to "Blue Girls". For an instant in the third stanza, the speaker deals in generalities, before turning to a specific, concrete incident. Such an explicit reference to the abstract is an unusual feature in a first-person poem by Ransom, where the speaker usually maintains focus on the specific. The speaker of "Philomela", who indirectly communicates a general loss, is at all times engaged in the narration of a particular set of incidents. "Vaunting Oak" seems to present more discursively

than is characteristic of Ransom's first-person poems the theme of mortality, yet even here the poet is careful to keep to a particular oak tree, one that is "looked upon" by the speaker, and to a particular couple.

The reflexive mode signifies, then, a move away from the concrete into the abstract or general. The reader is given an impression of direct or immediate contact with the process of the speaker's mind as it is engaged with concepts, reminiscences, habitual feelings or actions, universal truths, and not with a particular "out there", a presented world. The more emphasis given the reflexive mode in any one poem of Ransom's, the more atypical that poem is.

In a very suggestive comment, Cleanth Brooks has isolated an aspect of Ransom's characteristic manner:

Certainly Ransom's more typical irony is to be found in his commentaries on the human predicament, commentaries which he usually finds occasion for by throwing aspects of that predicament into the form of a little fable. But the commentary is not stated as a conclusion to the fable--it is, rather, diffused throughout the fable as the qualifying tone with which the poet relates it. For this reason, it is difficult to isolate the commentary in each instance.<sup>76</sup>

This is generally true of Ransom's first-person poems, where it is through such a word as "vexed",<sup>77</sup> for instance, that the whole range of the speaker's attitude is revealed. In most of his third-person poems, there is some explicit commentary on the presented world. Yet this commentary does not depart from the narrative, although it does sometimes tend towards abstraction. For instance, the final stanza of "Two in August" is spoken with one eye upon the presented world, as it were, and the other on the human predicament. Thus

the speaker emphasizes the representative quality of the two lovers, without belying their status as fictive figures and without that withdrawal into self that the term reflexive implies.

The balance between the speaker's narrative and reflexive voice is not so masterly in most of Ransom's early poems. Although a manifest attempt to present a concrete incident dominates most of these poems, the use here of the reflexive mode seems often to undercut the speaker's authority and to negate those particular strengths that are associated with Ransom's later narrative lyrics. One can see very clearly in these poems the beginnings of Ransom's characteristic manner and the awkwardness that he was later to lose.

The isolation of the reflexive mode in his work has another function. After the highly creative years from 1916 to 1927, Ransom was virtually to abandon his characteristic predilection for narrative. The few poems published after 1927 show, in various ways, a need to find a new voice, one that was concerned more with a "psychological event"<sup>78</sup> than with a presented world. This group of poems draws attention, if often by default, to many of Ransom's strengths as a poet.

As mentioned earlier, Ransom left Oxford with what he later called a "fury against abstractions".<sup>79</sup> He was, at this time, an admirer of Browning, and although he once said that this admiration was focussed upon the surprise that each line of Browning's poems seemed to contain,<sup>80</sup> it is probably significant that in the work of both poets there are very few poems that do not invoke a presented world.

The use of a concrete situation is, of course, a common poetic device. Yet where Ransom does seem to be unusual is in the increasing degree of preference for "showing" to "telling", and for perceptual to conceptual rendering. While one could cite many poets, especially

some of the Romantics, such as Wordsworth, and also Browning, Hardy, Yeats, the early Eliot, Frost and E.A. Robinson, as poets of the concrete situation, they do not maintain quite the rigid exclusion of the reflexive as does Ransom in his mature poetry. The success or failure of their poems does not seem to depend, as it does so often with Ransom, upon this very exclusion.

John L. Stewart has, very aptly, pointed out one of the ways in which Ransom's particular genius was to evolve:

Already [in Poems About God] he showed a preference for narratives, and one third of the collection consists of little anecdotes and fables. and all but one poem involve an account of some action. . . . [O]nly two or three poems are at all ruminative. He had difficulty in sustaining any argument in verse, being easily put off by epithets or allusions which pleased his fancy but did not point toward anything in the poem. He was more at ease with narratives and quasi-narrative forms.<sup>81</sup>

The concern with the concrete situation in Poems About God emerges in the "located quality"<sup>82</sup>--the positioning in a specific spatio-temporal realm of both the observer and the observed--and in the narrative element--the presentation of both the teller and the tale. Where the poems of the Fugitive days differ from Poems About God (and I speak here very generally) is in the degree of particularization and the delimitation of the presented world, the maintenance of the speaker's focus upon that world, the indirection with which the speaker's attitudes are communicated, and the establishment of the speaker's authority--all of which partly depend upon the increasing control of the reflexive voice.

We see the early Ransom, through various devices, trying to give a sense of the concrete situation and the particular setting, out of which abstract ideas will emerge. The use of the definite article,



with adjectives to present the textural details, are correlatives of the use of a particular perspective, as is demonstrated by the opening lines of "The Ingrate":<sup>83</sup>

By night we looked across my field,  
The tasseled corn was fine to see,  
The moon was yellow on the rows  
And seemed so wonderful to me,  
That with an old provincial pride  
I praised my moonlit Tennessee,  
And thought my poor befriended man  
Would never dare to disagree.

In later poems, Ransom would do this and more. Instead of having the speaker muse upon the scene, he would give the scene a rich particularity through an even greater focus on its textural details, as in "Philomela":

I went out to Bagley Wood, I climbed the hill;  
Even the moon had slanted off in a twinkling,  
I heard the sepulchral owl and a few bells tinkling,  
There was no more villainous day to unfulfil,  
The diuturnity was still.

(ll. 26-30)

In the lines from "The Ingrate", we have the sense of a man looking upon a scene that always has that appearance; in the lines from "Philomela", the scene is thus only for that particular moment. There is an incidental relationship between the speaker of "The Ingrate" and the presented world; the relationship between the speaker of "Philomela" and the presented world is organic. As Vivienne Koch puts it, "the country terrain is no longer merely catalogued but instead is involved in the dramatic circumstance."<sup>84</sup>

Besides using a particular perspective in "Sunset",<sup>85</sup> Ransom's first poem, he particularizes the presented world through the speaker's explicit recognition of the uniqueness of his and the girl's position:

Two people never sat like us by a fence of cedar rails  
 On a still evening  
 And looked at such fat fields.

(II. 13-15)

Moreover, a sense of the specific derives from the movement of the eyes over the setting, giving it spatial extension:

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.

(II. 41-45)

There is a similar attempt in "Noonday Grace" and "Geometry", for instance, to give the presented world a sense of temporal extension. In the first, the speaker recounts a dinner-time incident, ranging back in time to the church service that morning, as well as giving accounts of habitual action and feeling. In "Geometry", he moves from the specific scene outside his window to the general natural qualities of trees.

In later poems, the spatio-temporal extensivity is given more implicitly than in Poems About God. The life-likeness of the presented figures and the full dimensionality of the presented world are emphasized by the implication of a pre-history and a future. Yet the presented world itself remains clearly defined. As in "Parting, without a Sequel", the speaker maintains focus on the specific incident and does not recount habitual action.

Because of the strictly maintained narrative mode, the speaker's attitudes are usually presented more indirectly in Ransom's mature poems than in Poems About God. Even "Grace",<sup>86</sup> one of the early poems that is often quoted as an example of Ransom's developing abilities, suggests that more explicit rendering of attitude that

characterizes Poems About God:

If silence from the dead, I swore,  
 There shall be cursing from the quick!  
 But I began to vomit too,  
 Cursing and vomit ever so thick;  
 The dead lay down, and I did too,  
 Two ashy idiots: take your pick!  
 A little lower than angels he made us,  
 (Hear his excellent rhetoric),  
 A credit we were to him, half of us dead,  
 The other half of us lying sick.  
 (ll. 97-106)

And Ransom's use of metaphor in this early volume makes much the same point. In "November",<sup>87</sup> a girl is thus described:

A girl with laughing on her lips  
 And in her eyes the quickest tears,  
 And low of speech, as when one finds  
 A mother cooing to her dears.  
 (ll. 37-40)

The last two lines typify the general lack of compression in Poems About God. Later Ransom achieved both compression and enrichment in his descriptions, descriptions that remain, however, bound up with the narrative mode, as in the final stanza of "Blue Girls".

Many of the characteristics of the mature Ransom are illustrated in two early poems, "Overtures" and "Roses". "Roses", with comparatively minor revisions, became "The Rose"; "Overtures" was more extensively revised to become "Two Gentlemen Scholars", a first-person narrative lyric with dramatic tendencies turned into a dramatic poem with narrative tendencies. The revision is an interesting one, since it moves slightly away from narrative, as do most of Ransom's latest poems, and since it is also concerned with "detailing the courtship and marriage of the pair very briefly"<sup>88</sup> instead of implying it, as the original version did.

In both "Roses" and "Overtures", the speaker, in suppressing the reflexive manner, allows the presented world to be clearly demarcated and his attitudes to emerge indirectly. Such effects derive partly from the use of the past tense, which establishes the separation between speaking and experiencing selves--an uncommon feature in Poems About God.

In "Overtures", it is from the narrative that we are left to infer the speaker's sadness at the quarrel, as well as his relief that the quarrel is nearing its end:

Oh no, she walked alone, and I  
Was walking in the rainy wood,  
And saw her drooping by the tree,  
And saw my work of widowhood.  
(ll. 29-32)

Apart from this typical feature, the girl is herself presented in action, which gives her a distinct personality and that autonomous existence that characterizes the presented figures (who are often even named) in Ransom's mature work. The girl of "Sunset", in contrast, remains shadowy, more like a figment of the speaker's imagination than a fictive figure.

In "Roses",<sup>89</sup> the reflexive and the narrative modes are skilfully balanced:

I entered dutiful, God knows,  
The room in which I was to sit  
With dreary unbelieving books.  
It was surprising, I suppose,  
To find such happy change in it:  
There stood a most celestial rose  
And looked the flower that my love looks  
Who, where she turns her smiling face  
Makes heavy earth a hopeful place.

I blessed the heart that wished me well  
 When I had been bereft of much,  
 And brought such word of beauty back.  
 I went like one escaping hell  
 To drink its fragrance and to touch,  
 And stroked, O ludicrous to tell!  
 A horrid thing of bric-a-brac,  
 A make-believe, a mockery,  
 And nothing that a rose should be.

Red real roses keep a thorn,  
 And save their loveliness a while  
 And in their perfect date unfold.  
 But you, beyond all women born,  
 Have spent so easily your smile,  
 That I am not the less forlorn  
 Nor these ironic walls less cold,  
 Because it smiles, the chilly rose,  
 As you are smiling, I suppose.

Here, perhaps, there is a more explicit statement of the speaker's attitude than later occurs. Yet, through the incorporation of an audience into the poem, and through the temporal gap between speaking and experiencing selves, the "I" is given that dramatic quality that so distinguishes Ransom's mature speaking voice. The fusion of speaking and experiencing selves at the end of the poem is perhaps the most remarkable feature, the feature that above all others characterizes this as a poem of Ransom's mature manner. In "Roses", as in "Overtures", the imposition of a specific incident, within a strictly delimited spatio-temporal realm, involves a virtual suppression of the reflexive manner. The final identification of the two time levels in the poem implies, but does not state, the poignancy of the situation.

While the revisions to the second and third stanzas are minor ones, it is in the heavier revisions of the first stanza of "Roses" that we see the direction that Ransom's development had taken:

I entered weary of my woes  
 The room in which I was to sit  
 With dreary unbelieving books,  
 Astonished, as you may suppose,  
 To find such happy change in it:



There stood a most celestial rose  
 And looked the flower that my love looks  
 When men are mad to seek that face  
 Whose smile is very Heaven's grace.

The most telling revision here is in line four. Ransom changed "It was surprising, I suppose" to "Astonished, as you may suppose", perhaps because the original words, "I suppose", tended to diminish the impact of the bitter final line of the poem, "As you are smiling, I suppose."

An even more significant effect of this revision lies in the manoeuvring of the words from private utterance into more public utterance, without forfeiting the descriptive quality of the line. The revised line is fully in keeping with the narrative thread of the poem and with its spoken quality.

A particularly clear example of the confusion between the demands of the reflexive and the narrative manner of Poems About God emerges in the aspect of address. In "Sunset", the speaker addresses, it seems, the girl:

We had better start for the house.  
 Rover!  
 O here he is, waiting.  
 (ll. 57-59)

Here the speaker is actively engaged in direct address. Yet, at another point in the poem, the speaker suggests that his thoughts are part of an interior monologue or soliloquy and that he is simply imagining himself to be addressing his companion:

To me it is beautiful enough,  
 I am stirred,  
 I say grand and wonderful, and grow adjectival,  
 But to you  
 It is God.  
 (ll. 16-20)

The words "I say" negate the earlier suggestion of direct address.

This confusion, mirrored to some extent in the stanza from "November" quoted earlier, points to an aspect that is fundamental to the narrative mode: the authority of the speaker. In a purely reflexive poem, the problem of authority does not arise. The imagination is unrestricted: since the speaker's vision cannot be contested, he can in no way be charged with unreliability. But as soon as a poem is narrative, the reader may become involved in questions of credibility.

In "Sunset", we saw the speaker in a self-mocking attitude: "I say grand and wonderful, and grow adjectival". Here the self-mockery seems to diminish, rather than humanize, the speaker, an effect which is rare in the mature poems. If we feel the speaker of "Sunset" to be naïve, we may even go so far as to disbelieve him in "Noonday Grace".<sup>90</sup> He reproduces, in dialogue, his father's words, after which he adds: "These were the words of the old elect/ Or others to the same effect" (ll. 9-10). Ransom would later maintain a fine balance between the speaker's hesitancy and his authority, the first even establishing the second. The speaker of "Dead Boy", for instance, proves his authority through the confession of his limitation: he is "from the world of outer dark" (l. 4).

Again in "Sunset", the speaker attempts to find exact phrasing to denote the colour of the wheat-field, perhaps to convey its extreme impact:

The meadows are very wide and green  
And the big field of wheat is solid gold,  
Or a little darker than gold.  
(ll. 10-12)

Ransom would later manage to impart a sense of bafflement in his

speaker without making him seem naïve and without diminishing the actuality of the presented world. In "Two in August", for instance, where there is a strong sense of the mind of the speaker throughout, his perplexity is communicated without negating the existence of the two lovers, while, at the same time, he universalizes the situation:

How sleepers groan, twitch, wake to such a mood  
Is not well understood,  
Nor why two entities grown almost one  
Should rend and murder trying to get undone,  
With individual tigers in their blood.

(ll. 11-15)

It is the speaker's inability to maintain authority that flaws one of Ransom's later poems, "Somewhere is Such a Kingdom", first published in 1927. This inability stems very clearly from the confusion, within the poem, between the narrative and the reflexive manner.

Probably an extended allusion to Chaucer's The Parliament of Fowls, "Somewhere is Such a Kingdom" presents a contrast between an ideal and a realistic world. It is reminiscent both of Chaucer's shift from a harmonious to a quarrelsome situation and of the two inscriptions that Chaucer's narrator reads.<sup>91</sup> In the first stanza, the speaker reflects upon the bird kingdom:

The famous kingdom of the birds  
Has a sweet tongue and liquid words,  
The red-birds polish their notes  
In their easy practised throats.  
Smooth as orators are the thrushes  
Of the airy city of the bushes,  
And God reward the fierce cock wrens  
Who have such suavity with their hens.

Unlike this stanza, in which the kingdom is not seen but conceptualized, the second stanza moves into narrative. The speaker is placed in a

definite relationship with the birds:

To me this has its worth  
 As I sit upon the earth  
 Lacking my winter and quiet hearth.  
 For I go up into a nook  
 With a mind burdened or a book,  
 And hear no strife nor quarreling  
 As the birds and their wives sing.

The following three stanzas resume the reflexive mode:

Or, so it has been today.  
 Yet I cannot therefore say  
 If the red-bird, wren, or thrush  
 Know when to speak and when to hush;  
 Though their manifest education  
 Be a right enunciation,  
 And their chief excellence  
 A verbal elegance.  
 I cannot say if the wind never blows,  
 Nor how it sometimes goes.

This I know, that if they wrangle,  
 Their words inevitably will jangle.  
 If they be hateful as men  
 They will be harsh as we have been.  
 When they go to pecking  
 You will soon hear shrieking,  
 And they who will have the law,  
 How those will jaw!  
 Girls that have unlawful dreams  
 Will waken full of their own screams,  
 And boys that get too arrant  
 Will have rows with a parent,--  
 And when friend falls out with friend  
 All songs must have quick end.

Have they not claws like knives?  
 Have not these gentlemen wives?

The status of the final stanza is not immediately clear. It might either be a continuation of the reflexive mode or a reestablishment of the narrative mode:

But when they croak and flier and swear,  
 My dull heart I must take elsewhere;  
 For I will see if God has made  
 Otherwhere another shade  
 Where the men or beasts or birds  
 Exchange few words and pleasant words.  
 And dare I think it is absurd  
 If no such beast were, no such bird?

The speaker has moved from the empirical view--provided by narrative--of stanza two into doubt that this observation provides sufficient grounds for believing in the permanence of what he has seen: "I cannot say if the wind never blows,/Nor how it sometimes goes." The conditional mood of stanza four leads him to make, in stanza five, a more extreme statement of disbelief in the ideal world: "Have they not claws like knives?/Have not these gentlemen wives?"

On the basis of this increasing scepticism, we may assume that the final stanza will be a continuation of the conditional: that the speaker will arrive at a point of such extreme doubt that he will begin to search for another kingdom. Yet the use of the word "when" and the indicative mood work against this assumption; and it is here that one has difficulty in accepting the speaker's position. It seems that the speaker has either persuaded himself or somehow discovered--through knowledge of The Parliament of Fowls, perhaps--that this once peaceful kingdom is, in fact, full of discord.

The difficulty that the reader has at the end of the poem stems from the absence of signals as to the source of the speaker's new awareness. It is simply because the speaker founded his original belief on empirical evidence that the later scepticism may be called into question. Were the final stanza kept within the reflexive manner, this problem would not, of course, arise.

Here, then, are some of the difficulties that Ransom had, once the demands of the narrative manner were not fulfilled and once the



reflexive voice was not obedient to the dominant narrative mode. Although "Somewhere is Such a Kingdom" undoubtedly takes one back to the uncertainty of Poems About God as regards the use of the narrative and reflexive modes, most of Ransom's mature poems show his increasing awareness of where his main strengths lie--in the precise delimiting of the presented world, and in the dominance of the narrative over the reflexive manner.

There are, however, a few poems that do away entirely with the narrative mode. "What Ducks Require", like "Somewhere is Such a Kingdom", presents a non-human world, though at no point does it deal with the particular nor does it move into narrative. "Survey of Literature", also a purely reflexive poem, presents the speaker's interpretation of Plato, Aristotle, and such literary figures as Chaucer, Shakespeare and Blake. Its central importance would seem to lie in its being a rendering, in miniature, of Ransom's poetics, though critics disagree on this point.<sup>92</sup> "Our Two Worthies" is a rather more complex instance of the reflexive manner. Although the poem does seem to use narrative, the status of the figures mentioned would perhaps keep this poem within the reflexive mode. Here the speaker presents the distortion of Christ's teaching by Paul and the modern Church's unthinking acceptance of the Word as it has come through Paul. There is a sense in which Christ and Paul function as ideas rather than as figures within a presented world. They are not fleshed out into character-like or fictive figures; they are not released from the speaker's imagination, but exist simply as concepts.

That "Survey of Literature" and "Our Two Worthies" are both primarily in the reflexive mode is perhaps clearer when one recalls two other poems of Ransom's which allude to historical figures.

"Necrological", based upon an episode in the life of Charles the Bold,

Duke of Burgundy,<sup>93</sup> and "Judith of Bethulia", based upon the Apocrypha, present the figures as character-like, with a sense of autonomous existence within the presented world that dominates any knowledge of their historical rootedness.

These later poems--"Somewhere is Such a Kingdom", "What Ducks Require", "Our Two Worthies" and "Survey of Literature"--were first published in Two Gentlemen in Bonds in 1927. They point to Ransom's increasing concern with the reflexive mode, a concern that is illustrated more fully in some of the poems written after 1927.

In 1929, Ransom published three poems, none of which he selected for the final edition of his work.<sup>94</sup> The only four poems to be published since 1929 are almost entirely reflexive: "Prelude to an Evening", "Autumn Grief of Margaret" (the title of which was changed to "Of Margaret") and "Painted Head" in 1934, and "Address to the Scholars of New England" (later changed to "To the Scholars of Harvard") in 1939. All these are included in Selected Poems.

Many critics have been disappointed with Ransom's later poems, and, more recently, have disparaged his revisions. While this displeasure is largely due, it seems, to the metrical and linguistic innovations, a brief comment by Richmond Croom Beatty, who calls the later work a "thin and turgid trickle", is particularly suggestive: "The most striking attributes of [Ransom's] work for readers of the present and of the future will likely continue to rest in its language and its successfully rendered dramatic situations."<sup>95</sup>

By the term "dramatic situation", Beatty seems to mean just what Ransom meant in The New Criticism:

Most poems--exceptions would be poems in the "grand style" or poems in the severe "classical style"--particularize themselves with great naturalness because they represent inferentially some particular speaker;

and they may represent his speech as being directed to anybody who might be listening or again as addressed to some equally particular auditor. It becomes the speech of a "character" in a "situation," and its idiom becomes a feature of poetic "texture," though it comes up for review under the head of "dramatic propriety."<sup>96</sup>

It is such a dramatic quality that is generally lacking in Ransom's later work. One need not evaluate here: admiring critics naturally rebel against the loss of the Ransom they know. Ransom, a poet of specific incidents, of dramatized "psychological cruxes",<sup>97</sup> a poet of irony and detachment, must, in the reflexive mode, forego the complex relationships between speaking and experiencing selves, between self and other, between self and world "out there". It is the "dramatic situation", as Beatty and Ransom use the term, that forms the basis for the complex web of relationships between poet, speaker, presented world and reader.

It seems that after that highly creative period from 1922 to 1927, Ransom felt that he had exhausted the narrative mode. Robert Penn Warren remembers Ransom saying to him, some time well before the publication of "Address to the Scholars of New England", that "he thought he might write no more poetry [since] he couldn't bear merely to repeat himself." But he also said, "Of course, if some day I find a new way in, I'll probably start writing again."<sup>98</sup> There seems to be a need for a new poetic experience, a new way to render that experience, and perhaps even a movement towards assimilation of certain modern trends. (There is, in these later poems, a particularly distinct flavour of Wallace Stevens and E.E. Cummings.) These poems turn from the rendering of the psychological conflicts of others in narrative form (though the speaker himself also becomes involved) to a rendering of the speaker's psychological state

largely in the reflexive mode. In his new style, Ransom moves away from attention to the specific incident, so neatly objectified in the presented world, into greater abstraction, greater self-reflection.

Much of the criticism of "Painted Head" has dealt successfully with the thematic significance of the poem--the conflict between scientific and aesthetic views of reality, or between Platonism and Aristotelian principles; the uneasy interdependence of mind and body or, in Ransomic terms, structure and texture. There remains confusion, however, about how the poem develops these ideas.

Critics generally seem to regard the poem as a bilgedicht or "picture poem"; that is, a poem which refers, through narration or description, to a particular work of art outside itself. Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" or Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" are two of the best-known examples of this genre;<sup>99</sup> and it is possible that Ransom's "The Last Judgment: A Fresco"<sup>100</sup> narrates the incidents actually depicted upon a fresco.

The danger with reading "Painted Head" as a bilgedicht is that the nature of the head changes throughout the poem:

By dark severance the apparition head  
Smiles from the air a capital on no  
Column or a Platonic perhaps head  
On a canvas sky depending from nothing;

Stirs up an old illusion of grandeur  
By tickling the instinct of heads to be  
Absolute and to try decapitation  
And to play truant from the body bush;

But too happy and beautiful for those sorts  
Of head (homekeeping heads are happiest)  
Discovers maybe thirty unwidowed years  
Of not dishonoring the faithful stem;

Is nameless and has authored for the evil  
Historian headhunters neither book  
Nor state and is therefore distinct from tart  
Heads with crowns and guilty gallery heads;

Wherefore the extravagant device of art  
 Unhousing by abstraction this once head  
 Was capital irony by a loving hand  
 That knew the no treason of a head like this;

Makes repentance in an unlovely head  
 For having vinegarly traduced the flesh  
 Till, the hurt flesh recusing, the hard egg  
 Is shrunken to its own deathlike surface;

And an image thus. The body bears the head  
 (So hardly one they terribly are two)  
 Feeds and obeys and unto please what end?  
 Not to the glory of tyrant head but to

The estate of body. Beauty is of body.  
 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.

In the first stanza, the head is an "apparition" or "Platonic" head; in stanza three, a "homekeeping" head--now not divorced from the body. In stanza five, mention is made of "this once head" and, in the following stanza, of "the hard egg", while, in the penultimate stanza, we are told of "flesh contouring shallowly on a head". To overcome this difficulty and yet keep to the bilgedicht tradition (if only by implication), one critic has explained that a concern with the painting "is the emphasis in the first six quatrains, whereas the attitude of the body, which is not present in the painting, is the emphasis of the last three quatrains".<sup>101</sup> Another critic, in an apparently serious statement, finds that the last three stanzas maintain focus on the head: "The blue birds would have to be the eyes, and I take the sea-shell flats to be the teeth and the caves the mouth and perhaps the ears. 'The olive garden for the nightingales' is troublesome; the brain has been suggested."<sup>102</sup>

The most reasonable interpretation comes from Charles Moorman, who suggests that the poem is made up of a dialectic between



the aesthetic and the scientific view; it is about the proper viewing of a particular painting.<sup>103</sup> What Moorman does not do is clarify the extent to which the poem is a bilgedicht: he moves from analysis of the scientist's view of the object to the poet's. It seems that the painting itself is simply the starting point, or impulse, but there is no suggestion by Moorman as to the point at which the poem departs from the particular work of art:

The poet is aware of his heresy, says Ransom; he knows the "no treason of a head like this," yet with a "loving hand," he commits the capital irony. Having made his initial abstraction, however, he must make amends. His created head is "unlovely" because bare. He has too tartly and "vinegarly traduced the flesh" of the world's body until the "hurt flesh" has "recused," objected, and pleaded its defence against the head. Then it is that the poet makes repentance by pickling the "hard egg" of his own idea in the same vinegar until it shrinks to its proper size<sup>104</sup> and proportion in the delicate equilibrium of flesh and head.

The unsatisfactory aspect of this analysis is the lack of clarity about the object viewed, since Moorman takes it that one is.

I should like to suggest, as tentatively as this complex poem demands, that reading it as a reflexive poem (that is, as a poem in which the conceptual and not the perceptual is dominant) clarifies many of the problems related to the changing nature of the head and to the rôle of the artist--which would include both painter and poet.

We may take it that the poem does not present an individual painting as a fait accompli but as an activity in process, which is made clearer by the original title, "Painting: A Head".<sup>105</sup> First, the head is outlined; then the artist, who has had to make an abstraction--the process of art requires, after all, an intellectual ordering of experience, a structure--makes up for the betrayal and fills in the sensuous details, the texture, without which the structure can have

neither meaning nor value.

With this sense of process in mind, the argument as a whole seems to fall into place. The "apparition head" signifies the primary abstraction that for a moment tempts the artist to follow the Platonic ideal, to paint a head that is "Absolute". It is the word "head" and not "artist" (understood) that forms the subject of the first four stanzas: the aesthetic purpose, the conception emerging within the artist's mind, is itself in control. It is this very conception that compels the artist not to dishonour "the faithful stem".

Unlike Moorman, I should take the word "Till" (l. 23) as grammatically following "traduced" and not "Makes repentance". The adverbial clause of time, "Till . . . surface", would seem to qualify the phrase, "having traduced", because of the absence of a comma after the line, "For having vinegarly traduced the flesh". That is, having shrunken the abstraction to "its own deathlike surface", to an "apparition" or "hard egg", the artist, who knows the "no treason" of the aesthetic purpose, "makes repentance" for having betrayed (though it was a necessary preliminary) the sensuous details. "And an image thus" signifies the continuation of the artist's craft, after the slight shift back in time in the previous three lines, and his obedience to "the extravagant device of art".

"Extravagant" is an intriguing word in this context. Here Ransom goes back to the Latin derivation, whereby "extravagant" suggests erring, straying from the bounds of the structure. It is this very extravagance that leads to the enrichment of the structure by attending to the "world's body":

The world of art is the actual world which does not bear restriction; or at least is sufficiently defiant of the restrictiveness of science, and offers enough fullness of content, to give us the sense of actual objects. A qualitative density, or value-density, such as is unknown

to scientific understanding, marks the world of the actual objects. The discourse which tries systematically to record this world is art.<sup>106</sup>

It is only in the first stanza that any perceptual basis to the poem is suggested. After this stanza--and there is a similar shift in the predominantly reflexive poem, "Of Margaret"--the poem renders conceptually: emphasis is on the speaker's inner reflection as he imagines the proper process of art. The process itself is admirably represented in the metre and rhythm.

Except in the last stanza, there is a varying feeling of unease in the sound-combinations and word-order. Throughout much of the poem, the iambic metre is rearranged by means of spondaic substitutions; towards the end of the poem this becomes rarer. A greater sense of fluidity begins in the seventh and eighth stanzas, which contain the first hints of a change from, in Arnold Stein's terminology,<sup>107</sup> "vertical" to "horizontal" rhythms, and which are linked, for the first time in the poem, by enjambement. This fluidity is still occasionally broken by the use of caesura, the parenthetical statement, the uneasy word-order and the rise in pitch in the phrase, "and unto please what end?"

The initially uneasy coexistence of structure and texture turns finally into pure harmony, although the word "colorify" briefly reminds one, with its vertical rhythm, of the delicate and precarious equilibrium. Immediately after this, however, with the move into the final stanza and the portrayal of the complete sensibility, the rhythm is one of fluidity: the alliteration is worked, not to create junctures (as in the earlier vertical rhythm) but to present a musical pattern of gathering emotion as sound picks up sound. There is an increasing sense of a "singing voice" rather than Ransom's characteristic "speaking voice".

Here, then, is Ransom's mimetic principle: he seems to be representing not simply a painting but the very process involved in the creation of art, and particularly of poetry, in which "the ideas and the indeterminate material in which they are enveloped"<sup>108</sup> coexist and connect. "Painted Head" is uncharacteristic in that it is not, strictly speaking, a narrative though it follows a process; and in that it does not invoke a presented world as its object of discourse but instead refers to a mental process. In order to reveal certain aspects of the human predicament, Ransom usually creates figures who are both representative and rooted in the presented world. In "Painted Head", he bypasses the concrete incident and refers directly to the universal.

"Prelude to an Evening", in its original version, is uncharacteristic in that it reflects a man's inner state, without the concern for that full objectification that one associates with Ransom's poetry. And, like "Painted Head", it employs a language that is far more elliptical and abstract than Ransom's usual style. In one sense, however, the poems are recognizably Ransomic: they deal with a relationship between self and self--with the speaker's consciousness as it becomes redefined and resolved.

A brief comparison of the original with the revised version of "Prelude to an Evening" provides a significant comment on Ransom's use of the reflexive and the narrative modes, for the revision reverts slightly to the narrative mode, whereas the original is almost entirely reflexive.

This poem reverses the characteristic situation of Ransom's first-person poem. Instead of confronting his past self, the speaker imagines his future. This alone would suggest that the poem is conceptual rather than perceptual.

Yeats's poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree"<sup>109</sup> clarifies the

distinction between the actual world within the poem--the presented world--and the world of the future--the imagined world. These are posited by Yeats respectively as a world of "pavements grey" (l.11) and one of bees, linnets, lake water. The force of the subjunctive realm is such that the speaker says of the water, "I hear it in the deep heart's core" (l. 12); yet this world remains, of course, imagined.

To a lesser extent, Donne's "The Apparition" grounds the speaker in the actual world, though more is implied of his present situation than is actually stated. The imagined world is particularized to a greater extent than is that of Yeats's poem: the speaker's account of future attitudes and actions gives the future a sense of immediacy.

In the original version of Ransom's "Prelude to an Evening", the speaker's rootedness in the actual world is only implied. It is the subjunctive realm that receives emphasis; and it is even at times treated as if it were actually happening. This sense of immediacy derives partly from the substitution of the present participle for the future tense; partly from the vivid details given. Yet this future world does not become an actual one for the speaker.

In the original version, the spatio-temporal orientation of the speaker seems to remain fixed, as is common with Ransom's poems. Some time during the day, he imagines his arrival at home that evening:

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

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

To avert the gun of the swarthy soldier,  
For cry, cock-crow, or the iron bell  
Can crack the sleep-sense of outrage,  
Annihilate phantoms who were nothing.

(ll. 1-16)

After the first stanza, if I read the poem correctly, the speaker imagines his wife's subconscious, filled as it is with a sense of evil that remains, however, submerged. The remaining four stanzas explore the consequences of a full invasion of evil into this woman's consciousness:

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.

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.

Ransom's relationship with this poem has a remarkable history, which he details in his discussion of the revision in Selected Poems. Unhappy with the inconclusiveness of the ending, and apparently affected by a critic's comment about the speaker's brutality, Ransom eventually decided to restore "the happy connection"<sup>110</sup> between man and his God by allowing the speaker to repent and not to force upon his wife that "perverse supposal". One is reminded of the revision

of "Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son", in which the boy is allowed his bright future, and of "Armageddon", which used to end with the indecision of Christ and Antichrist about beginning the fighting<sup>111</sup> and now ends with Antichrist bleeding.

Ransom's desire for a conclusive and happier ending to "Prelude to an Evening" was to result in the use of a narrative mode: the speaker's physical movement towards his house providing a basis and a parallel to his mental development, his move into repentance and a new decision. Since the poem is in the present tense, the speaker's spatio-temporal orientation now shifts throughout the poem (as it does in "Somewhere is Such a Kingdom" and in many of Poems About God). In order to build up a complex response within the speaker towards his own feelings and aspirations (usually handled in terms of the speaking and experiencing selves), Ransom uses some interesting techniques.

In the last four stanzas of the poem, which provide an addition to the original version, itself revised, the concrete situation is intact. We are no longer presented with the speaker's imaginings, but with a world of external action:

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,  
Clipping on stage in the Name of the Law?  
That was me, forbidding tricks at homecoming  
Just as I'm nearing the white threshold.

I have gone to the nations of disorder  
To be quit of the memory of good and evil;  
There even your image was disfigured,  
But the boulevards rocked; they said, Go back.

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.

Ransom has tried something difficult here. . The original version, as a whole, was concerned with the speaker's potential self. Now, building from that basic situation, Ransom wishes to create a relationship between the speaker and his past self, in order to objectify the growth of consciousness, without the posterior temporal vantage point usually exploited by him for such purposes.

Obedient to the idea of self meeting his future, Ransom makes his speaker meet the forbidding "No!" of his future self, which then, as the speaker thinks further, becomes his past self: "That was me . . .". The idea is compelling, yet it seems less adeptly handled than one would expect from Ransom. The poet's task is to communicate to the reader both external and internal action: the speaker's spatio-temporal position and his complex thoughts. Because of the combination in this poem of first-person and present tense, the poet's task is made especially difficult, and unfortunately results in awkward transitions and awkward phrasing: the words, "I am here", sound oddly ludicrous.

Such a failure is particularly clearly illustrated in lines forty-four to forty-nine. The penultimate stanza (ll. 45-48) is possibly the strongest in the poem; and it must be about this part of the poem that Robert Lowell writes: "One new quatrain in 'Prelude to an Evening' has the richness of lines from Macbeth."<sup>112</sup> Yet, framed as it is by the line, "Just as I'm nearing the white threshold" and the words, "I am here", it loses much of its impact.

One wonders why Ransom did not revert to the use of the retrospective speaker for his revision; it would have enabled him to handle with greater ease the speaker's development. Ransom, in fact, said of this revision, "The social issue is saved, but I, like some of my friends, am not sure whether an expiation is always in the interest of a fiction."<sup>113</sup>

### NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

<sup>1</sup>For this suggestion, I am indebted to Käte Hamburger, p. 292, who says of the pure lyric that we experience "only the experience-field of the lyric I".

<sup>2</sup>Chills and Fever, pp. 19-20. Ransom unfortunately chose not to reprint this pair of sonnets.

<sup>3</sup>Buffington, The Equilibrist, p. 46.

<sup>4</sup>Selected Poems, p. 134.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>6</sup>Williams, p. 112.

<sup>7</sup>"Portrait of the Critic-Poet as Equilibrist", Sewanee Review, LVI (1948), 432-33.

<sup>8</sup>The Revival of Metaphysical Poetry: The History of a Style, 1800 to the Present (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1959), p. 186. The couplet quoted is from Donne's Elegie VIII, titled "The Comparison", ll. 33-34, in John Donne: The Complete English Poems, ed. A.J. Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 103-104.

<sup>9</sup>Duncan, p. 186.

<sup>10</sup>Parsons, p. 82.

<sup>11</sup>A Survey of Modernist Poetry (London: Heinemann, 1929), p. 229.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>13</sup>Buffington, The Equilibrist, p. 43.

<sup>14</sup>"A Poem Nearly Anonymous", American Review, I (1933), 195.

<sup>15</sup>Koch, p. 238.

<sup>16</sup>Parsons, p. 96.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 64, 86 et passim. Parsons's main objection is that "authorial intrusions" reduce the reader's feeling of empathy for the presented figures.

<sup>18</sup>Buffington, The Equilibrist, p. 75.

<sup>19</sup>Williams, p. 63. Williams is actually referring to the third line of the poem where "we are warned that the actual girls are not the ones seen by the speaker; he is lost in some sort of dream, maybe nostalgia." I find that in the first two stanzas the speaker is still concerned with "lived" (that is, non-visionary) experience. There are foreshadowings of the later realization of a visionary experience but the speaking self does not yet seem to be aware of their cause.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>22</sup>Buffington, The Equilibrist, p. 75.

<sup>23</sup>Parsons, p. 96.

<sup>24</sup>Stauffer, p. 432.

<sup>25</sup>"Primarily Language", Sewanee Review, LVI (1948), 297.

<sup>26</sup>"A Poem Nearly Anonymous", p. 188.



<sup>27</sup>Selected Poems, p.151.

<sup>28</sup>"A Southern Mode of the Imagination; Circa 1918 to the Present", The Carleton Miscellany, I (1960), 9-23. The quoted passages are from pp. 22 and 15 respectively.

<sup>29</sup>Williams, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup>Wells, The American Way of Poetry, p. 163.

<sup>31</sup>Buffington, The Equilibrist, p. 62.

<sup>32</sup>Williams, p. 34.

<sup>33</sup>Matthiessen, "Primarily Language", p.398.

<sup>34</sup>The New Oxford Book of English Verse, pp. 773-74.

<sup>35</sup>Jarrell, p. 91.

<sup>36</sup>Matthiessen, "Primarily Language", p. 400.

<sup>37</sup>Tate, "A Southern Mode", p. 23.

<sup>38</sup>I.A. Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism (1924; rpt. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 250.

<sup>39</sup>"Thoughts on the Poetic Discontent", The Fugitive, IV, No. 2 (1925), 64.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>42</sup>There is, however, another excellent analysis of "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter", though largely an expansion of Warren's suggestive comments: M.E. Bradford, "A Modern Elegy: Ransom's Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter", Mississippi

Quarterly, XXI (1963), 43-47.

<sup>43</sup>"Pure and Impure Poetry", Kenyon Review, V (1943), 240, n.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p.238.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p.240.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>The World's Body, p. 33.

<sup>48</sup>Warren, "Pure and Impure Poetry", p. 239.

<sup>49</sup>Sense and Sensibility in Modern Poetry (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 140-41.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>51</sup>Selected Poems, p. 152.

<sup>52</sup>"The Doric Delicacy", in A Shaping Joy: Studies in the Writer's Craft (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 275.

<sup>53</sup>Chills and Fever, p. 51.

<sup>54</sup>Tilbury Town: Selected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Macmillan, 1953), p. 87.

<sup>55</sup>In "A Rose for Emily", the story moves from talk of a funeral to the realization of the death-marriage metaphor; in "Emily Hardcastle, Spinster", the "stately ceremonial" appears at first to be a wedding, but turns out to be only metaphorically so. And in "Richard Cory" (Tilbury Town, p. 38), the glittering and envied man "Went home and put a bullet through his head " (l. 16).

<sup>56</sup>Buffington, The Equilibrist, p. 47.

<sup>57</sup>Cited by Buffington, The Equilibrist, p. 93.

<sup>58</sup>Matthiessen, "Primarily Language", p. 394.

<sup>59</sup>Buffington, The Equilibrist, p. 93.

<sup>60</sup>Southwest Review, X (1925), 13-14.

<sup>61</sup>Buffington, The Equilibrist, p. 94.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 94. Buffington thinks, mistakenly, that stanza six is spoken by the old men.

<sup>64</sup>For a briefer analysis of the final stanza of "Antique Harvesters", the conclusion of which supports my own, see Warren, "Notes", p. 332.

<sup>65</sup>The New Oxford Book of English Verse, pp. 717-19.

<sup>66</sup>A further similarity in technique between this poem and some of Ransom's resides in the attempted communication between the two ontologically distinct worlds, not only stretching from dead figure to speaker but also from speaker to dead figure. In some of Ransom's third-person poems, such as "Morning" and "Parting, without a Sequel" (both discussed in the following chapter), there is a suggestion of just such an impossible communication. In "The Blessed Damozel", there is a hint, in the damozel's repetition of the earth-bound speaker's phrase, "we two", that she has heard from the other world. The New Oxford Book of English Verse, pp. 710-14, stanzas 17 and 18.

<sup>67</sup>Koch, p. 249.

<sup>68</sup>"A Meditation for His Mistress", lines 12 and 17 respectively, in The New Oxford Book of English Verse, pp. 243-44.

<sup>69</sup>"To His Coy Mistress", in The Poems of Andrew Marvell, ed. Hugh MacDonald (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), pp. 21-22.

<sup>70</sup>This is a difficult point to establish. Ransom has actually spoken as if the girls do hear: "the girls in the schoolyard are preening themselves in their beauty (as they should) till a man looking on addresses them and forces them to take account of a blear-eyed old woman whom he invents on the spot, and describes, with the threat that to her favor they must come soon." Selected Poems, p. 152.

<sup>71</sup>"To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time", l. 3, in The New Oxford Book of English Verse, p. 243.

<sup>72</sup>Thomas Nashe, "In Time of Pestilence", in The New Oxford Book of English Verse, pp. 105-106.

<sup>73</sup>Ransom himself calls "Blue Girls" a "vindictive" poem. Selected Poems, p. 152.

<sup>74</sup>Theory of Literature, 3rd ed. (1949; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 227-28. I scarcely need add that one does not take "poet" to mean the man, but instead the formalized version of the poet, or the fictive speaker.

<sup>75</sup>A Glossary of Literary Terms, 3rd ed. (1957; rpt. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 89.

<sup>76</sup>Modern Poetry and the Tradition (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1939), p. 93.

<sup>77</sup>"Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter", l. 19.

<sup>78</sup>Langer, p. 217. Professor Langer means "the occurrence and passage of a thought" by this term. It must be noted that I do not speak of mutually exclusive modes here, but of emphasis.

<sup>79</sup>Cited by Stewart, The Burden of Time, p. 206.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid.

<sup>82</sup>Langbaum, p. 40.

<sup>83</sup>Poems About God, pp. 11-12.

<sup>84</sup>Koch, p. 234.

<sup>85</sup>Poems About God, pp. 13-16.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., p. 18-23.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., pp. 59-52.

<sup>88</sup>Selected Poems, p. 116.

<sup>89</sup>Poems About God, pp. 47-48.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., pp. 6-10.

<sup>91</sup>Ransom's speaker refers also to a book, harking back, perhaps, to the book that precipitates Chaucer's narrator's dream.

<sup>92</sup>Jarrell (p. 95), for instance, says of "Survey of Literature" that the word "cake" cannot be "a judgment but [is simply] a rhyme" for a poet "whose favorite word was howl".

<sup>93</sup>Stewart says, "Ransom wrote 'Necrological' soon after reading an account of the siege of Nancy, where the body of Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy (1433-1477), had been left on the field and eaten by wolves." The Burden of Time, p. 217.

<sup>94</sup>The poems are: "Autumn Love", New Republic, 20 Feb. 1929, p. 10; "Old Man Pondered", Saturday Review of Literature, 15 June 1929, p. 1107; and "The Feasting of Maionides and Stephen Dedalus", New Republic, 14 Aug. 1929, p. 342. "Old Man Pondered" was selected for the 1963 edition of Selected Poems, but was not kept for the last edition.



<sup>95</sup>Beatty, "John Crowe Ransom as Poet", p. 366.

<sup>96</sup>The New Criticism, pp. 61-62.

<sup>97</sup>Warren, "John Crowe Ransom: A Study in Irony", Virginia Quarterly Review, XI (1935), p. 103. Warren is quoting here, but no name nor source is given.

<sup>98</sup>Warren, "Notes", p. 343.

<sup>99</sup>As regards "Leda and the Swan", the issue is slightly confused; according to T.R. Henn, the poem probably refers to more than one work of art. The Lonely Tower: Studies in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats (1950; rpt. London: Methuen, 1965), pp. 255-56.

<sup>100</sup>The Fugitive, III, Nos. 5 & 6 (1924), pp. 148-50.

<sup>101</sup>Samuel H. McMillan, "John Crowe Ransom's Painted Head", Georgia Review, XXII (1968), 194.

<sup>102</sup>Buffington, The Equilibrist, p. 124.

<sup>103</sup>"Ransom's Painted Head", Explicator, No. 15. (This suggestion is supported by Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition, pp. 98-99.)

<sup>104</sup>Ibid.

<sup>105</sup>New Republic, 26 Dec. 1934, p. 185.

<sup>106</sup>The New Criticism, p. 293.

<sup>107</sup>John Donne's Lyrics: The Eloquence of Action (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1962), p. 20 ff. By vertical rhythm, Stein means a rhythm in which syllables do not flow into each other with a forward motion but are stiffened by stress and thus kept apart. On the other hand, horizontal rhythm refers to a rhythm modulated by use of syllabic structure, a rhythm with a dominantly forward motion.

<sup>108</sup>The New Criticism, p. 302.

<sup>109</sup>The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1950), p. 44.

<sup>110</sup>Selected Poems, p. 153.

<sup>111</sup>The final stanza of the earlier version (Chills and Fever, pp. 58-61) reads:

The immortal Adversary shook his head:  
If now they fought too long, then he would famish;  
And if much blood was shed, why, he was squeamish:  
"These Armageddons weary me much," he said.

<sup>112</sup>Lowell, "Four Tributes", p. 5.

<sup>113</sup>Selected Poems, p. 148.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THIRD-PERSON AND DRAMATIC POEMS

#### 1. The Nature of the Third-Person Speaker

It is worth repeating briefly the distinction between the third-person and first-person mode in order to draw attention to some of the possibilities open to the third-person speaker. The third-person poem presents a world peopled by figures whose realm of existence is distinct from that of the speaker. Here the action is not presented simply as a fragment of the speaker's past or present (as it is in Ransom's typical first-person poem); it is action engendered and experienced by others.

The distance between the realms of speaker and presented world implies two things in particular: an act of narration and the speaker's potentially omniscient rôle. In all of Ransom's third-person poems, the speaker places himself, explicitly or implicitly, in the rôle of story-teller. Just as Ransom has shown himself to be aware of the limits and potentialities of the first-person poetic situation, so does he, in his third-person poems, make use of traditional story-telling devices: of exposition, authority, privilege, of alternately maintaining and subverting the illusion of reality. Such traditional devices reveal, more clearly than do the first-person poems, Ransom's

particular cast as a teller of tales (often taken as a feature of his Southern heritage) as well as his affinity for the ballad.

That so few critics have attempted to explore, and that only briefly, the variety in the nature and rôle of Ransom's speaker and the complex and subtle shifts in perspective open to him is surprising. Vivienne Koch has made some comments on "the intimacy of [the speaker's] vantage-point"<sup>1</sup> and his involvement with the presented world, comments which usually remain, however, purely suggestive and occasionally erroneous.<sup>2</sup> Parsons attempts to come to terms with some of the different points of view but applies so rigorously prescriptive or else mistaken a thesis that his findings are seldom valid.<sup>3</sup> And Colin Partridge, while focussing on some interesting aspects of the relationship between speaker and world, disappointingly implies that the speaker is always "uninvolved" or "subordinate".<sup>4</sup>

The nature and rôle of Ransom's speaker, even within the third-person framework, vary more considerably than any of his critics seems to have realized. At one end of the spectrum, there is an impersonal speaker, almost totally withdrawn and anonymous, who stands behind the scene and draws minimal attention to his own realm or rôle. In "Necrological", for instance, the speaker is so little discoverable that most of the poem reads as figural presentation, in which the central figure's consciousness seems to be directly rendered. The slightly less impersonal speaker of "Morning" retains control of the mediative process despite the direct contact we seem intermittently to have with the figure's inner consciousness.

As we move further along the spectrum of possibilities, the speaker becomes more personal in that he emerges as a self-conscious story-teller. He remains, however, withdrawn and discreet, as in

"Good Ships", for instance, where he refers to his own realm only once, in the words, "I should think" (1.12). Though he does draw attention to his rôle as mediator, the traditional superiority of the third-person speaker is invoked so tentatively that he virtually abjugates the authority permissible to the auctorial consciousness. More highly aware of his auctorial rôle is the speaker of "Man without Sense of Direction", who introduces his story with these two stanzas:

Tell this to ladies: how a hero man  
Assail a thick and scandalous giant  
Who casts true shadow in the sun,  
And die, but play no truant.

This is more horrible: that the darling egg  
Of the chosen people hatch a creature  
Of noblest mind and powerful leg  
Who cannot fathom nor perform his nature.

The more the speaker designates his own realm and function and articulates his own responses and attitudes so that they are made explicit and not merely implied, the more he emerges as a fictive figure, as a discoverable, character-like personality. In "Captain Carpenter", the development of the speaker's response parallels the development of Captain Carpenter's situation. This is not an unusual feature of Ransom's poetry; what is unusual in this poem is the foregrounding of the speaker's changing attitude. The speaker of "The Equilibrists" emerges as even more personal: in addition to articulating his responses, he is seen as a figure with distinct mannerisms and traits, actively participating in the presented world.

These variations of perspective should not obscure the features which span the spectrum of possibilities, and which even align the third-person with the first-person poetic situation. Both modes



involve some kind of confrontation that is worked out in the dialectical manner that Allen Tate speaks of.<sup>5</sup> The first-person speaker views his experience, and perhaps the experience of others, in and of the presented world. The third-person speaker, at a further remove, confronts, from a position external to the presented world, the conflict of figures, or the conflict within one figure, in the presented world. In the third-person poem, like the first-person peripheral poem, there are two stands of action: first, the external action of the presented world and the internal conflict of the presented figures, and second, the speaker's internal action. Both the third- and the first-person peripheral speakers approach the figures through sympathy. The speaker's psychological involvement is explicit to a greater or a lesser degree, and may or may not be given additional focus through the speaker's spatio-temporal incursion into the presented world.

The speaker's internal action is manifested in his profound understanding of the presented world, and is made possible through his capacity to view the world from a distance. Since this privilege is not usually open to the figures themselves, the third-person poetic situation permits an exploitation of discrepancies of awareness between speaker and figure. The speaker may reveal at the outset his superiority, as in "Man without Sense of Direction", or, more commonly, he may tactfully mask it for a while, as in "Parting, without a Sequel", or else he may show the reader the development of his attitude from one of acceptance of the world's norms to one of disgust, as in "Captain Carpenter".

While the speaker, impersonal, discreet, or personal, always implies some response, and always has recourse to some superior awareness, his tactfulness is one of the most striking general features of Ransom's first- and third- person poems. Ransom was neither

tempted to use the speaker of an awareness so limited as to be unreliable, nor was he tempted to use the speaker inspired by divine knowledge. The Ransomic speaker stands midway between these two extremes. Yet, though one may speak of a characteristic stance, this position allows considerable variation.

## 2. The Discreet Speaker

Thomas Hardy, preoccupied with man's isolation from man (one of the sharpest differences, perhaps, between his poetry and Ransom's), usually chose to write in the first person, a perspective traditionally restricted. Although his "Beyond the Last Lamp"<sup>6</sup> is a first-person poem, it shows marked similarities in the speaker's attitude to experience to Ransom's predominantly third-person poem, "Spectral Lovers". Standing alone, Hardy's speaker sees two lovers "blinded . . . to time and place" (l. 7). He wonders at their unhappiness: "One could but wonder who they were/And what wild woe detained them there" (ll. 20-21). The questions posed in "Spectral Lovers" reveal a similar, and a characteristic, sense of bafflement and disappointment: "Why should two lovers be frozen apart in fear?/And yet they were, they were" (ll. 5-6).

Ransom's choice of the third-person mode and his evident awareness of the weight of auctorial judgements is combined with a characteristic hesitancy over making final and strict evaluations. The Ransomic speaker rarely, if ever, makes those pronouncements of universal validity that characterize the omniscient speaker. While he does, undoubtedly, evaluate, he does so with exquisite hints of self-deprecation, as in "The Equilibrists":

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?  
 (ll. 33-36)

Yet, since there are often strong indications woven into the texture of the poem of his powers and his evaluation, the speaker's restriction is often to be seen as a pose, an assumed attitude. The speaker's discreet demeanour has a humanizing effect. Ransom creates him as a figure entirely trustworthy, because of his humility and his moral enquiries.

Two poems, "The Tall Girl" and "Good Ships", illustrate, very differently, some of the ways in which Ransom's speaker seems to shed any evaluative function. They are both variants of Petrarchan sonnet, though in neither is the speaker the traditional sonneteer. "The Tall Girl" reveals, beyond the speaker's superficial hesitancy, an even more profound discretion in his unwillingness to provide either final judgement or prediction. The speaker of "Good Ships", on the other hand, though still superficially discreet, provides a more authoritative view.

"The Tall Girl" presents two opposing forces, the Queens of Hell and the Queen of Heaven, one of which will decide the destiny of the central figure:

The Queens of Hell had lissome necks to crane  
 At the tall girl approaching with long tread  
 And, when she was caught up even with them, nodded:  
 "If the young miss with gold hair might not disdain,  
 We would esteem her company over the plain,  
 To profit us all where the dogs will be out barking,  
 And we'll go by the windows where the young men are working  
 And tomorrow we will all come home again."

But the Queen of Heaven on the other side of the road  
 In the likeness, I hear, of a plain motherly woman  
 Made a wry face, despite it was so common  
 To be worsted by the smooth ladies of Hell,  
 And crisped her sweet tongue: "This never will come to good!  
 Just an old woman, my pet, that wishes you well."

There are two hints that the intervention of evil will be effective. One is in the Queen of Heaven's prophecy--"This never will come to good!"--made both more credible and more poignant by her own self-deprecation, by the implicit recognition that her mildly expressed wish is impotent in the face of evil--"Just an old woman, my pet, that wishes you well." The other hint comes to us through the speaker: "despite it was so common/To be worsted by the smooth ladies of Hell". Yet, where the use of the present tense would have drawn attention to the speaker's realm and to his evaluative function, the use of the past tense locates the suggestion firmly within the presented world, distances it, that is, from the speaker. It seems, then, that we are given a fact of existence as seen by the Queen of Heaven herself. Though the speaker is aware of and mediates her opinion, he does not assume it as his own.

In a further effort to isolate the speaker's attitude, one would, perhaps, examine the epithets used to characterize the two opposing forces. Obviously these epithets serve to present the oppositions--the suavity and persuasiveness of evil against the ordinariness and ultimate dependability of good. For instance, the word "lissome", Buffington suggests, reminds us of "the serpent's assurance to Eve that she can taste the fruit without committing herself to time or to the chain reaction of cause-and-effect: 'Ye shall not surely die.'"<sup>7</sup> Yet these epithets have a curious flatness, which is provided, it seems, both by their stock function and by the speaker's general maintenance of distance. This fundamental distance is established

in the words "I hear", which serve to give the story a sense of authenticity but which also remove from the speaker any responsibility for the story's veracity. The epithets are neutralized in the sense that they are aspects of a story the speaker has heard tell of; they are handed down and have become firmly attached to the story. They do not carry the weight of the speaker's personal response.

The speaker's refusal to commit himself unequivocally regarding the presented situation is further indicated in Ransom's negation of the traditional function of the sestet, which is, in offering a second position, to resolve the argument or mood of the first. Here the sestet, dealing with the power of good, contains the suggestion that goodness has a familiar and dependable face, however passive and impotent it may seem. But there is no resolution to the situation presented in the octave, for the suggestion is also that the Queen of Heaven's wry warning is final. She cannot provide a solution to the girl's temptation; indeed, the ironic reversal of the sestet's traditional function is a gentle mockery of her lack of power.

The speaker of "Good Ships" apparently restricts his authority and judgement in much the same way:

Fleet ships encountering on the high seas  
 Who speak, and then unto the vast diverge,  
 Two hailed each other, poised on the loud surge  
 Of one of Mrs. Grundy's Tuesday teas,  
 Nor trimmed one sail to baffle the driving breeze.  
 A macaroon absorbed all her emotion;  
 His hue was ruddy but an effect of ocean;  
 They exchanged the nautical technicalities.

It was only a nothing or so until they parted.  
 Away they went, most certainly bound for port,  
 So seaworthy one felt they could not sink;  
 Still there was a tremor shook them, I should think,  
 Beautiful timbers fit for storm and sport  
 And unto miserly merchant hulks converted.



Again, the sestet is ironically manipulated, embodying the speaker's disgust at the dehumanized couple, yet providing no resolution.

A stronger indication of the speaker's attitude emerges in his handling of the extended conceit, the comparison of the man and woman to two ships, for it is through the conceit that the speaker's values are articulated, an articulation stronger than is to be found in "The Tall Girl". His values are affirmed through a process of negation. The conceit is, first of all, built upon a contrast: the couple's depersonalized quality, their absorption in social rôles and masks, and their inability to adjust their "sails" to "the driving breeze", render them less than magnificent sailing vessels. The sestet, however, reveals that the vehicle is not what it was taken to be in the octave. The ships are not magnificent. This discovery gradually undermines the vehicle so that the tenor itself is further devalued. The poem ends with a comparison between the two people and the two ships, a comparison which serves to degrade both sets: "Beautiful timbers fit for storm and sport/And unto miserly merchant hulks converted."

In "The Tall Girl", then, the speaker emerges with a more distinct, if mixed, attitude than the words "I hear" point to. And in "Good Ships", the speaker emerges with a more emphatic, less inclusive, response than the tentative "I should think" would suggest. Whatever degree of discretion the speaker assumes, his psychological involvement is a strong one.

Nevertheless, the speaker does not don in either of these poems the full omniscience to which the third-person speaker is traditionally entitled. In "The Tall Girl", his self-imposed restriction rests upon the device of hearsay. He reproduces dialogue, which corroborates whatever evaluation is borne by the epithets, but he

does not give an inside view of any of the presented figures. He appears not so much creator as simply the recipient of the story which he is passing on.

In "Good Ships", the speaker's limitation is slightly more complex. In lines twelve and thirteen, he says: "So seaworthy one felt they could not sink; / Still there was a tremor shook them, I should think". Whether the pronoun "one" refers to either one of the two figures or to a presumptive observer, the speaker, in imagining a "tremor", is setting himself up as slightly more knowledgeable than either one of the figures or than the limited observer. This being so, he tends towards an omniscient stance. The shift from the impersonal to the first-person pronoun in these two lines might, besides, invite us to identify the presumptive observer and the speaker, who is thus referring to his own process of delayed awareness. As limited first-person peripheral observer, he was deceived by the appearance of the couple; as auctorial consciousness, he is not. Whichever way we read these lines, the speaker seems to be making the same kind of statement we find in many of the first-person poems about the growth of consciousness that follows the interaction of the past and present.

Ransom's awareness of the two extremes of omniscient and restricted speaker and his ability to play one concept against the other is just one indication of his narrative artistry. He employs a structural device for thematic purposes. In "The Tall Girl", presumably to conceal from the reader the sense that his judgement is being manipulated, the speaker does not characterize himself as an all-knowing, all-seeing figure, does not, that is, avail himself of one of the privileges open to the third-person speaker--that of seeing into the mind of a presented figure.

Again, an example from Hardy will illustrate this kind of

rejection of omniscience. The speaker of "Midnight on the Great Western",<sup>8</sup> observing the boy's appearance, imagines his psychological state, even including an "as if" construction (l. 13) to emphasize his own limited knowledge. Two of the four stanzas are questions. Nor is this privilege exploited in "Captain Carpenter", although the speaker assumes a self-conscious auctorial rôle. He simply presents himself as witness to what is said, thus stressing his restricted powers at that point, and, at the same time, communicating (through this shift from a position outside to one inside the world) a deepening sympathy for Captain Carpenter. The speaker of "Spectral Lovers", too, restricts his powers. It is perfectly in accord with his general puzzlement as to the nature of these lovers to leave it to them to reveal, through dialogue, details about themselves that he, as speaker, simply cannot reach. His restriction is more emphatically established at the end of the poem, as he remembers having stood watching the lovers.

Yet the very fact that this speaker is both third-person storyteller and peripheral observer hints at his protean nature. And certainly the suggestion is that the speaker is, in a sense, responsible for the story. For, beyond his restriction, there is another and more profound possibility, one that emerges through the literary language that the figures use. The auctorial medium has imagined, has himself fabricated, the words of the lovers. Indeed, they seem not to hear each other.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, then, we know the speaker as restricted story-teller and witness and we know him as the active manipulator, even the creator, of his presented world.

This duality is taken further in "Old Man Playing with Children", where the speaker is less discreet about his powers. He both accepts and discards his privilege: he first opens up the old man's mind and then he delegates to him the presentational process, while the stylized

language itself (as in "Spectral Lovers") points back to the auctorial medium:

A discreet householder exclaims on the grandsire  
In warpaint and feathers, with fierce grandsons and axes  
Dancing round a backyard fire of boxes:  
"Watch grandfather, he'll set the house on fire."

But I will unriddle for you the thought of his mind,  
An old one you cannot open with conversation.  
What animates the thin legs in risky motion?  
Mixes the snow on the head with snow on the wind?

"Grandson, grandsire. We are equally boy and boy.  
Do not offer your reclining-chair and slippers  
With tedious old women talking in wrappers.  
This life is not good but in danger and in joy.

"It is you the elder to these and junior to me  
Who are penned as slaves by properties and causes  
And never walk from your insupportable houses.  
Shamefully, when boys shout, you turn and flee.

"May God forgive me, I know your middling ways,  
Having taken care and performed ignominies unreckoned  
Between the first brief childhood and brief second,  
But I will be more honorable in these days."

The last three stanzas embody the old man's answer to the householder's judgement: "'Watch grandfather, he'll set the house on fire.'" Because of the transparently patronizing tone of this injunction, the reader assumes that the delegated speaker corroborates the primary speaker's view. Further suggesting corroboration is the marked resemblance of the grandfather's style of speech to the primary speaker's. The delegation is, then, something of a ventriloquist's act.

By making use of a delegated voice, the speaker introduces the obvious dramatic advantages of having a figure reveal his own character. Once again Ransom's predilection for "showing" rather than "telling", for indirect rather than direct presentation, is apparent. The grandfather's revelation of self complements the

speaker's implied view of him, justifying the reverence we infer from the reference to "snow on the head" and "snow on the wind". It is also set in ironic juxtaposition with the earlier evaluation from the middle-aged man. The grandfather is manifestly better equipped to take on the task of correcting the householder's response: after all, he has made the mistakes of middle age himself. The speaker, then, uses the old man not simply to give dramatic immediacy to the scene, but more especially to provide a voice of superiority, a voice that speaks from experience. The speaker is thus enabled to provide, through delegating responsibility, a more emphatic, less tactful mockery of the "discreet householder" than he himself would indulge in. The speaker communicates his total acceptance of the old man's viewpoint yet he remains detached from it because of the very abdication of responsibility.

### 3. The Speaker as Story-Teller

Questions of probability and verisimilitude are usually not considered relevant to lyric poetry. But in Ransom's poetry, fusing as it does narrative and lyric impulses, such questions come to be asked. In the first-person poem, the problem of authority is taken care of simply through the speaker's presence within the presented world. Unlike the third-person speaker, the first-person speaker, a speaker within the presented world, is epistemologically limited: he can only presume what others are thinking and feeling. In the third-person poem, Ransom has shown himself to be aware of the traditional devices for establishing authority as well as of the



possibilities for rendering the inner consciousness of his presented figures.

In "Man without Sense of Direction", the speaker suggests that the story he is about to tell has the status of a traditional tale. In "Parting at Dawn", he invokes as his authority "Philosophy", which is set against the authority of Browning's "Parting at Morning", one of the poems to which Ransom is obviously alluding. The speaker of "Captain Carpenter" tells us that he heard the Captain speaking; in "The Tall Girl", he uses the device of hearsay. "Good Ships" contains a suggestion that the speaker has watched the couple, and, in "Spectral Lovers", he attests to the credibility of the supernatural world by moving into it himself.

In perhaps no other poem of Ransom's is the speaker more conscious of his rôle as story-teller than in "Captain Carpenter". A full appreciation of the poem would require, among other things, a lengthier and more detailed exploration than is possible here of the apparent echoes of the medieval romance and of the traditional, broadside and literary ballad,<sup>10</sup> as well as of other possible literary echoes, all of which would illuminate the sense the reader has of a tapestry of stylistic juxtapositions and anachronisms.<sup>11</sup> Yet any analysis of the poetic situation of "Captain Carpenter" must necessarily pay homage, however fleetingly, to the control over and freedom within the story-telling mode as it is related to some of the narrative methods of the traditional ballad. One of the more interesting and less elusive aspects of this rich poem is the developing relationship between the speaker and his hero, a relationship conceived through the speaker's shifting stance, both spatio-temporal and psychological, through his acknowledgement of and departure from the typical function of the traditional ballad speaker, and through the presence of a range of

literary styles, which not only seems to foreground his changing attitude but also imbues the speaker with a self-conscious literariness that tends, perhaps, towards romantic irony.<sup>12</sup>

Captain Carpenter is a Quixotic figure who, in battles with several enemies, loses his nose, legs, arms, ears and eyes, and, finally, his heart. The sixteen stanzas fall naturally into three parts. The first seven stanzas, which form the exposition, consist of three pairings--the first of each pair presenting Captain Carpenter's movement into battle, the second the battle itself--and an additional stanza, the climax to the exposition, in which Captain Carpenter loses not only his ears but also his "sweet blue eyes":

Captain Carpenter rose up in his prime  
Put on his pistols and went riding out  
But had got wellnigh nowhere at that time  
Till he fell in with ladies in a rout.

It was a pretty lady and all her train  
That played with him so sweetly but before  
An hour she'd taken a sword with all her main  
And twined him of his nose for evermore.

Captain Carpenter mounted up one day  
And rode straightway into a stranger rogue  
That looked unchristian but be that as may  
The Captain did not wait upon prologue.

But drew upon him out of his great heart  
The other swung against him with a club  
And cracked his two legs at the shinny part  
And let him roll and stick like any tub.

Captain Carpenter rode many a time  
From male and female took he sundry harms  
He met the wife of Satan crying "I'm  
The she-wolf bids you shall bear no more arms."

Their strokes and counters whistled in the wind  
I wish he had delivered half his blows  
But where she should have made off like a hind  
The bitch bit off his arms at the elbows.

And Captain Carpenter parted with his ears  
To a black devil that used him in this wise  
O Jesus ere his threescore and ten years  
Another had plucked out his sweet blue eyes.

In the following six stanzas, the pace is slower, for it is here that the Captain directly communicates his courage and self-esteem and that the speaker focuses on his hero's final battle:

Captain Carpenter got up on his roan  
And sallied from the gate in hell's despite  
I heard him asking in the grimmest tone  
If any enemy yet there was to fight?

"To any adversary it is fame  
If he risk to be wounded by my tongue  
Or burnt in two beneath my red heart's flame  
Such are the perils he is cast among.

"But if he can he has a pretty choice  
From an anatomy with little to lose  
Whether he cut my tongue and take my voice  
Or whether it be my round red heart he choose."

It was the neatest knave that ever was seen  
Stepping in perfume from his lady's bower  
Who at this word put in his merry mien  
And fell on Captain Carpenter like a tower.

I would not knock old fellows in the dust  
But there lay Captain Carpenter on his back  
His weapons were the old heart in his bust  
And a blade shook between rotten teeth alack.

The rogue in scarlet and grey soon knew his mind  
He wished to get his trophy and depart  
With gentle apology and touch refined  
He pierced him and produced the Captain's heart.

The final three stanzas may be taken as an epitaph, although they are not labelled as such:

God's mercy rest on Captain Carpenter now  
I thought him Sirs an honest gentleman  
Citizen husband soldier and scholar enow  
Let jangling kites eat of him if they can.

But God's deep curses follow after those  
That shore him of his goodly nose and ears  
His legs and strong arms at the two elbows  
And eyes that had not watered seventy years.

The curse of hell upon the sleek upstart  
That got the Captain finally on his back  
And took the red red vitals of his heart  
And made the kites to whet their beaks clack clack.

As the epitaph traditionally demands, the speaker addresses the audience directly, pays tribute to Captain Carpenter's courage and integrity, and lays a curse upon his destroyers.

After each of these three groupings, and after each pair of stanzas in the expository section, there is an unspecified temporal gap. This is in keeping with temporal presentation in many popular ballads<sup>13</sup> and gives credence to Captain Carpenter's aging process through the time presented in the poem. There is, nevertheless, a vagueness in the spatial and temporal details that introduces into this ballad a fairy-tale quality. In the first stanza, we are told that Captain Carpenter "had got wellnigh nowhere at that time"; thereafter, he seems to be in or near a castle, though his exact spatial relation to the "gate" of stanza eight is not specified. In stanza seven, he is not yet "threescore and ten years"; at the end of the ballad, the implication is that he has kept his eyes unharmed for seventy years.

The speaker of the popular ballad typically refers to himself and to his story-telling rôle only to account for his privileged view and to draw the reader into the scene, thus providing authority for, among other things, the occasional didacticism of the ballad. Usually, what moral warning is explicit in a traditional ballad is attached at the end; it is not woven into the texture of the poem. The recurring epithets and adjectival clauses and phrases do not draw attention to the speaker; they are not primarily manifestations of the speaker's evaluation. In "Captain Carpenter", on the other hand, the various epithets used take on their full meaning and clearly reveal aspects of the speaker's estimation of the presented figures. There are two reasons for this. One is the blending of archaic diction and colloquial phrasing, the latter shocking the reader into receiving the full, ironic impact of the individual words; the other is the speaker's designation

of his evaluative rôle, which itself provides an index to his attitude and also extends the meaning of the epithets used.

In the first four stanzas, the use of a mixed register reinforces the macabre atmosphere initially presented through the ironic contrast within the presented world--the horrifying mutilation of Captain Carpenter by figures who appear kind and chivalrous. The world against which Captain Carpenter contends becomes the more horrible for its deceiving appearance. The casual phrasing points to the offhanded way Captain Carpenter is treated by his enemies, as in the line, "And let him roll and stick like any tub", as well as suggesting the speaker's initial detachment. He is aware, it seems, of the humiliation of Captain Carpenter, but does not yet seem to be involved in judging his enemies' actions.

In the third stanza, in the phrase, "but be that as may", the speaker is still standing back from any emotional involvement in the central figure's plight. But this sense of objective observation decreases as the poem proceeds and as the speaker begins to disclose the shifts in his response. In the sixth stanza, when the speaker says, "I wish he had delivered half his blows", he is warming to the battle, warming to the pattern of bravery that his hero exhibits. And in the next two lines, "But where she should have made off like a hind/The bitch bit off his arms at the elbows", the speaker regrets that the wife of Satan is a "she-wolf" and not the doe that the leman of "The Three Ravens" turns into, for this transformation would have been a tribute to Captain Carpenter. The speaker is obviously aware of the ironic fact that the Captain is not accorded the glory traditionally given knightly heroes. The suggestion here is possibly of a speaker communicating an awareness of his rôle as ballad speaker--through his manifest knowledge of the ballad tradition--and, hence, an



awareness of his creative capacity, that breaks for an instant the reader's illusion of reality. Unlike the speaker, Chaucer, in "The Tale of Sir Thopas", whose participation in a mock-heroic tale is presented as a naïve one, Ransom's speaker is here highly self-conscious. In William Cowper's "The Diverting History of John Gilpin", the speaker interrupts his story with a comment that reveals his self-conscious rôle as story-teller:

So like an arrow swift he flew,  
 Shot by an archer strong;  
 So did he fly--which brings me to  
 The middle of my song.  
 (ll. 153-56)

Here, Anne Henry Ehrenpreis says, "Cowper is burlesquing the minstrel's intrusion into his narrative in such ballads as 'Chevy Chase'."<sup>14</sup> The interjection, and especially the word "song", tends to break for a moment the reader's illusion of reality, one that is maintained elsewhere through such phrases as "Now see him mounted once again" (l. 77) and "'Twas wonderful to view" (l. 118), both of which place the speaker and the reader in the position of observer. Similarly, in "Captain Carpenter", the speaker's reference to "The Three Ravens" subverts the sense of an authentic event that is established in such phrases as "I heard him" and "that ever was seen". Thus both Cowper and Ransom (though less obviously) shift from being simply a story-teller to a fictive figure, a figure spatially and temporally involved in the presented world, to an auctorial commentator explicitly aware of a special rôle not simply as mediator but as ballad speaker. There is, perhaps, an additional suggestion of a tendency towards romantic irony in the line, "I would not knock old fellows in the dust", which, on one level, simply contrasts the speaker's benevolence towards Captain Carpenter with the knave's abuse of him and, on another

level, implies the speaker's awareness of his ambiguous rôle as Captain Carpenter's creator.

From the seventh stanza on, the speaker directs a more and more sympathetic glance at Captain Carpenter. Ransom cleverly manipulates the speaker's spatio-temporal orientation to communicate or emphasize this shift in emotional response. While the words, "I wish", refer to the speaking present, the words, "I heard him", in stanza eight, point to the speaker as peripheral observer, which not only increases the reader's sense of immediate contact with the presented world but also provides a spatio-temporal analogue to the erosion of psychological distance between speaker and presented figure. In stanza seven, in the lines, "O Jesus ere his threescore and ten years/ Another had plucked out his sweet blue eyes", the temporal reference of "O Jesus" is perhaps purposely kept vague, providing a bridge between the shift from speaker as posterior narrator in stanza six to speaker as observer in stanza eight. Ransom seems here to combine the advantages of these two perspectives. The exclamation communicates both the observer's sense of shock and horror at the sight of this brutal blinding and the posterior narrator's reprimand to the God who would let such harm come to innocence. It is this development in the speaker's response to his hero's ill-treatment that allows him finally and unequivocally to curse the "sleek upstart" who deals Captain Carpenter the death blow.

In the final three stanzas, the epitaph, the speaker virtually turns his back on the depicted scene, addresses the audience directly and thus expresses more fully his subjective involvement with the Captain's tragedy. We would do disservice to the speaker's response, however, if we did not recognize the implicit mockery of his hero through the note of burlesque that is reminiscent of the broadside ballad. In

"The Journey into France",<sup>15</sup> for instance, dated about 1623, the speaker ruthlessly mocks the relics kept at Notre Dame:

There's one Saint there hath lost his Toes,  
Another his Head, but not his Nose,  
A Finger and a Thumbe . . .  
(ll. 43-45)

At the beginning of "Captain Carpenter", the mockery is perhaps comparably ruthless, but it becomes gentler as the poem proceeds. Certainly the Captain's idealism is extreme, his self-esteem myopic, yet these features serve to increase the sense of sympathy, even of admiration, at the end of the poem, and not to deflate it.

Both the broadside and the literary ballad often foreground the speaker's involvement, though in very different ways. In the broadside ballad, "We are told what emotions are felt by the characters and instructed how we are to feel as well."<sup>16</sup> In keeping with Ransom's predilection for dramatic presentation, the speaker does not "tell" us how his figures feel. He delegates to his hero the task of revealing his own emotions, in stanzas nine and ten, maintaining here the sense of detachment (by refusing an explicitly omniscient stance) of the traditional ballad. On the other hand, the speaker interjects evaluative comments, a feature rare in the traditional ballad but more common in the literary ballad. He emerges as a character in his own right as in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner and in William Edmonstoune Aytoun's nineteenth-century ballad "The Execution of Montrose".<sup>17</sup> In the latter, such comments as "O deed of deathless shame!" (l. 26) and "Ah God! that ghastly gibbet!" (l. 157) as well as the portrayal of the crowd's growing sympathy for Montrose parallel, in some respects, the kind of presentation and the kind of involvement we see in Ransom's ballad. Ransom seems, then, to have adapted from the traditional, broadside

and literary ballad various narrative and tonal features.

Tracing the complex poetic situation through this poem reveals a great deal about how the poem works, yet it is difficult to leave it without saying more. Critics have felt the need to attribute to the poem a wider relevance, to see it as being about something else in a quasi-allegorical manner. Thus they relate it to the story of the old, organic society of the South overcome by the new, mechanistic society of the North, or they see, with little more evidence than his name, Captain Carpenter as a Christ-figure, or they find in the poem a conflict between the mythopoeic mind and the scientific mind. What Ransom has had to say about the poem has scarcely been an antidote to such speculations:

There's an old hero who dies with his boots on, so to speak,  
and I've been asked if he could not have represented the Old  
South. Or if he could not have stood for the old-time  
religion. But those ideas did not enter my mind when I  
was composing the little ballad.<sup>18</sup>

There is some evidence, however, to support an interpretation of "Captain Carpenter" along the lines of a conflict between the old and the new religion which Ransom, in The World's Body, discusses in terms of the mythopoeic and the scientific mind. Captain Carpenter seems to have been devalued by a scientifically minded world, rather than by a world which adheres to a chivalric code. The "pretty lady" and the "wife of Satan" do not behave as they ought; they do not pay Captain Carpenter the traditional tribute owed a chivalric hero. The knave seems to perform a scientific operation on Captain Carpenter: "He pierced him and produced the Captain's heart." And if we recall Ransom's belief about the way in which science views objects as useful, particular impact is given the "black devil" who "used him in this wise". In addition, the speaker seems to include himself in this

group, for a possible implication is that it is he who has placed the Captain in this particularly vulnerable position. And perhaps the audience is included as the cause, for the line, "I thought him Sirs an honest gentleman", has a reprimanding ring.

The poem, seen this way, dramatizes the demystification process that science precipitates. Just as Captain Carpenter's body has been slowly destroyed, so is man blinded to the uniqueness, to the rich particularity, of the "world's body". The heart of myth is taken away; now only the tongue, the voice that tells of myth, in short, the voice of the poet, remains. It is this, finally, that is threatened by the kites' discordant "clack clack".

Although Ransom was only to articulate in 1930 his thesis that the new rationalism failed to make allowance for the supernatural and the "fullness of the natural",<sup>19</sup> and a few years later that the artist should be governed by love for the "precious object" with its sensuous qualities and rich particularities,<sup>20</sup> it is perhaps of importance to the interpretation of "Captain Carpenter" that, in the issue of The Fugitive in which it was first published, Ransom wrote an editorial, "The Future of Poetry", that implies his later theses. He says here, for instance:

We [modern poets] do not obtain so readily as our fathers the ecstasy which is the total effect of poetry, the sense of miracle before the union of inner meaning and objective form. Our souls are not, in fact, in the enjoyment of full good health. For no art and no religion is possible until we make allowances, until we manage to keep quiet the enfant terrible of logic that plays havoc with the other faculties.<sup>21</sup>

In "First Travels of Max", a poem clearly indebted to the fairy tale, there is also a suggestion of the speaker's self-conscious literary sense. The beginning of the poem establishes the illusion of reality in



a traditional manner:

In that old house of many generations  
 The best of the Van Vroomans was the youngest.  
 But even Max, in a chevroned sailor's blouse  
 And tawny curls far from subdued to the cap,  
 Had slapped old Katie and removed himself  
 From games for children; that was because they told  
 Him never never to set a naughty foot  
 Into Fool's Forest, where the devil dwelt.

Both the reference to the early history of the Van Vrooman family and the portrayal of some commonplace details about the family's habits attest to the purported genuine existence of the Van Vroomans, besides, of course, filling in necessary background to Max's exploration of the forest.

It is the first two lines in particular that alert us to the fairy-tale quality, for these lines are reminiscent of the "Once upon a time" formula that opens a fairy tale. This formula sets up a paradoxical awareness for the reader: he knows that the story is fabricated, but he is being prepared to receive it as if it were real. This paradox is important in the reading of the poem.

At the end of the poem, Ransom again uses a traditional device of narrative literature, the confluence of the time level of action and the time level of speaking, to reinforce the illusion of reality and to give credence to the speaker's authority:

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

Even more interesting than the use of this typical narrative device

are the implications concerning fact and fancy that it opens up. In foregrounding the paradox of which the reader has already been made aware, the speaker not only provides testimony of the Van Vroomans's purported actual existence in this "great house" but also hints at the fictiveness of the situation. For when he tells us that the Van Vroomans "Live there at least when any are at home", he is giving us an indication of the fairy-tale status of his story, and of his own story-telling and creative rôle. The fairy-tale quality is, indeed, implied throughout the poem. After slapping his nurse, young Max leaves home to go into the wood; he encounters magic and meets the Red Witch, whom he cannot conquer, being "only armed in innocence". Followed by the witch's jeering, he returns to security. The fairy-tale quality is reasserted with an ending reminiscent of the traditional fairy-tale ending, not the English version ("They lived happily ever after") but the German one, Und wenn sie nicht gestorben sind, dann leben sie noch Heute; and if they haven't died they're still alive today. Here again is foregrounded that paradoxical awareness that attends the reading of fiction. In the reference to Max's "famous curls unsmoothed", there is also a reminder of the timelessness of art, of the eternal present, through which the reader becomes aware that the illusion of reality is indeed illusion.

While the speaker of a poem, no less than the presented figures, is a product of the poet's words, there is a curious sense in some of Ransom's poems that the speaker is himself endowed with a literary knowledge. The poet sometimes seems to hand over to the speaker a poet's awareness. In "Captain Carpenter", the speaker appears as a self-conscious ballad speaker: he alludes to the ballad tradition and he recognizes the ironic plight of his ballad hero. Whether or not the speaker of "First Travels of Max" alludes consciously to the fairy-

tale tradition is not certain, yet he does designate himself, very briefly, as self-conscious creator of his world. In "Master's in the Garden Again", the rhyme game signals an extra level of awareness attained by the speaker. The speaker's capacity in such poems as "Two in August", "Jack's Letter" and "The Equilibrists" to view the presented world as a representative world also suggests an extension of the powers of the speaker, now very far from the restricted speaker of "The Tall Girl".

It is not only the speaker's emphasis upon the representative quality of "the equilibrists" but also his creation of an epitaph and even the range of literary echoes that characterize him as a literary figure. And here, as in "Blue Girls", he conveys a feeling of aesthetic pleasure at the situation before him. Perhaps it is something of this nature that Louise Cowan had in mind when she said of "History of Two Simple Lovers" (the first version of "The Equilibrists", which appeared in The Fugitive in 1925) that the speaker seems to represent, generically, the artist.<sup>22</sup>

In "Parting at Dawn", Ransom extends even further the impression of the speaker's literariness. Here the act of fashioning the presented world is so highly evident, and the presentational process emphasized to such a greater extent than is the presented world, that the speaker is very clearly identifiable as an artist-figure, conscious of the aubade tradition, and as creator of his world.

"Parting at Dawn" alludes specifically to Browning's "Meeting at Night",<sup>23</sup> as well as to the dawn dialogue in Romeo and Juliet.<sup>24</sup> The main allusion, however, is to Browning's "Parting at Morning": the speaker forces the presented figures to enact, in their imaginations, the kind of parting that is suggested in Browning's poem.

If there was a broken whispering by night  
 It was an image of the coward heart,  
 But the white dawn assures them how to part--  
 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.

And then? O dear Sir, stumbling down the street,  
 Continue, till you come to wars and wounds;  
 Beat the air, Madam, till your house-clock sounds;  
 And if no Lethe flows beneath your casement,  
 And when ten years have not brought full effacement,  
 Philosophy was wrong, and you may meet.

The use of the imperative indicates, first of all, the speaker's rôle as creator of his world. Building upon the presented world of Browning's poem, which looks at the moment before parting, Ransom's speaker pushes his figures towards the barren and bitter culmination of the moment represented by Browning. This is not to say that there is, throughout the poem, the kind of indication of movement in time and space as there is in Ransom's other third-person poems. The presented world is invoked in an extremely attenuated form, and it is really only the speaker's ability to turn to address his figures as if they exist in a world "out there" that allows one to categorize this poem as third-person and not as reflexive, that is, a poem without a presented world.

The figures are, to a slight degree, particularized, and there is a hint of action in this presented world in the speaker's words, "Say then your parting". These words suggest not simply the speaker's command, but also an attitude of resignation towards an action that is, at the time of the command, already being enacted. From this point on, the presented world appears as a frozen moment. The lovers have said their farewell and now the speaker explores for them the implications of this farewell--what will happen afterwards and

under what conditions their words of farewell must be consummated.

The relationship between speaker and presented figures is a two-way one. The words that open the sestet, "And then?", read as the speaker's repetition of a question posed by the figures themselves. We may take it, then, that the figures are compelled to enact, at least imaginatively, the sequences that the speaker indicates to them.

The use of the imperative also suggests the speaker's confirmation of the figures' inescapable fate, inescapable, that is, once the farewell, prefigured in "Parting at Morning",<sup>25</sup> has been said. The speaker takes to a natural conclusion the moment represented by Browning; he also reinterprets the details of that presented world. The "path of gold" (l. 3) that gives Browning's lyric "I" his direction is transformed into a "cold glitter of light"; the "world of men" (l. 4) is represented by the "barren anchorite" and a man "stumbling" towards "wars and wounds", and is further evaluated through the ironic use of the words "coward" and "Stoics". Ransom's speaker is able, through the invocation of "Philosophy"--experience, knowledge of human behaviour--to reveal to the figures the nature of their destiny once the separation has been made and, more important perhaps, the brutalization of self that making such a separation must involve.

#### 4. The Use of Free Indirect Style

Just as the use of the imperative may suggest both the speaker's passive confirmation of a perverse destiny and his own creative capacity, so is there a similar duality contained in Ransom's use of the auxiliary verbs "must" and "would". While the



implication is by no means that Ransom is the only poet to draw upon the potentialities of these words, his repeated use of them, in such poems as "Jack's Letter", "Persistent Explorer", "Blackberry Winter" and "Armageddon", significantly focuses attention on the speaker's realm and rôle.

In "Persistent Explorer", the central figure is briefly tempted by the magical and sensuous world that almost persuades Ralph of "Morning" to assume a new and fuller personality:

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

So be it. And no unreasonable outcry  
The pilgrim made; only a rueful grin  
Spread over his lips until he drew them in;  
He would not sit upon a rock and die.

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

But there were many ways of living, too,  
And let his enemies gibe, but let them say  
That he would throw this continent away  
And seek another country--as he would do.  
(ll. 28-44)

Line thirty-six, "He would not sit upon a rock and die", and the final line of the poem, "And seek another country--as he would do", both reflect two aspects of the speaker's omniscient rôle: his passive awareness of the figure's unavoidable fate, and his active manipulation of the figure's future. Similarly, line thirty-two, "Why, he must turn and beat them down again", refers to the speaker's omniscience.

Yet there is a third way in which the speaker of these three

lines can be called omniscient. From his privileged auctorial position, he is seeing into the mind of his figure: not simply making an inference about his consciousness, nor reporting his thoughts indirectly, but rather reproducing these thoughts in a near-immediate manner. If we change only the pronoun of line thirty-two, "Why, he must turn and beat them down again", we have a reflection of the explorer's inner consciousness. Lines thirty-six and forty-four, both of which use the word "would" rather than "must", also represent the explorer's thought, though now the particular tense used keeps these sentences more firmly within the speaker's mediative control.

The linguistic device identified here is termed "free indirect style", which is "characterized by the withdrawal of the narrator and by the reader's illusion that he is receiving a direct glimpse into the consciousness of a figure".<sup>26</sup> Since the use of free indirect style characterizes most surely the third-person speaker as omniscient and since Ransom has made such extensive and varied use of this device, it is worth devoting a large part of this chapter to it, with particular emphasis on its effects on the relationship between speaker, figure and reader.

Although study of the use of free indirect style in the novel is not uncommon, the use of this device in poetry is virtually unexplored, at least in Anglo-American criticism. Used systematically and self-consciously, free indirect style is a recurrent feature of twentieth-century prose and poetry; it also occurs sporadically and unsystematically in earlier prose fiction, and less frequently still in earlier verse. One finds examples of the technique in longer, and especially narrative, poems; for instance, in Chaucer's description of the Monk in The Canterbury Tales<sup>27</sup> and also in the last line of Milton's "Lycidas".<sup>28</sup>

In modern poetry, it is used for a special effect in Yeats's "Leda and the Swan"<sup>29</sup> and, more regularly, by Robert Graves,<sup>30</sup> who exploits the device in a manner somewhat similar to Ransom, though with less complexity, it seems.

Like the use of dialogue, free indirect style suggests Ransom's concern with a dramatic rather than a discursive mode of rendering. Yet, as will emerge, the use of free indirect style implies a greater variety of thematic possibilities, ones which Ransom uses repeatedly in his poetry.

In free indirect style, the features of "showing" and "telling" are fused, for here the figure's thoughts are shown to us in apparently unmediated form yet at the same time the speaker retains control of the mediative process, despite his largely obscuring his presence. As Werner Günther has said, there is a synthetic act of "internal vision" and "external vision" on the part of the speaker and reader.<sup>31</sup>

The effects of free indirect style vary considerably since the speaker, as mediator, may make his presence more or less felt, may filter the figure's thoughts to a greater or lesser degree. Generally, the reader will adopt, however briefly, the perspective of the figure whose thoughts are thus presented, while remaining aware, however slightly, of the speaker's controlling presence. Since free indirect style provides the reader with an experience of the figure's interiority, the result is often an empathetic identification between reader and figure.

In Chapter II, the importance of proper attribution of voice to an understanding of Ransom's (or indeed any other) poetry was stressed. With the use of free indirect style, this question of voice becomes even more important and even more complex. Without recognition of this device and its effects, the reader will

not be able to make the necessary distinction between the norms of the presented world and the speaker's values, nor will he have access to one of the most interesting and subtle ways in which Ransom achieves his ironic effects, and he will forego that heightened pleasure that comes with the awareness of how his responses are shaped.

There are two principal kinds of free indirect style to be discussed in relation to Ransom's poetry: the rendering of thought and the rendering of perception. These may not always be distinct. "Necrological" provides us with a clear example of substitutionary perception:<sup>32</sup> we assume the eyes of the friar as they move from one part of the battlefield to the next:

The friar had said his paternosters duly  
And scourged his limbs, and afterwards would have slept;  
But with much riddling his head became unruly,  
He arose, from the quiet monastery he crept.

Dawn lightened the place where the battle had been won.  
The people were dead--it is easy he thought to die--  
These dead remained, but the living all were gone,  
Gone with the wailing trumps of victory.

The dead men wore no raiment against the air,  
Bartholomew's men had spoiled them where they fell;  
In defeat the heroes' bodies were whitely bare,  
The field was white like meads of asphodel.

Not all were white; some gory and fabulous  
Whom the sword had pierced and then the gray wolf eaten;  
But the brother reasoned that heroes' flesh was thus;  
Flesh fails, and the postured bones lie weather-beaten.

The lords of chivalry lay prone and shattered,  
The gentle and the bodyguard of yeomen;  
Bartholomew's stroke went home--but little it mattered,  
Bartholomew went to be stricken of other fœmen.

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.

Close by the sable stream that purged the plain  
Lay the white stallion and his rider thrown,  
The great beast had spilled there his little brain,  
And the little groin of the knight was spilled by a stone.

The youth possessed him then of a crooked blade  
 Deep in the belly of a lugubrious wight;  
 He fingered it well, and it was cunningly made;  
 But strange apparatus was it for a Carmelite.

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 first stanza seems to emanate from the auctorial voice, who gives an overview of the Carmelite's habitual praying and self-flagellation. The words, "and afterwards would have slept", suggest, again, the friar's usual activity as well as giving us a glimpse of his initial desire to block out consciousness. But the problem that makes his head "unruly" compels his attention.

In stanza two, the figure's thoughts are signalled by the words, "he thought"; the last line of stanza four is presumably given the same status through the word "reasoned" in the preceding line. (In the original version,<sup>33</sup> the comma at the end of this line makes such thought presentation clearer than does the semicolon in the final version.)

From stanza two on, we are invited to adopt the perspective of the friar as his eyes move over the battlefield, and as they are arrested by such details as the devoted leman, the stallion's "spilled . . . brain", the "crooked blade". A comparison of some aspects of the original and the revised version of this poem suggests Ransom's attempt to keep the speaker's mediative presence at a minimum. In the original version, the first two lines of stanza six read: "The monastic strode beneath the firmament/And found a warrior . . ."; the exclusion of the label "monastic" in the version revised for Grace After Meat and the correlative changes--which appear unrevised in the latest version<sup>34</sup>--strengthen the suggestion



of substitutionary perception. Another suggestion that Ransom revised this poem partly to make the point of view more consistent is seen in the substitution of the words, "and it was cunningly made", for the original, "and found it cunningly made". In the changed version, we are referred more clearly to the friar's seemingly unmediated perception.

One can only presume, and that largely because of the framework of substitutionary perception, that such phrases as "but little it mattered" and "But strange apparatus was it for a Carmelite" are unspoken thoughts which emanate from the figure in free indirect style. Beyond a few such phrases, there is virtually no mental response explicitly indicated. The friar is puzzled, it seems, by the discrepancy between the values and the worth of the man of action and the man of contemplation, by the difference between the chivalric and the monastic code. To come to terms with a world so different from his own, he first tries to reconstruct some of the events of the chivalric life, and, at the end of the poem, we see him trying to move into an empathetic relationship with the dead, trying to understand their motivations, their duties, their recompense. And he remains puzzled, as Louise Cowan puts it, by "the vast disparity between the moral and physical realm . . . the terrible difference between a spiritual heaven, in which only loving-kindness can be considered sweet, and a physical heaven, inhabited by vultures to whom the ultimate violation of man is sweet indeed."<sup>35</sup>

The rendering of thought by means of free indirect style is clearer in "Morning", a poem which also uses substitutionary perception. Free indirect style, which does not presuppose the arrest of the speaker's mediative process, is here used to particular effect, occasionally providing the poem with a rich ambiguity because

of the maintenance of a double perspective. The reader is invited to share Ralph's perspective as he lies on his back looking upwards and around, and then as he looks through the window:

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.

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.

Ralph is briefly tempted to assume a new and fuller personality, to give access to a side of himself that is normally suppressed. Noticing the "blue air" and the "meadow/Of wings and light and clover", Ralph receives his first awareness that his life is limited by his excision of the sensuous. Both sets of features are reminiscent of the images that so trouble the "Man without Sense of Direction". Ralph, too, is pulled in the direction of myth, away from or beyond the scientific world that Ransom speaks of in God Without Thunder:

In the modern style, dryads, oreads, and nymphs have gone nearly out of use. . . . The demonic terms have largely disappeared. Personal or subdemonic terms have had to replace them, and these are mostly found in poetry and the literature of children, where they exist

on the sufferance of a scientific public. These personal terms nevertheless persist unquestionably in our thinking. They are those personifications of things that have been condemned under what has been called the "pathetic fallacy": for example, a breath of wind; the laughing waters; the brooding forest; the vengeful lightning; the devouring sea; the stubborn stone. Objects thus evoked are perfect ghosts, with a fabulous investment of substantial quality.<sup>36</sup>

In lines eleven and twelve, the reader has a glimpse of the decision resulting from Ralph's vision: "He would propose to Jane then to go walking/Through the green waves, and to be singing not talking". The use of the word "would" in a poem presented in the past tense is, as already suggested, a clear signal of the momentary but near total shift in perspective. But for the word "then" (a signal of mediation), we leave the speaker's realm and enter Ralph's consciousness.

This movement towards free indirect style is balanced by a distancing device (a strong assertion of reporting and, hence, of mediation) at the beginning of the third stanza: "Suddenly he remembered about himself,/His manliness returned entire to Ralph". The use of both "himself" and "His" and the seemingly gratuitous repetition of Ralph's name accentuate the presence of a mediative process. This distancing is further strengthened by the caustic words of the speaker, who likens Ralph's mind to a competent machine.

In between the shift towards Ralph's mind in lines eleven and twelve and the shift away from him mentioned above, there are two lines which are ambiguous in origin, partly because of this particular frame and also in so far as they contain ambiguous evaluation: "Such imps were pranking over/Him helpless lying in bed beneath a cover." The words "imps" and "pranking" refer to the magical world that Ralph feels he is about to enter, and are therefore compatible both with the

speaker's implied values and with Ralph's thoughts at that time. These lines, then, demonstrate the temporary accord between speaker and figure. Yet, built into this accord, there is also a hint of the incompatible standards of speaker and central figure. The ironic reference to the bedcover reminds us that the impulses come from outside Ralph, not being part of his psychological make-up, and also that Ralph is, ultimately, protected from or insulated against his fantasies.

After feeling these external impulses, Ralph reverts to his old standards, a reorganization of personality that colours the gap between stanzas two and three. It is as though the meaning of the word "imps" suddenly changes for Ralph; they no longer signify magical delight but become troublesome, as deceptive and as distasteful as the "sly visitors . . . like eels" that they turn into in line nineteen.

The use of a sentence fragment to end the poem, "Simply another morning, and simply Jane", offers us again a glimpse into Ralph's consciousness, the absence of a temporal referent increasing the sense of Ralph's subjectivity. The repeated use of the word "simply" communicates Ralph's relief at the clear direction of his day and at the absence of anything that would muddle "the true householder Learning". If the sentence implies boredom on Ralph's part, he is, at most, only slightly conscious of it. Unlike "Man without Sense of Direction", he is unaware of his loss. The word "simply" reflects the speaker's attitude, too; it is an ironic reminder of the meagreness of Ralph's existence, in which one day, one woman, are not made unique.

Ransom plays strange tricks with perspective in this poem. At a point where we are closest to Ralph's mind, he uses the word "imps", which ultimately refers us to the speaker's values. And when the description of Ralph's machine-like mind effects a psychological

distance between Ralph and the reader, who thus becomes aware of the mediative process, the speaker uses the word "eels", which refers us to the figure's values. The speaker could hardly be more discreet.

Despite the impression of the speaker's anonymity, the use of irony does, of course, imply his freedom to supersede his figure's limited vision. John L. Stewart has said that Ransom's poems "never come down foursquare on one side of an issue or offer any resolutions to the situations they present".<sup>37</sup> But the very revelation of a figure's limitations suggests the speaker's judgement, not the less emphatic because it is gently and discreetly revealed. Ransom's speaker does not, of course, appear to prejudge: the figure's mind is dramatized for our assessment.

Although we are invited to share the figure's spatio-temporal perspective and so, at the beginning, feel ourselves to be drawn towards an empathetic identification with him, we are finally instructed of the psychological obstacles to any permanent and sympathetic feeling for the figure. In some of Ransom's poems, the empathetic involvement is built up so gradually that, despite the negative evaluation of the figure, our final impression is of the speaker's sympathy. As suggested in the first chapter, spatio-temporal orientation with a figure is a morally seductive position.

In "Parting, without a Sequel", the particular use of free indirect style (both rendering of thought and rendering of perception) generates a curiously fluctuating tone, one that is only in the last stanza finally resolved. Here a girl performs a cruel act of bitterness of which she later passionately repents. It is the vision of her repentance, the "inside view" that Wayne C. Booth speaks of,<sup>38</sup> that ameliorates the negative judgement of her.



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 gave it  
 Saying to the blue-capped functioner of doom,  
 "Into his hands," she hoped the leering groom  
 Might somewhere lose and leave it.

Then all the blood  
 Forsook the face. She was too pale for tears,  
 Observing the ruin of her younger years.  
 She went and stood

Under her father's vaunting oak  
 Who kept his peace in wind and sun, and glistened  
 Stoical in the rain; to whom she listened  
 If he spoke.

And now the agitation of the rain  
 Rasped his sere leaves, and he talked low and gentle  
 Reproaching the wan daughter by the lintel;  
 Ceasing and beginning again.

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.

The use of the present perfect tense in the first stanza alerts us to the invitation to stand with the figure, an invitation that is emphasized in the use of free indirect style in lines two and four. Both lines--"which he so richly has deserved" and "And nothing could be better"--clearly emanate from the girl. To the first of these, the reader (on first reading) is probably indifferent in the sense that he has no reason not to accept the girl's bitterness. But with the recognition of the malice behind the "characters venomous and hatefully curved", the shock of the words, "And nothing could be better", is extreme. Forced to adopt the girl's perspective, the reader must simultaneously detach himself psychologically: anti-contextual suggestions--the girl's greed for revenge, her overwhelming satisfaction at the strength of her cruelty--have determined the reader's psychological distance from the girl. It is with relief that the reader

recognizes in the fourth line, in so far as it is attributed to the speaker, the ironic note that communicates the chasm between the girl's and the speaker's values.

The change to the past tense in the second stanza seems to stabilize the reader's response: he has moved away from the figure in time and has adopted the speaker's perspective. But this "safe" distance is itself complicated, for now the speaker reveals the flickerings of the girl's conscience which, in the three stanzas that follow, are transformed into the certainty that she has done the wrong thing. The girl is seen from an external perspective ("All the blood/Forsook the face") yet the dramatization of her suffering and her acquiescence in the wise oak tree's reproach tend again to decrease the psychological distance between speaker and figure, reader and figure.

And in stanza five, to confirm this closing of distance, the word "now" is used, drawing one again to adopt the girl's spatio-temporal perspective and preparing one for the speaker's unqualified sympathy in the last stanza. Here, through the device of substitutionary perception, we stand again with the figure, watching the departure of the "leering groom". The reader's continual and disquieting movement between adopting the girl's spatio-temporal perspective while experiencing psychological detachment, on the one hand, and experiencing psychological identification while being spatio-temporally distanced, on the other hand, comes to rest in the last stanza, the only occasion in the poem in which spatio-temporal orientation and identification with the girl occur simultaneously. The impact of this stanza seems to derive partly from this, as well as from the realization that in this "briefest amount of time"<sup>39</sup> presented in the poem, the girl's past and her future, her youth and potential happiness, have

been destroyed.

The destruction of her future is presented through the sense of stasis in the last stanza. The words "forever" and "all the time" neutralize the potential movement in the words "went" and "went up". This static quality, this sense of permanent equilibrium, is reinforced by the irreconcilability of the two opposites: "And all the time she stood there hot as fever/And cold as any icicle." The use here of a Petrarchan conceit so often to be found in Wyatt's poetry, for instance, balances the possible allusion in the second line to Wyatt: "which he so richly has deserved".<sup>40</sup> The two allusions, or echoes, themselves communicate the girl's development of awareness, from bitterness and insufficient attention to the future to a tortured state of mind that now realizes futurelessness.

A number of Ransom's third-person poems illustrate a very special interaction between speaker and figure, one that seems to involve an attempt on the part of the speaker to reorganize his figure's consciousness. Such an interaction between figure and third-person speaker, who exist in different ontological spheres, is logically impossible. Yet it does seem, on occasion, that Ransom allows some suggestion that the barriers built up between speaker and world are transgressed. The most striking examples of this are "Miriam Tazewell" and "Parting at Dawn"; and there are hints of it in "Parting, without a Sequel" and "Morning". In these poems, the third-person speaker is analogous to the speaker as teacher in such first-person poems as "Vaunting Oak" and "Blue Girls".

While the last line of the first stanza of "Parting, without a Sequel" has already been explained as communicating, from one perspective, malicious satisfaction and, from another perspective, irony, it can also be understood as having an additional import. We

discover later, and so does the girl, this further meaning: that the girl's destiny has been so shaped that it will never be "better". In so far as this emanates from the speaker, it functions as a kind of prolepsis, foreshadowing the later attitude of the figure and drawing out the full meaning of the title--the act that has no sequel. The speaker knows, before the girl does, the end of the story.

Thus far, the ambiguity arising from this dual perspective is not unusual: it simply demonstrates to us the speaker's superior knowledge. But the peculiarity of this ambiguity emerges in the next stanza, for it is here that the figure's awareness changes:

But even as she gave it,  
Saying to the blue-capped functioner of doom,  
"Into his hands," she hoped the leering groom  
Might somewhere lose and leave it.

The words, "functioner of doom", are, of course, the speaker's touch. Yet the girl seems suddenly aware of the outcome. The temporal gap between stanzas one and two has been coloured, it seems, by the figure's sudden awareness of the inevitable. It is as if the figure has caught the ironic innuendo contained in the words, "And nothing could be better."

This interaction between the speaker and his creation is reminiscent of, though taken further than, the play on the word "imps" in "Morning". There, the speaker's interpretation of the word does not control Ralph's interpretation for, once it is said, Ralph recognizes, perhaps, how little the earlier shared interpretation fits his own norms, his "manliness". In this case, the speaker has failed to instruct Ralph, has failed to impinge on him the mythical connotations of the "imps" and the necessity of such connotations for a full life of the senses.

It is a failure much of this kind that is the informing principle of "Miriam Tazewell". The poem deals with Miriam's inability to form an adequate response to a violation of her ideals. She makes this mistake despite the manifestations around her of allowing disasters their proper perspective, and despite the speaker's admonition:

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 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.

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.

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.

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.

The poem begins with a device akin to substitutionary perception: we "hear" the storm "through Miriam's ears". But Miriam "stuffed her ears", taking the storm and the ruined flowers into herself. In stanzas two and four, the speaker attempts to place before Miriam various consolations as well as instances of detachment, but Miriam continues in her grief and in her inability to draw the boundary between her internal world and the external world.

It is across a temporal gap that the speaker calls to Miriam in stanza two, trying, it seems, to make her adopt a view similar to his own, trying to make her see how the sun's stoical response dries



up the storm. But in the last three stanzas, the speaker seems to acknowledge his failure. He has to turn away from Miriam, creating an increasing sense of detachment. We notice, for instance, how the word "this" in line six changes to "that" in line thirteen, and how the last stanza begins "To Miriam Tazewell". The speaker's detachment suggests his awareness of his inability to control the figure's perspective.

Despite this detachment, there are tones of sympathy for Miriam Tazewell. Her romantic view is one which the speaker (and even Ransom himself) finds untenable, yet it is seen as pathetic. In his article, "Thoughts on the Poetic Discontent", Ransom mapped the stages whereby man, struck by his separation from the objective world, will attempt to find consolation. Miriam Tazewell, it seems, is fixed in the first position, one that is characterized by man's desire to impose his will on nature: she has transformed "a wilderness . . . into a garden, a habitat which has the makings of a home".<sup>41</sup> The destruction of her garden leads her into a feeling of isolation from nature; she constructs for herself a malevolent power, one that has "deflowered" her lawn and "strung"<sup>42</sup> and "pelted" her flowers. The speaker is wishing, it seems, that his presented figure would see herself in some kind of relationship with the universe; wishing that she would find aesthetic satisfaction at the harmony of the universe, despite--or including--the fact of death. She will not "unstop her own storm", which would, presumably, be a move toward acceptance of the harsh fact of dualism; nor can she make the additional step, signified by the birds' singing "in the bitten poplars", of combining sorrow with a "disarming rueful comic sense of [her] own betrayal",<sup>43</sup> that is, for Ransom, the most satisfactory of all poetic attitudes.

Ransom's concern with shaping and exploring the variable relationships between poet, speaker, presented world and reader is one of the richest effects of his mature poetry, and the one that adequately defines his distinctive manner. The communication or attempted communication between speaker and figure is just one of the devices which reveal Ransom's extraordinary interest in exploring the nature and limitations of his chosen poetic situation. He challenges the very boundaries that define it. Such a preoccupation is manifested also in his first-person poems: in his use of the speaking and experiencing selves, in his awareness and occasional transgression of the epistemological limitations of the first-person speaker. And it is evident, too, in his ability to combine, in fresh and exciting ways, the first- and third-person modes. It is such a combination that accounts largely for the effects of "The Equilibrists".

### 5. The Mixing of Modes

Critics have been fond of pointing out that Ransom's poems are "made": that they do not read as direct expressions of feelings but instead give a strong impression of highly created works. This is not surprising, given Ransom's distrust of spontaneity and obviously autobiographical poetry, and of the limitation of the poet's creative freedom to a mere achievement of expression. He was, in fact, once scathing about poets who write "without wit and playfulness, dramatic sense, detachment" since, he said, "it cuts them off from the practice of an art."<sup>44</sup>

The "practice of an art" may be seen in Ransom's language,

that combination of "the archaic and the contemporary, of the Latinized diction and the native idiom";<sup>45</sup> it is evident, too, in his use of a story-telling mode: in the gesture and self-deprecation that so distinguishes his speakers, in the stylized characters, and in his sense of tradition. His work is very much a "literary exercise", a phrase he used of pre-eighteenth-century verse, when speaking of "the craftsmanship, the formal quality which is written on it, [which] is meant to have high visibility".<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps nowhere so clearly and so uniquely does his craftsmanship emerge as in his awareness and even enjoyment of the demands of poetic situation. There is nothing necessarily extraordinary about the poet who explores the possibilities of a chosen perspective. Chaucer experimented with narrative stances and inconsistent perspectives. Some of Milton's minor poems<sup>47</sup> reveal a concern with a controlling perspective as well as a tendency to shift perspective. In "The Blessed Damozel", Dante Gabriel Rossetti incorporates the perspectives of both an auctorial and a restricted first-person speaker, artfully manipulating the speaker's ontological status and his epistemological limitations. Wyatt and Wordsworth use, in different ways and to varying degrees, a retrospective speaker, a speaker who is engaged in looking back on past experience. Hopkins's "Felix Randal" develops a complex set of relationships between speaker and past self, speaker and figure. Browning experimented with the psychological distance between poet and speaker. Hardy worked with a restricted speaker, Eliot with the speaker involved in observation of self. The examples are many and varied.

Whether Ransom has been a pioneer in any one field is difficult to establish, particularly given the absence of existing criticism of the poetic situations explored by other poets. Yet it does seem that the

very extent of Ransom's interest in the limits and potentialities of the chosen poetic situation, an interest that informs most of his work, is a distinctive one.

Few lyric poets have, I think, been quite so persistent and so radical in their exploration of poetic situation. None, it seems, has been so playful. Although hints of romantic irony may be found in Chaucer's work, for instance, and in Byron's Don Juan (as well as in many eighteenth century novels, of course), Ransom's interest in and devices for intermingling the different realms of reality seem not to have a parallel in English lyric poetry. His third-person speaker moves in and out of the presented world. A communication, actually impossible, is hinted at between omniscient speaker and created figure through Ransom's peculiar handling of free indirect style. The use of apostrophe in "Miriam Tazewell" and of imperatives in "Parting at Dawn" show a similar inclination to defy those barriers set up between speaker and presented world. The speaker draws attention to his own creative rôle.

Poetic situation is explored in an unusual way for Ransom in "The Equilibrists", a poem slightly revised from the 1925 poem, "History of Two Simple Lovers", and first published in Two Gentlemen in Bonds in 1927. In many respects, "The Equilibrists" seems to be the distension of some of Ransom's earlier experiments. The original version comes three years after "Necrological", the first of Ransom's poems to use the device of substitutionary perception, and a shorter time after "Miriam Tazewell" and "Jack's Letter", the second of which moves into rendering of thought in free indirect style. "The Equilibrists" opens with what seems to be free indirect style. Yet the presented figure's thoughts are not simply rendered in this near-immediate manner, but he himself seems to be in control of the

mediative process. Such a control is comparable to the use of the speaking and experiencing selves in such a poem as "Winter Remembered", published at much the same time as "Necrological".

The third- and first-person modes are even more distinctly combined in that the auctorial speaker is suddenly found in the presented world, at first as a peripheral figure, later as a central figure. Ransom had already experimented with the movement of the first-person speaker from the periphery towards the centre of the world in "Vaunting Oak", published in 1923; and his speaker in "Captain Carpenter" and "Spectral Lovers" (which many critics refer to as the prototype for "The Equilibrists") transgresses the ontological boundary that separates his realm from that of his figures. In "The Equilibrists", both movements are foregrounded to a greater extent: there is neither the brief "I heard him" (l. 31) nor the passive "They passed me once" (l. 31) of "Captain Carpenter" and "Spectral Lovers", respectively. The speaker's active participation in the presented world--his digging in the "quiet earth" (l. 53)--is developed to an unusual degree for a predominantly third-person poem. The extent of the speaker's participation suggests that he has a more positive sympathy for the two lovers than has the speaker of "Spectral Lovers", and a purer attitude than the speaker of "Captain Carpenter". That such a degree of attention is called to this mingling of ontic spheres makes the poem perhaps more daring than the earlier poems, "Judith of Bethulia" and "Antique Harvesters" (published only five months prior to "History of Two Simple Lovers"), which also combine third-person and first-person types.

These are some of the striking features of "The Equilibrists". In these and in the other ways that will be explored in the following pages, the poem seems to be one of Ransom's most ambitious creations,



perhaps his greatest poem. Yet it is oddly elusive. The difficulty of establishing the time levels, the tonal qualities and the degree of mediation renders my analysis a necessarily tentative one, even more tentative than is usually demanded by Ransom's work.

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,  
Till cold words came down spiral from the head,  
Grey doves from the officious tower illsped.

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.

Importunate her doves. Too pure, too wise,  
Clambering on his shoulder, saying, Arise,  
Leave me now, and never let us meet,  
Eternal distance now command thy feet.

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.

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.

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.  
Would you ascend to Heaven and bodiless dwell?  
Or take your bodies honorless to Hell?

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.

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.

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.

At first reading, it is tempting to see in this poem something of the speaker's development in "Captain Carpenter" from lack of concern to sympathy. The emphasis on the presented couple with which the poem opens gives way to what appears to be a slighting tone--as in the words, "Predicament indeed"--akin to the disparagement with which Captain Carpenter is first spoken of. The speaker's solicitude at the end of "The Equilibrists", and especially in the epitaph, seems not to be hinted at earlier.

Yet the speaker's tone is extremely complicated, as one would expect from Ransom, and perhaps even more elusive, at certain points, than it is in "Captain Carpenter". The problem one has in defining tone here stems largely from the difficulty in attributing voice: in deciding to what extent there is a mediative process in the early stanzas of the poem, and to what extent the man in the presented world is responsible for, or at least party to, certain words chosen. Yet another problem in defining tone lies in what seems to be a difference throughout much of the poem between ostensible and underlying attitudes;

that is, between the speaker's basic attitude towards the figures and the apparent tone that he assumes.

The difficulty in establishing the extent of mediation derives largely from the ambiguity of the temporal signals in stanzas one to seven particularly. The temporal realm of the figure--his pastness in relation to the speaker--is indicated by the word "traveled" in the third line. Lines one and four refer to the same time level, while line two, "He had a thousand times remembered sin", takes one back in time. Whether this line, with perhaps the first line, is imparted by the speaker as pre-history or whether it is the figure's own retrospection (as, possibly, in the opening lines of "Necrological") is not easy to determine. Were the man himself totally unaware of the dilemma offered by the conflicting impulses of honour and desire, one would obviously decide that this stanza and the following five were mediated by the auctorial speaker. Yet the man's awareness is signalled by his ability to make a choice; that is, not to choose between a spiritual and a physical existence, but to maintain a "torture of equilibrium". Because of his self-knowledge, he can refer to his act of retrospection through the word "remembered", its meaning of "borne in mind" making amply clear the activity of his intellect as it disengages itself from his physical self. Thinking, then, of the man's awareness of the duality of mind and body and remembering, too, the retrospective device of Henry James's chapter beginnings in The Ambassadors, one is probably permitted to read the second line as the figure's own retrospection: he remembers, as he travels, that "He had a thousand times remembered sin."

If one is correct in assuming the man's self-knowledge, one is invited to see at least the first four stanzas of the poem as predominantly in free indirect style, as emanating from the figure himself and not

totally from the speaker. Usually, such words as "minding" and "remembered" (used in both lines two and five) signal mediation; here, because of the man's special consciousness, the mediative process virtually disappears. The phrases or words that open stanzas two, three and four and which are all followed by colons would seem to signal that free indirect style follows. These initial words all refer to the temporal realm established by the past tense in line three: the lines that follow would then be the man's retrospection. The status of the opening words is not quite clear. I think that one is invited, given earlier assumptions as valid, to see the speaker as almost totally withdrawn and the figure himself as in control of the mediative process. This invitation comes chiefly through the use of the word "remembered", which suits so well the figure's consciousness, but more particularly through the fact that the mediative introduction of stanza three lacks a verb, and thus a temporal signal, and that, in the fourth stanza, the participle "talking" gives us a sense of the present or immediate.

We may see the words following the colons of stanzas two, three and four, first of all, as free indirect style and, secondly, as mediated through the figure rather than by the speaker. All that the speaker retains as medium is the use of the past tense (which is gradually dropped) and the third-person pronoun.

There is a startling sense of immediacy provided by these opening stanzas. Apart from the initial retrospection in line two, even the first stanza works towards immediacy: the evocative first and fourth lines, and particularly the present participle in line four, foreshadow the sense we come to have of the present existence of the couple. Of course, the present participle suggests, first, contemporaneity to whatever tense is being used. I do not mean to suggest that there is at this point any sense of temporal dislocation. Yet there is

increasing impression, hinted at in these first two stanzas as well as in the opening words of stanzas three and four, of presentness, an impression which is to be fully realized in stanzas five and six. In stanza three, the present participle "beseeching" and the following line, "If he would pluck and wear them, bruise and break", which seems to emanate almost directly from the girl herself (as free indirect style), both suggest presentness, as do the words of the girl in stanzas four and five, now in direct speech (though without quotation marks, which renders them apparently even more immediate).

We see, then, the figure's remembered past impinging more and more upon his thinking present, an impingement from which we may assume that the figure has difficulty in remaining detached from his memories. Working against this suggestion is "the slightly archaic diction and mannered syntax" which, to Bernard Bergonzi, "give an effect of distancing and remoteness which suggests that the original experience is already subject to the formalizing and distorting effect of memory".<sup>48</sup> However, it seems reasonable to assume that the distance derives even more from that very split between mind and body, between honour and desire, from which the man suffers. The Anglo-Saxon word "Mouth" is transformed by the man into the Latinate "orifice", which signals the man's intellectual self, the self that calls honour to mind, and his dutiful alienation from physicality. That he has disengaged himself has already been signalled in line three--"Alone in the press of people"--which notion foreshadows the "torture of equilibrium" that the couple are to move into. So actively does the man re-live his remembered experiences that his thoughts lead him from the distance implied in the words "quaint orifice" to the more passionate and more concrete "heat that flamed upon the kiss". This mnemonic movement imitates the actual past movement towards physical



possession of the woman, an activity that was stopped by the words like "Grey doves".

The word "officious" of line eight has, in this context, two possible meanings: "dutiful" and "meddlesome". Both meanings are possible to the figure. There is a curious correspondence between this word, "officious", and the word "Importunate" in stanza five, a word that would seem (for reasons to be clarified later) to emanate not from the figure but from the speaker. "Importunate" has "troublesome" as one of its possible meanings; another, "persistent", corresponds to the meaning of "dutiful" we derive from "officious". Because of this double correspondence, and because we may be reasonably sure that each word emanates from a different source, we are invited to align the sympathies of the speaker with the man. Both use the same words; each seems to know as much as the other.

The shock of the initial word "Importunate" and the sudden evaluation of the phrases, "Importunate her doves. Too pure, too wise", seem to indicate that the speaker is beginning to emerge as commentator. It is he, too, who says, "Predicament indeed" and the remainder of that stanza; and in the following stanza, stanza seven, he emerges more fully.

The sympathetic tone that is implied in "Importunate her doves" is suggested more emphatically, I think, in the oddity of the temporal signals. Already noticed is the sense of immediacy in the figure's remembered past and in his thinking present; now, it seems, the speaker recognizes that immediacy to the extent that he himself moves into the figures' temporal realm. The phrase which begins the fifth stanza, lacking a temporal signal, provides a bridge for this fusion of the speaker's and the figures' temporal realms. The second couplet of stanza five, in which the man's knightly duty is outlined,

appears as direct speech, because of the pronouns used, although there are no quotation marks. Both this suggestion and the potential presentness of the word "Clambering" serve to bring together the figure's past and present. In turn, in stanza six, the speaker discusses the lovers in the dramatic present: "discovers", "they feel" and "is".

Working against the development of a sympathetic bond between man and speaker is what seems to be a flattening of the speaker's tone in these two stanzas, stanzas five and six. There is something of an offhandedness, partly because of the pedantic words and partly because of the speaker's generalization of the lover's plight, in which he expresses astonishment at the incongruity of honour "among thieves" and "between lovers". It might be that the speaker must distance himself, must deny that developing compassion manifest in the merging of the temporal realms. The phrase, "Predicament indeed", has already been considered as slighting. On the other hand, we might even see accord between the two--the man and the speaker--in the word "Predicament", which, first, means an "unpleasant, trying situation" and, secondly, might take us to Ransom's avowed mentors, Kant and Aristotle, who used the word to mean the "pure a priori conceptions of the understanding; in which (as forms) mind envisages matter".<sup>49</sup> Both speaker and figure are aware of this predicament, this victory of mind over flesh. Probably the effect we have in these two stanzas of a flattened tone is not a decrease in sympathy but an increase in gravity. The speaker's tone mirrors the figure's necessarily stoic acceptance of the code of honour, of the sword of chastity that must stay between him and his lover.

A surprising change comes in stanza seven. Now the speaker

returns to the past tense, but he shows himself to have been a peripheral figure, as having actually seen the lovers: "At length I saw these lovers fully were come/Into their torture of equilibrium". With the evocation of spatio-temporal indefiniteness and with the greater foregrounding of the speaker's opinions and generalizations, the sense of a specific, particularized presented world is modified. Not only does this structural indefiniteness have thematic significance-- the couple is committed to an eternity of torture-- but, in combination with the speaker's generalized view, it also invites one to see the couple as universals. In stanzas seven and eight, the lovers have left the specific spatio-temporal realm of the presented world, becoming as the stars, eternally twirling, eternally attracted to and repelled by each other. And, as if to communicate their existence now as eternal types, even as concepts, the speaker turns to speak to "Man" in general, with the "your" of stanza ten referring back to those lovers and also, I think, functioning as direct address to the reader. What we have here is something in the way of an exemplum: a specific incident turned into a generalized moral sermon. We hear not just the sermon but the preacher preaching, which, with the near-burlesque of the grandiose sermonizing manner in such words as "puddled brow" and "descanting", ostensibly changes the speaker's character.

The posturing here, and in the sermon that follows, is intended, it seems, to provide a rationale for the lovers' decision. The choices open to them are an ideal spiritual existence in Heaven, and a physical existence in Hell. Neither, implies the speaker, is desirable. He is angry, he says, at the lovers, but there is an oddly artificial attitude in his words, "Ah, the strict lovers, they are ruined now!./ I cried in anger". In this way, he invites us to see him as assuming

a conventional response that deviates from his basic attitude, in much the same way that we might find the slight in "Predicament indeed" to be an assumed tone. The speaker moves into his sermon with an obvious self-mockery: his brow is furrowed and his mind correspondingly confused. Apparently assuming the attitude of the cynic, he sees the lovers as "strict" and "ruined", as "gibbeted and brave"; that is, as unnecessarily and stubbornly spoiling their beauty and thus as objects of scorn, and showy ones, at that. On the other hand, he assumes a moralistic attitude: the lovers are courageous in their refusal to consummate their love. Underlying these two attitudes, there are hints already of approval for the "strict" lovers ("strict" as neutrally descriptive a word as "clear" and "nice" might be). These emerge partly in the speaker's self-mockery--he scorns the assumed attitudes--and in his desire to "devise"; that is, to understand the division of these courageous beings.

These hints of sympathy and comprehension are very much below the surface at this stage. There is a note of impatience in the question: "Man, what would you have?" If it is addressed to the lovers, the speaker appears to be irritated at their indecision. It is equally possible, however, that the speaker is addressing man in general, including himself, with the intention of showing the failure of both the cynical and the pious views of the lovers, views that he has ironically assumed.

The pronoun "your" of the next line--"For spin your period out, and draw your breath"--is directed at the lovers, who are spinning, as well as to humankind in general: the reader is invited to fill in that "your" and even more the word "you" of the following stanza. The injunction "and draw your breath" is a little difficult to interpret: it perhaps looks back to the "cold words [that] came

down spiral from the head", and means that man should subdue the sense of honour that prohibits physical satisfaction. The speaker might be introducing a carpe diem theme: man should live all he can before the "kinder" period of death. On the other hand, he might simply be referring to that period of torturous waiting before death introduces the decision: "Would you ascend to Heaven and bodiless dwell?/Or take your bodies honorless to Hell?" The point of the questions in either case appears to be that a choice must be made, and it is in the next two stanzas that the speaker examines the alternatives.

In these stanzas, there is a precarious equilibrium set up in the syntax and diction, so that the speaker's evaluations of each of the two possibilities--honour and a spiritual existence, on the one hand, and dishonour and physical union, on the other--neutralize each other. Unlike Bergonzi,<sup>50</sup> I feel that the speaker is no more horrified at the idea of carnal satisfaction than at the idea of spiritual calm. The reader must recall the beauty of the erotic imagery in the opening stanzas, and the sense that honour was an intrusive element, neither invited nor welcomed by the couple. The response to the question, "Would you ascend to Heaven and bodiless dwell?", is, then, undoubtedly a negative one, given the evocations of the first four quatrains.

The speaker, to maintain a balance between spiritual and physical health, must in some way counteract this memory. Now any overbalance on the side of the spiritual is remedied once we recall the entire poem. In the second stanza of the speaker's sermon, the appeal of the "long white arms and milky skin" remains with us. This appeal works against the appeal of purification once the flesh and blood have "escaped". The image of "male and female tissue



sweetly shaped" is more delicately (and anasthetically) erotic than the "quaint orifice" of stanza two; it seems here that the speaker is doing more than simply neutralizing the negative evaluation implicit in the word "lecheries".

If the appeal of the flesh remains with us in this stanza, it is both more violently and more beautifully present in the next. Yet again the tone is complex, with words neutralizing each other or even themselves. The word "Infatuate", for instance, refers to an extravagance of passion (reminding us of the "extravagant device of art" of "Painted Head"); it also means "foolish". And, while calling such passionate lovers "stubborn" might be denigratory, and such words as "Stuprate", "rend" and "pieces" evoke a destructive violence, the speaker also recognizes their greatness, so amply illustrated by Dante's episode of Paola and Francesca, of which this stanza contains echoes.

Through the various antitheses and neutralizations, the speaker himself establishes an equilibrium, which we may take to be an expression of aesthetic pleasure at the equilibrium of the two lovers. Here is much the kind of rather awesome but admiring sympathy we find in "Blue Girls" (published a year before): the matching of exemplum to presented world. Throughout the poem, we have seen the speaker imitating the man's attitude to his dilemma; now he imitates the decision to remain in a "torture of equilibrium".

During the sermon, then, the speaker's underlying admiration reasserts itself: the assumed tones are dropped as the speaker comes to realize not just the impossibility of a choice between Heaven and Hell but, more especially, the beauty of the lovers' equilibrium. In the penultimate stanza, as in the epitaph, the speaker's tone is purely admiring at the perfect balance between

"flames" and "ice" and at their "perilous and beautiful" equilibrium. So full of admiration is the speaker that his words, "perilous and beautiful", defy the categories of honour and desire, of the spiritual and the physical. Each word points to both states. Whereas some of the words earlier in the poem, such as "strict" and "brave", occur to set up a tension or an ambiguity, the syntax and the diction of the epitaph particularly (though we see the beginnings in the sermon) set up a reconciliation of the opposite forces. In the epitaph, which commemorates the lovers' decision, the speaker guides the "stranger" towards the sense of religious awe he himself has come to have. There is, perhaps, also an invitation to see the "stranger" as the speaker himself: he is, in effect, warning himself not to devise for the lovers an alternative solution.

The return by the speaker to a specific presented world is, in some ways, baffling. As suggested earlier, his active participation suggests a purer sympathy than occurs in "Captain Carpenter" and it is the creation of an epitaph that emphasizes particularly the speaker's aesthetic pleasure. Beyond this, it seems that the re-establishment of a particular couple, who, metaphorically, I imagine, lie in the earth, retains the emotional force with which the poem opens, as well as the intellectual force derived from regarding the couple as universal types.

As Bergonzi says, "the two lovers are more obviously symbolic, standing for all lovers in this kind of predicament, than in Ransom's other poems on the theme".<sup>51</sup> The lovers that are represented include the legendary Tristram and Iseult, Paolo and Francesca, Abelard and Heloise, a representation suggested not only by the common theme but also by particular allusions to Dante and Pope.<sup>52</sup> Just as "Captain Carpenter" seems to allude to an

entire tradition (though its range of allusion is purposely greater than that in "The Equilibrists"), so is this poem in itself an allusion to the tradition of love (and death) and its literature. For parallels one would go from the "Song of Solomon" to Donne's "The Exstasie", John Fletcher's "Love's Emblems", Henry King's "A Renunciation", and many Elizabethan love sonnets and epitaphs. One is also reminded of such later poems as Thomas Hood's "Rosaline" or even Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard". Ransom's poem is concerned with the idea of the polarity of honour and desire as much with the polarity itself, and thus he draws upon the archetypal theme and the conventional phrases of poems about love.

It is clear that Ransom has mingled the third-person and first-person (both central and peripheral) types to a greater extent here than in his other poems. These shifts and combinations are created comfortably and tactfully: there is not the suggestion that the reader is playing with the reader's illusion of reality for the sake of playfulness (as in "First Travels of Max") but rather more to suggest that development of awareness which is the characteristic procedure of Ransom's poetry, and to maintain in equilibrium the conceptual and the perceptual. While many of Ransom's poems incorporate both the particular and the representative, they do so in a less conspicuous manner than does "The Equilibrists". "Two in August", for instance, published two years later, employs such auctorial commentary as "Yet he of the wide brows that were used to laurel/And she, the famed for gentleness, must quarrel" (ll. 8-9), thus maintaining the sense of representative particulars without moving away from the particular as Ransom does in "The Equilibrists".

Perhaps the most interesting development within what I have

termed Ransom's mature poetry lies in his use of free indirect style. In this poem, the figure's thoughts are less ostensibly mediated--more dramatically rendered--than in the two slightly later poems, "Morning" and "Parting, without a Sequel", that use free indirect style. Even the figure's past, which comes through memory, seems immediate. Whereas free indirect style is used in "Morning" for ironic purposes, that is, to signal psychological distance between speaker and figure, here it is used to communicate a basic accord, not an accord that is worked against by moral judgement, as initially in "Parting, without a Sequel, but a more complete sympathy.

#### 6. The Dramatic Mode

In such third-person poems as "The Equilibrists", in which free indirect style is used to render the figures' unspoken thoughts, Ransom's speaker seems, at times, to forego his rôle as mediator. The reader has a greater sense of immediacy than is so in the case of reported thought. At such moments, these poems move toward dramatic rendering, in the strict sense of the term dramatic, that is, toward a mode which is defined by its lack of a mediative process. Four of Ransom's poems move even more radically into the dramatic mode of rendering: "Spiel of Three Mountebanks", "Eclogue" and "Piazza Piece", all published in the 1920's, and "Two Gentlemen Scholars", an extensive revision, for Selected Poems, of the early "Overtures".

Ransom, as emphasized before, is primarily a story-teller: his favourite way of ordering experience is in the sequential stages

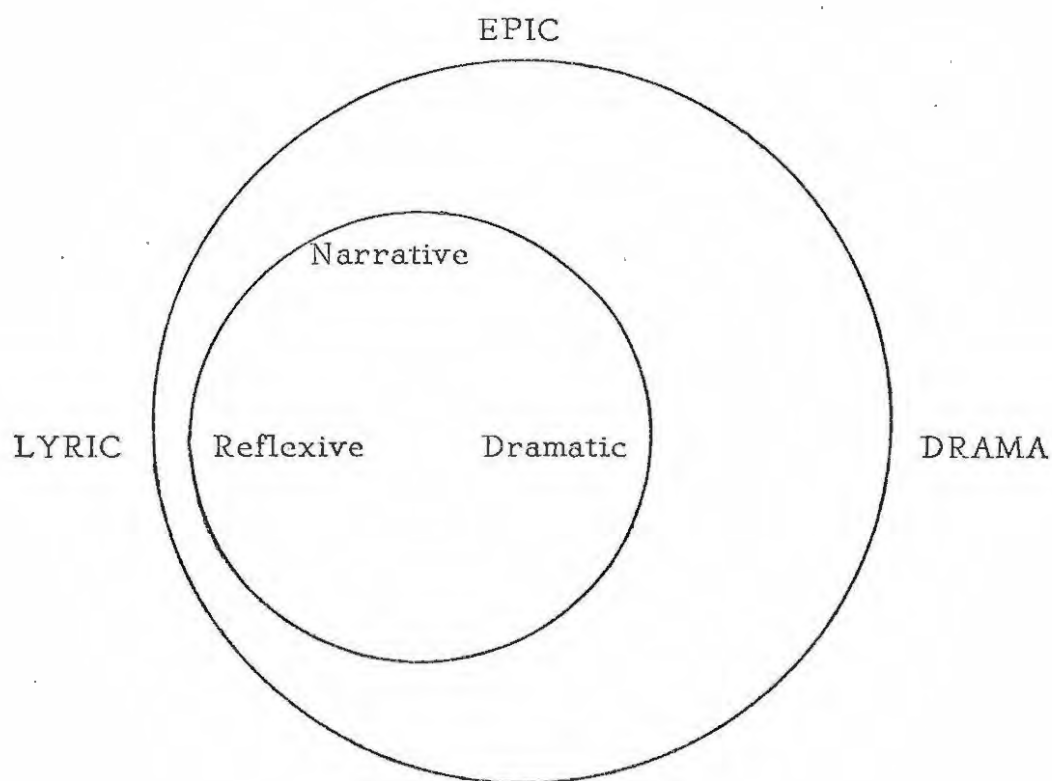
of narrative. The narrative mode and the reflexive mode in his poetry have been analysed; it now remains to isolate his use of the dramatic mode, as well as to relate briefly the relation that these three basic modes of poetry bear to each other.

Käte Hamburger, in a section entitled "The Relation of Dramatic to Epic Fiction", cites an earlier critic, Julius Petersen, who defines epic (in the sense of narrative) "as the reporting of an action in monologue", lyric "as the presentation of a state in monologue" and drama "as the presentation of an action in dialogue".<sup>53</sup> Here Petersen is indebted to Goethe, who says of these three basic modes that they

can be intertwined so marvelously [and] are infinitely manifold; and thus it is so difficult to find an order according to which one could arrange them one next to or after the other. But one will find some help if one places the three main elements across from each other in a circle and then seeks models in which each element exists alone. Then one should collect examples which tend in one direction or in the other, until the union of all three finally appears and thus the whole circle is closed in itself.<sup>54</sup>

Franz Stanzel, in order to establish a typology of the novel arranged on the basis not of "material and content" but of narrative situation, draws, inside Goethe's circle, a smaller circle to clarify the relationships between different types of narrative situation possible to the novel as well as to suggest an analogy between these three different types and Goethe's basic modes.<sup>55</sup> Using Stanzel's diagram and his explanations as a model, it is possible to make an analogous typology of the lyric genre, on the basis of poetic situation, in order to show how the three potentialities of lyric poetry generally, and of Ransom's poetry in particular, relate to one another and how they correspond to those broader categories distinguished by Goethe:





Whereas Stanzel's circle is placed in the neighbourhood of the epic, the circle for the modes used by Ransom must, of course, be drawn closer to the lyric. This displacement indicates that his poetry does not remove itself from the lyric realm, however extensive the employment of narrative and dramatic tendencies. The inner circle and its position allow one to see the movement away from pure lyric or reflexive toward or into narrative or dramatic which is so clearly his characteristic manner, as well as to see the correspondence

between Ransom's narrative lyric and the epic mode, both of which involve the speaker's spatio-temporal detachment from the presented world, and between the dramatic lyric<sup>56</sup> and the dramatic mode, in both of which the auctorial medium withdraws entirely.

Most often the narrative mode provides the framework for Ransom's lyrics. In any one poem, there may be various and slight departures towards the reflexive, on the one hand, and the dramatic, on the other. In Ransom's narrative lyrics, the speaker will comment on the presented world or even on himself, a movement toward the reflexive mode; or he will seem to disappear, and the reader will have that sense of immediate contact with the presented world that occurs in dramatic rendering. Such tendencies do not, of course, break the predominantly narrative mode. A poem in which the act of narration is not foregrounded is unusual for Ransom. In terms of the preferred poetic situation, those poems in which the reflexive or the dramatic manner of presentation is dominant form an anomalous group in his work.

In a letter to Allen Tate in 1923, Ransom wrote: "You are attempting an art of the sub-rational. To me that seems as limiting as is the American formula for the short story. Everything in dramatic situation, no comments, no author's personality. We know what that produces."<sup>57</sup> One assumes that Ransom is not speaking here of the purely dramatic mode, "the presentation of an action in dialogue", but, on the one hand, of Tate's increasing concern with the dramatic unfolding of a figure's consciousness in interior monologue (largely derived from T.S. Eliot) and, on the other hand, of what Ransom felt was as "formless" as he had found "The Wasteland".<sup>58</sup> Yet this comment reveals a significant factor: Ransom's distrust of poems that are not explicitly mediated by a controlling rational presence. This distrust

explains, perhaps, his tentative and infrequent experiments in the reflexive and the dramatic modes.

Since Ransom once suggested a distrust, too, of the intrusion into a poem of the poet's private personality,<sup>59</sup> he obviously means by "author's personality" the controlling force provided by the first-person speaker who orders and evaluates past behaviour (his own or that of the others within his world) as well as the regulative function of the third-person speaker, who makes both explicit and implicit commentary upon the narrated events.

One might suggest that the felt need for an art which is not only rational but also firmly rooted in tradition provides some explanation of Ransom's choice of form open to the dramatic mode. Always a traditionalist, Ransom goes back to Theocritan dramatic eclogue in three of his dramatic poems and to the Petrarchan sonnet form in the fourth.

The dramatic poem has already been defined by the absence of a presentational process. To take a well-known set of examples, Frost's North of Boston poems, which he called "New England Eclogues",<sup>60</sup> have generally been labelled as dramatic poems, the use of an auctorial introduction or of narrative links signifying their departure from purely dramatic presentation. "Blueberries" is one of the few poems in this volume that foregoes such narrative tendency.

Ransom, like Sidney in the pastoral dialogues between Strephon and Klaius, adopts the mime tradition in which a dialogue is set out as drama, not to be enacted but presented as enactment. In "Spiel of Three Mountebanks", the figures' titles ("THE SWARTHY ONE", "THE THICK ONE", "THE PALE ONE") introduce their speeches. "Two Gentlemen Scholars", subtitled "a pastoral", employs a similar method, with the addition of the setting given as a

stage direction and the word "Exit" (in parenthesis) to end the poem. In "Eclogue", there is a slight tendency toward a narrative frame: the stage directions are incorporated into the stanza form, as in

JANE SNEED WITH GRIM LIPS MOCKED HIM: Who can tell--  
Not I, not you--about those mysteries!  
(ll. 51-52)

In "Piazza Piece", there are neither stage directions nor hints of mediation: the two speeches are kept distinct as the octave and the sestet of a Petrarchan sonnet.

The term eclogue is often used synonymously with pastoral; it is necessary here to invoke the brief distinction suggested in the Dictionary of World Literary Terms between pastoral as referring to content and eclogue as referring to form: "It may be loosely defined as a dramatic poem which, without appreciable action or characterization, includes (1) an objective setting, described by the poet or one of his characters, and (2) appropriate sentiments expressed in dialogue or soliloquy."<sup>61</sup> Since eclogue has been used to designate both dialogue and soliloquy, the term dramatic eclogue is apt for Ransom's poems. Understood by the term, and relevant to Ransom's four poems, is the rural setting, often referred to as one of the pastoral conventions.

Although not a dramatic poem, "Master's in the Garden Again" reveals, in one respect at least, Ransom's interest in the eclogue tradition. This poem seems to refer to the origin of the pastoral, where, as J.A.K. Thomson writes, "one competitor made up a verse, then the other capped it with one as good or better, until the judge was able to decide which ought to have the prize."<sup>62</sup> This was the convention from which Theocritus worked; his dramatic figures Menalcas and Daphnis are thus judged. Thomson also points out the antiphonal responses of Virgil's Eclogues: "the second singer takes up the

words of the first and moulds his reply upon them in form and to some extent in sound."<sup>63</sup>

Ransom's own comments on "Master's in the Garden Again" imply that one of the conventions followed is this amocbean<sup>64</sup> kind of pastoral employed by Theocritus:

Conrad is a poet and his wife is not; he rhymes easily, but she has no knack for it. So the naughty man means to hear out her unrhymed lines, then cap them with a group of lines that supply rhyme-mates for hers, and for good measure some rhymed lines entirely his own. That is why her first address in two lines ending with bold and garden is followed by his stanza of five lines ending with well, cold, fell, pardon, burden; two separate rhymings for her garden. Her next sally is to assume that muck and neck may be put to her credit as lame rhymes (a little of his art having rubbed off on her) though probably their near-rhyming is perfectly accidental. He replies with four lines ending in here, miasma, there, and lake. The insult of the rhymes looks very rude of him; yet I thought of it as one of the conventions of their dialogue whenever they were having an argument.<sup>65</sup>

This comment refers to the 1964 version of "Master's in the Garden Again", which was slightly revised for the final edition of Ransom's work. Since critics felt Conrad's language to his wife rather "brutal", Ransom "sweetened" it.<sup>66</sup> But the rhyme game remains intact.

To a lesser extent, we find a sense of competition in all of Ransom's dramatic poems. Howard Nemerov, perhaps missing the generic intention of "Spiel of Three Mountebanks", writes:

[T]he reader is required, rather against the poem, to remember that the sponsor of Agnus is, equally with the sponsors of Fides and Humphrey, a mountebank. I think the difficulty I have with this in many ways admirable work is that its arrangement prohibits any summation or full composition of its elements: it indicates three Ways with great brilliance and humor, but its artifice may demand too strongly that we consider each Way exclusive of the others; and surely that of Agnus, both by its position and its tone, is as though automatically awarded the victory, so that to my mind we are left with more of a competition than a composition.<sup>67</sup>



Ransom showed an interest in the dramatic competition as early as Poems About God. "A Christmas Colloquy",<sup>68</sup> largely but not entirely a dramatic poem, invokes a speaker who, having heard the story, it seems, from his dog, Inez, presents a dialogue between his niece and his brother, about the implications of Christmas, material on the one hand, and spiritual on the other. Set in octosyllabic couplets, with occasional triplets and even quatrains, the poem allows one to discern a rhyme game between the two dramatic figures, though one less complex than in "Master's in the Garden Again". The dialogue opens with couplets, Thomas, the father, slipping up, perhaps, in his rhyme of "girl" and "world" (ll. 29 and 30). Ann, the daughter, seems to surpass her father in her rhyme of "Jesus" and "tease us" (ll. 35 and 36). Thomas answers immediately with a triplet, before moving back to the couplet pattern; Ann, in answer, saves her triplet to end her particular retort. Her father's attempt to dominate his argumentative child now takes the form of two quatrains, the first informed by near-rhymes--"for us", "thus", "pleasures", "treasures" (ll. 55, 56, 57 and 58)--the second by full rhymes. Ann, in her final reply, seems to attempt a near-rhyme quatrain--"apart", "heart", "out", "about" (ll. 63, 64, 65, and 66)--but ends her speech with a triplet. As the next and final stanza to the poem, the speaker reports that "valiant Thomas held the fort", (l. 73), an ironic victory.

Whether Ransom consciously went back to the amoebean pastoral is not, of course, clear. In his comments on "Master's in the Garden Again", he mentions his indebtedness to Hardy's "The Master and the Leaves", as well as to Laforgue:

I had taken my cue from the charming but sophisticated French poet Jules Laforgue. . . . One of his best inventions was to match an intellectual man with the woman of his heart who was a sentimentalist; so that if the woman, for example,

asks the man if he loves her still, he may reply with some completely irrelevant wisdom beyond her head. The invention works as a convention; it does not keep Laforgue's heroes from showing their real gallantry in action, when the occasion arises.<sup>69</sup>

This is a late influence: the original versions of the poem do not invoke such a relationship. Certainly the first-person "Prelude to an Evening", first published in 1934, depicts a similar relationship; and "Eclogue", first published ten years earlier, consists of a dialogue between an intellectually superior John Black (or so he regards himself) and the sentimentalist, Jane Sneed. The dialogue is particularly distinctive. Each has a different way of ordering experience: John Black is prone to abstraction, Jane Sneed favours personal experience. It would seem that, despite the primary speaker's words--"JOHN BLACK'S THE LAST SAY THEN" (l. 71)--it is Jane Sneed with whom his sympathies lie. She mocks John Black's abstractions, his pretentious attempt to explain evil, with the haunting words:

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

(ll. 53-55)

And it is the woman who is able to maintain a dream of happiness, about which John Black decrees: "We are one part love/And nine parts bitter thought" (ll. 73-74), the precision in this metaphysical statement further characterizing him.

One is impressed by the characterization of the two speakers of "Eclogue" and also in "Spiel of Three Mountebanks", which, Henry W. Wells points out, illustrates "the oneness of man and beast".<sup>70</sup> But, according to the previously cited definition of eclogue in Dictionary of World Literary Terms, this tradition does not contain

"appreciable . . . characterization".<sup>71</sup> It seems that Ransom may have taken some inspiration from the closely related mime tradition, initiated by Sophron and followed by Theocritus, in which, according to Thomson, character played a considerable part: "The Mime is a closely and often satirically observed study of a scene from ordinary life, and has always a dramatic or semi-dramatic character."<sup>72</sup>

H.J. Rose calls Theocritus' Idylls, which are mimes, "highly dramatic, lifelike and full of admirable touches in character".<sup>73</sup>

Of the three dramatic eclogues, "Two Gentlemen Scholars" develops character the least. Explaining the subtitle, "a pastoral", Ransom says: "Both are gentlemen scholars; and poets of some sort, employing the 'traditional' or Renaissance style of verse; and their speech is pastoral because they have chosen to live in the country, and the country has much to do with their interests."<sup>74</sup> There is not only a pastoral convention isolated here, but also a pastoral theme: the past-present conflict related to the country-city conflict.

Revised from "Overtures", a first-person poem that, unusually for Ransom, involves a secondary speaker, "Two Gentlemen Scholars" is purely dramatic. In accordance with the requirements of the eclogue tradition, the action is off-stage: the personal history of the husband and wife is recounted to the friend. Though the setting is "objective"<sup>75</sup> and presented as a stage direction, the setting of the narrated action is metaphorical and even symbolic.

The pastoral convention, in its reduction of the complex to the simple, and in its expression of the universal in concrete terms,<sup>76</sup> is evident in this late revision. Yet some of the simplicity of "Overtures" is lost. Buffington says of the change: "Ransom frequently prefers the choppiness of rhythm and the terseness of phrase he employed in 1963 in 'Master's in the Garden Again' . . .

and in the revised 'Prelude to an Evening'. In other passages, he is, I am afraid, rather close to doggerel."<sup>77</sup>

What is expressed in "Two Gentlemen Scholars" is the traditional poet's relationship with the modern poet, a problem that has already been mentioned in relation to some of Ransom's late reflexive poems. We see in this poem something of the attempt at compromise with which Ransom had come to approach modernism, an attempt found in The New Criticism but absent from earlier, Agrarian writings. His essay in honour of Allen Tate, "In Amicitia", contains reference to his approval of some of the "cultural signs" of the new age, though he earlier speaks of its "sprawling and unformed barbarism".<sup>78</sup> The main speaker, the husband, is married to a woman who precipitates a conjugal argument by being rude about Donne's poetry. Although the husband, the traditionalist, has effected a reconciliation, he fears another disaster. The friend advises him:

. . . Let her find  
Her own words, up to the breaking point.

Her voice is modern, and we know those  
Young bards who listen to the birds  
And sing with insufficient words.  
Yes! Fate, uneasy, may propose  
A second reckoning with her woes  
Whose lute is tuned to such discords.

(ll. 54-61)

"Piazza Piece", not simply the best-known and the most admired of Ransom's dramatic poems, is probably also his finest experiment in the sonnet tradition:

--I am a gentleman in a dustcoat trying  
To make you hear. Your ears are soft and small  
And listen to an old man not at all,  
They want the young man's whispering and sighing.  
But see the roses on your trellis dying  
And hear the spectral singing of the moon;

For I must have my lovely lady soon,  
I am a gentleman in a dustcoat trying.

--I am a lady young in beauty waiting  
Until my true love 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.

As are so many of Ransom's poems, this one is pervaded by a sense of allusiveness to a whole range of literary traditions. An experiment with the Petrarchan sonnet form is announced, in a minor way, by the rhyme scheme and the use of feminine endings. Ransom's variations on the Petrarchan sonnet involve the rôle of the sonneteer, the setting and, most important here, the poetic situation.

Through such words as "trellis", "vines", "roses" and "piazza" (meaning "porch" in the South), the setting is taken to be local, rural and semi-modern: a Southern belle waits on her verandah for a caller. Yet the word "piazza" also suggests an Italian setting, as does "vines" (though it may simply suggest twining plants), pointing to one of the more obvious allusions in the poem, that is, to Romeo and Juliet. Juliet, waiting on her balcony, about to meet the youth who will indirectly bring about her death, says, "But what man art thou, that, thus bescreen'd in night/So stumblest on my counsel?"<sup>79</sup> Besides, then, this Southern and near-pastoral setting, we have an older flavour, reminiscent of Shakespeare's Italy and perhaps Browning's too, a sense of tradition further emphasized by the formality of the speech patterns and the ritualized, theatrical aspect of rôle-playing by the two figures.

As the Browningsque title advises, the poem is in the dramatic mode: a dialogue (though the extent of the communication has yet to be explored) between Death and the Maiden. The sonneteer-lover of the



Petrarchan tradition becomes an aged man, a death-figure, with the aspect of a lover. His participation in the world of the living reminds us of some of Emily Dickinson's poems about death. It is quite possible that Ransom consciously created a parallel: as in Emily Dickinson's poem beginning "Because I could not stop for Death", his death-figure not only approaches the girl as a lover but is also a rather mysterious and formal gentleman. Ransom's girl, however, refuses her would-be escort-lover whereas Emily Dickinson's speaker accepts him and, in the poem beginning "Tie the Strings to my Life, my Lord", even invites him.

The formality of the speech patterns is achieved largely through the repetition of the formulaic self-introduction that each figure employs. Taking one back to the antiphonal pattern of the dramatic eclogue, the girl announces herself in imitation of the old man's formula: "I am" followed by a noun, a qualifier and a present participle. While this kind of repetition, in many dramatic poems, would serve to strengthen that sense of communication we assume from dialogue, it serves here to suggest only the faintest communication. The girl is unaware of the significance of the dusty gentleman, and his words come to her "as in a dream". It is in her antiphonal response that she makes apparent that there is some (unconscious) reception of the man's words. We hear, however, not so much a dialogue as two monologues, which are, perhaps, even spoken at the same time: the two realities, the one defined by "truelove", the other by old age and death, compete simultaneously. Here is Ransom's variation on the dramatic mode.

The formulaic announcements introduce an additional irony: the repeated word "waiting", in the last line of the sonnet, stretching forward into the empty time phase, takes on an ambiguity of which the girl herself is scarcely, if at all, aware. Similarly, the old man's word "trying"

shifts its syntactical function and assumes, in its repetition, those sexual innuendoes of Marvell's lines: "then Worms shall try/That long preserv'd Virginity" (ll. 27-28).<sup>80</sup>

The old man's intention is to make the girl hear his words so that she will gain knowledge of time and mortality through the moon and the roses. As the use of imperatives informs us, he wishes to lure the girl into his temporal sequence but, unlike the speaker of "Parting at Dawn", does not succeed. The girl's senses are untrustworthy; as in some of Hardy's 1912-13 love poems, there are particular auditory or oral or visual barriers between the two realms of life and death.

Buffington, in a brief comparison of "Piazza Piece" with Hardy's "Heiress and Architect", suggests that Ransom's speaker "takes a more gentle and understanding tone" than does Hardy's.<sup>81</sup> This may be so; the abrupt "For you will die" (l.60) of Hardy's speaker lacks compassion. Yet one should not miss that crooning, hypnotic quality of the old man's voice, the insinuation of the word "trying" in line eight and of most of lines three and four: "Your ears are soft and small/And listen to an old man not at all." These lines hold hints of physical dangers, the more terrifying since the peremptory "not at all" merges with the established hypnotic sound. There is a predatory quality about this gentleman (reminding one of Red Riding Hood's wolf who praises with a greedy eye), comparable to the eagerness of those Queens of Hell in "The Tall Girl" who seem to fix their eyes on the golden hair. While the death-figure of Hardy's "Heiress and Architect" has a "measuring eye" (l. 56), it is not so bent on violation as this one.

Further qualifying the old man's tone is the courtliness that marks his approach. Perhaps it is such a reference as "lovely lady"

that implies gentleness to Buffington. There does seem to be, beyond the speaker's insinuating and menacing manner, an appreciation of the girl's beauty and a sadness at the inevitability of death: "For I must have my lovely lady soon". The gentleman insists that the girl see and hear time and death, but, within the limits prescribed by his nature, he does so with commiseration.

Louis D. Rubin finds that Ransom's poetry in general is made the more terrifying because of the very urbanity and gentleness that masks the agony. He says that Ransom is "an artist appalled by and obsessed with the unhappiness of the human situation, who uses gentility and decorum in order to heighten the incongruity of the savage reality embedded in the civilized patterns".<sup>82</sup> It is this very incongruity that leads to the speaker's ultimately sympathetic glance at Captain Carpenter. But Rubin is here pointing to the tone of the poet, not of the speaker, to the consciousness that is responsible for the various arrangements and juxtapositions. The overall tone of a dramatic poem is particularly elusive; not so much, perhaps, in "Eclogue", where we have the primary speaker saying a few words which give some indication of his tone, or in "Two Gentlemen Scholars", where one tends to identify the poet's tone with the husband's. In "Piazza Piece", there are few such signals.

That the poet scorns the girl's values, or some of them, is clear from the word "truelove". The use of a compound, which lessens the stress on the word "true", devalues the separate words "true" and "love". "Truelove" is a facile concept that demonstrates the girl's naïve romanticism. She seems to exist in a state between two dreams: one that will fade with the roses, one that will become reality. Her naïveté involves an inability to determine which dream it is that will become real. She sees, among the vines, the grey figure of death and

attempts to reaffirm her own world, to keep unreal the approaching reality, by threatening to "scream". One is reminded of "Vision by Sweetwater", in which a scream heralds the advent of a death-defined, adult world. More important, one is compelled to see the pathos in the girl's plight. For all her naïveté, one senses the Ransomic tendency to sympathize with the child who tries to refuse access to death.

Yet it is difficult to establish with certainty how the poem communicates the compassion one infers is felt by the poet. We know from such poems as "Janet Waking", "Vaunting Oak", "Blue Girls" and even "Miriam Tazewell" that the speaker, and the poet behind him, is sympathetic to those shocked by mortality, whether they admit awareness or no. The girl's naïve optimism may be dismissed, but the girl herself is not. There is something poignant in her repetition of the formula, "I am a lady young in beauty waiting", a poignancy already introduced through the other feminine endings in the sonnet. The absence of an object to the participle "waiting", in both uses, suggests futility, which notion the word "until" (in the place of "for") strengthens, as does the final position given the participle itself. We not only sense the pathos but we also respond to the Quixotic stubbornness of the girl, who refuses a change of vision, refuses acceptance of an objective reality of evil and death.

The pathos in "Piazza Piece" emerges most clearly in the colourlessness of the girl's future, a future that might even have to be looked upon with "Blear eyes". The "dustcoat" worn by the "grey man" is a coat of death and decay, comparable to the "dusty cassock" (l. 33) that the Christ of "Armageddon" wears and in which he chants of "death and glory and no complaisance" (l. 74). Tom, in "Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son", has grey eyes before his death; in "The Equilibrists", honour, which brings bodily death, is a "grey word" (l. 24), like

William Collins's "pilgrim grey" (l. 9) in "How Sleep the Brave".<sup>83</sup>

Colour is used by Ransom to suggest passion, vitality, love and hope; he liked particularly the colour blue, which provides, as in "Blue Girls", an opposition to death and decay. But, pointing out the fading roses and the ghostly moon, the death-figure strips the girl's world of its colour.

This is not to say that the gentleman is any harsher than he need be. He is, like so many of Ransom's speakers, a teacher: he must point the way to full awareness of man's position in nature. Allen Tate, in fact, has said, in a short phrase, one of the most important things about this poem, about the Ransomic speaker, and even about Ransom himself; namely, that this dustcoated gentleman is Ransom's constant döppelgänger. Ransom's persona is a figure "through whom he tells us that nothing will last, all will go, and that our mastery of decay and death is the ironic cultivation of 'graves rites and funerals'".<sup>84</sup> However Ransom creates a speaker, whether there is simply a voice, or else a fictive figure, or a figure half in, half out, the presented world, we still hear that dry, ironic, loving voice, a voice both self-controlled and passionate.



## NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

<sup>1</sup>Koch, p. 238.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 240-41. See her comments on "Miriam Tazewell" and "Spectral Lovers".

<sup>3</sup>Parsons, John Crowe Ransom.

<sup>4</sup>"'Aesthetic Distance' in the Poetry of John Crowe Ransom", Southern Review: An Australian Journal of Literary Studies, III (1968), 166.

<sup>5</sup>Tate, "A Southern Mode".

<sup>6</sup>Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy, 4th ed. (1930; rpt. London: Macmillan, 1952), pp. 296-97.

<sup>7</sup>Buffington, The Equilibrist, p. 77.

<sup>8</sup>Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy, p. 483.

<sup>9</sup>I am indebted to Brooks, "The Doric Delicacy", p. 278, for this suggestion. Brooks's essay is one of the few in which Ransom's use of perspective is given an adequate, if brief, examination.

<sup>10</sup>While the narrative method of "Captain Carpenter" is comparable to the ballad traditions, the plot itself goes back to the medieval romance, to such features as a knight-at-arms, a damsel in distress, the quest and a succession of tests and combats (for which Ransom provides a Quixotic parody), as well as to a sense of the fantastic and of the other-world

and to the imposition of Christian references. These may, of course, also be ballad features.

Richard Kelly, in "Captain Carpenter's Inverted Ancestor", American Notes and Queries, VII (1968), 6-7, has suggested that the source for "Captain Carpenter" is a sixteenth-century ballad reprinted in A Book of British Ballads, ed. R. Brimley Johnson (London: Dent, 1912), pp. 57-60, under the title "Captain Car, or Edom O'Gordon". Here the central figure, Captain Car, ruthlessly destroys by fire a castle and its inmates, one of whom, Lady Hamilton, has laid a curse upon him for killing her son: "He cut his tongue out of his head, / His heart out of his brest" (ll. 67-68). Kelly suggests that Ransom's poem "may be read as an ironic form of poetic justice".

Equally interesting as possible allusions would be the ballad "Hugh of Lincoln" and its parallel in The Prioress's Tale, for references to antagonism between Christian and Jew and to the heart and the tongue. Again, the fragment "Hardyknute" in Thomas Percy's Reliques of Ancient English Poetry, ed. Henry B. Wheatley (New York: Dover, 1966), II, 109-21, shows certain similarities: Hardyknute's age—"Full seventy years he now had seen" (l. 3)—his encounter with a wounded knight who has been betrayed by a woman, his "stout heart" (l. 233) and extreme courage, the mockery of him by his enemies, as well as some of the grotesque battle incidents. Perhaps the strongest echoes are to be found in two ballads by Thomas Hood, "Faithless Nelly Gray" and "A Waterloo Ballad", which may, together, even constitute a source for "Captain Carpenter".

<sup>11</sup>The rhythm itself is anachronistic. The four-stressed lines and such a feature as the accent that falls on the last syllable of the word "elbows" suggest Middle English rhythms; but working against this is the accent that falls on "I'm" at the end of line 19. Again, while such words as "mien", "knave" and "bower" are medieval, there is often a curious sense of colloquial usage in the poem, as in the line, "And let him roll and stick like any tub", although none of the individual words is modern. "Tub", in the derogatory sense of a clumsy ship that can only "roll" and "stick" is seventeenth-century, for instance. And, further extending the range of register, the expression, "with meek apology and touch refined", is distinctly Victorian, as is suggested by Laura Riding and Robert Graves, p. 107.

<sup>12</sup>The term "romantic irony" is used here in the sense in which it is defined by Abrams, p. 83.

<sup>13</sup>One would cite the opening stanzas of "The Twa Sisters", for instance.

<sup>14</sup>Ehrenpreis, ed. The Literary Ballad (London: Edward Arnold, 1966), p. 16. Cowper's ballad appears on pp. 51-59. In another aspect still, it provides a parallel to "Captain Carpenter": in the note of burlesque, the disastrous ride and, at times, the similar stanza opening, as in "Away went Gilpin" (l. 229).

<sup>15</sup>The Faber Book of Ballads, ed. Matthew Hodgart (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), pp. 165-70.

<sup>16</sup>Ehrenpreis, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 128-35.

<sup>18</sup>Cited by Buffington, The Equilibrist, p. 90.

<sup>19</sup>God Without Thunder, p. 67.

<sup>20</sup>The World's Body, p. 36.

<sup>21</sup>"The Future of Poetry", The Fugitive, III, No. 1 (1924), 2-4.

<sup>22</sup>Cowan, p. 215.

<sup>23</sup>The first line of "Parting at Dawn" seems to echo the end lines of Browning's "Meeting at Night": "And a voice less loud, through its joys and fears/Than the two hearts beating each to each!" The New Oxford Book of English Verse, p. 661.

<sup>24</sup>The sixth line of Ransom's poem seems to echo deliberately Romeo's line, "Dry sorrow drinks our blood." Romeo and Juliet, III.v.59, in William Shakespeare: The Complete Works, ed. Peter Alexander (London: Collins, 1951).

<sup>25</sup>The New Oxford Book of English Verse, p. 662.

<sup>26</sup>Stanzel, p. 150. Stanzel's translator uses the term "narrated monologue". I have decided to follow the usage of W.J.M. Bronzwaer who translates the French term style indirect libre into "free indirect style". The term in its German formulation, erlebte Rede, is used by Leo Spitzer in his essay on "Leda and the Swan" in Essays in English and American Literature, p. 12; this essay is one of the few applications of the term and concept in criticism of poetry in English.

<sup>27</sup>  
 And I seyde his opinion was good.  
 What sholde he studie and make hymselfen wood,  
 Upon a book in cloystre alwey to poure,  
 Or swynken with his handes, and laboure,  
 As Austyn bit? How shal the world be served?  
 Lat Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved!  
 ("General Prologue", ll. 183-88)

The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F.N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (1933; rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1957), p. 19.

<sup>28</sup>The last line reads: "Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new." The Poems of John Milton, ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London: Longman, 1968), pp. 239-54.

<sup>29</sup>In the three quatrains that largely comprise lines 5 to 14 of the stanza, Spitzer, p. 12, finds a movement from empathy to objectivity. The first quatrain he considers to be in free indirect style; that is, it is Leda's question though formulated in the third person. The second question is asked by a sympathetic observer, the third (the only one which is not purely rhetorical) by the objective poet.

<sup>30</sup>Free indirect style occurs in Graves's "With Her Lips Only", "Down" and "The Troll's Nosegay", for instance.

<sup>31</sup>Cited by Stanzel, p. 152.

<sup>32</sup>This is a term used by Stanzel, p. 150, who acknowledges a debt to Bernhard Fehr, "Substitutionary Narration and Description",

in Von Englands geistigen Beständen (Frauenfeld, 1944), p. 264 ff.

<sup>33</sup>The Fugitive, I, No. 2 (1922), 62-63.

<sup>34</sup>Except for the word "with" in the penultimate line of stanza 6, which reads "by" in Grace After Meat, though "with" in Chills and Fever, p. 56. I am indebted to Buffington, The Equilibrist, p. 140, for the information about the version in Grace After Meat; this volume is not available in South Africa.

<sup>35</sup>Cowan, pp. 60-61. One would prefer, however, to take the "sweet birds of Heaven" as kites or eagles, in order to preserve the tradition of earlier literature.

<sup>36</sup>God Without Thunder, p. 321.

<sup>37</sup>Stewart, The Burden of Time, p. 206.

<sup>38</sup>The term is first used by Booth on p. 116.

<sup>39</sup>Beatty, p. 358.

<sup>40</sup>Wyatt's half-line in his poem beginning "They flee from me that sometime did me seek" reads: "--what hath she now deservèd?" (l. 21). It is the mood of these words rather than the actual words themselves that seems to be recaptured in Ransom's poem. I refer here to the text used in The Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250-1900, ed. Arthur Quiller-Couch (Oxford, Clarendon, 1918), p. 63.

<sup>41</sup>"Thoughts on the Poetic Discontent", p. 63.

<sup>42</sup>The verb "to string" may mean "to deceive" in American and English colloquial speech, a meaning which would concur with reading the name "Tazewell" as "Tease-well".

<sup>43</sup>"Thoughts on the Poetic Discontent", p. 64.

<sup>44</sup>"A Poem Nearly Anonymous", p. 181.



<sup>45</sup>Brooks, "The Doric Delicacy", p. 272.

<sup>46</sup>"A Poem Nearly Anonymous", p. 182.

<sup>47</sup>See Brooks's comments on the similarities in the treatment of "aesthetic distance" in the poetry of Ransom and Milton; "The Doric Delicacy", pp. 275-79. Brooks finds the use of perspective in such of Milton's poems as the "Nativity Hymn" and "Lycidas" particularly subtle.

<sup>48</sup>"A Poem About the History of Love: 'The Equilibrists' by John Crowe Ransom", Critical Quarterly, IV (1962), 131.

<sup>49</sup>See the entry under "predicament", OED.

<sup>50</sup>Bergonzi, p. 135-36.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 133. Bergonzi quotes from Pope's Eloisa to Abelard.

<sup>53</sup>Käte Hamburger, p. 196. These fundamental categories are referred to by Scholes and Kellogg, p. 4, and by Wellek and Warren, pp. 227-28.

<sup>54</sup>Cited by Stanzel, p. 158; from Goethe's "Noten und Abhandlungen zu besserem Verständnis des west-östlichen Divans" (Leipzig, 1934).

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., pp. 158-69.

<sup>56</sup>The term dramatic lyric as I use it here refers to a lyric in which the presentational process is absent. It bears no relation to Langbaum's dramatic lyric in which "the poet discovers his idea through a dialectical interchange with the external world" (p. 46).

<sup>57</sup>Cited by Cowan, p. 101.

<sup>58</sup>Ransom's dislike of Eliot's poetry was the subject of acrimonious debate between him and Tate. See Ransom's "Waste Lands", Literary Review, 14 July, 1923, pp. 825-26, rpt. in

Christopher Morley, ed., Modern Essays, Second Series (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1924), pp. 345-59.

<sup>59</sup>"A Poem Nearly Anonymous", p. 180.

<sup>60</sup>In a letter from Frost to John T. Bartlett, dated 7 Aug. 1913, printed in Selected Letters of Robert Frost, ed. Lawrance Thompson (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965), p. 89.

<sup>61</sup>See entry under "Eclogue", The Dictionary of World Literary Terms, ed. Joseph T. Shipley, rev. ed. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970).

<sup>62</sup>Classical Influences on English Poetry (London: Allen and Unwin, 1951), p. 173.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>64</sup>The term is used by Thomson, Classical Influences on English Poetry, p. 174.

<sup>65</sup>"On 'Master's in the Garden Again'", in The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic, ed. Anthony Ostroff (Boston, Little, Brown, 1964), p. 137. Part of this is reprinted in Selected Poems, pp. 121-24.

<sup>66</sup>Selected Poems, p. 122.

<sup>67</sup>"Summer's Flare and Winter's Flaw", Sewanee Review, LVI (1948), 422.

<sup>68</sup>Poems About God, pp. 53-56.

<sup>69</sup>"On 'Master's in the Garden Again'", p. 137.

<sup>70</sup>Wells, The American Way of Poetry, p. 163.

<sup>71</sup>Much the same definition is given in Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, ed. Alex Preminger (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1965), p. 212.

<sup>72</sup>The Classical Background of English Literature (London: Allen and Unwin, 1948), p. 78.

<sup>73</sup>A Handbook of Greek Literature: From Homer to the Age of Lucian, (New York: Dutton, 1960), p. 332.

<sup>74</sup>Selected Poems, p. 116.

<sup>75</sup>As in the previously cited definition of "Eclogue" in The Dictionary of World Literary Terms. Again, The Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, p. 212, supports this definition.

<sup>76</sup>The Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, p. 603.

<sup>77</sup>"The Poetry of the Master's Old Age", Georgia Review, XXV (1971), 10-11.

<sup>78</sup>"In Amicitia", Sewanee Review, LXVII (1959), 538 and 537.

<sup>79</sup>Romeo and Juliet II.i.95-96.

<sup>80</sup>"To His Coy Mistress", in The Poems of Andrew Marvell, pp. 21-22.

<sup>81</sup>Buffington, The Equilibrist, p. 67. I am indebted to Buffington for some of the allusions cited. The text used for Hardy's "Heiress and Architect" is Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy, pp. 67-68.

<sup>82</sup>"John Ransom's Cruell Battle", Shenandoah, IX (1953), 27.

<sup>83</sup>The Poems of Gray, Collins and Goldsmith, p. 437. The title given this poem in this edition is "Ode, Written in the Beginning of the Year 1746".

<sup>84</sup>"Gentleman in a Dustcoat", Sewanee Review, LXXVI (1968), 375-76.

## CONCLUSION

### TONE, VOICE: THE RANSOMIC MANNER

At the end, as at the beginning, it is necessary to assert both the usefulness and the limitations of poetic situation as an analytical tool. Looking at Ransom's poetry specifically through his handling of poetic situation has, inevitably, left much unsaid. The relation between his poetry and his aesthetics, his fastidious revisions, his metrics, his formalism and its implications are areas which poetic situation cannot embrace. Yet this approach has, despite its limitations, an important justification. As has been implied throughout these chapters, it covers areas hitherto scantily researched.

Ransom's critics, consistently fascinated by his tone and particularly by his dualistic attitude, have examined these features largely in terms of the thematic oppositions set up in his poetry and in terms of the contrasts embedded in his textural details. Especially important are the aphorisms, informed by antithesis and alliteration, and the diction: the use of the archaic and the contemporary, the pedantic and the colloquial, the Latinate and the Anglo-Saxon--Ransom passing "back and forth between his two languages".<sup>1</sup>

Yet this touches only the surface of what is a very complex poetic attitude. Insufficient attention has been given the emergence

of tone and attitude. It is an unfortunate aspect of most articles and books on Ransom's poetry (inevitable, perhaps, given limitations of time and space) that tone is discussed as an end product, as that "inclusive response", rather than as a series of fluctuating attitudes. One of the things offered by poetic situation has been a view of the tonal qualities as a part of the unfolding process of a poem.

That the speaker's attitude changes is not, of course, an idea offered only in this study. Robert Penn Warren's analysis of "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter",<sup>2</sup> with its concentration on the tonal twists and turns that come to rest in the word "vexed" (l. 19), has provided an excellent model. G. R. Wasserman has discussed the change in the speaker's attitude from detachment to sympathy.<sup>3</sup> Colin Partridge, on the other hand, sees a change from an attitude "pro" to one "contra" the situation and code presented in Ransom's poetry.<sup>4</sup> Apart from Warren, such criticism, as well as the attempts to discuss Ransom's "aesthetic distance" in terms of metaphor, diction and setting, is usually impressionistic and imprecise, not having recourse to carefully defined terminology.<sup>5</sup>

The two major contributions of the term and concept poetic situation and its separate aspects would seem, then, to be the relative precision with which one may discuss both the process of presentation and the reading experience and also the invitation to see poetry in its unfolding. Moreover, concentration on the speaker's rôle and his development of awareness discloses subtle aspects of Ransom's voice.

The Ransomic speaker may generally be seen as standing in an intermediary position between man and nature. It is his task to recognize and to introduce to the presented figures the "taste of ashes"<sup>6</sup> and to direct them if he can, mourn for them if he cannot, towards an acceptance and an ironic contemplation of man's precarious existence.



Often saddened by his rôle, he is yet scrupulous in his function.

The speaker provides a paradigm for what man's existence can become, a way to know "wisdom and not bitterness, 'poetry and not prose, health and not suicide'.<sup>7</sup> Ability to make the inclusive response that Ransom deemed necessary to man's sanity is provided by self-restraint, by adherence to a code of manners. And to the man under self-restraint is revealed the world of particularity, a world not ruined by abstraction.

While Ransom conformed to the New Critics in his definition of irony as an inclusive response, he differed from them in his belief that "opposites can never be said to be resolved or reconciled merely because they have been got into the same poem".<sup>8</sup> Throughout his mature poetry, there is a sense of balance or equilibrium, if not of resolution, that is provided by a controlled response. Such a notion is suggested particularly emphatically in "The Equilibrists", where the speaker is finally able to contemplate an order both "perilous and beautiful" (l.56). In "Blue Girls", too, the speaker finds aesthetic satisfaction. Warren says of "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" that the immediate anguish is transcended: "the lost world is, in one sense, redeemed out of time, it enters the pages of the picture book where geese speak, where the untrue is true, where the fleeting is fixed. What was had cannot, after all, be lost."<sup>9</sup>

Ransom's Southern heritage emerges in various ways: in his choice of certain words of Elizabethan or seventeenth-century usage, in his urbanity, in his sense of the tradition--its shared values and its code of manners--and in his evocation of an inherited, stable world-view, a mythopoeic image of man and a classical sense of man's coherence with society. Unlike, say, a Baudelaire or an Eliot, Ransom expresses no need to get back to a sense of rootedness. But

Ransom's rootedness is a precarious one, a point which could not be put better than Leslie Fiedler has done:

There is a pathos of lastness about him and his accomplishment, the sense of a world already lost to his audience even as he continues to exploit it; but there is never a hint of smugness. And always beneath his surfaces there are, thank God, both madness and passion, and a kind of humor congenial to both--thrusting against the tight control, the polished form; making the ordered lines buckle, the controlled metaphors blur, the well-bred voice break.<sup>10</sup>

The absence of smugness, the assertive voice that carries with it the seeds of its own parody, is one of Ransom's greatest strengths and one of his greatest contributions. The complex counterpointing of authority and hesitancy gives Ransom a perilous mid-way point between the relativism explored by Browning, Yeats, and various twentieth-century poets, and the set of shared values of an older age. The use of a single consciousness through whom the experience is viewed, which would normally tend toward subjectivity, is balanced in Ransom's work by the narrative, the creation of a presented world that is given objective reality. And the self-mockery, the bafflement, the sense of his restricted powers serve to humanize the speaker and to make of him a figure with attractive properties, a figure whose orientation the reader will readily assume.

Some critics would have it that the very absence of assertiveness, of a joyous, passionate affirmation, delegates Ransom to a minor position.<sup>11</sup> But leaving aside questions of major or minor importance, it is sad to notice that Ransom, with his distinctive voice, his immediately recognizable manner, his obvious craftsmanship, has achieved little notice in Britain and is, furthermore, slowly being ousted from American anthologies. Although he had a seminal influence

on a whole generation of writers and critics, he had always taken second place to other poets of his time: Eliot, Pound, Frost, Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams. Now it appears that he must make way for a new generation of poets.

One might argue that Ransom's work has neither the bulk nor the range to be assured of a stable and undisputed place in the tradition of poetry in English. On the other hand, "bulk" and "range" are not necessarily absolute criteria; the second is certainly variously interpreted. What is important is that within Ransom's relatively small number of poems, there is an astonishingly high proportion of successful ones, as most of his critics would agree. Furthermore, while there is a marked thematic contiguity in his work, there is also a set of subtle formal experiments and variations, and especially an exploration of tone, that gives his work surprising range.

One takes courage from Randall Jarrell, who, accepting Ransom's limitations, considers that his poetry will always be read and appreciated:

[I]t is easy to see that his poetry will always be cared for, since he has written poems that are perfectly realized and occasionally almost perfect--poems that the hypothetical generations of the future will be reading page by page with Wyatt, Campion, Marvell, and Mother Goose.<sup>12</sup>

## NOTES TO THE CONCLUSION

<sup>1</sup>As Ransom himself says of Shakespeare in "On Shakespeare's Language", in Poems and Essays, p. 134.

<sup>2</sup>"Pure and Impure Poetry", pp. 237-40.

<sup>3</sup>"The Irony of John Crowe Ransom", University of Kansas City Review, XXIII (1956), 151-60.

<sup>4</sup>Partridge, p. 166.

<sup>5</sup>G.R. Wasserman, for instance, misuses the term "point of view" and his essay thus fails in its stated aim of exploring that structural device. Thornton Parsons's John Crowe Ransom has already been mentioned as both imprecise and prescriptive.

<sup>6</sup>Ransom, "Man without Sense of Direction", l. 43.

<sup>7</sup>Ransom, "Thoughts on the Poetic Discontent", p. 64.

<sup>8</sup>The New Criticism, p. 95. There are two stages to Ransom's discussion of irony. The first is the view of irony as an inclusive response; the second is the statement quoted here. While the two positions are not necessarily contradictory, the second is generally taken as a change in aesthetic belief, since Ransom went on to say that irony "is something very special, and ought to be occasional".

<sup>9</sup>"Pure and Impure Poetry", p. 240.

<sup>10</sup>"A Kind of Solution: The Situation of Poetry Now", Kenyon Review, XXVI (1964), 61.

<sup>11</sup>For discussion of this, see especially Warren, "Notes", pp. 346-49; Isabel Gamble, "Ceremonies of Bravery: John Crowe Ransom", Hopkins Review, VI (1953), 115; Geoffrey Grigson, "John Crowe Ransom", New Verse, XVI (1935), 14; and F.O. Matthiessen, "American Poetry, 1920-40", Sewanee Review, LV (1947), 40-41.

<sup>12</sup>"John Ransom's Poetry", pp. 98-99.



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