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IRONY AND DISTANCE IN JOHN CROWE RANSOM'S POETRY

A computer-assisted study

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Introduction

John Crowe Ransom's small mature poetic output was distinguished by its urbanity, detachment and ironic poise. At the same time as he was producing these poems he was also engaged in, as well as his normal work of academic criticism, a vigorous controversial existence which involved him in theological and political debate. It is the comparison and contrast between the first and the last of these activities that is the main focus of the following discussion. Of course, it is the poetry that concerns us most, but the background provided by those other realms of engagement cannot be properly ignored and are part of what constituted him as a Southern American poet, man of letters and distinctive stylist.

Ransom was born in Pulaski, Tennessee, 30th April 1888, and was educated at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee. He afterwards studied Greats for three years as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University. In 1914, the casual meetings of the Fugitive group started when Ransom read out his first poem, "Sunset" for the group. Between 1917 and 1919, he served in the United States Army, latterly in France. A few months after his return from military services he published his first book of verse, *Poems about God* (1919).

Ransom's early phase of his poetic career (1914-1919) was not as successful as he would later become (1922-1927). The public reaction to his first book of verse was not at all encouraging, perhaps because of his immature severely sarcastic attack on American religious practices, behaviour especially regrettable from a poet from a conservative and Methodist background.

By the time the Fugitive movement was launched between 1922 and 1925, Ransom's poetic technique had changed in a remarkable fashion which is the main topic of the thesis. Gone was a direct, almost brutally sarcastic manner to be replaced with a polished irony that places a considerable distance between him, his subject and his reader. He is no longer involved in the narrative action of the poems as in *Poems about God*, and there is more concentration on the action of the poems than description.

In *The Fugitive* (1922-1925) Ransom published his most successful poems such as: "Ego", "Bells for John Whiteside Daughter", "Philomela", "First Travels of Max", "Captain Carpenter", "Prometheus in Straits" "Ada Ruel", "Old Mansion", "Blue Girls", "Adventure This Side of Pluralism", and "Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son". These poems and a number of others were also published in separate collections, *Chills and Fever* (1924), *Grace after Meat* (1924). Some of these poems underwent few changes while others were revised drastically.

The Fugitive group disbanded in 1926 and their magazine ceased publication. In 1927, Ransom published *Two Gentlemen in Bonds.* In this last book of verse Ransom introduced sonnets for the first time in his publications, though he had experimented once before in "Sunset".

After 1927 some members of the Fugitive group began to reestablish contact and they soon became Agrarians in the economic, political, agricultural, and perhaps literal sense of the word. During the Agrarian years (1927-1938), Ransom was busy in three spheres: professor of English at Vanderbilt University, contributing to the editorship of the Agrarian publications, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, (1930), and *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence* (1936), and

finally publishing his first works of literary criticism; *God without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defence of Orthodoxy* (1930) and *The World's Body* (1938).
After the end of the Agrarian years, in 1938, Ransom began the editorship of the *Kenyon Review* (1937 to 1959). In 1941, Ransom published *The New Criticism*, and in 1955, he published *Poems and Essays*. In the years between 1947 and 1969, Ransom published a series of his *Selected Poems*: 1947, 1952, 1963, and 1967.

Throughout his short poetic career Ransom was always changing his technique. I have attempted to track this change in poetic language and style by concentrating on his employment of techniques of irony and distance and by noting the parallel and implicated life of controversy.

John Crowe Ransom was a recipient of many honours and prizes in recognition of his achievement as poet, critic and scholar. He died on 3rd of July 1974.

John Crowe Ransom's Technique of Irony and Distance

When we realize that any human statement may contain its own contradictions or that any human action may contain the seeds of its own defeat, we may perceive a sense of irony either within a text, or person, or within life in general. At such a time, we feel that there is no pure or ultimate truth, cause, or motive.

During the course of its literary development, *irony*, as a technical term, expands into many striking rhetorical forms and metaphysical functions: irony of wit, irony of situation, irony of fate, and recently, metaphysical irony. After a long and devious development of the concept, *irony* developed an aesthetic of its own, becoming a complex mode of literary expression, changing from a simple rhetorical device into a mode of sensibility or philosophical trend. "Irony in its own right has expanded from minute verbal phenomenon to a philosophy, a way of facing cosmos."[1] In this sense, unlike Socratic irony, is not easy to force *irony* into a context of definition. It wears various *masks* and eventually goes beyond the old Greek and Romantic elements of the concept.

In effect, *irony*, as a rhetorical device, has undergone a series of various and remarkable changes and these changes have occurred in concept as well as in technique.

Tracking down the semantic changes taking place, over time, in the concept of *irony* is not the subject of discussion here. Nevertheless, a brief historical orientation, focusing on the fact that *irony* as a rhetorical device has been transformed into a metaphysical and tragic discourse may help to clarify this change in the rhetorical function of the term and the theory of its technique altogether. This change is related to the way man views the world, and his position in it.

[1] Worcester, D., *The Art of Satire*, Russell & Russell, New York, 1960, p. 75.

In Greek literature, irony was through the figure of the *eiron*, the character who is able to laugh at himself. The ironist repeatedly utilizes his dialectical technique to satirize others' beliefs. In this sense, irony is "running the whole gamut of emotional effects from the subtle and the gentle to the cruel and cutting, [which] can be utilized as an instrument of satire."[2]

In seventeenth-century England, *irony* was mostly regarded as a rhetorical device employed in attacking or defending a community, person, or policy.

In the late eighteenth century, Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) formulated a challenging aesthetic of *irony*. He sees irony as a result of an unavoidable conflict between the ideal and the real. He argues that:

> Romantic irony represents the outcropping of subjectivity in its most extreme form. The romantics fled from an unknowable and intolerable "reality" into the inner fastness of the self. Romantic irony in thus to be identified, for better or worse, with this outbreak of subjectivity, a rebellious impulse on the part of the literary artist to rise above the restrictions of reality. Irony provided an essential expression of the *Weltanschauung* of the romantic temper.[3]

Accordingly, Schlegel expands irony into the philosophy of "subjective idealism", arguing that the world does not possess "objective reality", and the only existing reality is the "Ego". This notion, consequently, brings to attention the "paradox of the dualism", that dominated the romantic mind during the nineteenth century. The core of Schlegel's argument revolves on man, who is finite and confined within his consciousness, in confrontation with an alien world outside his ego. The only means, according to Schlegel, to make sure that existence is fact and not a "subjective

[2] Highet, G., *The Anatomy of Satire*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1962, p. 56.
[3] Beda, A., *Ironie und Dichtung*, Unterjesingen-Tübingen: Günther Neske, Pfullingen, 1956, analyzes the underlying connection between modern literature and irony, quoted in an article by Glicksberg, C. I., *The Ironic Vision in Modern Literature*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1969, p. 5.

illusion" is through "deepening" contradiction and distance between the finite [man] and the infinite [world]. In turn, this contradiction leads to dualism and then to irony.

In a literary work of art, we find a finite persona who tries to affirm his freedom against the infinite world; nevertheless, his finitude limits him. These limitations lead to the ironic vision of man's finiteness and a perception of distance between the subject [man] and the object [world]. Thus, the author, in the work of art, achieves this ironic distance by never identifying himself with the personae.

Nevertheless, Hegel attacked Schlegel's concept of irony arguing that: "[T]his type of romantic irony, arose from intensified subjectivity; it represents a philosophical aberration."[4] To support his argument Hegel quotes from Schlegel's work:

> True irony arises from the view that so long as man lives in this present world, it is only in this world that he can fulfil his 'appointed task' no matter how elevated a sense we give this expression. Any hope we may have of transcending finite ends is foolish and empty conceit. Even the highest is existent for our conduct only in a shape that is limited and finite.[5]

The quotation provides clear definition of the romantic irony. The only fate or destiny for man in this world is subject to limitations of his/her "finitude". Hegel believes in man's finitude and the inner conflict between the "animal and [the] spirit" in his nature. This conflict and struggle in man's nature is due to a split of ego or a divided-self, or as Hegel calls it the "dichotomy"[6] of his personality. "Hegel is well aware of the dichotomy in man, in the conflict in his nature between animal and spirit, but if man is compelled to live in two worlds that are in opposition to each other, the earthly and temporal and the world of eternal ideas, this is [according to Hegel] no cause for

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[4] Glicksberg, C. I., *The Ironic Vision in Modern Literature*, p. 6.
[5] *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, translated by T. M. Knox, The Clarendon Press, Oxford 1942, p. 102.
[6] Ransom calls it duality, but later on, he used Hegel's term "dichotomy" as well.

despair."[7] Hegel argues that being in two contradictory worlds should not end in "despair"; rather, this should encourage man to search for a way out of this "impasse" or contradiction and consequently from his finitude. It is through "ironic detachment" that man solves his distance from the infinite world. The artist, according to Hegel, "is but a godlike spectator of the puppet show he had put into motion. Seated on Mount Olympus, the artist gazes down on the mortal scene with ironic detachment."[8] Thus irony, for Hegel, is "the negation of art, since it presents characters who are featureless, full of contradictions, of illusion all compact". Hegel emphasizes "the dualism between body and spirit, the objective and subjective, necessity and freedom. Man is driven by an inner compulsion to transcend this dualism, to impose the ideal on the objective order of existence."[9] Contrastingly, the modern ironist does not laugh at himself; instead, he distances himself from the narrative action and from his *adversarius* as well.

Cesare Pavese describes the change that has come over the concept of irony from the time of Schlegel to the present age in his diary entry:

> Great modern art is always *ironic*, just as ancient art was *religious*. In the same way that a sense of the sacred was rooted in visions beyond the world of reality, giving them backgrounds and antecedents pregnant with significance, so irony discovers, beneath and within such visions, a field for intellectual sport, a vibrant atmosphere of imaginative and closely reasoned methods of treatment that make the things that are represented into symbols of a more significant reality. To treat a thing ironically it is not necessary to make a joke of it.... it is enough to create imaginative visions according to a standard that transcends or governs them.[10]

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[7] Hegel, G. W. F, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, translated by F. P. B. Osmaston, G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., London, 1920, I, p. 91.
[8] Ibid, I, p. 91.
[9] Ibid, I, p. 217.
[10] Pavese, C., *This Business of Living*, edited and translated by A. E. Murch, Peter Owen Limited, London, 1961, pp. 91-92

Pavese agrees that what the radical semantic shift the ironic vision has undergone is characterized by loss or abandonment of hope. Modern man cannot comprehend the reason for his existence, but he ceases as a rule, as Pavese says, to regard his metaphysical dilemma as sustenance for his ironic vision of the world. The modern ironist realizes that he cannot arrive at truth through rational thinking, thus he escapes to irony and imagination.

By the time *irony* reaches its twentieth-century concept, it has become a phenomenal attitude: a wryly-disillusioned expository rhetorical device dominates modern writers' treatment of man's dilemmatic and dubious position in the universe. In 1908 Alexander Blok, the Russian poet, analysed the modern temper arguing that:

> All the most lively and sensitive children of our century are stricken by a disease unknown to the doctors and psychiatrists. It is related to the disorders of the soul and might be called "irony". Its symptoms are fits of an exhausting laughter which starts with a diabolical mockery and a provocative smile and ends as rebellion and sacrilege.[11]

Blok here defines irony in life as a phenomenon. Irony, in a text, may locate itself by the laughter of a protagonist who laughs at any thing the world considers holy. Then he tragically laughs at himself for being in this world.

Thus, the metaphysical or cosmic mode of irony differs in the sense that it goes beyond Socratic irony and "portrays a hero who, while retaining the Socratic intellect and the Socratic method of questioning every revered truth, transcends his role as dissembler; as ironist, he ceases to be heroic, or becomes heroic in an entirely different sense."[12]

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[11] Quoted in Tertz, Abram, *On Socialist Realism*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1960, p. 74, in Glicksberg, C. I., *The Ironic Vision in Modern Literature*, p. 3.
[12] Glicksberg, C. I., *The Ironic Vision in Modern Literature*, p. 12.

Perhaps the general attitude towards irony is similar to what G. R. Wassermann believes, as he studies Ransom's irony, that "all irony is a form of contrast between appearance and reality; elements which are essential to it are an ironic will (in nature god; in fiction the author), a spectator, and a victim. Ironic effect is the secret intimacy enjoyed by the will and the spectator at the expense of the latter, or, in other words, the awareness of discrepancy between reality and its false appearance in the mind of the victim".[13] However, in Ransom's case, it would be an overstatement to restrict "*All*" ironies to a single "form" of "contrast" between "appearance and reality". *Irony*, in its modern sense, is not such a simple and rigid "form of discrepancy" between two things or ideas. Wassermann hopes to pin the concept down, but it is simply not applicable to *all* literary texts or arguments. Furthermore, the definition assimilates *irony* to the "feigning" technique of Socrates, neglecting many other ongoing forms or *masks* and techniques that *irony* may take on.

A world beyond comprehension, and man's position in the cosmos, now, fascinate such modern ironists as John Crowe Ransom. The modern ironist may revolt against reason, logic, and science, but he cannot cope with his absurd fate. In this sense, he is "ironic at his own expense, the struggle taking place for the most part within the privacy of his own mind"[14]. *Irony*, for the modern ironist, becomes a defensive armour and wearing it saves him from "losing his grip and enables him to retain some measure of sanity."[15] Consequently, though there is distance, he achieves balance between reason and emotion.

[13] Wasserman, G. R., "The Irony of John Crowe Ransom", in *John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography*, edited by Young, T. D., Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1968, p. 143.
[14] Ibid, p. 12.
[15] Worcester, D., *The Art of Satire*, p. 107.

As a cult, *irony* emerged in modern literature and acquired its complex and ambivalent meaning for two reasons: the failure of romantic individualism and the conflict between illusion and reality. Consequently, in the study of various manifestations of *irony*, it becomes increasingly obvious that comedy and tragedy are closely related and fused into a kind of interdependent unity. Thus, Worcester concludes that: "[L]aughter and tears are reconciled in irony, it brings laughter to tragedy and tears to comedy,"[16] neither is ever pure or straight.

In Ransom's case, the metaphysical concept of irony in many of his poems becomes tragic when he seeks to give imaginative expression to the carelessness of the universe with regard to the fate of man. Since the world is absurd, therefore, it is tragic.

Ransom believes that man's position in the universe itself is ironic: he argues that man's rational mind faces a nonrational and uncontrollable universe. Ransom starts his argument by first describing and defining the mind of the dualist, and then the kind of dualism he acquires. He argues:

> A dualist is a practical man whose mind has no philosophical quality. It may be that we begin our lives as dualists, but under the logic of experience (if our minds entertain the logical categories) we soon find that the largest problem of our lives is to effect an escape from dualism. The dualist sees himself as one, and the objective world as another; this world is not sympathetic, not even sentient, but still fairly plastic to his will, and capable of being made by hard work to minister to his happiness: a wilderness which may be transformed into a garden, a habitat which has the makings of a home. His problem is purely the physical one: the application of force at the point where it will do the most good.[17]

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[16] Ibid, p. 140.
[17] Young, T. D. & Hindle, J., ed. *Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom*, "Thoughts on the Poetic Discontent", p. 30.

Here Ransom's concern is with dualism, which he goes on to argue, is the essential nature of the world in which man must live. Since the dualist is a "practical man whose mind has no philosophical quality", some critics may not be satisfied with this definition. Nevertheless, Ransom suggests, it may be that man begins his life as a dualist, realizing the difference between the spiritual world within and the objective world without. In the first stage, man sees the world as "plastic" to his will and believes that through special attention and diligence he can have it minister to his happiness. He looks upon the world as a "wilderness which may [be] transformed into a garden, a habitat which has the makings of a home". When it becomes apparent that he cannot control the world, he turns to philosophy and metaphysics. Seeing that he cannot "impose his will upon Nature", man concludes that his "personal identity" will be annihilated by superior forces. He then, enters the second stage of his development and surrenders the idea of his own dominating personality in exchange for the more tenable idea that he is in some manner related by ties of creation to the world and entitled to some share in the general "patrimony".

Then Ransom develops his viewpoint on man's position in the universe. He argues:

> Philosophy and metaphysics take their rise most naturally when one perceives that the object, which is the world, is too formidable to be controlled altogether by the subject, which is oneself. Defeat humbles the proud spirit of a mortal. He cannot impose his will upon Nature, and self-respect will not permit him to deceive himself through the illusion of work, the debauchery of the "practical" life. Insisting upon his own independence, he is forced to conclude that his personal identity is a tiny thing fighting a precarious and inevitably a losing fight against annihilation by superior forces. Then he consents to surrender the idea of his dominating personality in exchange for the more tenable idea that he is in some manner related by ties of creation for the world, and entitled to some share in the general patrimony. The second step in his intellectual career is to

discover somehow this community. It is a mystical community, capable of a great variety of definitions. So he finds God appointing to Nature and to himself appropriate places in a system where not a sparrow falls without effect and the hairs of his own head are numbered. So he is quick to note every sign of understanding, on Nature's part, and his songs are filled with "pathetic fallacies". He is persistently trying to escape from an isolation which he cannot endure.

These efforts may or may not bring contentment. The romantic constructions of his mysticism are generally obnoxious to the sober observations of his science, and frequently they fall. The romantic poet comes to the point of puncturing his own illusions, objecting to his own romantic treatment of Nature, and cancelling the line which his own creative fancy has projected. He has advanced at this point to a third position which is later and further - though not all would say higher - than the position he has just vacated. Certainly it is not merely a return to his first position, though it is an affirmation of dualism[18].

Ransom's viewpoint here is very similar to Hegel's. Hegel argues that:

The ironical here, however, as a genial individuality, consists in the self-annihilation of what is noble, great, and excellent. Consequently the independent figures of art will also have to illustrate the principle of absolute subjectivity, and to do so by exhibiting all that is of human worth and dignity as a mere naught in this process of self-annihilation. This implies not merely that we are not to take seriously justice, morality, and truth, but that there is really nothing in what is highest and best. In short it amounts to this, that irony contradicts and annihilates itself as manifested in individuals, characters and actions, and consequently is an irony which overreaches itself.[19]

Ransom argues: "the romantic treatment of Nature" is a kind of escape and poets have to turn back to dualism "with a mellow wisdom which we may call irony". With this standpoint, Ransom does not take a despairing but ironic view of man's finiteness and his inability to master or overcome the world and his surroundings. He argues that: "irony may be regarded as the ultimate mode of the great minds - it presupposes the others". In this ironic view of an infinite world, Ransom finds a comfortable

[18] Ibid, p. 30.
[19] Hegel, G. W. F., *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, I, p. 92.

detachment from these surroundings and the finiteness of man. In turn, this ironic detachment enables him to make a balance within a world of dichotomies: the desirable and the impossible, the abstract world of the scientist and the philosophical world of the artist.

Balance is a word that will probably surface frequently in any analysis of Ransom's verse. This standpoint is apparent in many of Ransom's poems; as Bradbury puts it:

> His humanistic training imposed on a traditional Methodist substratum had developed a habitually dualistic mode of thought. In his most characteristic utterances, he opposes human reason to a nonrational natural order, which he accepts empirically. His recognition of Nature's indifference and mystery, however, is tempered with a sensuous appreciation of her careless bounties and beauties. As a true humanist, he insists upon cultivation of both mind and body, senses and reason; he sets himself equally against puritan asceticism and irrational indulgence[20].

Ransom tries to achieve balance between reason and emotion as a means of coping with the large changes suffered by the American South. Such changes and their consequences as the Civil War and the Reconstruction, led many thinkers and men of letters at that time, e.g. Robert Penn Warren in *All the King's Men*, to adopt a divided self between two identities. One is romantic: it looks with sentiment and sympathy at tradition and the values of the Old South. The other, because realistic, struggles to cope with the New South and its new codes.

In his essay, *A Naturalist Looks at Sentiment*, George Core argues that

> "Sentiment is not useful, nor moral, nor even disciplinary; it is simply aesthetic," Ransom observes in "Sentimental Exercise." Sentiment's homely but powerful surety will irrupt into everyday life at expected and unexpected turns all the same, and it will affect even the business world. Its near cousins - familiarity, nostalgia, respect, tenderness, affection for the object, love - are "all

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[20] Bradbury, J. M., *The Fugitives*, Chapel Hill, 1958, p. 28.

subjective or emotional terms." In its mysteriousness, irrationality, and perfect inutility sentiment reminds us of poetry.

Art affords the poet the opportunity to join sentiment and aesthetics, Ransom argues: the poet can use his sentiments, "when nourished by properties and privacies, and by rites or ceremonies," as one dimension of the experience in which his poetry must be rooted. He might, for instance, write a lyric about the ritual of the fox hunt or the ceremonies of death. On the other hand, like the businessman or the scientist, he might, willingly or not, let friendship's demands intrude upon his life and art. Aristotle, Ransom reminds us, argues that friendship is "the occasion of a great extension of knowledge."

What part did sentiment play in the life of John Crowe Ransom and in the making of his art? It is a critical commonplace that in his poetry he avoided sentimentality by the use of aesthetic distance - the observer in Ransom's lyrics is posted far from the action that he describes - and by the employment of subtle and sometimes devastating irony. The poet achieves this distance and control and balance in the writing of poetry that is often homely and mundane in subject.[21]

It is because of the political and economic changes that took place in the South that many poets such as Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Penn Warren, have struggled to say what they feel and demonstrate it. Irony became a growl of anger and despair. They wish to give reference to their meanings and survive these meanings in relation to their experiences and contradictions of life and society. Thus, irony becomes, for them, the best possible rhetoric of reference. The ongoing changes in the South and the contradictions of the society gave rise to a political dimension of irony in *The Fugitive* in the 1920s and economic perspective in the Agrarians' aesthetics later in the 1930s.

John Crowe Ransom tries to establish a balanced relationship between the past and the present. "Antique Harvesters" and "Old Mansion" are instances of many poems that discuss the idea of balancing, ironically, between the past and the present.

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[21] Core, G., "A Naturalist Looks at Sentiment", *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 1977, vol. 53, No, 3, p. 456.

Of "Antique Harvesters" Ransom says; "This is my Southern poem".[22] The poem first appeared in the *Southwest Review* April 1925 where the poet was quoted as saying that it is "the appeal of the Old South to the young men to stand by the cause", and it gives "the viewpoint of the local lean old veterans".[23] The direct appeal to the young men comes at the end of the poem in the final three stanzas. The old men are gazing, mostly, upon themselves, as in the dignity of their history and the communion of ritual they endure for only a little longer on a declining land:

> 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.

They make the common joke of fathers upon their sons' alienation from hard work. For the rest there is a feeling that though there is distance between them and the young, there is yet an affirmation from the poet that the future can be as vital as the past. A delicate shift towards uncertainty in the tone when the verb tense moves into the future perfect:

> 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."

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[22] "John Crowe Ransom Reads from His Own Works."
[23] "The Authors in this Issue", *Southwest Review*, x, No. 3, April, 1925, p. 125.

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.

"Tawny", "grey", "mild as yellow air," "full bronze," "autumn tone", and "bronze burdens" mark the dominant atmosphere of the poem as hazy and sad. Nevertheless, the tone of irony in the poem works against any sense of appeal or resolution, especially in the final stanza. Ransom seems uncertain about the management of tone, he left the verse out of the version printed in *Two Gentlemen in Bonds* (1927), ironically, at a time when the Fugitive-Agrarians were beginning to turn their attention to the future of the South. He did, however, restore the full poem in *Selected Poems.*

"Old Mansion", stresses time by implying a contrast between the past - imaged in a crumbling Southern mansion - and the present, represented by the curiosity of a tourist or passer-by who asks to look inside the house and is turned away. It is a world ultimately denied the speaker, but one his detached appreciation allows him to share, imaginatively, for a "languid" moment:

Emphatically, the old house crumbled; the ruins
Would litter, as already the leaves, this petted sward;
And no annalist went in to the lords or the peons;
The antiquary would finger the bits of shard.

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.

Ambivalence of response is the main theme in this poem. The kind of disjunction in this poem, according to Warren, is a psychological one - that is, a dualism of thought and feeling in man's nature toward everything related to the past. Warren defines two

aspects in Ransom's verse: "Man is a creature little lower than the angels and, at the same time, of the brute creation; again, there is a conflict between the scientific vision of quantity and the vision concerned with quality. The issue in itself is as old as man."[24]

> The aspiration here is for some sort of fusion of two experiences that ordinarily repel one another: the abstracted exercise of reason in hard fact and calculation; and the inclusive experience of literally everything at once. But we cannot have our theory magical and intelligible at the same time. For it would seem that from that precise moment when the race discovers that what has seemed to be an undifferentiated unity is really a complex of specialized functions, there can be no undifferentiated unity again; no return. We do not quite know how to feel a thought. The best we can do is to conduct a thought without denying all the innocent or irrelevant feelings in the process. The dualism remains.[25]

In his letter to Allen Tate in Spring 1927, Ransom argues in defence of dualism. The letter is in three parts developing one idea: "dichotomy". In the third part, he argues:

> III. I've used the word Dichotomy. Another version of my present view (and I know it's largely yours): Art is our refusal to yield to the blandishments of "constructive" philosophy and permit the poignant & actual Dichotomy to be dissipated in Trichotomy; our rejection of the Third Terms; our denial of Hegel's right to solve a pair of contradictions with a Triad. And here's a slogan: Give us Dualism, or we'll give you no Art. This slogan is counter to philosophy; we have a fight to make there, as well as the simpler fight we make on science.[26]

A strong element, especially of early Ransom, sentimentally and emotionally, looked back to the old South while at the same time trying to find a life within the codes of the new, as if from a new Southern skyscraper. All the while, he is trying to cope with the currents of his time through adopting a duality of approach to achieve a balanced complexity of thought. This choice sometimes presents itself as being

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[24] "A Note on Three Southern Poets", *poetry*, xl, No. 2, May, 1932, p. 110.
[25] *The New Criticism*, pp. 183-4
[26] Young, T. D. & Core, G., ed. *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge and London, 1985, p. 169.

between forgetting all about the Old South and failing to cope; or elsewhere as having to make a balance between two codes, Old and New. This "dualistic mode of thought" is expressed in terms of irony and distance in his poetic practice.

It is not an easy task to discuss irony in Ransom's poetry and its relation to his dualism, if only because the term is made to do such varied service in his writing. Nevertheless, one key to Ransom's duality in his poetry may lie in his creation and use of a persona who speaks in a modest yet intelligent manner.

The *persona*, according to Ransom, functions as a personal meditative dimension to the poem. Therefore, it is through the medium of the persona's consciousness that the reader perceives the poem's narrative action. Additionally, this persona controls the level of sympathy and critical response to or within the poem. Nevertheless, a reader cannot remain confident in assuming that this is Ransom's own voice, except perhaps, occasionally when the use of a scholarly or Latinate diction operates ironically to detach a speaker further from his subject. For example, the salesman's daily spoken language in "Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son", shows curious lapses into a learned mode at odds with his proposed character. There one may perhaps detect hints of Ransom's own voice trying to articulate to the reader a message beyond the resources of the character. But while it may be possible to locate Ransom's own voice in the poem's diction, he is quite absent from the poem's narrative action:

> 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 -

For Ransom, the issue of *persona* is important. In many of his narrative poems, Ransom creates and uses a *persona* as a *Mask* to achieve some degree of distance.

The *persona*, moreover, enables the reader to perceive the poem's narrative action within a critical and sympathetic mode of response by engaging the reader in the depth of the poem's situation and its psychological dimension.

In terms of its function in poetry, Ransom regards the persona as necessary for the poet's 'anonymity' that enriches the poem's, as well as the poet's objectivity. For Ransom, being anonymous is an aspect of distance in many of his poems:

> Anonymity, of some real if not literal sort, is a condition of poetry. A good poem, even if it is signed with a full and well-known name, intends as a work of art to lose the identity of the author; that is; it means to represent him not actualised, like an eye-witness testifying in court and held strictly by zealous counsel to the point at issue, but freed from his juridical or prose self and taking an ideal or fictitious personality; otherwise his evidence amounts the less to poetry...The poet must suppress the man, or the man would suppress the poet[27].

Thus, the *persona* functions to encourage the reader to assume or accept the validity of the writer's argument in the poem or, in other words, to see the truth that the writer sees or at least the way he wants the reader to see this truth. Ransom establishes this persona-reader relationship in order to convey the material of the poem while at the same time holding the man Ransom himself absent. Though the strategy is to present the man Ransom as absent from most of his poems, we find that there is, nevertheless, a distinct voice, which could be no one else's, right from the first word of the poems.

In "Necrological", for example, Ransom employs vocabulary, syntax, and imagery, which locate the persona as a scholarly observer. Language, including archaism and densely Latinate words, operates ironically to detach the speaker from his subject. Elsewhere, Ransom's rhetorical consistency allows one to speak of a persona even when some alternative speaker is not obviously present in the first

[27] Ransom, J. C., "A Poem Nearly Anonymous", in *The World's Body*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1968, pp. 2-3.

person or dramatically involved in the action of the narrative. Thus, Ransom creates and uses the persona to function on two levels in the poem: irony and distance.

Stylistically, there are four outstanding qualities of the persona that may be isolated: earthiness, wit, irony, and graciousness. In some poems, we may find one quality dominates the whole poem, in others we may find all of them simultaneously at work. While the persona sets the tone for the poem, these qualities control the reader's perception of the intellectual content of the argument.

Many of Ransom's personae tend to earthiness of manner, to draw the reader in by using the colloquial language of everyday experience for analogies and illustrations. Alternatively, earthiness may be achieved by the employment of such important effects as anti-academic diction in order to encourage the reader to feel rather than analyse what he reads. Earthiness here operates as a kind of code, a strategic method of drawing the reader's attention to experiences and situations which Ransom pretends to be involved in. However, Ransom does not speak to the ordinary men of his community; the codes Ransom provides in the poems do not reach beyond the campus of Vanderbilt University. Earthiness, in this case however, may enrich Ransom's own solitude and strangeness, as a Fugitive, from his community.

Wit frequently has a sarcastic flavour as Ransom uses it to diminish an antagonist or an opposing idea. Ransom's wit draws the reader into the poem by compelling a response; consequently, the reader becomes involved not only with the action but also with the persona. Wit in Ransom's poems functions, also as a balancer against over-seriousness by holding at bay some sentimental or romantic implications.

Both wit and earthiness contribute to the effectiveness of the third quality in the persona's voice: irony. Ironic technique in Ransom's poetry includes juxtaposition of colloquial and scholarly diction. At the same time, it manoeuvres the reader's

perspective on the issue under examination. Often a distance emerges between what is said and what is actually meant. For example in his complex attitudes towards religion, Ransom stresses that irony is the mode of the modern sensibility, and that irony is the key to the strategy of the persona. The persona does not speak as the one who wishes to proclaim absolutes, but as one who recognizes human nature as dualistic, as one who recognizes the vast realm of human choice and possibility.[1]

A final quality exhibited by Ransom's persona is graciousness. The persona's graciousness is a natural strategy for one who gently asserts the futility of grand statements or sweeping judgments, for it stimulates attention to the minutest details. The speaker assumes a graciousness of manner in his attitude toward the reader or toward the characters in the poem. But there is always a touch of coolness in the manner which indicates a certain self-consciousness in talking about the subject and this coupled with an ever-present ironic understatement distances the reader from the action of the poem as well as from the persona himself.

This dominance by a *persona* is found not just in Ransom's poetry, but is also active in his prose. Ransom's prose style and language have attracted many critics but have received comparatively little analysis. Moreover, few of these critics pay attention to the function of the persona in Ransom's critical essays. However, Arthur Mizener is one who has noticed the importance of the persona in Ransom's prose and offered some insight into the effects of Ransom's use of it:

> Mr. Ransom writes like a poet, adopts, that is, a particular form and a persona.... In one way this fact is itself a mild rebuttal of Mr. Ransom's too stern rejection of "the mixed affair of poetry and prose"; he uses such a mixture so successfully himself. And this quality over and above the requirements of strict utility in Mr. Ransom's book is what gives it, in a phrase he himself uses to describe Santayana's *Life of Reason*, "the vitality of a discourse that is fertilized by metaphor"; it is

> the reader's surest warrant that Mr. Ransom knows thoroughly, which is to say with his imagination as well as his practical mind, what he is talking about.[28]

As the tone and the persona engage the reader in the poem we find that the same two factors engage the reader in Ransom's prose. Allen Tate has anticipated that Ransom's critical essays will retain their popularity because of their prose style:

> I risk the guess that Eliot's essays will be read, by that mythical character posterity, for their opinions; Ransom's, for their style, regardless what they say. For John Ransom wrote the most perspicuous, the most engaging, and the most elegant prose of all the poet critics of our time.[29]

We can apply the four qualities of the persona we discussed earlier to the prose as well to the poetry. When we read some of Ransom's prose extracts we find that the light tone, the common idioms or even colloquial language, invite the reader not to take for example love or death too earnestly. It is the persona's earthiness, as well as his wit, that eliminate the mundanity of the subject(s). Earthiness and wit mix the moral and aesthetic elements and lemonade:

> Lemonade is only a mechanical mixture, not very interesting to a chemist. Aside from the water, a drop of lemonade contains lemon and sugar in no standard proportions. If it tastes too sour, add sugar, and if it tastes too sweet, add lemon. (And do not forget to stir the mixture.) No matter what the final proportions, you can still detect in the lemonade the sweet taste and the sour; though this is too abstract a matter to bother if the lemonade is satisfactory, for in that case you simply drink it.[30]

In the concluding phrase Ransom's assertion is confidently about the validity of his language and more importantly it defends him against those who may be tempted to ridicule his earthiness. Moreover, the persona here is a true modern ironist in the sense we laugh with him not at him.

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[28] "Recent Criticism", *Southern Review*, 5, 1939, pp. 381-382.
[29] "Reflection on the Death of John Crowe Ransom", *Sewanee Review*, 82, 1974, p. 551.
[30] "Poets without Laurels", *The World's Body*, p. 72.

The passage also shows Ransom's wit as an equally notable quality of the persona. Ransom's wit usually has a sarcastic flavour especially when he directs it against romanticism and Platonism.

The process of using personae in Ransom's poems evokes two considerations: first, the appropriateness of any particular persona to the presentation of Ransom's argument and narrative action, and secondly, the effect of this use of persona upon the understanding of this argument, as well as such subsidiary effects as irony and distance.

Irony carries with it implicit standards of judgement and norms of conduct; it begins in a perception of contrast. Nevertheless, it may further include the justification of the irreconcilable or incompatible elements, which compose it - even when this explanation is merely the awareness that the elements are indeed irreconcilable. Such awareness implies that the ironist is himself a victim. Thus, he cannot escape from his knowledge or remain objective. He cannot humanly criticize without qualification those who for example are not aware that man and God are irreconcilably opposed.

The mood of irony in modern verse is accompanied by distance. In one way or another, we find that the ironist is distancing himself from the poem and withdrawing from its action, and this gives irony its modern dimension. Does this distance emphasize objectivity or irony?

Ransom pays some considerable attention to irony, as well as distance, in his criticism. Although, he did not identify irony with distance, we can propose that they are related to each other at least in his poetic practice. For example in *The World's Body* Ransom argues that:

> When a consensus of taste lays down the ordinance that the artist shall express himself formally, the purpose is evidently to deter him from expressing himself immediately. Or, the formal tradition intends to preserve the artist from the direct approach to his object. Behind the tradition is probably the sense that the direct approach is perilous to the artist, and may be fatal. It is feared that the artist who disregards the instruction may discover at length that he has only been artless; or, what is worse, that he will not make this important discovery, which will have to be made for him by the horrid way of autopsy. I suggest, therefore, that an art is usually, and probably of necessity, a kind of obliquity; that its fixed form proposes to guarantee the round-about of the artistic process, and the "æsthetic distance"[31].

Thus, distance is related to irony, but is not identical with it — it might be regarded as being more general than irony, and does not have the metaphysical aspects that as we will see later, may be thought to exist in some of its forms.

Distance occurs either when the reader is given to understand that the beliefs, attitudes, or emotions expressed are not necessarily those of the author– either because they are markedly different from what we might reasonably attribute to the author in these circumstances or because the author's own commitments remain veiled, obscure, or uncertain. In irony, on the other hand, it is frequently assumed that the author's 'real' opinion can be discerned and that it is radically different from that expressed.

It is the obscure or hidden that most often attracts attention, and gives rise to such questions as, "Where does the author stand on this?" This is not a question concerning the "objective" author, as if it were a kind of biographical issue, rather it relates to the ostensible commitments of the speaking voice and its context.

This hidden aspect of commitment does not just occur when an "objective" author presents us with a situation concerning which it is either unnecessary or

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[31] Ibid, p. 32.

superfluous to offer comment. On the contrary, it is most often a situation where the reader may legitimately feel that comment is required, but it is withheld or concealed.

Here is one notable difference between the two: for while a sense of duality is common to both situations, irony would suggest reversal or qualification of the expressed attitude; distance may remain neutral or express puzzlement.

When a poem begins "My heart aches and a drowsy numbness pains My senses" and continues in more or less the same vein we are not particularly concerned with Keats's feelings in the matter of nightingales but we are concerned with the ostensible commitments of the poem. The voice, as it were, endorses the situation outlined and does not present, even by implication, any ulterior or hidden approach. Clearly, this is trespassing on some of the same ground as the notion of "sincerity", but it is, again, not identical with it.

There is another kind of distance which is not our topic, and that occurs when a writer is sufficiently detached from his subject that some kind of over-involvement or over-identification is avoided. Part of the process here lies in locating and specifying the speaking voice(s).

Many critics and men of letters have tried to define *irony* according to the way they perceive it in the narrative action of a poem or in a work of art in general. However, the term *irony* is abstract enough to put some of these efforts into comparison and contrast against many other abstract and insubstantial forms of definition.

D.C. Muecke writes concerning irony that frequently "like beauty, [irony] is in the eye of the beholder and is not a quality inherent in any remark, event, or

situation".[32] Muecke is in favour of locating what he called "'the *formal* requirements' of an ironical remark or ironic situation," before we even discuss irony itself. However, these '*formal* requirements' should come out of some questions: "*Was it meant ironically? And of a situation, Do you see it as irony? Or, more exactly perhaps, Do you feel it as irony?*"

However, Muecke notes that one cannot have a "brief and simple definition that will include all kinds of irony while excluding all that is not irony, that distinctions from one angle may not be distinctions from another, and that kinds of irony theoretically distinguishable will in practice be found merging into one another." Moreover, the ironic effect should be governed by "certain minimal aesthetic qualities... to affect us as irony".

Muecke goes on to define the ironist by saying that he "is not just like an artist, but is an artist, governed by the artist's need for perfection of form and expression and all 'the nameless graces which no methods teach.'" If we consider irony as a criticism of life, the ironic events or situations that life constitutes "are more or less effective according to how they exhibit the balance, economy, and precision of a work of art." The ironic sense, and we mean here by ironic sense the ability to locate the *potentially* tragic, or comic, or bitter, or playful situation, in a work of art "is to have, among other qualities something analogous to the artist's ability to see what would make a good picture or the critic's ability to see how an event could be turned into a good story." Thus, the "aesthetic qualities" would be of importance to warrant the "subjective quality".

Though it is not always easy to locate irony in a text, in general irony will be one of three distinguishable yet interdependent elements that Muecke theoretically

[32] Muecke, D. C. *The Compass of Irony*, Methuen & Co. ltd., Barnes & Noble Inc., 1969, p. 14.

categorizes: The first element is a "double-layered" irony or "two-storey phenomenon" where we have two levels in the situation: lower and upper levels. In the lower level, we have the situation or the narrative action as it appears to the victim or as the ironist, deceptively, presents it. In the upper level, we have the same situation but from the ironist's point of view. In this level, we see the ironist evokes the situation to give the reader a hint that he [the ironist] does not see the situation as he has presented it in the lower level or that the victim does not see the situation as it really is.

In the second element, we have contradiction, as well, between lower level and upper level: what is said is incompatible with what is meant. There is a contradiction between what the victim of irony thinks and what the reader knows. This element is unique; there may be opposition between two elements within the same level [the lower level] that is obvious and striking, which Empson calls 'Double Irony'. Nevertheless, at the same time, we have contradiction between two levels that Muecke calls 'Simple Irony'.

In the last element, we have the element of 'innocence' in which we have a self-indulgent or self-deceptive victim unaware (willingly or unwillingly) of another point of view that invalidates his own, or in which an ironist pretends to be unaware of that point of view. We may call this type of irony 'sarcasm' or 'overt irony' where "the ironist does not pretend to be unaware of his real meaning and his victim is immediately aware of it"[33]. Being one person either the victim or the ironist cannot pretend to be 'innocent', thus, 'self-irony' emerges as a distinct feature in this type of irony. "But self-irony implies a 'splitting of the ego' and hence an ability to see and to present oneself as an 'innocent'."

[33] Ibid, p. 20.

"Irony of contradiction" is the form most frequent in Ransom's poetic practice. Ransom uses this irony in the form of 'Simple Irony' as Muecke calls it. In 'Simple Irony', we have "an ironist [who] presents or evokes a duality of opposed 'valid' and 'invalid' levels, at the same time pretending, more or less covertly, not to be aware of the 'valid' level. This kind of irony appears more frequently in Ransom's poems than any other kind. Ransom usually states serious question or valid assumption and encourages the reader's expectations, but at the same time he invalidates what the reader expects through what really happens. Ransom corrects what we expect and this constitutes Ransom's duality in his poetry. 'Simple Irony' comes in many forms; it occurs when "a person with a sense of irony sees in some situation...a contradiction of some kind, at the same time perceiving some other person to be confidently unaware of it." Another form is seen when "a person opposes in his mind one situation or event or idea with another which invalidates it, at the same time being aware that there are those to whom such an invalidating confrontation would not occur".

Metaphor, symbol, myth and allegory, lies and hypocrisy may have something in common with irony but Muecke defines "(verbal) irony" as "saying one thing and meaning another".

> No sense of pity restrains him from giving moderate expression to his vision of the void. Life is a meaningless dance, a whirlwind of mechanical energy, a game that follows no comprehensible rules and that can never be won, a joke, a thing of sound and fury signifying nothing. All distinctions are confounded: good and evil, comedy and tragedy, heaven and hell, spirit and flesh, mind and body. [34]

Ransom while writing with the acute self-awareness of the modern poet, also inherits a Southern cultural and artistic tradition: he cannot escape the contradictions in his

[34] Glicksberg, C. I., *The Ironic Vision in Modern Literature*, p. 3.

mind towards some meanings in his surroundings. This is because "twentieth-century literature is in many ways committed, for better or worse, to the ironic mood".[35] Even when Ransom plays the role of the ironist, he laughs at himself because he is part of the cultural dilemma that he explores in his poems.

For Ransom, irony enables him to see life as comedy, farce, or chaos and this justifies his attitude even towards himself. Thus, irony, in the poetry of Ransom becomes a kind of debate or conflict between mind and body, reality and illusion, instinct and reason, flesh and spirit, meaning and fulfilment, good and evil in a world which seems to be, for Ransom, bereft of explanatory reality - a situation exacerbated by the dominance of science. Ransom's poetry always stresses the dilemma of a self that is divided between two identities. Ransom solves this dualistic dilemma by fusing irony and distance. Ransom apportions this divided self between two identities, while he ironically confesses that dualism is essential for the individual to live properly and pretends, in some poems, to be involved in the action only to suddenly distance himself in order to heighten the sense of irony in the poem.

Ransom's self-presentation in a number of his poems is divided among three visions: ironist (most of the time), observer, and victim. As ironist, Ransom sees life as absurd rather than in moral terms of good and evil. In this respect, Ransom is different from the satirist: the satirist is conservative by nature, utilizing his art "to shore up the foundations of the established order"[36]. The ironist, in Ransom's viewpoint, has no desire to see man suffer, but is aware that the position of man in the universe is beyond remedy and this vision causes Ransom's despair. Despair arises because the persona in Ransom's poems must fight in vain and he knows that he

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[35] Frye, N., "The Road to Excess," in *Myth and Symbol*, edited by Bernice Slote, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1963, p. 11.
[36] Robert, G. E., *The Power of Satire*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1960, p. 273.

fights in vain. That is why he is spiritually frustrated: he has no faith in society, supernatural forces, or in the triumph of scientific rationalism. Thus, he evokes irony most of the time to express this frustration. Warren argues that Ransom's poetry is systematic:

> It refers regularly to a center which is precise and has been objectively formulated by the poet himself, although not in relation to his poetry. Items of his poetic performance which appear the most innocent and peripheral are usually, on inspection, to be interpreted in relation to the basic idea of his work. Poetry must stand or fall in, and of, itself; but meanwhile, if it is to be fully understood, if its theme is to be stated, if certain effects of poetry itself are to be appreciated, it must be read in terms of that center to which it refers.[37]

In order then to describe the modern ironist one must determine the degree to which under the pose of objectivity his view of the world passively - if not actively - involves him in that irony. One may further apply the categories discussed above. One level is the irony that the poet creates in the poem. This situation is ironical because of two possibilities; the victim understands it as ironical, or the ironist himself presented it as an ironical situation. Another kind of irony is that irony of situation: where the readers witness a contradiction between what they know and what the victim thinks or expects. In addition, this kind of irony is very similar to Greek irony where we find that the ironic will is located in fate of God or Nature. The last category is 'innocence' where we find that the victim - willingly or unwillingly - escapes reality and deceives himself by adopting one idea in his mind and invalidates it by another one at the same time.

Though Ransom most of the time uses the irony of contradiction in its simple form, i.e. 'Simple Irony', we find that, in a number of his poems, many forms of irony

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[37] Warren, R. P. "John Crowe Ransom: A Study in Irony" *Virginia Quarterly Review*, xi, January, 1935, pp. 93-112, in *John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography*, edited by Young, T. D. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1968, p. 24.

are working at once, and this creates one of the distinctive features of his poetry; namely its duality: it is everywhere in his poems. There are conventionally treated ironic situations: the death of the young, the inefficacy of innocence, and the self-destroying nature of sexual love. All this is structural, but its effectiveness as in the case of equilibrium - tension - depends on the texture, on the sense of irony that is woven into it. There is, for example, frequently a theme concerning love but it commonly involves situations distant from the author who is not himself implicated in the events of the poem. Irony in Ransom's work becomes an attitude rather than an aspect of craft: an ironic attitude towards his art and towards life in general. "Most of Ransom's poetry," George Williamson writes in his essay "Donne and the Poetry of Today," "combines an amusing texture with a serious emotion...wit has become a poetic attitude."[38] This seems a conventional description of Ransom's work. Williamson's remark suggests that wit exists for wit's sake, that it is a poetic attitude not a functional aspect of the general state of mind from which the poetry is written.

It is the present argument that the poetry of Ransom is formed by a constant ironic view of the world, that in Ransom's poetry, the ironic contrast that is implicit in the subject of the poem, or the poet's vision of the tension that exists in this contrast, is to some extent modified by the personal feeling of the poet. Ransom's awareness of what Warren referred to as "ethical centre" keeps Ransom from being so delighted by the effect of irony as to escape from reality but keeps him from the position of objective irony as well. "Ethical center" thus, is a reference to the poems' hidden themes. The concept of irony in Ransom's work appears to offer an objectivity

[38] Williamson, G. "Donne and the Poetry of Today", *A Garland for John Donne*, 1631-1931, edited by Theodore Spencer, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1931, pp. 153-76, in *John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography*, edited by Young, T. D. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1968, p. 30.

toward his art, but in fact, turns out also to be a means of revealing key aspects of Ransom's personality.

This technique of irony does not appear in Ransom's earliest collection of *Poems about God* (1919). In these poems, there is a more obvious provincialism of theme. This provincialism seems to have been derived from an instinctive nostalgia, turned towards an order of life, which the poet has analysed and defended on social and economic grounds.

The type of irony in *Poems about God* is largely a circumstantial one. "In reality, *Poems about God* it is not so studiously schematised as the introduction would suggest. When "God" does not appear in a poem, the word "Christian" does — to keep the frame of reference straight. However, the poems are hardly devotional. It is just possible that there was a deliberate irony in the very *absence* of a religious tone in contexts where "God" occurred"[39]. Ransom observes and records certain discrepancies in the nature and conduct of human affairs. We can call this approach a psychological one. This is an anecdotal and external irony; the poet offers the situation, with its obvious contrast.

In 'Grace' for instance, one finds Ransom's early deployment of irony. The poem relates the humiliating and mean death of a pious hired man. The irony here is external, a disjunction between the supposed relation of God and man. Irony in the poem arises from the contrast between God's reward and man's, fate which is death.

The example he gives of such a death concerns a hired man with whom the speaker once worked. The verbal irony in this poem is, in fact, more bitterly sarcastic

[39] Koch, V., "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom", in *John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays and a Bibliography*, edited by Young, T. D. pp. 115-16.

than any other poem in the volume: Ransom thinks "how he was saved/ One day while ploughing the corn"; and remembers the hired man's hymn:

> I thought of the prayers the fool had prayed
> To his God, and I was seeing red,
> When all of a sudden he gave a heave
> And then with shuddering - vomited!
> And God, who had just received full thanks
> For all his kindly daily bread,
> Now called it back again - perhaps
> To see that his birds of the air were fed.

Nevertheless, in making the irony deeper by emphasizing the contrast between the desert and the reward, the poet (as distinct from the narrator) makes himself visible in the poem and thus involved directly in the situation. His comments are direct and rather simplistic in their bitterness:

> 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.

The sickness of the poet not only emphasizes his disgust at the fate of the hired man but also brings into the account a reflection on the conventional omnipotence of God and suggests that this man is apparently a victim of God's will.

This type of irony is persistent and systemized in the poetry of Thomas Hardy who had an early and powerful influence on Ransom. Like Ransom, Hardy's irony is remarkably effective because, instead of being metaphysical or abstract, it remains close to reality and human experience. "Hap", for instance, written as early as 1866, sums up Hardy's pessimistic attitude towards life. Similar to most of the poems in

Poems about God, God is not named or referred to except ambiguously as simply more powerful than man:

> Then would I bear it, clench myself, and die,
> Steeled by the sense of ire unmerited;
> Half-eased in that a Powerfuller than I
> Had willed and meted me the tears I shed.

The personification of God in the situation of the poem is, however, meant to be taken as a poetic device, without any direct metaphysical reference and this is very similar to Ransom's technique in *Poems about God*; that is why many critics are apt to bracket "God" when they discuss Ransom's volume.

Hardy's irony is more corrosive than Ransom's. Though we feel sometimes that while Hardy meant to evoke compassion and sympathy with his protagonist through this irony, yet he cannot conceal the realities and facts for compassion's sake. He continuously emphasises the theme that all agencies in Nature are indifferent to man. Hardy expresses this through story-like events, circumstances, or incidents: there is more emphasis on narration in Hardy's poems than in Ransom's. Thus, the first stanza in "Hap", sees God as having forgotten all about the creation of the universe, calling man a "thing", enjoying this (thing)'s hardships and sufferings and putting God in "ecstasy":

> If but some vengeful god would call me
> From up the sky, and laugh: 'Thou suffering thing,
> Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,
> That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!'

However, Ransom's poetry is more descriptive; it tends to record and describe events. He has his own satire of circumstances. While Hardy's satire of contrast depends on the idea of justice, and emphasises arbitrary discrepancies in the conduct of the world, Ransom's, on the other hand, concerns itself more with the discrepancies between human desire or expectations and their fulfilments. This imparts a sense of

conflict and tension to Ransom's poems. There is a struggle between the human and non-human forces in life; and this conflict appears clearly in his views on God, Nature, and Man, as we will see in the following chapters.

The difference between Ransom's early poetry and his later 'mature' work becomes obvious when we compare his treatment of death of the hired man as we have seen in "Grace" to the theme of death in *Chills and Fever* (1924).

In *Chills and Fever* and *Two Gentlemen in Bonds,* there is a disintegration of sentimentality in two forms: in elegies and poems which show the perilous nature of life and beauty, and in poems about love that show its fragility, especially in the face of convention or caution. Throughout these poems, characters are struggling to resolve, irreconcilably and forever opposed conflicts and paradoxes, which they believe they can resolve, or must struggle to make compatible. It is in this contrast between wish and fulfilment that Ransom locates his irony; the "operative irony". One thinks for example of 'Spectral Lovers' who "go frozen asunder in fear," of the "Equilibrists," who "rigid as two painful stars" in "their torture of equilibrium," burn "with fierce love always to come near," yet are kept apart by "Honor" or of "Ecologue". Such poems invariably conclude that the main characters' innocence and hope was a "dream" and that they might as well, be "beneath the ground as above". In these poems, we notice that Ransom frequently takes on the role of objective spectator (a technique that will be further examined in Chapter 6) and uses his commentary on both situation and theme to point up his irony. However, Ransom continues to sympathize with his antagonists, and on those occasions when the antagonists are effectively invisible, it may be noted that it is Ransom, as the only one who appears constantly in the poem who maintains our awareness of the problematic nature of the situation.

"All poetry stands at no less than one remove from the experience it treats. However, much of Ransom's poetry stands at two removes from the experience, for instead of looking directly at life he has in many instances, looked into other works, into the Bible, Shakespeare, sermons, bestiaries, 17th century lyrics, 19th century novels, and children's stories."[40] The stance and the rhetoric, drawn from such a various array of times and places work in the poetry to build a unique and distinctive manner - not so much Modernist montage as expressing a cumulative disenchantment. Although Ransom has been a great influence as a man of letters, he has had no perceptible stylistic influence through his poems. He has written in a style too much of his own. When we read him we find that he was among the few who has understood the meaning of structural tension in verse and we will see in the balancer of forces, the poet as equilibrist.

"Miriam Tazewell" will serve as an example of this tension. The subject of the poem is the ironic contrast between an ideal world and Nature, between Miriam's romantic dream, her feelings of pity for her storm-ruined garden, and the insensitivity with which "the regular stars went busily on their courses",

> When Miriam Tazewell heard the tempest bursting
> And his wrathy 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.

Here the satiric phrases such as "like a young thing" and "heart full of flowers" represent Miriam as if she were a romantic foolish girl engaging in an attempt to make the real world conform to her ideal. However, Ransom softens the ironic effect by explaining that such disasters are only the ways of Nature or of the real world:

> But the earth shook dry his old back in good season,
> He had weathered storms that drenched him deep as this one,

[40] Stewart, J. L. *John Crowe Ransom*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1962, p. 29.

And the sun, Miriam, ascended to his dominion,
The storm was withered against his empyrean.

The indirect address of Miriam is a reinforcement of the narrator's detached point of view. At the same time, this intrusive address makes us feel that the poet involves himself in the situation. Perhaps the effect of distance predominates because he does not really speak to *her*, but delivers a general point in which she happens to be included. This gives the situation two dimensions: it secures the distance between Ransom and his character allowing the employment of irony, and it generalizes the situation to gain wider effect and perspective. Moreover, this makes the situation more transparent revealing deeper irony; as the situation is now beyond a mere contrast between Miriam's expectations and fulfilments; it is tension and struggle. In Miriam's own romantic interpretations of Nature, we feel that she is a part of the cause of her excessive grief: she is angry because "some bridals" were calendared, and that "the birds demurely sang in the bitten poplars". To Miriam the world is not merely harsh, it has become unruly and masculine. The deflowering of her lawn is the deflowering of her innocence by experience; but the sexual references are without any sense of fulfilment:

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.

Miriam is a romantic, escapist and innocent; her garden is an evasion of the full commitment of sexuality and she attempts to escape realities of Nature by self-deception (the third category from Muecke's point of view). The irony is not without criticism; he does not sympathize with her self-indulgence in reproving Nature in its course, and in encouraging the reader to acknowledge the harshness of the real world reinforces the criticism of Miriam's self-indulgence: "The spring transpired in that

year with no flowers": Ransom here is calendaring Nature's course in that time of the year. This line makes the poet secure, distant, and objective to the situation as well as to the character. The speaker in the poem is entirely outside the poem's narrative action. The speaker's detachment extends the perspectives to a social level and provides a universal context for Miriam's situation. The narrator is almost fully withdrawn from the action, and his distance gives him the critical perspective of the satirist.

Another example of the tension in Ransom's poems can be seen in "The Equilibrists". The argument emphasizing man and woman's attempts to resolve the conflict between the intellect and emotion, head (the "grey doves from the officious tower" which cry "Honor") and body (the "lilies," "beseeching him to take"). Their resolution is, however, "their torture of equilibrium ...rigid as two stars, and twirled":

> They burned with fierce love always to come near,
> But Honor beat them back and kept them clear.

In this poem, we see the dualistic point of view in the lovers' dilemma. "Man" has his decision to make:

> 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.

Ransom brings himself closer in the epitaph that falls at the end of the poem indicating that the only possible and logical resolution to the lover's dilemma lies in an ironic effect; the integration of thought and feelings but in the tomb:

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.

In general, the development of Ransom's irony may be described as a modification of "applied irony", a modulation from his early ironic models such as Hardy's *Satires of Circumstances*[41] to a more personalized view of the ironic view of life in general.

The instrument of wit in Ransom's poetry is usually directed to a specific and constant ironical effect, which would make irony an essential feature in the poem. Ransom uses irony to divorce himself from any involvement in the action, and this results in an effect of distance. The "irony - the index of distance, the mark of uninvolvement - makes the tenderness, the involvement, possible."[42] Thus, the protagonist of a poem is the sufferer and represents a disorder contrary to the principles of order that the poet in his more explicit, non-poetic work, might defend and the poem is a commentary on this situation. In such cases, the poet - from this secure position - yet with a concrete realization of details, dramatizes the commentary. Thus an effect of dualism allows the poet to be very close to the details of the situation but at the same time to be so distant from the action as to enable the dramatization of the situation and the employment of irony.

"Janet Waking" illustrates this kind of mock tragedy with sympathetic tones. Ransom is creating two ironies here: juxtaposition of serious and trivial (the poet's

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[41] A group of poems by Thomas Hardy published in 1914; telling anecdotes about Nature's and God's indifference to man's fate. Apart from the ironic reflections in these lyrics, they become haunting symbols for all humanity. Examples of these lyrics are; "Channel Firing," where the coffins are shaken and the dead sit upright, thinking that Judgment Day has come, "Titanic," show how the Immanent Will works silently and invisibly to arrange the conjunction between the ocean liner and an iceberg, and "A Plaint to Man" where God asks why, when man gained insight, he felt the unhappy need of creating a form like his own to whom he could pray.

[42] Warren, R. P. "Notes on the Poetry of John Crowe Ransom at His Eightieth Birthday", p. 329.

exaggerated interest in the death of the little girl's pet hen) and that implied by contrast between the title "Janet Waking" (to reality) and her mistaken interpretation of that reality. Again, the poet disappears from the situation and objectively records the events. In achieving this distance or objectivity, Ransom the witness becomes aware of the irony as does reader. Chucky's death represents Janet's first encounter with incomprehensible reality. She slept "beautifully" in innocence, "till it was deeply morning." Her refusal to be "instructed" stands for a universal quandary of humans confronted with the irrationality of Nature. Ransom's revision of the second line in the third stanza ("Running across the world upon the grass" *Selected Poems* 1969) – originally ("Running on little pink feet upon the grass" *Two Gentlemen in Bonds*) suggests Ransom's attempt to secure his distance from the situation and a more objective view giving universal and comprehensive application of the irony. Nevertheless, the tone of the poem changes when the poem shifts to heroic glory and religious perspective:

> 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.

The lines carry mocking exaggeration of the poet towards what Janet is doing: crying for the resurrection of the chicken. In the meantime, we notice in the last stanza a sudden personal intrusion of the narrator when he says, "Janet implored us". Ransom is managing very cleverly the alternation between mockery and his sympathy. Janet does not delude herself that all this is a bad dream - she just cannot understand the fact of death:

> Janet implored us, "Wake her from her sleep!"
> And would not be instructed in how deep
> Was the forgetful kingdom of death.

Ransom here infuses his feelings with Janet's. "Forgetful kingdom of death" shows, with the equally sudden shift to a Classical frame of reference, a common human flaw in the face of love and death.

However, this secure position does not mean that the poet is integrated into the narrative action of the poem. He [the poet] cannot diagnose the situation in the poem while he is distanced from the situation; there must be some awareness that constitutes the ethical reference to the centre of the poem. In this perception we move from *Poems about God* and *Chills and Fever* to *Two Gentlemen in Bonds*. Ransom's later work - poems like 'Painted Head' - can be considered as the result of this development: there is an ironic view of life and the world in these poems but in a more impersonal and indirect manner.

In 'Painted Head' Ransom presents the problem of the always unbalanced relationship between head and body, abstract and concrete, intellect and feeling, idea and fact, part and whole. Through six quatrains Ransom develops an image thus painted "on a canvas sky", and in so doing, implies the role of the body. There is an ironic relation between the lifelessness of the head and the life presented. In the final three quatrains, the character of the body is described, so that the ironic pairing of both head and body is complete.

The painting of the head is emphasized in the first six quatrains, while the body, which is not present in the painting, is emphasized in the last three quatrains. The point in the poem is that the head and the body are both essential and fundamental facets of man's experience and existence, but presented through the painting as a bodiless head. There is a unique kind of distance in this poem; since the emphasis is generalising on body and head we feel that the narrator is unimportant: the poem is concerned with absolutes, not one man's reaction to, or impression of a piece of art.

While the reader is concerned with the absolutes, Ransom is evoking the irony of the mind's self-delusion and the body's self-negation.

After the initial statement of the head's condition, Ransom begins the process of irony by implication, for as the head is without body, the contrasts between the head and the body and their interdependence are only implied. The head deludes itself about its "grandéur", its being "Absolute", its desire "to try decapitation" from an awareness of the body. By contrast, the happiest minds, in the third quatrain, are those, which retain an awareness of the whole (head and body). But this head, which is somewhere between the happiest and the always separated heads, has aspects of both, for, although it is now deluding itself, there was the time in its youth when it had an awareness of the whole. Moreover, this head is nameless to stand for all the humanity.

The meaning of the body having been implied by ironic contrast through the first nine quatrains, it is now developed in the tenth and eleventh quatrains. The body has its own attitude, it bears the head and "feeds and obeys" it only for its own benefit:

> 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

Related to the self-deception both of the head and of the body are the irony in the poem. The body through its self-deception ironically takes on the character of its counterpart, abstraction. This point of the irony is seen in the tenth quatrain in which

we are told that, according to the body, "Beauty is the body". Thus, the irony of the poem is of a dialectical sort: for the head denies the body and body denies head.

This contrast between head and body also finds expression in Ransom's distrust, from his earliest publication, of the related false dichotomy of abstract and concrete.

"Blackberry Winter" is a good example of this notion. The poem deals with Ransom's own anger and indicates his knowledge and feelings for the characters in all of his poems. Anger arises against the influence of science upon the world, and upon the poet himself. The life that once inspired poetry has been killed off by the abstractions and mechanizations of science:

> The breath of a girl is music of fall and swell.
> Trumpets convolve in the warrior's chambered ear,
> But he has listened; none is resounding here,
> So much the wars have dwindled since Troy fell.

The poet is left alone with the "Daughter of Heaven" who is "cold" and whose house is decorated. Ransom builds irony in to the last stanza to echo the disillusionment set in the first one:

> If there be a power of sweetness, let it lie,
> For being drunken with steam of Cuban cigars
> He takes no pungence from the odor of stars,
> And even his music stops on one long sigh.

Words like "drunken", "steam", "odor", and "cigars" set the tone of the poem. The first line of this stanza is directed against "the pale youth". Ransom's revision of "die" in *Chills and Fever* to "lie" in *Selected Poems* (1969) still holds the same sense, but allows the extra resonance in the more ambiguous word. The opening line of the poem is the voice of the responsible poet. We feel sadness, helplessness, and disappointment. The objectivity of the irony of the poem is accomplished at the expense of the "pale youth", by the contrast between the inability to climb the hill and

Ransom's own comments in the last stanza, which Ransom inserted in *Chills and Fever* version and deleted in *Selected Poems* 1969:

> But still I will haunt beneath my apple-tree,
> Heedful again to star-looks and wind-words,
> Anxious for the flash of whether eyes or swords,
> And hoping a little, a little, that either may be.

It is not easy to read and understand Ransom's poems without the whole person in mind, the Southerner, the Methodist, the scholar and the man, because they all come continuously into his poems. Moreover, all these qualities are situated in the poetry with a steady ironic view. The irony of Ransom comes from his trying to make a balance between the world of the scientist and the philosopher, the world of matter and of spirit. The need to give balance to these two worlds creates tension, and this in turn, gives life to Ransom's poetry. Through all this, there still operates the pervasive irony of tone, the tension between sentiment inherent in the situation and the apparent inappropriateness of the language, whether it is the Latinate language of objectivity or the language of wit. He "combines an amusing texture", as Williamson argues, "with serious emotion". Louis Rubin sees "The underlying mood of Ransom's poetry" is "terror and savagery masked by urbanity; the tension of a violent content described in bloodless language".[43]

"Armageddon" is a nice illustration of Ransom's irony and distance. The poem is about attitudes. One senses the detached, mock-pedantry of a poet "waiting the light and sorry for the dark...loving neither the sterner vices nor the sterner virtues..."[44] In the beginning there is some sort of an established struggle of opposites, the religious dilemma, but this proves far otherwise when analysed in the light of the poet's stand. Initially, there seems to be a conflict between two worlds,

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[43] Rubin, L. D. Jr., "John Ransom's Cruel Battle," *Shenandoah*, ix ,Winter 1958, pp. 23-25
[44] Jarrell R., *Poetry and the Age*, New York, 1953, p. 98.

between good and evil. In this sense, the poem also reads as a fable of the endless war between body and soul. Body is represented by Antichrist, who enters the scene "playing his lissome flute and merry."

On the other hand, Christ, the power of good, is "brooding upon his frugal breviary." They are knights, each with an army and at sight of one another, they arm for the battle. There is a sharp contrast of styles: Christ rides a "cynical hairy jennet", Antichrist a Barbary steed; and he carries "a spray of rosemary," Christ "a dry palm that grew on Calvary," Christ wears "dusty cassock," Antichrist owns a rich "tiring hall." However, the Antichrist whose motto might be "peace in our time" dismounts and doffs "his plume in generous prostration". Christ returns the courtesy and they enter upon a knightly friendship. After they exchange their mounts, rosemary, and palm, Antichrist offers his new friend the use of his wardrobe,

> Whence Christ did not come forth too finical,
> But his egregious beauty richly dight.

Again, in this poem Ransom is using mock mid-sixteenth century diction with a scattering of Latinisms, for example, "egregious", here used punningly in its etymological sense. At the table, Christ in his turn makes the wine weaker by "more ethereal bouquet", a mixture from which both can benefit:

> The rubric and the holy paternoster
> Were strangely jangled with the dithyramb.

An old patriarch who is disturbed by the misalliance seeks Christ's ear, but because he can no longer tell the bosom friends apart, he speaks to the Antichrist instead, "hissed in the wrong ear," but the result is the same. Christ is shocked that such a mistake could be made; "Sheds unmanly his devil's pelf,"

> His trump recalls his own to right opinions,
> With scourge they mortify their carnal selves,

In addition, the war resumes between soul and body or good and evil. "These Armageddons weary me much," says Antichrist squeamish at the sight of blood, charming as the spokesperson for the claims of the body.

The poem, then, is a study of private and personal feelings about the not-too-wise ones of the world and their private clashes with the practical. The poet seems to feel affection for both, since both seem to him somehow lost in the maze of the world, and somehow in need of each other. The whole tone of the poem is ironical beginning with the medieval romance form and continuing through a complex deployment of meter, diction, and theme.

A last question arises: in Ransom's point of view, do tensions in the poem enrich the intention of irony? As we have seen, in many of Ransom's poems there is tension, or struggle, or conflict between two qualities among the characters. On the structural level Ransom believes "that opposites can never be said to be resolved or reconciled merely because they have been got into the same poem, or got into the same complex of affective experience to create there a kind of "tension"; that if there is a resolution at all it must be a logical resolution; that when there is no resolution we have a poem without a structural unity; and that this is precisely the intention of irony, which therefore is something very special and ought to be occasional"[45].

In effect, then, Ransom's irony is a mixture of Socratic and modern concepts of irony; it accepts the human limitations in order to achieve truth. Thus, there is a constant contrast and conflict between appearance and reality in Ransom's poems and this gives rise to irony and distance that reveal dualism in the work - as well, perhaps, as in his personality.

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[45] Ransom, J.C. *The New Criticism*, p. 95.

Poems about God, and J. C. Ransom's Theology

Poems about God (1919) was Ransom's first collection of poetry and is typical of his early thinking on religion. It provides considerable insight into Ransom's views on "*God*"- both as a concept and as a social phenomenon. In crude summary we might say that the volume offers the reader, from Ransom's theological point of view, three different propositional attitudes: believers as naïve, God as tyrant, and God as He might be understood as being expressed in Nature. Ransom presents these propositions in an unrelentingly ironic and sarcastic manner.

Indeed, throughout the volume, Ransom criticizes, ironically (or sarcastically), many aspects of American everyday religious behaviour. A reinforcement of this attitude had been found in his reading of the poems of Thomas Hardy, of whom he was later to remark that "as if to allow in advance the failure of human speculations, including his own, Hardy often gives them a sporting or rowdy turn which makes them comic in their irony."[1] Nevertheless, Donald Davie argues that Ransom's observation is "more applicable to the American's own work than to the British poet."[2]

Poems about God does not manifest one God but many gods, almost as many gods as there are human points of view. But they are, taken together, a testimony that accords with the preference in *God without Thunder* for a style of mysterious God as found in the Old Testament rather than for the "cooperative" God of the New. Indeed, Ransom stresses the inscrutable aspects in God and nature, thus evoking a sense of the sublime but not of the beautiful. His examination of that concept is not at all similar to a search for an unknown God, but rather suggests the expression of a reluctant and tentative gesture.

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[1] Stewart, J. L., *The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians*, Princeton, 1965, p. 214; Ransom, ed., *Selected Poems of Thomas Hardy*, p. x.
[2] Davie, D., *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*, New York, 1972, p. 30.

The poems present an exploration of occasions in which the presence of God is supposed to be observable; however, the investigation is ironic in the sense that the persona is unable to square this presence with his rational and realistic understanding of the realities of the situation. A scene of conflict between a family's naïve pious sense of duty and youthful rational scepticism suggests this viewpoint in some of the poems, while in many others the argument suggests adversity towards God and nature alike.

In effect, "the overwhelming impression of the collection is that it is the output of an author who has little respect for the traditional Christian pieties but who also has not yet adequately developed the elements of an alternative philosophy."[3]

Thus, the focus of this chapter is twofold: to show that almost from the beginning of his poetic career, Ransom 'believed' both in the God of the Old Testament and in an almost pantheistic concept of nature as expressive of that God; additionally, we shall examine how far this might be seen to affect the technique in his poetic practice and theory.

In February 1923, Ransom argues in a letter to Allen Tate that he: "almost persuadest me to be Christian - but I am a tough heathen."[4] This has to be read in the context of his having published *Poems about God* in 1919. The volume is the work of a young man and Ransom republished only one poem from this book in his later collections. Part of the reason for this self-censorship may be that in *Poems about God*, it is difficult to discover Ransom's intention behind his use of the word "God", or what was

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[3] Quinlan, K., *John Crowe Ransom's Secular Faith*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge and London, 1989, p. 24.

[4] Young, T. D. and Core, G., ed., *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge and London, 1985, [February, 1923] p. 119.

supposed to be the kind of religion - if there is any - under examination. He had written in its introduction:

> The first three or four poems that I ever wrote (that was two years ago) were done in three or four different moods and with no systematic design. I was therefore duly surprised to notice that each of them made considerable use of the term God. I studied the matter a little, and came to the conclusion that this was the most poetic of all terms possible; was a term always being called into requisition during the great moments of the soul, now in tones of love, and now indignantly; and was the very last word that a man might say when standing in the presence of that ultimate mystery to which all our great experiences reduce.
>
> Wishing to make my poems as poetic as possible, I simply likened myself to a diligent apprentice and went to work to treat rather systematically a number of the occasions on which this term was in use with common American men. And since these occasions fairly crowded into mind even at the most casual inventory, I also likened myself to a sovereign and a chooser; and I very quickly ruled that I should consider only those situations as suitable in which I could imagine myself pronouncing the name God sincerely and spontaneously, never by that way of routine which is death to the aesthetic and religious emotions. I anticipate the objection that the name of God is frequently taken here in ways that are not the ways of the fathers. I reply in advance, there are many mountains; and probably every one of them is worthy of being charted on the true Chart of God's world.[5]

In 1919, Ransom was assuming something of the role of his Methodist minister father. He was still writing in the same vein in 1922, "being sympathetic more than other men, they [poets] may contain within themselves the conflicting emotions of different classes of society; in poetry they resolve this conflict, and then men hear a voice which is larger than the voice of any class, and which is the voice of God"[6].

[5] Ransom, J. C., *Poems about God*, Henry Holt, New York, 1919, p. vi-vii.
[6] Ransom, J. C., *The Fugitive*, I, 1922, pp. 66-68, quoted from, Wayne A. Knoll, S. J. "Ransom as Religionist", *Mississippi Quarterly*, 1976-7, p. 111.

We can organize the poems in *Poems about God* according to topic as follows: "Noonday Grace", "Worship", and "Prayer" which present believers as naïve; "Grace", "Moonlight", "Wrestling", "The School", and "Sickness" where God appears as a tyrant. In "The Swimmer", "Sunset", "Darkness", and "Geometry", God is pantheistically perceived in Nature.

Believers as Naïve

The scene in "Noonday Grace" tells of a father, mother and son sitting at a table. The father offers the blessing, praying that God "turn not away from us thy face / Till we come to our final resting place". The son thinks:

> I love my father's piety,
> I know he's grateful as can be,
> A man that's nearly seventy
> And past his taste for cookery.

Nevertheless, he himself is not at all past taste; he prays with total fervency for the food:

> Thank you, good Lord, for dinner-time!
> Gladly I come from the sweat and grime
> To play in your Christian pantomime.

He proceeds to give separate and distinct thanks to napkin, platter, centrepiece, milk, yams, country ham, vegetables, corn on the cob, tomatoes, beans, cucumbers, corn bread, and so on.

The poem has some of its background in Ransom's early childhood: his father was a Methodist and as a child Ransom hated this strict way of living. The narrator of the poem is a boy who makes satirical observations about his father's practice of saying traditional grace at mealtime. The boy seems to be still in "pantomime" mode when he thanks God "who made the garden to grow, / Who took upon himself to know / That we

loved vegetables so." The boy's tone seems to imply that he does not believe in this, and this is confirmed shortly afterwards:

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

The boy himself answers the question:

> They pray for individual things,
> Give thanks for little happenings,
> But isn't his sweep of mighty wings
> Meant more for businesses of kings
> Than pulling small men's petty strings?

The boy's answer here provides us with the lack of elevated aspirations of most believers. The boy further on questions the preacher, a "valiant democrat," as to how an infinite God could concern himself with mere "creeping man." The two-line stanza that immediately follows is placed within quotation marks and would appear to be, in its hymn-like rhythms, the minister's response:

> He's infinite, and all of that,
> The setting sun his habitat,
> The heavens they hold by his fiat,
> The glorious year that God begat;
> And what is creeping man to that,
> O preacher, valiant democrat?
>
> "The greatest of all, his sympathy,
> His kindness, reaching down to me."
>
> Like mother, he finds it his greatest joy
> To have big dinners for his boy.

As a whole, the narrator mocks the ridiculously self-oriented nature of Christian piety, though he does not express explicit doubts concerning the existence of the deity. The ironic narrator hints that he has a far more elevated concept of such a divine being than

most believers do. The persona in this poem cannot reach a logical explanation until he formulates a philosophical explanation of what others may do. One moves from scepticism to theism through clearing one's mind of all beliefs and reordering them again in one's mind after doubting everything around one. Moreover, this is what Ransom is trying to do in these poems. Ransom is trying to find a logical explanation for the idea of God and religion. The kind of conflict between familial piety and youthful scepticism is reminiscent of those early exchanges with his father and that Ransom was to recall so vividly in his old age.

In "Worship", the speaker ironically describes a man-God relationship. It is similar to the theme in "Noonday Grace" where God can be worshipped in the kitchen. He presents a parody of the way people say they can pray or worship God anytime and anywhere. The first line indicates that this man whom the speaker describes, is very religious and he performs his worship when he can:

> I know a quite religious man
> Who utters praises when he can.

However, in this poem, where the speaker finds God especially (and conventionally) in Nature, his friend finds him mostly in the bar:

> Now I find God in bard and book,
> In school and temple, bird and brook.
>
> But he says God is sweetest of all
> Discovered in a drinking-hall.

The drinking religionist continues to describe his friendship with God who is, moreover, humble:

> For God requires no costly wine
> But comes on the foam of a crockery stein.
>
> And when that foam is on the lips,

Begin then God's good fellowships.

God, according to the poet's viewpoint, would not hold out for expensive wine, he is just as pleased with an ordinary glass of beer. With this beer begins that friendship which he assigns to God. God asks for no special worship: all he wants is a glass of beer and nice companionship, besides which all worship and praises are in vain:

Cathedrals, synagogues, and kirks
May go to the devil, and all their works.

And as for Christian charity,
It's made out of hilarity.

At the end of the poem the speaker suggests that all sorrow would be vanquished were God to be here drinking with him, although the persona perhaps coarsens the point by wondering if he will be so sure tomorrow.

In "Prayer" the narrator mocks a poor woman for her unnecessary self-abasement before a rather distant and foolish divinity. In the opening stanza the narrator is satirizing that "foolish" woman who forgets any other duties and prays for her son on "Sunday morning":

She would not keep at home, the foolish woman,
She would not mind her precious girls and boys,
She had to go, for it was Sunday morning,
Down the hot road and to the barren pew
And there abuse her superannuate knees
To make a prayer.

The speaker is mocking the literalism of this religious woman who wants to go to the church, and suffer being on her knees, though she is old and awkward, "To make a prayer".

Although throughout this volume, Ransom is generally satirizing God and the way people worship him, in this poem, much of the attack is directed towards the woman

herself and her motives for going to the church. The irony tends to fall at the end of each stanza; the first stanza, ends: "To make a prayer"; the second, "Thank God she asked that favor!"

The second stanza begins by explaining in a cutting tone why she has to go through all these sufferings and go to the church:

> She had a huge petition on her bosom -
> A heavy weight for such a lean old thing -
> Her youngest boy made merry in the village
> And had not entered into the communion;
> And having labored with him long for nothing
> She meant to ask of God to save him yet.

She, though she is old and her "petition" is a "heavy weight", has to pray on her knees for her son who is away from God and playful. Thus, the speaker mocks her appeal to God to help with her son whom she has tried, in vain, to persuade to be pious and obedient to God. Nevertheless, the speaker ironically indicates that all her prayers are in vain:

> The manner of it echoes still in heaven.
> Before she dared to utter her desire
> The strange old woman made approach to God

The choice of the verb "echoes" suggests emptiness and hollowness as if there is no God to hear this "foolish woman". However, the woman continues to pray even:

> With many a low obeisance and abasement,
> As having done so many things she ought not,
> And left undone so many things she ought,

expressing her regret and repentance. Then the speaker unveils in terms borrowed from the Prayer Book Confession, the wickedest sin she has committed:

> And being altogether very wicked;
> She testified she had not kept his temple,

In the confession of her sin, most of the irony falls in the last three lines of the stanza; with the Biblical image of housewifely duties:

Which was her heart, all swept and white and ready;
She testified it - O the shameless woman,
The spotless housekeeper!

In the context, words like "swept", "white and ready" and "spotless", have a precision rather lacking in the spiritual dimension they are meant to correspond to, and the exclamation is coarse in its irony.

In the last stanza the speaker turns his irony on God who is supposedly listening all this time to the woman's prayers. The first description of him echoes the choice of words in the previous stanza; as he "swept" his people with a selective eye:

Now God sat beaming on his burnished throne
And swept creation with appraising eye,
Finding, I fear, not all was free from blemish,

Nevertheless, God "fell ashamed" when he saw this woman of such age kneeling before begging him to be forgiven her sins and answers her prayers:

For when he saw that aged lady drooping
And wearying her bones with genuflections
For her unworthiness, he fell ashamed

In the last four lines of the last stanza, the irony is very strong when he says:

He groaned, he made a mighty face so wry
That several seraphin forgot their harping
And scolded thus: "O what a wicked woman,
To shrew his splendid features out of shape!"

"Groaned" and "mighty" are joined with "wry" preparing us for something important to come; however, it ends in the deflation of gossipy angels complaining about a trivial facial expression. The angels stopped their harping and the suggestion is that God's reply to her prayer comes in their calling the woman "wicked" for being so importunate as to disorder God's sublimity. A further reading of the situation might suggest that we may not bargain with God by offering to exchange good conduct for His mercy.

The main point seems to be that the contrast between God's sublimity and man's pettiness renders all prayer futile.

God as Tyrant

We have already noticed "Grace" in Chapter 1. In this sequence of "*Poems about God*" "Grace", Ransom preserves the sequence of time. The situation is as if the boy of "Noonday Grace" is now grown up, though he is still in the world of his "mother's pickles and pies". The satirical vision has grown also and the problem is presented with less lightheartedness; the speaker now being concerned with the pain and ugliness of death. The poem opens with a direct accusation:

> Who is it beams the merriest
> At killing a man, the laughing one?
> You are the one I nominate,
> God of the rivers of Babylon.

He describes how the hired man and he would work together in the fields, singing hymns, and how on one hot day the hired man, who was pious and believed in salvation, suddenly fell into the furrow:

> For it was a foolish kind of sprawl,
> And I found a hulk of heaving meat
> That wouldn't answer me at all

He drags the man over into the shade, angry over the thought "of the prayers the fool had prayed / To his God." Then the dying man vomits:

> And God, who had just received full thanks
> For all his kindly daily bread,
> Now called it back again - perhaps
> To see that his birds of the air were fed.

He has seen God provide merciful deaths, he says, but the hired man "in his vomit laid down, / Denied the decency of blood." The spectacle makes the speaker himself sick, and he too vomits. The example of this death would seem to invite the reader to

sympathise with the hired man. His fate came suddenly and during intervals of rest, he would lead the hired man on by singing a gospel tune such as "Down at the cross my savior died", to which the man would respond, "there did I bury my sin and pride." But the narrator of the poem suddenly pauses to comment:

> Sinful pride of a hired man!
> Out of a hired woman born!
> I'm thinking now how he was saved
> One day while plowing in the corn.
> We plowed that steamy morning through,
> I with the mule whose side was torn,

The poor man's self-criticism would seem to be just as inappropriate as the gratitude of the father "past his taste for cookery" in "Noonday Grace." The narrator continues,

> I'm thinking now how he was saved
> One day while plowing in the corn.

One can almost hear the ironic inflection on the word *saved*. The hired man in fact fell in a furrow while his horse went "marching blindly on" thinking of the well-provided stall. The poet ironically commends this sadistic attitude of God though he confesses that on the occasion itself he was "forward and untamed" and reacted in a quite different way, protesting:

> "I will not worship wickedness
> Though it be God's - I am ashamed!
> For all his mercies God be thanked
> But for his tyrannies be blamed!
> He shall not have my love alone,
> With loathing too his name is named."

In the final section of the poem, God's praises fill the earth, the melodious song broken only by a solitary crow that caws:

> And while his praises filled the earth
> A solitary crow sailed by,
> And while the whole creation sang
> He cawed - not knowing how to sigh.

These concluding lines reveal the narrator's disordered feelings at the time of the original experience. Alternatively, as Ransom was to remark years later concerning the flatness of the last line of one of Emily Dickinson's poems: "Its blankness cancels out the expostulation we had expected, and pure contingency replaces the vicious agent we would have blamed [for a death], and there is nothing rational to be said. Who is going to blame a fact?"[7]

In "Wrestling," God's name seems to figure at first only as an exclamation or interjection. The setting of the poem is "threshing-time the manly season":

> We kept the thresher thundering by daylight,
> And rested all the sweeter after dark,
> Telling of tales, and washing in the river.

One of the hands, "some twenty miles strangers" boasts that he has never lost a wrestling match.

> We had a champion there. He looked and listened,
> He measured off his man, he made his mind up.
> And thus he brought great honor to his county:
> "My friend, I've heard you bragging, heard you braying,
> And now I say, for God's sake come and wrestle."
> And thus appealed, the other came, for God's sake,
> And they did wrestle.

By the end of the poem, the effect of the name is more than that of mere exclamation; the "by God" of the final verse-paragraph, spoken by a voice at first mysterious, suggests that it is only "by God"- by God's favour- that the county champion is able to win:

> But while the tide of battle ran so equal,
> I heard a sound, I took it for a voice,
> I almost saw it, spitting out a passage
> Between the haggard jaws of my poor hero,
> The voice as of a man almost despairing,

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[7] Ransom, J. C., "Emily Dickinson: A Poet Restored," in Richard B. Sewell, ed., *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, 1963, p. 92.

> Hoping again though all his hopes had failed:
> "By God, I'll have you down in one more minute!"
> And it was as he said; for in a minute
> He had him down, by God.

A poem about two strong men turns out to be a poem about the limits of man's strength. The lines that describe the wrestlers' extreme exertions,

> They sprang, they gripped, they strained and rocked and twisted,
> They pounded much good sod to dust and powder,

are touched with irony in the verbs; these are not the words of an aficionado, absorbed in the strength and grace of the athletes - no holds are described, no half-nelsons or headlocks - but share a sense of human puniness even here, and who might be imagined recalling, as he watches them pound "much good sod to dust," what the Bible says will come to human flesh. These lines of course do not set the tone for the whole poem: the poem ends with victory; but they allude to the context of human victories, a context that Ransom would say makes them all sweeter, as the labour of the threshers by daylight makes rest "all the sweeter after dark."

The problem in "The School" is threefold: distance, estrangement, and duality. The speaker ironically expresses his frustration and anger. It will emerge that the "The" preceding "School" suggests reference to two schools. Through the definite article, Ransom directs the reader to some particular school, as if he says "this is "the school" that causes all this estrangement and puzzlement" and he wants to tell the reader about that school.

The opening stanza introduces this first school, namely, the academic one of Greek literature. In this stanza, with its reference to classical studies, we can hear a voice very close to Ransom's own. It links to the first line of the following stanza with its "Grecian

thoughts". Thus, the opening stanza is an introductory statement suggesting that there are two schools to choose between, and the persona is puzzled about that choice. Ransom depicts events in Greek mythology to echo with those in the South at his time. But the levity of "whisking off to war" points to the presence of irony and distance. Ransom's use of his knowledge of classical literature is not uninflected.

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

Since the persona, perhaps Ransom himself, is equipped with "Grecian Thoughts" he asks a question that intensifies his distance from the rest of the community:

> Equipped with Grecian thoughts, how could I live
> Among my father's folk?

The question carries its own answer: the simple possession of the Grecian intellect indicates the persona's own alienation and distance from his community. He is no longer capable of understanding this community; and it is no longer suitable for him:

> ...My father's house
> Was narrow and his fields were nauseous.
> I kicked his clods for being common dirt,

The persona feels frustration, and then regrets being in this place, which may be the "Athens of the South"; but in fact has no use for these classics, since they are not the means of communication between him and his fellows:

> 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.

In this part of the stanza, the speaker introduces the second school, which is the "world" of his birth, in comparison and contrast with the academic, and this contrast intensifies his estrangement, regret, and distance from the community when he says; "Cursed the paternity that planted me". Ironically, the South used to like to think of itself as "Athenian" in her architecture and way of thinking, but now the persona is "One green leaf in a wilderness of autumn". The line indicates, as well, one of the qualities of persona: the speaker thinks of himself very highly and regrets being in such place and among these people with their narrow houses and chaotic meadows.

The persona here reminds us of the one in Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken", whereby he cannot make up his mind which road to take. In "The School", the persona is like Janus, the god who faces ironically in Ransom's poem, two contradictory ways. The persona here is looking upon the present moment of time through "a [mind] Equipped with Grecian thoughts". Tension in the poem is sustained without resolution in a single character. He is divided between his intellect and what he finds in the community. The persona's "Grecian Thoughts" split his ego into two since he measures what he sees in the community against his intellectual, scholastic model. This type of irony is very similar to Ransom's mature irony in his later poetry.

In accordance with this atmosphere, Ransom turns towards his second school with a mock religiosity:

> The Lord preserves his saints for Christian uses.
> He sent a pair of providential eyes.
> They would have sat in any witless head,

The scholar's head may be filled with the knowledge of Greece, but it still is "witless" and God has other purposes in the community in mind. The speaker had measured or

"deemed" them according to his classical intellect and found them useless. But at the end of the poem he says:

> And what were dead Greek empires to me then?
> Dishonored, by Apollo, and forgot.

The last two lines indicate and stress, tension and puzzlement in the nature of the speaker of the poem. The poem ends without any indication that the speaker took any of the possible roads. We leave him puzzled and confused in his choice. It is by his "Grecian thoughts" that he measures the new objects of his devotion, the eyes that "would have sat in any witless head," the "circumstantial" coin.

"Sickness" presents God as weak and unable to provide salvation or help for a dying person. God's tyranny is suggested here in a very unusual way: it is God's weakness that causes his cruelty. In the poem, God is in attendance, with an almost mocking solicitude, at the bedside of:

> The toughest carcass in the town
> Fell sick at last and took to bed,
> And on that bed God waited him
> With cool, cool hands for his frantic head,
> And while the fever did its dance

The narrator in the poem identifies God's presence with death's or the doctor's when he uses words like "Waited him", and "cool hands". The irony of the poem is apparent when it is discovered that God is not obviously cruel and harsh, but that his feeble kindliness has much the same, or worse effect:

> They talked, and a good thing was said:
> "See, I am not that Scriptural!
> A lesser, kinder God instead."

The reader is told that God cannot do anything to the dying person as:

> Fever must run its course, and God
> Could not do much for the countryman

implying that God at least belongs to the same imperfect world people inhabit. He is, however, able to save this dying person, ironically, from what are referred to as "certain dreams". Among these dreams of "a bruised, a beaten slave," a redemptive gesture from "God's white hand" is compared to the dashing of a stone on the sick man's head.

The criticism implied here is of those who see sufferings in the world as a mysterious exercise of God's mercy or beneficence and hope for salvation through this suffering:

> And did his best to smoothe the pain.
> The sick man said it was good to know
> That God was true, if prayer was vain.
> "O God, I weary of this night,
> When will you bring the dawn again?"
> The night must run its course, but God
> Was weary too with watching-strain.

The poem's conclusion implies doubt in the narrator's mind about the possibility of salvation in this world or even in the next. God watches the dying person speechless. All prayers and tortured knees are in vain now:

> On that imperfect break of day,
> "Now, Lord, I die: is there no word,
> No countervail that God can say?"
> No word. But tight upon his arm,
> Was God, and drew not once away
> Until his punctual destiny.
> To whom could God repair to pray?

The narrator at the end stresses the imperfection of the world and makes irony of those who thank God for his hostility and tyranny:

> Now God be thanked by dying men

Who comrades them in times like these,
Who dreads to see the doom come down
On these black midnight canopies
And on this poisonous glare of dawns.
The whole world crumples in disease,
But God is pitying to the end,
And gives an office to my knees.

The implication being that God's pity finds its only outlet in giving the knees something to do.

God in Nature

"The Swimmer," suggests a perverse kind of *carpe diem* way of thinking through the enjoyment of the moment in the speaker's life. The speaker points out that men gave up the hardships of life and hard work in the fields:

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

First, we find that there is conflict between body and soul. Worn down by "dog-days" when "grasses on the upland broil" and "eggs and meats and Christian spoil," the swimmer would resolve the conflict in favour of soul, whose voice is the voice of reason, and lets himself sink to the bottom of the water.

What do I need of senses five?
Why eat, or drink, or sweat, or wive?
What do we strive for when we strive?
What do we live for when alive?

The invitation to enjoy the moment is suggested and stressed through the speaker's doubt of the resurrection:

And what if I do not rise again,
Never to goad a heated brain
To hotter excesses of joy and pain?

Why should it be against the grain
To lie so cold and still and sane?

Water represents infinity to the swimmer, washing his body, and this suggests a pantheistic concept of Nature; where man and God become one:

The color of leaves in a starlight scene,
And it is as white as the stars between.

It is the soul's "native seat" and "forgiving element", "so long by forfeiture escheat" "the garden's curse is at least unsaid." Nevertheless, man is meant to find no such easy resolution of his dualistic state. Ransom views man as meaningless without evil. Whether the swimmer goes through with a literal suicide or not, he is the "wicked swimmer" for having in the language of the later "Painted Head," "traduced the flesh."

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

The poem suggests that life or Nature will be meaningless without evil, toil and hardship. Throughout the poem much of the criticism appears to be focused as much on the God who has created this harsh world and nature as on those men who are naïve enough not to recognize the discrepancy between their belief in a mild deity and their actual experience of life; thus the narrator has advanced to a further stage of religious scepticism although this level has not yet been satisfactorily expressed.

If we look for example at the first poem Ransom wrote, "Sunset", we find that this poem is about the incomprehension between a man who is impressed by the beauty of this world and a woman who sees such beauty as merely a reflection of God:

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

To me it is beautiful enough,
I am stirred,
I say grand and wonderful, and grow adjectival,
But to you
It is God.

The woman's look "terrifies" the lover, but he concludes that he will, however, simply wait until she "And her strange eyes / Come home from God."[8] Ransom's poem provides us with a clear statement of the conflict between immanence and transcendence, between the body of the world and the insubstantiality of the other world. This notion preoccupied Ransom throughout his life. In this poem religion is conceived of as an abstraction that takes away from the fullness of the world.

We see a young man address his woman as they both watch the sun set on the meadows and fields. To emphasise his point (a bit bluntly) each of the five verse-paragraphs ends with the word God. Ransom's 'earliest intellectual recollection' according to John L. Stewart, "was of fury against abstraction." There is an avoidance of the concrete in the idealization of the universe. The attitude of the girl of the poem shares a universal moment 'towards the sunset,' deflecting the beauty elsewhere.

Robert Penn Warren has remarked that Ransom as a poet can deal with the emotional and intellectual cares which are struggling in his mind and engaging it:

> If the theme of poetry had been, we can argue, of merely intellectual urgency, it would seem logical, in the light of his own special philosophical training and interest, to suppose that he would have approached the issue by the way of prose speculation. In any case, the issue was not...merely of intellectual and professional concern; it had been, and was being lived into... From this poetry would spring because poetry gave the only way to deal with the issue.[9]

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[8] Ransom, J. C., "The Question of Justice", *Yale Review*, iv, July 1915, pp. 684-98.
[9] Warren, R. P., "Notes on the Poetry of John Crowe Ransom at His Eightieth Birthday", *Kenyon Review*, xxx, 1968, pp. 322-23.

Warren's observation implies that Ransom had already lived into and resolved emotionally the issues he was dealing with in these early poems even before he came to write them.

In "Darkness", the speaker is very pessimistic about nature's attitude towards him losing faith in God and his creation:

> When hurrying home on a rainy night
> And hearing tree-tops rubbed and tossed,
> And seeing never a friendly star
> And feeling your way when paths are crossed:
> Stop fast and turn three times around
> And try the logic of the lost.

The speaker here is lost, confused and has no hope in anything. The speaker is describing man as one lost in darkness where there is no star to lead you. Moreover, your way is confused, so "crossed" that after many trials, there is only return to the same place. There is no hope but, ironically, to "try the logic of the lost". Then the speaker asks many questions expressing his loss of faith:

> Where is the heavenly light you dreamed?
> Where is your hearth and glowing ash?
> Where is your love by the mellow moon?

After the speaker expresses his loss of faith and his subsequent confusion, he ironically asks questions which only serve to intensify his loss of faith and his anger against what he expected to see but he did not find according to the promises of religion. In the second part of the stanza he answers himself, remarking that there is not even lightning in such a rainy night. Nothing other than fear and anger:

> Here is not even a lightning-flash,
> And in a place no worse than this
> Lost men shall wail and teeth shall gnash.

At the end of the poem, the speaker's anger and loss of faith reach its climax. He does not even trust anything he sees. And if there were to be lightning, it would fade quickly, and dawn will not shine. Darkness, loss of love and faith and confusion would be prevail:

> Lightning is quick and perilous,
> The dawn comes on too slow and pale,
> Your love brings only a yellow lamp.
> Yet of these lights one shall avail:
> The dark shall break for one of these,
> I've never known this thing to fail.

In "Geometry", there is a comparison and contrast between God and man. Man in the poem is the source of order in Nature, though it is order only for man himself. On the other hand, God is "a crazy God" who is young and cannot differentiate between "right" and "wrong". Additionally, the poem suggests that man, given the chance, might have designed Nature better than God has. The opening lines state the location where the narrator stands:

> My window looks upon a wood
> That stands as tangled as it stood

The time element that we saw in earlier poems such as "Noonday Grace" and "Grace" is now ambiguous. For the fourteen-year old Tennessean boy is now substituted a wise man who ironically, seems to God growing up in front of him:

> When God was centuries too young
> To care how right he worked, or wrong,

As God was "too young", he cannot know if what he is doing in Nature is good or bad, nevertheless:

> His patterns in obedient trees,
> Unprofited by the centuries
> He still plants on as crazily

As in his drivelling infancy.

The narrator is employing several adjectives that operate, ironically as they are not normally associated with deity. At the same time he offers a remedy for the anarchy God has caused in Nature. The ordered mind of the narrator suggests that the reader:

Imagine what a pretty thing
The slightest landscape-gardening
Had made of God's neglected wood!
I'm glad man has the hardihood
To tamper with creation's plan
And shape it worthier of man.
Imagine woods and sun-swept spaces,
Shadows and lights in proper places,
Trees just touching friendly-wise,
Bees and flowers and butterflies.

An easy thing to improve on God,
Simply the knowing of even from odd,
Simply to count and then dispose
In patterns everybody knows,
Simply to follow curve and line
In geometrical design.

He realizes, however, that such speculative improvements would be frustrated by a powerful though temperamental divinity:

But as for me, I keep indoors
Whenever he starts his awful roars.
What can one hope of a crazy God
But lashings from an aimless rod?

Even if the poem reads as an ironic criticism of the way man perceives God's arbitrariness in Nature, it also implies that Nature is a harsh and bitter place to live in, where the finiteness of man is in terrible contrast to Nature's infinite power and force.

All this would seem to suggest that Ransom's position in these poems, and perhaps more generally, was that of the sceptic or straightforward unbeliever. That this is not

quite the case can be seen in his letters and, more elaborately, in *God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy* (1930).

One aspect of Ransom's concept of God begins in his dismay at any attempt to reach a compromise between science and religion. This uneasiness emerges clearly in his letters to Allen Tate in the late 1920s. For example on July 4, 1929 in a letter to Tate Ransom argues:

> It is just as you say: Religion is fundamental and prior to intellect (or human) conduct on any plane. I had this in mind even in so secular a paper as my Southern one; but of course didn't venture to press the point there. Religion is the only effective defense against Progress, & our very vicious economic system; against empire and against socialism, or any other political foolishness. It is our only guarantee of security and - an item that seems to me to carry a good deal of persuasive power–the enjoyment of life. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of the wisdom; a big beginning, but only a beginning of which the end is the love of the Lord. Substitute nature for the Lord and he won't feel aggrieved. The Jews knew all about that in their Old Testament.[10]

Such an adaptation of orthodoxy to modern science is "fundamentally irreligious, or secular, both in its doctrines and in its works". Orthodoxy, Ransom contends, is more to be found in the religion of the Eastern, or Orthodox Church, less so in the Roman and Anglican churches, even less so again among the nonconformists, eventually tapering off "towards the vanishing point, by varying degrees which I could not define, into Unitarianism" - an observation that is certainly important in the light of Ransom's subsequent identification of the world's body.

God without Thunder is important to our understanding of the poetic theory which Ransom began developing after his last book of verse, *Two Gentlemen in Bonds* (1927). Ransom's devotion to literary criticism gave him the opportunity to evaluate nearly a

decade of poetic practice that was quite without explicit theory, and to clarify many issues that had been struggling for expression. The motive behind the book was to attack what he saw as the scientific way of thinking and it implicit definition of knowledge.

The main topic of *God without Thunder* concerns man's quest for an inscrutable God, a God that cannot be explained by rationalism or understood through scientific calculations. If man is to understand the relationship between the physical and metaphysical, then it is only through myth that man can comprehend and affirm this relationship. What Ransom is trying to do, he argues in his preface, is to explain the "function of myth in human civilization", and to point out "why one myth may be better than another". In short, he aims at showing where the modern American myth is going and to that extent the argument is sharply aware of its political and cultural implications.

Exploring Ransom's treatment of religion leads us to the concept of myth that he insists on giving a role throughout his poetic practice and theory. *God without Thunder* is where we can find some explanation of his decidedly eccentric theological views.

It is from this point of view of man's need for an inscrutable God that Ransom constructs his argument. According to Ransom, it is only through religious myth that man is able to bridge the gap between the physical and metaphysical realms and thus give a satisfactory account of his experience in a way that can "represent the fullness of the natural".

Ransom poses two questions which he argues to be fundamental for any defender of the religious tradition, to answer: "What is the intention of myth? And how does it relate to history and science?"[11]

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[10] Young, T. D. & Core, G., ed; *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, p. 180.
[11] Ransom, J. C., *God without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy*, Harcourt, Brace and

As a starting point, Ransom begins with the clash between science and religion. Ransom sees that "it is a pity that science and religion should fight! And it has not been the fault of science alone..."[12] Ransom insists that, "a scientific definition of the object is not false in the sense that it is not the truth, but only in the sense that it is not the whole truth."[13]

The issue of the struggle between science and religion was not an exclusively Ransomian one. When we examine the criticism of such contemporary critics as Allen Tate, we find the same attitude toward science. Tate expressed what we may call the antiscientific attitude:

> The point of view here, then, is that historicism, scientism, psychologism, biologism, in general the confident use of the scientific vocabularies in the spiritual realm, has created or at any rate is expression of spiritual disorder. That disorder may be briefly described as a dilemma.[14]

Thus, for Ransom and many of his contemporaries "myth" was intended to secure an alternative discourse separate from both science and religion and expressing aspects of expreience and understanding that neither of those realms comprehended.

Ransom tries to explain the "function of the myths in human civilization and to point out why one myth may be better than another". This may help, according to Ransom, in tracking down where and how the mythology of American civilization is working - or failing to work.

Ransom argues that historical orthodoxy is an accumulation of myths or stories, which reveal God as mysterious, and the author of both good and evil. Moreover, this God is worshipped through offerings and sacrifice. The finiteness of man is

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Company, New York, 1930, p. 56.
[12] Ibid, p. 11.
[13] Ibid, p. 259.

complemented by the greatness of this mysterious God who cannot be fully comprehended and who revealed himself to prophets in visions.

Ransom argues:

> Our historical orthodoxy was an aggregate of super-natural stories, or myths. As soon as I make this statement, I remember painfully that there is a certain state of mind which will reply: "Myths are for children, and I am adult, and I do not care to hear about your historical orthodoxy." Probably this state of mind is not the advanced mental age it supposes. But here it is enough to say: "Myth is the historic types. Our myths were taken partly from the Old Testament and partly from the New. We will examine in rather short order the part which was taken partly from the Old Testament, and which has to do with the question, Who was the God of Israel? I would fix attention upon only a few leading features, the ones which seem most peculiarly Hebraic, and the most foreign to the temper of our Occidental modernism.[15]

On the other hand, the new God is to be found in a particular view of nature, and here lies, according to Ransom, one of the most fundamental deficiencies of modern religious practice. For poets and religious men, nature is "feared and loved", but for scientists nature is "studied and possessed".

Naturalistic, scientific beliefs declare that one cannot know anything except nature and that there is nothing else to know. As far as we are concerned with physics this appears to be true, but when it comes to metaphysics it is untrue. Ransom argues, "Nature is for history the aggregate of observed facts. Nature is for science the aggregate of facts arranged in groups, or displayed as instances of types, or classified under headings."[16]

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[14] Tate, A., *On the Limits of Poetry*, Swallow Press, Denver, 1948, p. 4.
[15] Ransom, J. C., *God without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy*, p. 28.
[16] Ibid, p. 74.

Therefore, Ransom argues, the scientist blinds himself to all aspects of nature, which he cannot reason with, understand, or control. Moreover, the scientist sees God as the one who rules through law and through nature, which can be depended upon, a universe of "consistency, orderliness, and the beauty that goes with order".

On the contrary, the old religion did not assert God or nature as dependable, or that God "would surrender himself to laws formulated by man". The old religion asserted that God was wholly God, governing the entire universe and not part of it. To think otherwise would be to create a half-God or demigod which is merely comprehendible to man.

Consequently, the new God is no longer worshipped through offerings or sacrifice. The only sacrifice offered is through human welfare. This, in Ransom's viewpoint, ends religion as a significant influence on man's beliefs.

As a result, modern man cannot accept the validity of myth: he insists instead on facts. Because of man's reliance on scientific facts he cuts himself off from an important area of history and human civilization. It is through myth that man can know a God who embraces the whole universe in terms of time and space and reaches beyond the natural history.

Ransom argues that myths embody a unique approach to understanding, one which is unavailable to the scientific method. He argues:

> Religious doctrines are embodied in myths, and myths attempt to express truths which are not accessible to science. They are necessarily super-scientific, or super-natural, but they are not necessarily anti-scientific and un-natural. The myths which our historic orthodoxy employs are very old ones. It was their intention to be accurate so far as their scientific or natural content went, and only after that to transcend science or be supernatural. But scientific knowledge has advanced, until now these myths are definitely antiquated and objectionable on their scientific side. For instance, they represented God as presiding over a Ptolemaic universe. When science substituted the Copernican for

> the Ptolemaic universe, the defenders of the faith were placed in an embarrassing position. They might conceivably have modified the myths and represented God as presiding over a Copernican universe. They elected to dispute science so long as they could. The myths in their hands did not prove sufficiently elastic, they were not modified gracefully in points that were not quite critical. But the obstinacy of the religionists invited retaliation. Science proceeded to dispute the myths *in toto*, because it overestimated the importance of their purely natural features. It was mistaken in supposing these to be of the religious essence. And so the issue was joined. The controversy between two such unyielding opponents was a tragic one.[17]

The preceding passage describes how Ransom fuses Myth and religion and explains how religious doctrines are embodied in myths. Some further explanation of this passage comes later on in chapter seven when Ransom talks about the figure of Jesus Christ as a person. He argues that Jesus as a person, historically, was "wrapped" with myths as there is not a single document about him that provides "pure natural history" that is "free" from mythical additions.

However, what does Ransom means by "myth"? In addition, how does it work in literature?

Ransom defines "myth" as:

> A representation of the event which jumps clear out of the natural background. Its terms are pure fictions: supernatural terms, or terms which history knows nothing about. This is why science and religion conflict - this is why a bible composed by Eastern religionists is unsatisfactory to Western scientists.[18]

The explanation Ransom gives in *God Without Thunder* as to the exact status of myth and its relation to science and religion leaves, he says, four unanswered questions:

[17] Ibid, pp. 11-12.
[18] Ibid, p. 61.

...what lies beyond the ordered and classified facts? What lies out in further space beyond the immediate limits of visibility, what lies before and after the period of time which dates the observations? And what lies at the heart of any individual object, which makes it so much more complex than all the formulations the historian can give to it?[19]

Ransom argues that the answers to these questions cannot be based on scientific facts. A religionist "knows that nature is made and kept natural only by the virtue of a supernatural being that compels it; or, that one cannot account for the facts except by appealing to something not fact".[20] The names which the mythmaker has given to these metaphysical entities are God, Satan, Heaven, and Hell. The nature of these names is phenomenal; in other words, they have a mythical context and they are "enjoyed, repeated spontaneously and as an act of ritual, professed, practiced, believed, and held firmly...as a guide to conduct, passionately defended from competition, meant intensely and fiercely."[21]

Thus, the mythmaker created the story of Eden, Adam and Eve, and of Satan and the Fall. This myth, as Ransom reads it, presents the conflict of science and religion in the human mind and from the victory of science comes the first sin. After they had eaten from the forbidden tree, Adam and Eve realized they were naked and set out fashioning garments from fig leaves. As a kind of punishment God sentenced woman with subservience to her husband and the pain of childbirth, and man to toil and suffering, for both; death.

According to Ransom's reading of the story, the forbidden tree was science, which "scorned the simple, animal-like adaptation of man to his environment, and suggested

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[19] Ibid, p. 74.
[20] Ibid, p. 75.
[21] Ibid, p. 85.

that man ought to possess nature as he was entitled to." The myth here deals with man's attempt to rise above his origin and, thus, with the fact that he must return to dust; with his ascent to power by estranging himself from earth; with his fall from an economic status in which "he picked his living off a tree to one in which he kills animals and raises crops."

Ransom's argument here points towards his Agrarian thought especially when he talks about the myth of Cain and Abel which he reads it as a replacement of the pastoral economy by an agricultural one. The Fall was man's choice to turn away from "the idyllic simplicity of life, to seek to improve the human position at the expense of nature as an enemy." Man, according to Ransom, built an artificial environment, one much simpler than the natural one, and produces in consequence an illusion regarding nature's simplicity.

Further, "old orthodoxy" never asserted that either God or Nature was dependable or orderly, nor that God "would surrender himself to laws formulated by man". Therefore, the old God is complete because he rules the entire universe, not just that part that is intelligible to man.

This change of attitude towards deity is why the only sacrifice modern man can present to God is man's welfare. Man's welfare has become the standard of evaluation that governs man's attitude towards God. For Ransom this attitude would end the true spirit of religion and its significant influence on humanity. There is no more God of good and evil: there is only one God of good and whenever there is evil, science would take care of it and cure the problem.

It is for this reason that modern man denies myth and believes only in facts. He cannot accept myth that is essentially based on story or fables. Modern man's

explanations never go beyond his natural history and because he only employs part of history, an essential part of human experience is missing.

What is going on in America, but, for Ransom's purposes, particularly in the New South was that an amiable and understandable God was replacing the stern and inscrutable God of the Old Testament: "We wanted a God who wouldn't hurt us; who would let us understand him; who would agree to scrap all wicked thunderbolts in his armament. And this is just the God that has developed popularly out of the Christ of the New Testament: the embodiment mostly of the principle of social benevolence and of physical welfare."[22] Ransom's objection here is not to the unbelievers but to the believers who would pretend that the world is other than it really is: a harsh and difficult place. The doctrine to which he is opposed is:

> that God as the ruler of the universe governs it in such a manner as to make it accommodate itself to the welfare of man. The Earth is for man's abode; and god 'developed' it; this phrase suggests that his instrument was an evolutionary or scientific process. Thus God is a scientist; the universe is his workshop; but among his productions he has produced man, and all the other productions are for man's benefit."[23]

It is the synchronization of the Protestant Churches and modern science that is responsible for this viewpoint. If God is now indistinguishable from Nature, the point now is to study the law that would govern Nature itself. Ransom quotes R. A. Millikan, a Noble Laureate in physics, as a typical purveyor of the new religion. According to Millikan, "The idea that God, or Nature, or the Universe ... is not a being of caprice and

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[22] Ibid, p. 5.
[23] Ibid, p.16

whim" but instead rules through law in a universe of consistency and orderliness, "has *made* modern science, and it is unquestionably the foundation of modern civilization."[24]

In attacking this view, Ransom makes the first of many highly unorthodox assertions:

> The Jews [of the Old Testament] were scarcely prepared to say, with the moderns, that they possessed a God whose simple function was to promote their good. They found too much realistic testimony to the contrary. The God who governed their universe was a spirit so inscrutable, so contingent, so mysterious, that his works could never be fully accounted for, and among these works of his will were evidently works that brought suffering upon human beings. To put this into words of one and two syllables: *God is the author of evil as well as good, and one can never be sure which of the two is coming next.*[25]

One of the arguments that Ransom uses to justify this assertion is that there are two biblical accounts of King David's census of Israel: in the first, Satan moves David to number the people of Israel, while in the second Jehovah causes David to take the census.[26] It is as if Satan or evil is identical with God.

Ransom's belief that God is the author of good and evil does not, however, depend on textual evidence; he begins from the perception that the world is made up from a mixture of good and evil. But he is even willing to change the Bible to suit his views on divinity. He is pleased for example, when Job accepts the inscrutability of God's will, but then declares:

> I exercise my privilege again, and pass over as an unworthy anti-climax the epilogue in which God, who has thus humbled the pride of Job, relieves his sufferings and gives him twice as much of worldly prosperity as he had before. This is somebody's 'happy ending' which spoils tragedy.[27]

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[24] Ibid, p.31.
[25] Ibid, pp.39-40.
[26] Ibid, pp.41-42.
[27] Ibid,pp.50-51.

Ransom's romantic conservatism is the main driving force behind his defence not just of the South but also of its Southern Fundamentalism. Nevertheless, he formulated a defence in his own fashion with his enlightened reinterpretation of Orthodox Fundamentalism.[28] However, the theology Ransom developed is one of aestheticism rather than of religion. It is not really religion at all.

Again, in a letter written to Allen Tate, Ransom stated:

> Actually - for you and me and the elite whom I know - art is the true religion and no other is needed. And for me - if not for you and others of the elite - this art must beware of cosmologies and "the fixed points of reference" or it will quickly become a merely systematic religion and scheme of valuation[29].

The first time Ransom used the term aestheticism was in 1925 in *Thoughts of the Poetic Discontent.* In this article, Ransom refused any form of mystical communion with nature, whether romantic or religious. In a letter of 1926, Ransom discussed the term "religious MAGIC" that is to say any form of prayer or ritual which could serve to "placate this Objectivity" and so serve one's own needs. Ransom implied in this article a denial of a God or a creator as a subsistent person capable of changing nature and its course. Ransom's notion in this respect is "give us dualism, or we'll give you no art". Moreover, Ransom argues, this is tantamount to the struggle against science. Ransom not only applied this view to his poetic practice and theory but to his own life. It became a principle underlying his own aesthetic creation. In this respect, Ransom situated the poet and the critic as the true religionists:

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[28] Conservative religious movement that arose among members of various denominations early in the 20th century. Its aim is to maintain traditional interpretations of the Bible and what its adherents believe to be the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. The movement developed (1909) in reaction to the emergence of liberal theology, which attempted to recast Christian teachings in light of the scientific and historic thought of the time.

[29] [Spring?] 1926.

> The poets are through with cosmologies and Magical Views. In the place of these vulgarisms, these obsessions with pure magnitude, they will simply exhibit the infinite of quality that is in every situation anywhere, anytime....In the poet's art we will have to see, if we are willing to look at all, the Objectivity of the World; this is a dreadful, an appalling, a religious, and a humble attitude to which we will come after the conceited Objectivism into which we have been persuaded by the practical and scientific life alike.[30]

A true poet then, according to Ransom, is in possession of the proper aesthetic stance toward the world. In this respect, the poet as a religious thinker is a synonym for Ransom's aesthetic preoccupations. The critic is, also, endowed with a kind of religious function since aesthetics has replaced religion. Further, critics must not involve themselves with any formula, concept, or system whether of religion, science, or even philosophy since any "Supersensible" is abstract. Additionally, critics must insist on the sensible perception of the surrounding world. So sensible objects are the only things worth grasping in the world.

Ransom was also consolidating his views on aesthetics in an article entitled "The Third Moment". In the letter sent in 1927 to Allen Tate, Ransom opposed the Oriental or Mystical mind and its tendency for pure quality to scientific perception and its abstract concept of perceiving facts. Ransom argued that neither is capable of true art: "what we require as intelligence is the conflict of the two principles".

He defines the way of life of the Old South by stressing the freedom of the human sensibility. He formulates his own notions of myth in order to explain the motivation for art, religion, dream, social ritual, and all modes of aesthetic enjoyment. The result was a manuscript "Giants for Gods" published as *God without Thunder*, a panorama of

[30] Young, T. D. and Core, G., ed., *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, [February 20, 1927].

Ransom's speculative thought that embraces Agrarianism, art, aesthetics, metaphysics, epistemology, science, psychology, industrialism, literary theory, myth, and probably religion. It is one of the best ways of looking at Ransom's *Poems about God.*

Although it was written eleven years later, in 1930, *God without Thunder* mirrors Ransom's concept of God and the kind of religion developed in his first volume *Poems about God.* It seems in many ways to be a reinterpretation of the poems of his first volume or an elaborate apologia for them. He is defending the way of life in the South and its fundamentalism. However, as Ransom stated frankly in the subtitle of the book, it is "An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy." If we are to say that religion entails the belief that there is a God, nothing in the book states this directly.

But in the end, Ransom sees the religious mentality as mystic or fictive. Ransom is trying to explain to the Western world the importance of myth in human life: "it has occurred to me therefore that I might undertake to explain to it [the Western world], the function of the myths in human civilization."[31] Ransom argues that for an individual to live well in this world he should have his proper myths:

> We mean by religion, usually, a body of doctrine concerning God and man. But the doctrine which defines God, and man's relation to God, is really a doctrine which tries to define the intention of the universe, and man's proper portion within this universe. It is therefore the fundamental philosophy, it expresses the conviction he holds about his essential destiny, and it is bound to be the determining influence upon his conduct[32].

This becomes, then, a programme involving three steps: rejecting the New God of the New Testament (Jesus Christ as son of God), restoring the God of the Old Testament

[31] *God without Thunder*, p. x.
[32] Ibid, p. 3.

whom science had rejected, and finally formulating the proper myths that an individual should live by to enjoy aesthetic modes:

> Orthodox means the religion of the historically elder varieties that antedated modernism. Orthodoxy - the religion which now is losing in the Western world — is therefore such a religion as that of the Eastern or Orthodox Church. Perhaps a little less, it is that of the Roman and Anglican Churches, and perhaps still less that of several major non-conformist communions. From there orthodoxy tapers off towards vanishing point, by varying degrees which I could not define, into many local Congregational units, into Christian Science; and into philanthropic societies with a minimum of doctrine about God, like the Young Men's Christian Association, welfare establishments, fraternal organizations, and Rotary[33].

According to Ransom, religion is not a secular code of conduct or an ethic but a form of worship. However, you cannot have religion without God. Ransom culls two implications from the manifesto that he saw as very objectionable; he argues that:

> I believe there are at least two doctrines implied here which are of all importance in the new religion. The first of these is that God as a ruler of the universe governs it in such a manner as to make it accommodate itself to the welfare of man. The earth is for man's abode; and God "developed" it; this phrase suggests that his instrument was an evolutionary or scientific process. Thus God is the scientist; the universe is his workshop; but among his productions he has produced man, and all the other productions are for man's benefit.
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> The second doctrine would seem to be this: Man is Godlike himself. God is the great original scientist, but man is himself a little scientist. For he can understand God's scientific techniques, and he can actually in considerable degree apply them in the human sphere, anticipating God and hastening the course of his good works[34].

However, it is not clear that Ransom is substituting the God of the New Testament for a mystical or fictive God, but what is obvious here is that there is a motivation for his

[33] Ibid, pp.4-5.

insistence on his view of the Old Testament God: "by poets, religionists, Orientals, and sensitive people, nature is *feared and loved* - hardly one without the other. But by scientists and modern Occidentals nature is studied and possessed"[35]. Ransom acknowledges that the universe is, at least partly, amenable to science but he maintains that the new religionists, whom he calls "Christian Scientists" "represent evil in general as temporary, identical, negligible, and slightly uncomfortable phenomenon, which hardly deserves an entry in the theological ledger. They have no god for it."[36]

Ransom here is not giving an accurate or sensible account of any formal religion or science; he is constructing his own myth about religion to achieve some compromise between religion and scientific discourse.

Ransom's contribution in the interpretation of religion here is a contrast between science and religion, nature and the supernatural, fact and myth. Though Ransom is not well acquainted with what he called "Oriental studies", nevertheless, he is obsessed by the Hebraic-Oriental mind (in the form of the Talmud) and this placed him in conflict with the Western mind that is more concerned with provable and observable fact. He argues:

> The interpreters have fallen into two general classes, of which one class has a Hebraic, Oriental, symbolistic cast of mind, while the other class is Occidental, scientific, modern and anthropological. I feel compelled to take the former group as the better authority: their credential impress me. But I must make this disclaimer: I have not a proper background for valuing these authorities, especially the former one - I am far from learned in Oriental studies. My acquaintance is quite insufficient with the Talmud, which was the work of the learned commentators upon the Scriptures; with the Cabbala, which represents the learning of still more learned and esoteric religionists; with the Hebrew language,

[34] Ibid, p. 16.
[35] Ibid, p. 31.

> which was so evidently the construction of priests, and crowded with esoteric meanings; with the labors of the neo-Platonists of the early Christian era who eagerly interpreted all religious myths whatsoever, including the Scriptural - and it is only from an Occidental remoteness and with an Occidental backwardness that I can define what seems to be distinctive in the Oriental mind generally, skilled as it obviously is in the creation and understanding of myths[37] .

Or in other words, he knows little of what these authors have to say, but does like the kinds of stories they tell.

When Robert Lowell submitted some poems to Ransom for the *Kenyon Review*, among them "Land of Unlikeness", and "Winter Sea", accompanied with a short prose essay, these poems and essays were "cries for us to recover our ancient freedom and dignity, to be Christian and build a Christian society"[38]. They were also a kind of defence of religious belief. Lowell regarded Ransom as an important mentor. Hence Ransom's letter to Lowell on April 27, 1943, which though accepting some of the poems, also makes very clear his rejection of Lowell's religious viewpoint:

> I'll give my objection to your position very briefly without documenting it. I think you argue that Thomism makes for human happiness, and I'm aware that it does, with *many minds*; with others it doesn't work. Thomism is philosophy as well as recorded "revelation"; as philosophy it's exposed to the liabilities of philosophy, and is countered by other philosophy. You are too easy about that, saying that "by guaranteeing certain demonstrable but arduous truths, Christian Revelation did actually confirm and liberate philosophy." But how can somebody else (was it the Pope, about 1870?) guarantee a truth to us? In what manner will compensation be made if it's found to be falsity rather than truth? And what were the specific arduous truths? You tend to want a kind of philosophy that

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[36] Ibid, p. 40.
[37] Ibid, p. 55.
[38] Hamilton, I., *Robert Lowell: A Biography*, New York, 1982, p. 72.

subordinates itself, and quits applying its method, at a certain point; but that's not philosophy in my estimation[39].

What is important about the letter is that it shows how deeply Ransom was committed to the requirements of a thoroughly philosophical investigation of the grounds of the human activities and beliefs. In the letter Ransom argues, "There is no hope of understanding religion unless it can receive a modern and therefore secular description"[40].

What best describes Ransom's religious point of view is his own expression 'backslid':

I have never imposed my own faith on anybody particularly, but for this occasion I do not mind calling it Unitarian. I had backslid from my father's faith to that position even before I came upon Kant the Transcendentalist who did not care to make images of the Unknown God. And that is exactly the position which nowadays even the clergy of most churches, including the Roman Catholic, have found themselves desperately studying and frequently accepting[41].

Ransom was trying to define faith with some kind of philosophical validity. Ransom's main problem with religion lies in his suffering from his own loss of belief in the tradition into which he had born in 1888 in rural Tennessee, a loss that initiated a process of redefining and reevaluating the religious experience. His starting point was with the great Victorian doubters such as Matthew Arnold as well as Thomas Hardy. Ransom was exposed to the higher criticism of the Bible that had developed extensively in the German Universities in the nineteenth century. The higher criticism of the Bible developed new theories concerning such matters such as the authorship of the Pentateuch, and the Book of Isaiah, the historical accuracy of the events of the Old and New Testaments, and the dating of the various gospel accounts of the life of Jesus. Published

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[39] Young, T. D. & Core, G., *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, p. 308.
[40] Hamilton, I., *Robert Lowell: A Biography*, p. 121.

in the *Methodist Quarterly Review*, Ransom's theories were a kind of reevaluation of the biblical texts and of religion in general. They were naturalistic in their exploration of the hope of preserving a liberal and intelligent faith in a new scientific age. But the result was that Ransom's confidence in the historical truth of the Bible was destroyed, in much the same way as Arnold's had been. Later, Ransom was to draw attention to the parallel between his own experience and that of Arnold:

> To me the most resonant and tragic version of the decline of institutional religion has been Arnold's perfect statement, pointing to the vulnerable spot in the defense of the establishment by its guardians: "Our religion has materialized itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact and now the fact is failing it." The Old Testament they regarded as history, till upset by their own "liberal theologians" a short while ago; and the damage spread, much more than influentially, to the reputation of the New Testament[42].

By this argument, Ransom is distancing himself from any religious orthodoxy. Schleiermacher, a German theologian, whose criticism of the Bible Ransom read, and who theorized a new way of viewing religion characterized by doubt and distrust of any kind of supernaturalism, is the cornerstone of Ransom's creed. No wonder then that Ransom's favorite topic among his students in Vanderbilt University after World War I is reported to have been "the extent to which the higher criticism of the Bible had undermined the elements of the Christian faith"[43]. In this sense, Arnold, for Ransom, is a parallel not a model. In E. D. H. Johnson's *The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry*, Ransom would simply refer to Arnold as suffering "from the breakdown of faith, which perhaps was the most poignant of the spiritual maladies of the Century; if our Century seems

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[41] Ransom, J. C., *The World's Body*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1938, p. 376
[42] Ransom, J. C., *The New Criticism*, New York, 1941, pp. 202-3.
[43] Young, T. D., *Gentleman in a Dustcoat*, Louisiana State University Press, 1976, p. 91; interview with Alec B. Stevenson, July 23, 1915.

different, it may become an acute pain has become Chronic and low-grade, so that perhaps most writers just make the best of it"[44].

Another important factor in Ransom's creed is the deep effect that Thomas Hardy's poetry had upon him. Hardy, who had been affected by Darwin's theories and the higher criticism of the Bible, provides a parallel model as well. However, there is a literary kinship between Hardy's verse and Ransom's creed. This is quite clear in Ransom's *Selected Poems of Thomas Hardy*, edited with preface by Ransom.

Ransom likened Thomas Hardy's poems to "fables" because they present "natural images" for gods in action or sometimes helpless inaction. Ransom says:

> The sharp and homely detail of the country naturalist in Hardy is not compromised by the presence of deity and his ministers; these are made to answer his own language to the naturalist or his spokesman in the poem. The tone of the composition may be altogether grave and earnest. But fable is a self-confessed fiction by an independent thinker, therefore very free in its images[45].

It was in Thomas Hardy's poems that Ransom found intellectual and emotional kinship. In his remarks on Thomas Hardy's verse, he depicts him as a naturalist wanting to find his God. Hardy's poetic endeavour was the work of "a metaphysical imagination, in the service of theological passion". Poetry was, for Hardy, an ideal place to indulge these speculations. Thus, Ransom goes on to depict and explore in his poems the theological scheme and pattern which Hardy develops in his art. Ransom notes that while the rhythms of, for example, *The Subalterns*, "are derived from church hymns, when one comes to meaning, which is our concern here, one finds that it is unacceptable to the orthodox mind and to some extent heretical."[46] What the poem suggests to Ransom is

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[44] Ransom, J. C., "Alienation a Century Ago," *Kenyon Review*, xv, Spring, 1953, p. 336.
[45] Ransom, J. C., ed., *Selected Poems of Thomas Hardy*, p. x.
[46] Ibid, p.xi.

that "Hardy exemplifies 'the classical spirit.'" From Ransom's description of this 'classical spirit', one can see that Ransom is talking about something very similar to his own:

> Its faith is in a created world in which our species can manage very well because we are adapted biologically to it, and by acting rationally become better adapted. The Subalterns such as we can distinguish must execute its laws, but they are at least as beneficent as they are harsh. Though the final outcome for individual man is death, he has a good chance to realize his share of happiness; and this for him, peculiarly among the created forms of life, is conscious and thrilling precisely because of his sense of the perils by which it is invested. He feels that the world is good, perhaps that it is the best of all possible worlds, as the religious philosopher said; and when he thinks of its creator he would be theologically of some Deistic persuasion[47].

Ransom suggests that exposure to the arguments of Darwin's *Origin of Species* and listening to the proponents of the higher criticism of the Bible must have precipitated in Hardy a crisis of faith. Hardy's first efforts in literature may have been undertaken "to confirm and publish his own theological speculations"[48] and then to display his own lost childhood beliefs. Ransom argues:

> We think of him wishing that he might return to the religious community of his boyhood, to the old faith, and the physical Church and its hymns. He was deterred, as many another naturalists must be more or less, by his conscientious objection to reciting the belief that God interposes in the execution of the natural law of the faithful Subalterns. But he had the Spirit of Irony to mitigate his distress. The ironic disposition of evil may look to us like an interim arrangement, while he was collecting his wits and gathering his courage again; and so it was. Yet there is a massive but naughty pleasure in one's indecision when the choice is between two conflicting allegiances so momentous as Science and Faith, and naturally can be prolonged. If deprived by some compunction of this refuge he would have had to

[47] Ibid, pp. ix, xiv-xv, xx.
[48] Ibid, p. xx.

> embrace Science and go without Faith. But meanwhile it is as if he were holding in abeyance the processes of nature while he gave time to some transcendent order to assert itself. We understand the sequel; irony became his rule[49].

Poems about God shows in terms of discussion and impression that there is a conflict or struggle among the poems, and this conflict is within Ransom himself. We seem to hear Ransom's own voice in these poems, because it is as if Ransom has put his inner war onto paper. Additionally, we can consider that this volume is an outburst against the injustice of God and universe. However, some soothing lines engage with conventional piety and from this point springs Ransom's irony. Unrelentingly, Ransom, throughout the entire volume, is critical of the religious phenomenon, not just in terms of "God" but also in the way common Americans worship him.

Ransom claims here that most Americans, including himself, are using the word God as merely a term. Ransom simply sidesteps the metaphysical issue when he observes that God's name is taken here "in ways that are not the ways of the fathers. I reply in advance, there are many mountains; and probably every one of them is worthy of being charted on the true Chart of God's world"[50].

The vague uneasiness of the last sentence apart, it is still rather odd to assert that God's name is being invoked "in tones of love", because almost all of the poems are indignantly and severely critical either of the deity himself or those who are foolish enough to worship him. Though the introduction suggests a studiously schematized treatment of a theme, this is not borne out in practice. Despite the occasional use of

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[49] Ibid, p. xxiv.
[50] Ibid, p. vii.

hymn-like rhythms, the poetry is anything but devotional. It is ironic in the very absence of a religious tone in poems even the term God appears and it is this very absence that seems systematic.

As Robert Penn Warren's remarks on the emotional and intellectual impact of the conflicts that were engaging Ransom:

> If the theme of poetry had been, we argue, of merely intellectual urgency, it would seem logical, in the light of his own special philosophy training and interest, to suppose that he would have approached the issue by way of prose speculation. In any case, the issue was not....merely of intellectual and professional concern; it had been, and was being lived into....from this the poetry would spring because poetry gave the only way to deal with the issue[51].

If Warren's observation is correct then it might be said that Ransom "lived into" and resolved the issues he was dealing with in these early poems even before he came to write about them. This is true in so far as Ransom's common persona in the poems is the Tennessee farmboy and that what a farmboy might say is not what we will expect a twenty-eight-year-old scholar to say. The result is the treatment of "a great issue [which] often seems merely absurd, merely bathetic"[52]. In 1969 Ransom put the matter more acutely when he described the volume as characterized by "blatant and inconsistent theologizing"[53].

At this early age, Ransom regarded piety and Deity as merely human creations through which man expresses his sense of mystery. Moreover, Ransom rejects the puritan attitudes of the religious phenomenon because this Puritanism limits the human

[51] Warren, R. P., "Notes on the Poetry of John Crowe Ransom at His Eightieth Birthday," *Kenyon Review*, xxx, 1968, pp. 322-23.

capabilities and imagination toward self-recognition and awareness as well as joy. In this respect and through his poems Ransom stresses the importance of rational humanism and this clarifies the use of irony, extended ambiguity and dualism. It is quite clear that Ransom only trusts his own senses, his mind, and that is why he holds to an ironical inspection of the moral conventions of his time and place. However, in this respect he may be accused of evasion through wit, such as in the use made of courtly terms like "gallant", "valiant" "dainty" and "cavalier", however ironically they are employed by the speaker who is, only occasionally, Ransom himself. This made Vivienne Koch comment on the volume saying that it is "transparently autobiographical"[54]. In any case, *Poems about God* is essentially retrospective though complicated by the feelings of disillusionment experienced in wartime. It mirrors his own youthful confusion about religion.

Poems about God reminds the reader of Robert Frost. The volume is Frostian in depicting the details of the country life. When Ransom embarked upon the theme of his volume Frost's fame was remarkable. Published in 1915, *A Boy's Will, Mountain Interval* and *North of Boston*, were all quite familiar to the American reader. "Grace", is a Southern version of "Death of The Hired Man." Ransom's predilection for the rural and domestic scenes as well as humour is skilfully employed. However, Frost made the narrative discourse his framework in most of his poems while Ransom is more descriptive though there is some narration of the circumstances in some poems.

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[52] Ibid, p. 326.
[53] Ransom, J. C., *Selected Poems*, 3rd ed., New York, 1969, p. 112.
[54] Koch, V., "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom", in Young, T. D., ed., *John Crowe Ransom: Critical Essays*, p. 116.

Unlike Frost, Ransom rarely employs a dramatic framework. Most of the poems in *Poems about God* are "I" poems and they are quasi-autobiographical in their technique. In the poems, we can see Southern people, rather like the poet's parents, reference to women e.g., the Tennessean boy's mother in "Noonday Grace", a great deal of talk about eating habits, country scenery, and a sense of sin that is mostly related to sex.

> What is most impressive about the poems, however, when viewed in the light of Ransom's origins and his later development, is their God-searching. They indicate how unwilling Ransom was, despite his philosophical bent and his voyaging far from the orthodox Protestantism of his Methodist background, to give up the traditional small-town religious attitude. The poems are almost all explorations of the human condition in a world that has moved away from theological certainty. And that world is generally found to be unavoidable but unsatisfactory.[55]

> *Poems about God* is a hungry book. What the poet has found thus far, in place of the orthodox Methodist past, is pretty bland and unappetizing. He consumes it, but with a wry face. He is on the lookout for something better, more pleasing to the palate. It *ought* to exist somewhere.[56]

For John Crowe Ransom the title of the volume, *Poems about God*, should have been actually rendered as *Poems about "God"*, for as Ransom noted in the introduction which he wrote in France in 1918 when he was serving as an artillery officer in World War I, it is not a personal god that the poems are dealing with but rather a *term* "the most poetic of all terms possible": "a term always being called into requisition during the great moments of the soul, now in tones of love and now indignantly; and was the very last word that a man might say when standing in the presence of that ultimate mystery to which all our great experiences reduces" (vi-vii)[57].

In effect, the poems reveal a great deal about the poet without representing him

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[55] Rubin, L. D. JR., "The Wary Fugitive: John Crowe Ransom", *The Sewanee Review*, Fall, 1974, p. 568.
[56] Ibid, p. 589.

directly. *Poems about God* launches an all-out war against the abstract in terms of a critique of religion. The volume suggests that a proper study of the duality of man's experience provides a desirable knowledge; because it is not possible to obtain this knowledge through reason or scientific discourse.

To sum up, though *Poems about God* provides the reader with a considerable insight into Ransom's early thinking on religious themes, yet the reader constantly feels that there is some sort of conflict or struggle in the poems - a conflict more extensive than the overt irony would encompass. The overwhelming impression of the volume is that it is the output of an author who has abandoned orthodox Christianity but who has not yet developed an alternative philosophy.

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[57] Ransom, J. C., *Selected Poems*, New York, 1969, p. 112.

The Fugitive *Ego* in the American South

The relation between literature and the culture of the region in which it is produced has been explored in many ways since Taine advanced his theory of literature as the product of "race, epoch, and era."[1] But the development of a sizable body of distinguished literature in the South during and after World War I has seemed to pose the matter in fresh terms. Therefore, it is the main concern of the present chapter to explore how operative this relation is in the Southern literary-scene during the Fugitive movement 1922-25, focusing on John Crowe Ransom's poetry during this early phase of his poetic career.

Since regional pride played an important role in the beginning and development of the Fugitive movement it is suggested that the movement might be viewed as an embodiment of this relation between the literature of the South and its culture. "Despite protestations to the contrary, it must be surmised that regional pride played a considerable role in the poetic excitement of 1922."[2] The beginning of the movement can be taken as marking a beginning of the Southern Renaissance.

However, what may first draw our attention to the movement and its magazine, is its name, "The Fugitive". This is a word which has always been associated with outlaws and wanted persons, perhaps even the likes of Jesse James. The Fugitives were aware of the association and that it might invite ridicule, as Allen Tate later pointed out. On the other hand, it has tempted critics of the group and of their poetry, mindful perhaps of *fin de siècle* overtones, to regard this name with excessive seriousness as if it convicts the group of escapism. But if the group saw themselves as fleeing from anything, it may be that it was from an easy and conventional sentimentality too often encountered in Southern literature.

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[1] Taine, Hippolyte, *Histore de la Litérature anglaise*, Paris, 1864, p. 3.
[2] Bradbury, M. John, *The Fugitives: A Critical Account*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1958, p. 5.

In the preface of the first issue of the magazine, Ransom wrote, "THE FUGITIVE flees from nothing faster than from the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South."[3] One year later, Donald Davidson enlarged Ransom's interpretation of the group and argued:

> If there is a significance in the title of the magazine, it lies perhaps in the sentiment of the editors (on this point I am sure we all agree) to flee from the extremes of conventionalism whether old or new. They hope to keep in touch with and to utilize in their work the best qualities of modern poetry, without at the same time casting aside as unworthy all that is established as good in the past.[4]

The beginnings of the movement were complex, but we can isolate several important factors: a reaction against the kind of literature being produced in the South at that time, memories of civil strife among the people of the same nation, and a conflicted response to Modernism. These factors contributed to the dislocation that was felt by many men of letters at that time. In addition,

> Much of the trouble was a direct result of the World War I: the wholesale intimate contact of the provincial South's youth with the youth of the other sections, the aftermath of disillusion and moral decay, from which the South was not exempt; the insecurity brought in by the immediate postwar depression with its accompanying fears and search for scapegoats.[5]

However, the origin of the Fugitive movement was not political. In a letter sent by William Elliott to Alec Stevenson during the summer of 1915, which marks the beginning of the informal phase of the Fugitive movement, William Elliott gave vivid evidence of the "Olympian" conversation flourishing just off the Vanderbilt University Campus that summer:

> Right now I am having what debutantes twitter "a gorgeous time." Nat Hirsch, Stanley Johnson, Donald Davison, John Crowe Ransom, and Sidney Hirsch were the company last night and it was

[3] Forward, *The Fugitive*, I, No. I April 1922, I.
[4] Unpublished MS., March 10, 1923.
[5] Bradbury, M. John, *The Fugitives: A Critical Account*, p. 8.

Olympian. I am living in the rare altitude this summer, though I haven't gone to Monteagle yet. We get together often and I feel myself grow.[6]

The letter focuses on a significant point in the history of the Fugitive movement for in it is described a meeting of men who possessed that rare binding quality necessary to the formation of a group. It is also evident in the letters that this group, who later became the Fugitive poets, were primarily interested in philosophical inquiry. Seven years before the beginning of the magazine and the formal phase of the movement in 1922, the group was already discussing philosophical as well as aesthetic problems.

In the beginning, the Fugitives largely ignored politics - they instead focused on literature. They did not pay attention to politics until the Scopes "Monkey Trial" in Dayton, Tennessee, at which time the group felt it necessary to expand their focus. The trial involved a violation of a Tennessee statute prohibiting the teaching of evolution in Public Schools. The Fugitives, especially Davidson, felt the trial was a contrived affair. They felt it was "conducted in a circus atmosphere under a powerful spotlight of national publicity and was designed to ridicule the local culture and humiliate the plain folk of Tennessee."[7]

But the "plain folk" rhetoric indicates another source of unease: though their town considered itself "the Athens of the South," the Fugitives, as university men, were not always regarded by the Southern community with fond admiration. Moreover, "though a Southern respect of privacy insured their being let alone and virtually unobserved,"[8] it was not always possible to distinguish this from neglect or even contempt. After all, the Fugitives stood for rationalism. They associated rationalism with the classical and humanist tradition identified with the freedom of

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[6] July 23, 1915.
[7] Havard, W. C., "Agrarians, Vanderbilt", in *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1989, p.1127.
[8] Cowan, Louis, *The Fugitive Group: A Literary History*, Louisiana State University Press, 1959, p. 5.

academic life. Though in some cases the university showed a degree of indifference to their creativity, it nonetheless provided the group with a world where they could function and express their thoughts as poets and critics. "In its peculiar mixture of the erudite and the homely, the universal and local, Vanderbilt was to furnish to the Fugitives the contrast of conditions needed for the operation of intellectual creativity."[9] The Fugitives, in turn, developed a commitment to what they regarded as exemplary Southern values. This commitment did not initially express itself as a reaction against progress *per se*, but (ominously) "sometimes in cultural crises there are particular arenas where opposing ideas and beliefs can come together in close contact as on the stage, the ensuing dramatic conflict revealing their true nature."[10] Ransom's attitudes were also influenced by the fact that when he first came to the university, the curriculum was, to a significant extent, dominated by the study of the classics, a discipline which has conventionally been at the centre of the civilized man's study throughout Western history.

The Vanderbilt scholars were also imbued with the concept of destroying all the barriers between the South, the North, and the West (California). Destroying all the barriers was to be achieved through economic development: according to *The Alumnus*, money "flowed like a beneficent river."[11] Additionally, education was the means that gave substance to the traditions of the Old South. One of these concept leaders was Professor Andrew Lipscomb, ex-chancellor of the University of Georgia. Twenty years later (in 1893) Chancellor J.H. Kirkland indicated continuity with the same conception of the goals of the university: "we are working for...the good of the

[9] Ibid. p. 5.
[10] Ibid. p. 5.
[11] The Vanderbilt, *Alumnus*, X, No. 6 (May, 1925), p. 185.

whole country," he announced; "No spirit of narrowness of prejudice controls us here."[12]

The idea of the South was conceived therefore in this initial phase, as nonsectional in terms of spirit. The egalitarian desire of the New Southern leaders was to make the South like the rest of the nation. The internationalization of the South was to be based on a nineteenth century liberalism aimed at producing cosmopolitan American citizens who were cultivated, humane, and successful. In the South, the bases on which the educational system stood were: comparative prosperity, sound intellectual achievement and a sturdy popular approval - all bound together by liberal Protestantism. Chancellor Kirkland saw the university as embodying confidence and tolerance: "we demand first of all that our professors shall be Christian men and competent scholars,"[13] he announced, "but further than that we have no question to ask and no instructions to give." Moreover, it was "with scholars and Christian gentlemen that the teaching staff was filled and, indeed, with men drawn from various locations outside the South."[14] A good example of this is Kirkland himself, who took his Ph.D. from Leipzig, and was professor of Latin. Herbert Cushing Tolman, who had received his doctorate from Yale, was professor of Greek.

In addition, many other doctors of philosophy were on the faculty of the Academic Departments, their cosmopolitanism manifesting that freedom from localism that the university's founders had proclaimed as an ideal, and which was to have a profound effect on the young men who later on became the Fugitives.

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[12]Cowan, Louis, *The Fugitive Group: A Literary History*, p. 6.
[13] *Proceeding and Addresses at the Installation and Inauguration of James Hampton Kirkland, Ph.D.* (Nashville: Published by the University, 1893), p, 46.
[14] Cowan, Louis, *The Fugitive Group: A Literary History*. p. 7.

In the meantime, the Fugitives were seriously interested in aesthetic questions. Their experience in philosophy had made possible an intellectual exchange and intermingling of various personalities that defined and strengthened identity. "They tended to shore themselves up in aesthetic-intellectual preoccupations. They could not and did not ignore their immediate surroundings. Nashville, Vanderbilt, and Dr. Edwin Mims[15] were daily realities to most of them and each of them contributed to the self-consciousness as well as to the alienation of the group."[16] The alienation spoken of here stemmed in part from the fact that in society at large although the lessons of the Civil War were by then fifty years old, still the bitterness of the war and the reconstruction that followed were an important part of the Southern mentality.

This self-conscious partial alienation led the Fugitives to attempt an analysis of the social situation and the fabric of the Southern community. The title of the magazine was itself (despite the connotations noted above) intended to imply this sense of isolation from the rest of the community. In fact, alienation became a constant theme in their poetry:

> And if an alien, miserably at feud
> With those my generation, I have reason
> To think to salve the fester of my treason:
> A seven of my friends exceeds much multitude.
> (Ego-*The Fugitive*)

The theme of the alienation of the artist from his society was banal enough - but in this case it regarded a very particular (and non-bourgeois) society: the American South - "the Brahmins of the Old South"[17] as the opening statement declared.

The magazine set a high intellectual tone. Poems like "Ego," by Ransom, "An Intellectual Funeral," by Johnson, and "To Intellectual Detachment," by Tate revealed the austerity of their poetic intentions, while at the same time reflecting uneasiness

[15] The head of the English department. He invited Ransom to join the department.
[16] Bradbury, M. John, *The Fugitives: A Critical Account*, p. 9.
[17] Ibid. p. 9.

about the dangers of spiritual pride and isolation, as if the authors felt trapped in their own self-consciousness and, though struggling to escape it, were shiftily aware of only limited success.

Later in 1929 Tate wrote: "These poets started with open minds - that is, with the simple aim of writing poetry. But after five or six years it became clear that quite unconsciously they were fostering a sectional spirit...supported by the prejudices, feelings, values into which the poets were born."[18] The ostensible policies of the magazine as reflected especially in poems like Ransom's "Ego," were aimed at two aspects of the region: its cultural provincialism, and its fast-growing materialism. These two topics became (not quite compatible) growth points for the Fugitives' sectional spirit as it was to manifest itself in 1925 and after.

The Fugitives conceived of themselves as rebels and reactionaries to the dogmas of the post-war South. But whether as rebels or reactionaries:

> They slid into a false kind of self-consciousness that put them into a wrong relation both to their present and their past, and so lost the inherited advantages that, as Southern poets, they should have enjoyed. They also were unable to utilize effectively for the purposes of high art the advantages that were offered them through the various poetry societies and little magazines that were striving to provide an audience for poetry[19].

The need to revivify the mores of the Old South, personified in the Fugitive movement, gave birth to what Donald Davidson and Robert Penn Warren found to typify the internal economy of the South: Civil Strife. Both Warren and Davidson analysed the social situation of the South in the early twenties in terms of an intra-Southern civil war. Warren wrote in 1932:

> During the last fifteen years this section has been drawn violently into the national life. This has meant an awaking and an agitation in many respects. But for some this agitation has taken the

[18] "American Poetry Since 1920," *Bookman*, lxix, p 504.
[19] Davidson, Donald, (Lecture One) in: *Southern Writers In The Modern World: The Thankless Muse And Her Fugitive Poets*, p 17.

form of a highly dramatic moral issue: old values implicit in a society have been made explicit; there has been a testing of the old by the new. Some generations back such testing might have taken the form of action, but by a peculiar conspiracy of circumstances, the ordinary channels of direct action have been stopped[20].

At the same time, Donald Davidson found that there had been "civil strife within the South itself," and felt that its effect had been to "dislocate many Southern writers from a proper relation to their own people and their own tradition."[21] This analysis of the post-Reconstruction Southern community dwells on the submerged violence and contradictions that threatened the Southern tradition. But the analysis itself arose out of a historical consciousness which moved toward a reconstitution of reality. The reality was a direct product of the Civil War and the Reconstruction that followed it. Historical consciousness then attempts to interpret Southern post-bellum history in terms of tragic confusion of identity and a disillusionment with both the past and the present. What recollection revealed were violence and civil strife, among the people of the same region, as lying at the heart of the tradition itself, an ever-present source of its weakness and contradictions. Thus the historical consciousness which emerged in the 1920s and 1930s - as these two decades mark the literary movement in the South - was a special manifestation in Southern terms of the ambivalent spirit of cultural modernism. The prototypical historical consciousness of the modern period is obsessed with the past and the precarious possibilities of its survival. But the preoccupation with the past among the Fugitives and Southern intellectuals in general in this period took a peculiarly local form: although they were alienated from the people whom they hoped to address, still they were united with them in a collection of attitudes toward the past and toward the Southern tradition in particular. Donald Davidson analysed the situation of the poet in the post-war years in remarking that it

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[20] Warren, Robert Penn, *A Note On Three Southern Poets*, *Poetry*, xl, p. 113.
[21] Davidson, Donald, *The Southern Poet and His tradition*, *Poetry*, xl, pp. 101-2.

was ironic for an ambitious young writer in the South to devote himself entirely to the art of poetry:

> There was no commercial profit in poetry, but there was nothing dangerous either. Poetry did not affect the price of cotton or the value of the real estate in Atlanta or Miami. It did not raise any questions among the clerics as to the Virgin Birth; or among scientists as to their secular sanctification of the theory of evolution. Seemingly poetry offered no threat to the multiplication of textile mills or the industrial growth of Birmingham. It could neither hurt nor help the Democratic Party, which was licking its wounds and trying to get patched up after its disastrous international adventure under Woodrow Wilson. Perhaps poetry did not have a little something to do with education, but neither Chancellor Kirkland of Vanderbilt nor any other college president of the nineteen-twenties could have suspected that the obscure poetic activities of certain young instructors and their students would ever be either an asset or liability to an institution of higher learning[22].

Davidson here is talking particularly about the situation of the poet in an age when materialism governed everything, but also more generally of its separation from the larger culture. The poet was ignored and marginalized when the New (or the post-war) South was instead using "as its mirror of well-being the front page of the news paper, or the society page, or the stock market quotations."[23] The civil strife between the old codes and new ones yet unformed attested to the 'Fugitive' idea of the poet as belonging to two worlds, two moral territories, one turning back and the other in dissentient struggle with the new world.

The regional role of the Fugitives was therefore strongly conditioned by the outcome of the Civil War, and the period of Reconstruction that followed. This period between 1865 and 1920 was important to the development of Southern literature in two ways. First, the formation of the Confederacy and its national call to

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[22] Davidson, Donald (Lecture One) in: *Southern Writers In The Modern World: The Thankless Muse And Her Fugitive Poets*, pp. 1-2.

[23] Hartz, Louis, *The Liberal Tradition In America*, Harcourt, Brace and World, New York, 1955, Chapter Six, and C. Vann Woodward, *American Counterpoint*, Little, Brown, Boston, 197, Chapter 4.

arms encouraged in Southerners an examination and assertion of their regional identity. Suddenly, the war forced Southern intellectuals to rely more fully on their own literary resources than on those of the North-East or Europe. However, this period also gave birth to a kind of literature that might be called the dark night of Southern writing. It was the age of the sentimental local-colour story, of the imitative moralistic poem, of the mythologically exaggerated picture of the plantation. The view of the pre-bellum South as a vast succession of white columned plantations resting on slavery was the stereotype of abolitionist writers[24]; but in general currency this scene was largely a literary construct and hardly existed until after the civil war[25], but it became a sentimentalised export that early moved to what Wilbur J. Cash had characterized as "Cloud-Cuckoo Land."[26] The best poet of the period was Sidney Lanier who, although he attacked the abstract idea of "Trade" in some of his poetry, generally supported the new economic order and was given to lushly expressed moral sentiments. The literature of the South at that time had a faint odour of overripeness. When Ellen Glasgow set out on her career it was in conscious revolt against sentimentality in literature and what she called "evasive idealism." James Branch Cabell, another Southern writer, deserted the region entirely.

The Fugitives began as a revolt against this kind of literature. They were encouraged in this by the observation, at the beginning of their career in 1915, that their potential readership had altered. No longer, would they be writing primarily for Northern readers whom they had come to regard as belonging to an increasingly alien culture; instead, they addressed their work to men and women who shared their cultural background and concerns.

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[24] Floan, R. Howard, *The South in Northern Eyes, 1831 to1861* Austin, 1958.
[25] Gains, Pendleton, *The Southern Plantation: A Study in the Development and the Accuracy of the Tradition*, New York, 1941.
[26] Cash, J. Wilbur, *The Mind of the South*, New York, 1941.

It was not only the Fugitives who tried to attack this traditional kind of literature. Henry Louis Mencken (1880-1956) had an influential role in Southern intellectual life of the 1920s. Particularly, he conducted a crusade against American provincialism, Puritanism, and prudery - all of which he believed he found, to a degree larger than elsewhere, in the states below the Potomac and Ohio.

Mencken shocked the Southerners when he published a severe indictment of Southern culture, *The Sahara of the Bozart* which first appeared in 1917 in the New York *Evening Mail.* The essay charges the Southern intellectual atmosphere with being "almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert". "In all that gargantuan paradise of the fourth-rate," he contended, "there is not a single picture gallery worth going into, or a single orchestra capable of playing the nine symphonies of Beethoven, or a single opera-house, or a single theatre devoted to decent plays." Most Southern poetry and prose was drivel, he charged and "when you come to critics, musical composers, painters, sculptors, architects and the like, you will have to give it up, for there is not even a bad one between the Potomac mud-flats and the Gulf."[27]

This kind of attack added another dimension of reflex defensiveness to the Fugitives' desire, to confront the results of the Civil War by restoring what they thought of as the old mores and values of the ante-bellum South. In this sense, they styled themselves as advocates of Southern tradition. But by then even for these rather self-conscious defenders of Southern culture, tradition had become an entity which could not be simply assumed as a given, but had to be reappropriated. Accompanying this reification of tradition was an upsurge in historical self-consciousness, itself a sign of the distance that had grown between self and tradition.

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[27] URL: http://docsouth.unc.edu/mencken/about.html p. 1.

After all, as Allen Tate wrote in 1930: "tradition must, in other words, be automatically operative before it can be called tradition."[28]

For the Fugitives, the Civil War and Reconstruction were the instruments that had killed what was valuable in the Southern tradition. Nevertheless, the generation between the heroic ante-bellum and their own, experiencing tradition as absent, had to live and make their way in the world rather than die heroically. The meaning of the Civil War is already objectified in Donald Davidson's semi-ironic allusion to *Henry V*:

> Something for grandfathers to tell
> Boys who clamor and climb.
> And were you there, and did you ride
> With the men of that old time?[29]

These large events, and in the South particularly those consequent upon Reconstruction, divided American intellectuals into two groups: the first group gravitated towards France and England in the period from 1890-1917, and published their poetry in such magazines as *Poetry*, *Little Review*, and *The Egoist*, and joined with Tristan Tzara in Dada gestures. "These young men Dos Passos, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Edmund Wilson, Malcolm Cowley, Hart Crane and many others rejected the tenets and the facts of capitalistic America and sought in art and life of the spirit a release for other and -although they did not always know it - older values."[30] Being themselves without strong regional attachments and having gone to Europe when they were young, they became cosmopolites, men whose relationship to their country became increasingly problematic. Thus, dislocation and alienation became a logical outcome of their escape.

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[28] Tate, Allen, *Remarks on Southern Religion; I'll Take My Stand*, Harper & Bros., New York, 1930, p, 162.
[29] Davidson, Donald, "*Sequel of Appomattox,*" *The Fugitive Poets*, Ed., William Pratt, E.P. Dutton, New York, 1965, pp. 78-79.
[30] Cowley, Malcolm, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920's*, New York, 1951, p. 189.

For those from the South who remained in the United States (even if after military service or education abroad), they could either be sophisticated spokespersons for the native Southern tradition, or speak out for change. To take the latter position was to run the obvious risk of being accused of "fouling one's nest," of being a fifth columnist for alien, or worse, "Yankee" notions.

Yet, as spokespersons for tradition and old values, the problem was that as intellectuals, they were alienated from those to whom and (supposedly) on whose behalf they spoke. "To be an intellectual in the South was to talk to oneself or at best a close group of sympathizers or to be set upon as an arrant traitor for daring to suggest that intellect might be used for something other than the exigencies of regional self-defence."[31]

> A crucial segment of the third (and in some cases fourth) generation, which was born around the turn of the century and lived through the cultural crisis of World War I, came to feel estranged from the tradition. That tradition loomed distressingly distant and overpoweringly strong, insupportable yet inescapable.[32]

This in turn raises the question, which has haunted the modern world and has remained central to the culture of modernism: what does it mean to live without a tradition? In so far as Southern writers and intellectuals were concerned with this question, they expressed in their own way a central concern of the modernist movement.

One of the expressions of the South in its move towards self-definition is *The Fugitive*. The magazine is expressive of the changes brought to the South by the Civil War and Reconstruction; it presents the poet as a melancholic, superior exile standing in lonely splendour on a distant horizon:

Betwixt the front bone and the occipital;

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[31] King, H. Richard, *A Southern Renaissance*, Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 11.
[32] Ibid, p. 16.

> Anatomy, that doled these dubious features,
> Had housed within me, close to my breastbone,
> My Demon, always clamoring Up, Begone,
> Pursue your gods faster than most of creatures;
> So I take not the vomit where they do,
> Comporting downwards to the general breed;
> I have run further, matching your heat and speed,
> And tracked the Wary Fugitive with you;
> (From *Ego*)

There is no other poem of the Fugitives' that tells, as this poem does, how close the Fugitives were in mutual affection and how as poets they felt themselves held suspect by the world because they were poets. Donald Davidson remembers:

> It would be more correct to say that Ransom, the most advanced, was the first to choose his orbit; then others, one by one, found theirs, exerting great mutual attraction, with perhaps some repulsion here and there, upon one another. An early poem of Ransom's bears upon this general matter. It appeared as the first poem in the first issue of *The Fugitive*.[33]

"Ego" is about the poet's decision to cast his lot with the muse and to follow the lead of his fellow Fugitives. He notes the criticism levelled against him by others to the effect that "a little learning addleth this man's wit" so that "he crieth on our dogmas, Counterfeit" and does not respect "duly our tall steeple" but prefers his books. He would prefer, he says, to have been "born dull, born blind," if thereby he "might not estrange his gentle kind, / Nor brag, nor run a solitary race," but being neither dull nor blind he cannot avoid the estrangement and alienation. He is made the way he is, and cannot help it; there is "my Demon, always clamouring Up, Begone, / Pursue your gods faster than most of creatures," and he must heed it. This constructs the trope of the Fugitive:

> I have run further, matching your heat and speed,
> And tracked the Wary Fugitive with you.

[33] Davidson, Donald, (Lecture One) in: *Southern Writers In The Modern World: The Thankless Muse And Her Fugitive Poets*, University Of Georgia Press: Athens, 1958, p. 19.

Having thus made his commitment, effectively alienating himself from his people, he finds compensatory solace in the elite formation of the Fugitive group:

> And if an alien, miserably at feud
> With those my generation, I have reason
> To think to salve the fester of my treason:
> A seven of friends exceeds much multitude.

The difficulty, however, is that the poem has, as Rubin argues:

> Instead of the emphatically defiant attitude expressed in the next-to-last stanza and in the last line, where the claims of friends and family who would have him desist are treated with the irony that such conviction and such defiance dictate, the rest of the poem wavers in attitude. At times the speaker seems quite satisfied with his choice; at other times he feels extremely guilty for having made it. This is reflected in the images, which are sometimes gentle, sometimes harsh. A poem that might have been written *about* such an ambivalence and fluctuation of attitudes, Ransom's poem instead depicts the ambivalence and the fluctuation *in* the stance of the poem - even though the poem is, in intent at least, "about" the poet's entire satisfaction with the choice he has made. The opinion of the reader is likely to be that the poet is by no means sure of his choice and is reaching about for rhetoric to reinforce it.[34]

Alienation is reflected in the posturing images of the lonely melancholic intellectual who cannot tolerate any longer the new/old codes in the South. And it would seem that the need for striking an attitude arises precisely because the images of the ante-bellum South still have a vital grip on the mind and dominate their way of thinking and reacting. Additionally, the poem presents itself as a kind of apologia for the whole Fugitive temperament, as well as for Ransom's own complex sensibility, but the pseudo-antique phrasing and windy heroics undermine both the tone and the intended effect. The occasion of the poem seems to be in local misunderstandings that had arisen over the publication of *Poems about God*, but in a larger sense it concerns the culture of misunderstanding and distrust by which a poet finds himself

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[34] Rubin, D. Louis, JR., "*The Wary Fugitive John Crowe Ransom*", *The Sewanee Review*, Fall, 1974, pp. 593-94.

surrounded, perhaps at any time but particularly in the South in the 1920s. "Another element manifests itself, however, later in the poem, Ransom was apparently aware that even with his poet friends he was subject to some misconstruction."[35] This is clear from the sixth stanza on; accordingly, the poem is addressed to them:

> Friends, come acquit me of that stain of pride:
> Much has been spoken solemnly together,
> And you have heard my heart; so answer whether
> I am so proud a Fool, and godless beside.

One wonders what sort irony is intended to be read into the word "Fool" or how the question is supposed to be answered without causing terrible offence

The periodical is considered to be the manifesto of the group. The appearance of this periodical, between 1922 and 1925, exemplifies the shift in ideas and the changes in attitudes of the men of letters at that time. As a group, they turned to the myths of the South and their instinctive recourse was to discover a poetic image for their critique of American society. In their history of the South, they perceived a region that had for many years resisted the domination of technology, persisting in defending its agricultural ways even after the military conquest, well into the present century, but finally beginning to capitulate to the standards of American industrial society.

However, in actual practice, most of the poetry turns away from these grand themes to concern itself with smaller, more intimate issues, ones rooted in the relations and responses of the immediate community. This relation between the individual and community is explored, for example, in "The Equilibrists." This poem deals with the theme of love between two "simple lovers" who come to exemplify the uneasy relationship individuals may have with inadequate but revered inherited values.

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[35] Cowan, Louise, *The Fugitive Group: A Literary History*, p. 49.

The poem was first published under the title of "History of Two Simple Lovers." Structurally the poem is a narrative - as the word "History" in the title of its first appearance indicates.

It begins with a clear enough situation: the man "alone in the press of people," remembering in images of violent sensuality the woman's beauty but also the cruel words" unspoken between them and fatally uppermost in both their minds - "Honor, Honor" and so the unspoken command:

> Arise,
> Leave me now, and never let us meet,
> Eternal distance now command thy feet.

The poem seems to be concerned with the breakup of a relationship, where "Honor" has proved a more powerful force than love, keeping them in a "torture of equilibrium." It appears that though they can never forget each other, they never meet again. The forsworn lovers have somehow come to be buried side by side, and it is the poet himself who (intruding somewhat abruptly) fashions their common tomb - perhaps the poem itself, as in Donne's lines from "The Canonization":

> We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms;
> As well a well wrought urn becomes
> The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs.

The poem is not concerned with a real action but with the situation identified by the narrative. Ransom called them "simple lovers", a title at odds with the complexities of the poem's mood:

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

We may say they are "simple" in the sense of "innocent" and "honest": however they are unwilling to compromise their natures, are neither cynical enough to deny honour nor strong enough finally to deny each other.

At first the narrator seems to feel some compassion for them in their predicament:

> Ah, the strict lovers, they are ruined now!
> I cried in anger. But with puddled brow

But they have refused love out of a muddled perception of standard values and dualism gives them no mechanism to live among cynics and moralists. Therefore, in the next half-line, the poet's tone begins to shift:

> But with puddled brow
> Devising for those gibbeted and brave
> Came I descanting:

The over-modest irony in "puddled brow," and "descanting" show that Ransom has a question in his mind about the lovers but he provides no answer:

> Man, what would you have?
> For spin your period out, and draw your breath,
> A kinder saeculum begins with Death.

For all his "puddled brow" the speaker can only see a resolution in death. Moreover, the speaker's arbitrary intrusion into the poem raises further issues of tone and direction, some of which will be examined in a later section.

In "Nocturne" the dualism of knowledge and physical experience as it causes social crises in the life of a young scholar is emphasized by the device of relocated Prufrockian agony. In Ransom's poem, we see the forces of social expectation and the desire for experience brought to bear on the young Southern intellectual likened to the post-lapsarian Adam:

> Where now has our young Adam
> Gone from his sultry Eden,
> And where is that Goat-footed
> Chasing his willing maiden?
> Our man shall cut few capers
> In his dark seersucker coat,
> With gravest eye subduing
> The outrageous tie at his throat;
> Wondering if he should carry
> His dutiful flesh to the ball,
> Or open books that are symbols

And rules and manual.

It is not clear how far Ransom wishes to generalise this image of youth adrift from the values and society of his community, but for all the hints of compassion, that haughty "our" is coldly distancing.

For the Fugitives, the preindustrial South, when measured by the dominant American ideal, had indeed been backward, but they saw it as having evolved a society in which tradition, leisure, aesthetic and religious considerations had not been ignored in the pursuit of economic gain. Only in modern times, by bartering its rural ways for the gaudy benefits of industrialism, was the South surrendering its spiritual heritage. For them, what was wrong with the South was not that it was caught in a nostalgic gaze back to the pre-civil war days but that it was failing to cherish its own highly civilized values. Moreover, this, according to the Fugitives, caused friction among Southerners themselves. For it was the South that retained the old American virtues that provided the style of living in which genuine religious and aesthetic experience were possible. As such, it provided an image of the good life, and thus furnished a needed corrective to American's headlong materialism. And it was with this lofty ideal in mind, that the Fugitive manifesto was written.

In the lifetime of the Fugitives' themselves, they had witnessed what they saw as industrialization going on at a particularly accelerated rate. Industrialism had been late in coming to the South and only in the 1920s was the full force of its impact being felt. In the contrast between what the Old South at its best had been, and the New South which was coming into being, they discovered a trope for what had happened to American life. In addition, to dramatize the kind of life the Americans should seek, they held up a mythologized image of the Old South.

It was the image of a society that had never existed, but perhaps should have; one where men could live as individuals and not as machines, conscious of their finiteness and their dependence on God and Nature. Individuals in this life would be imbued with a sense of the deep inscrutability of Nature, dedicated to the enhancement of the moral life in its aesthetic and spiritual dimensions. This was offered in comparison with and in contrast to the hurried rootless life in modern cities; the South was the image of a society in which human beings could live serenely and harmoniously, and not dominated by lust for money and power. They could be free of the tensions of the modern industrial community.

After 1914, Vanderbilt's growth was continuing in all branches except that of theology, although fundamentalism generally remained strong in the Southern states. When William Jennings Bryan identified Nashville as "the center of Modernism in the South," he was not deploring its taste in poetry. On the other hand, the official attitude of the university is best summed up in the statement of the Chancellor following the 1925 Scopes trial[36]: "The answer to the episode at Dayton is the building of new laboratories on the Vanderbilt campus for the teaching of science."[37] This debate between science and Fundamentalism may be credited with setting off the chain reaction, which resulted in the "movement of the Fugitive group out of its literary preoccupations into its social and religious concerns of the late twenties and early thirties."[38]

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[36] John T. Scopes, a high school science teacher, undertook to test the law by participating in the trial testing the constitutional status of the "Monkey Law" which prohibited teaching of Darwin's Theory of Evolution in the state-supported universities, normal and public schools in Tennessee. The Fugitive poets were thrust into a consideration of traditional values by the loud and sensational publicity given to the Evolution Trial in Dayton. The New South movement saw the Scopes Trial as a backward step. For example Mims in an article in September, 1925 *World's Work* lamented the fact that intellectual and cultural scene in the South had not kept pace with material development.

[37] Quoted in Edwin Mims, *The Advancing South*, p. 157.

[38] Bradbury, M. John, *The Fugitives: A Critical Account*, p, 11.

But it remains the case that the Fugitive group came out of rural Southern backgrounds. Years afterward, when trying to explain what it was that bound the Fugitives together, Tate wrote:

> The great universities of the East could have boasted in that period groups of writers quite as good as ours, or better, though I doubt it; yet they were not groups in our sense, being associated only through the university and having a cosmopolitan range of interest without, I think, a simple homogenous background which they could take with them to the university where it might suffer little or no break in continuity. I would call the Fugitives an intensive and historical group as opposed to the eclectic and cosmopolitan groups that flourished in the East.[39]

Thus, a self-conscious regionalism manifests itself in the Fugitives' works. In the work of the leading figures of the Southern Renaissance, one sees beneath the details of Southern landscape, occupations, customs and manners, beneath the florid language pursued, beneath whatever portion of the legend of the Old South and its displacement by the New is retold, an image of man toward which all the regional material tends, an image that lifts the work far above that of the local colourists for whom the Southern idiom and mode were ends in themselves. Here, by virtue of their apathy toward the new tendencies in American poetry more than by any special attitude regarding language or any unique sensibility, they may truly have been sectional and Southern. Even the advertising copy of *The Fugitive* betrays the earnestness of this striving towards regional self-consciousness.

Each member in the Fugitive group contributed to the self-consciousness, as well as to the alienation of the group. The Fugitives searched below the surface pieties and loyalties in an attempt to get at the underlying conflicts and tensions within their society. The Fugitive intellectuals wrote *about* the community but not *for* it. Unlike the antebellum Southern writers, and unlike most of the local colour

[39] "*The Fugitive* 1922-1925: A Personal Recollection Twenty Years After," *The Princeton University Library Chronicle*, III, April, 1942, p. 83.

writers, they collectively felt no compulsion to associate the premises of their art with the social and political objectives of the community. The Fugitives were involved with the imaging of human experience, as they saw it around them, and what they focused upon was the clash of the modes of human identity. The best poem to present this image is Allen Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead," a poem written in the late 1920s. The central image of the poem is that of a modern Southerner standing near the gate at a Confederate cemetery and finding himself unable to manage a creative identification with the dead and their Lost Cause. Each time he attempts imaginatively to cross over the wall that seals him off from the "arrogant circumstance" of the dead, his rhetoric breaks down:

> Turn your eyes to the immoderate past,
> Turn to the inscrutable infantry rising
> Demons out of the earth--they will not last.
> Stonewall, Stonewall, and the sunken fields of hemp.
> Shiloh, Antietam, Malvern Hill, Bull Run.
> Lost in that orient of the thick-and-fast
> You will curse the setting sun.
>
> Cursing only the leaves crying
> Like an old man in a storm
>
> You hear the shout, the crazy hemlocks point
> With troubled fingers to the silence which
> Smothers you, a mummy, in time.
>
> (From "Ode to the Confederate Dead")

Tate is presenting the distance between the modern and the historical identity, which is the dominant theme in the poem. The poem captures the separation between the 'immediate past' and the 'old man' a Lear-like tragedy of the alienated modern Fugitive mummified in time.

Writers of the Southern renaissance were almost all born within a few years of the turn of the century and they grew up as the South began its belated entry into the modern world. From their parents, from the public and private values and loyalties of

the community, they inherited the customs, manners, pieties, and beliefs of the older South. However, the assumptions and the attitudes of that South were making way for new ideas, attitudes, and beliefs; the ways of thought and the modes of sensibility of the twentieth-century urban, industrial America penetrating into the hinterlands of the South. "As young men and women and as Southerners they were the recipients of two different and often contradictory sets of values and attitudes."[40] What they were taught at home to think and to believe was one thing; what they saw going on around them and what they thought about it was something else again. This strengthened and confirmed the forces that were separating them from the community, from the old Southern community, forces that were already emerging within the community itself. This in turn put the Southern intellectuals and especially the Fugitives, unarmed, into confrontation with the world. They carried with them the experience of the Southern community and the Southern past and such experience was a formidable legacy of attitudes, presuppositions, and habits of feeling and belief which was not to be violated without resistance.

In Allen Tate's words, "the South not only reentered the world with the First World War; it looked around and saw for the first time since about 1830 that the Yankees were not to blame for everything."[41] Thus the exploration of the past became not merely an exercise in justification, but a search for meaning, which took the Fugitives down below the surface of the events into their underlying causes, and the result was a literature that at its best illuminated what Faulkner called the "problems of the human heart in conflict with itself."[42] Thus, the literature of the

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[40] Louis D. Rubin, JR. *The Writer In The South: Studies in a Literary Community* (University Of Georgia Press, 1972), p. 105.
[41] Ibid. p. 107.
[42] Faulkner, William, "*Address Upon Receiving the Noble Prize For Literature*", in *William Faulkner: Essays, Speeches and Public Letters*, ed. James B. Meriwether, Random House, New York, 1965, p. 119.

Fugitives is an exploration of the past, but also of the historical self within ongoing change. It is the exploration in love and hate of the confrontation of the older heritage and the modern circumstances within the imagination of writers. They tried to rediscover and understand their position in the New South through appropriation of the conflicts in their community. The Fugitives reacted to what was going on in the South, and they tried to explore their region and by doing so, change it.

Nevertheless, other elements in the South were imbued with the notion of destroying all the barriers between the South and the North and, indeed, the entire world. This desire embraced an oppositional nineteenth century liberalism in order to produce cosmopolitan American citizens who were cultivated, humane, successful, and free from localism and the spirit of narrowness.

The Fugitives tried to restore the old mores and tradition within the new concepts arising from the South's contact with the modern world. However, in their attempt at the reification of tradition, they over-developed a sense of historical self-consciousness, itself a sign of the distance between self and tradition. As a result, the Southerners belonged to two worlds, two moral territories, one turning back and the other coping with the new world. Typically, though Ransom tended to shore himself up in aesthetic intellectual preoccupations, he could not and did not ignore his immediate surroundings.

It is worthy of notice that the Fugitive movement was originally non-political; it was concerned with philosophical problems. The group stood for rationalism and philosophical inquiry. They participated little in the egalitarian desire of the New South leaders to make the South like the rest of the nation. However, there was a shift in its development. External events, like the Scopes trial and the internal dynamics of the Fugitive group changed their emphases and moved it out of its literary

preoccupations into the social and religious concerns of the late twenties and early thirties.

Ransom attempted to address the question of lack of tradition in three perspectives: theological, natural, and cultural. The theological part has been discussed with regard to Ransom's concept of God. And the Fugitives' later turn to Agrarianism marks a shift in attitude to Natural and cultural concerns.

History sees the South of the ante-bellum period as a spectacle of immense variety. It was a sophisticated civilization. It was not only culture that gave the South mores and patterns of thinking; it is the – for the Southerners – consciousness of their Southernism. It was so essential and powerful in the character and personality of both the South and the individual.

Ransom was among many poets who were attempting to express some kind of oneness between the culture and the literature within the region. Professor V. B. Philips has pointed out that Southern solidarity existed despite the lack of forces that commonly make for uniformity of thought and life. He says, "The South has never had a focus."[43] But this search for a distinctive oneness was not dominant only in the Old South but intensified during Reconstruction and still persists to the present day.

When we examine Southern culture closely, we notice that it is composed of many elements. The first culture we notice is an Anglo-Saxon one. But if we trace the later origins of Southerners we see that they emerge from a rich mix of European origins: German, French, Swiss and Spanish, but with the exception of the French, they are less numerous than those who derived from British Isles. Nevertheless, these population movements affected the South less than the North and seemed to have been better assimilated. It is in this limited sense that we can say that the Southerners

[43] Philips, V. B., "The Central Theme of Southern History," *American History Review*, xxxiv, p. 30.

preserved their cultural heritage. There was not a generation gap and families kept a generation after another within the same home. The economy of the ante-bellum South being an agrarian one, attachment to the soil was strong. The industrial revolution had hardly reached the Southerners. As a result, the South had missed the industrial leadership, yet it avoided the human squalor (with the enormous exception of slavery) that defaced industrial civilization.

The Civil War cleft the Southerners' interests sharply. The bitterness of that strife left the South suspicious of Northern culture, politics, and religion and intensified its loyalty to what it had come to feel was uniquely its own. Consequently, the Southerners relied more on their own culture and tried strongly to support their ante-bellum tradition and heritage, and it is at this point that myth intervenes to cover the civil strife within the region.

By the mid 1920s, *The Fugitive* stopped publishing and the group began to disband. The break-up of the group is evident in their letters as they began to change their houses and places of employment and did not meet any more. They were aware that the time has come for the group and the magazine to stop. One reason for Tate's willingness, for example, to withdraw from the group and the magazine was his conviction that the magazine had achieved its goal of allowing new poetic talents to develop:

> I think the *Fugitive*, if the sentiment involved through several years of organized work be put aside, should have suspended a few months ago or should suspend pretty soon in the near future. The work of such a magazine must be limited in time; for it has no more to say. At the same time, I can understand the natural emotions at the prospect of giving it up; there may be a variety of motives, in the variety of persons in the group, making for continuance, but I can't see how those motives at this date can be strictly critical in their desires.[44]

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[44] Tate to Davidson, May 5, 1925. Quoted from Louise Cowan, *The Fugitive Group: A Literary*

The Fugitives devoted themselves to a contradiction: on the one hand they wished to be literary modernists and philosophical rationalists, but on the other they wanted to confront the results of the Civil War by restoring the old mores and values of the pre-war South. As they became progessively immersed in controversy the emphasis slid towards becoming defenders of the Southern Tradition. For them the Old South and its rural way of living represented a set of values worth preserving.

The end of *The Fugitive* marked the end of the group as a cohesive force. But the era of the movement had witnessed the maturity of many poets like John Crowe Ransom. During the movement Ransom had published *Chills and Fever* (1924) and in 1926, towards the beginning of the Agrarian movement, he published *Two Gentlemen in Bonds*. Despite the break-up of the group, Ransom and Davidson were keen to maintain contact between the members. Ransom, Tate, Davidson, and Warren were the four Fugitives who were to become interested in planning and printing *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition.* It is thus that the end of the Fugitive group became the beginning of the Agrarian movement and its manifesto.

History, p. 198.

Love and Death as a Duality of Thought

If the key notion of Ransom's early poetry - *Poems about God* (1919) - was loss of faith, the key notion of his later poetry - *Chills and Fever*, 1924 (which reprints most of his *Fugitive* poems), and *Two Gentlemen in Bonds*, 1927 - is the general decay or ruin of the sensibility of mankind.

In these two books, Ransom is treating with irony, but also from an intensely conservative position, the threat to the individual of social dislocation rather than with religion in general as he did in *Poems about God*. Ransom believes that the kind of change typified by industrial growth forces society in a direction that could only lead one "to expect in America at last much the same economics as that imposed by violence upon Russia in 1917". "Creeping socialism", with its dehumanizing effects, and the "cult of science", with its unrealism about man and nature, ought equally to be resisted, he thought, by those concerned for the preservation of "genuine humanism" which was not an "abstract system" but a way of life possible only in a rural and traditional community.

These are the ideas which will eventually find expression in *I'll Take My Stand* and they are an important part of the background to the poetry of Ransom. One can call them the defence of what he sees as humanity and nature. It is very important to pay attention to the book because it is important for a proper assessment of the poetry of Ransom and it provides a means of placing him in his tradition alongside poets such as Allen Tate, Warren, and Davidson.

Technically and stylistically, the poems in the C*hills and Fever* as well as *Two Gentlemen in Bonds*, 1924, are strikingly different from the first volume. It is not just that they have thematically hardly anything in common. The manner is no longer direct and serious, but elegant, witty, evasive, noncommittal. Irony has become the dominant mode, producing a tone at once wry and wistful, nostalgic and sceptical.

The poems of these two volumes give the impression that there is a struggle between an archaic diction such as *bruited, leman, twirleth, halidom, thole, wight*, and a colloquial and factual manner which uses expressions as *ten frozen parsnips, deep in the belly, bandy-legged, rotten teeth,* whose yoking within the frame of a formal traditional meter suggests a desire to contain stresses and tensions not always explicitly treated. Ransom tackles Humanity in these two volumes. His poems are related to his Agrarian concerns for humanity and with a particular manner of dealing with such perennial concepts as love and death.

For Ransom, the agrarian image is a kind life in which leisure, graciousness, and civility can exist in harmony. When Ransom writes on nature, it is not as wilderness, but as farmland. His agrarianism is of the old Southern plantation, the gentle, mannered life of leisure and refinement. The Civil War and Reconstruction created a climate which distorted love and brought death unmitigated by community. These two events defaced humanity and disintegrated the experience between body and soul. However, the tone of the poetry remains detached and elegant, even when dealing with themes as perennial and dramatic as love and death.

"Captain Carpenter" is another example of Ransom's ironical detachment. The title character is a gentleman of the old school, courteous, traditional, and chivalric, who rides out to confront the modern world with the disappointing results that will inevitably follow on romantic literalism. First he meets a "pretty lady and all her train" who "played with him so sweetly" but then seized a sword "and twined him of his nose for evermore". Next he encounters a stranger rogue, and at once

> ...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.

The captain loses one encounter after another. His trouble is that while he goes about his questing in what he supposes is the traditional, chivalric style, he also has a bad habit (fairly or not) of choosing poor targets. The wife of Satan "bit off his arms at the elbows." He "parted with his ears" to a black devil, and he yields up "his sweet blue eyes" to another. Finally, "the neatest knave that ever was seen" steps out and falls upon the Captain:

> I would not knock old fellows in the dust
> But there lay Captain Carpenter on his back
> His weapons were the stout heart in his bust
> And a blade shook between rotten teeth alack.

The knave, "with gentle apology and touch refined," thereupon "pierced him, and produced the Captain's heart." Yet there is something admirable about him:

> 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.

As for the Captain's death,

> 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.

The Captain is perpetually unequal to the kind of combat he faces. It is not clear why this should be so, nor what his motivation in all this turmoil might be. In true Romance style his adventures exist for their own sake. Despite the consideration that Carpenter represents the deluded chivalry of the South, Ransom takes the Captain's side. In this sense, Ransom's irony in this poem, is an interesting variant of its modern sense discussed in the introductory chapter and the laughter is directed also at himself.

Much of the interest in Ransom's poetry lies in his ability to avoid sentimentality where it threatens. This technique creates an atmosphere of suspense

in waiting to see if, as a poem develops, he will be able to manage the narrative action with the poise and elegance necessary to maintain his ironic distance and not fall into either sentimentality on one side or cynicism on the other.

Love

What these have done in love[1]

> It seems inappropriate and misleading to speak of Ransom's love poems. They are poems about love that have modernist technical guards against obviousness, naïveté, and sentimentality. None of them has the passionate, reckless immediacy that we expect of love poems... All of them reflect Ransom's conscientious aversion of directness and to revelation of the author's private personality and his faith in distance-creating techniques, his determination to hold the reader at a psychological remove from the emotion and from the imaginary people involved.
>
> There is a ready-made distance available to a poet who decides simply to withhold his commitment to the emotion and emphasize irony. Cutting across the emotion with irony entails a handicap, though: the poet must work the more ingeniously to create an excited response in his reader. Ransom likes to assume sometimes that love and honor are irreconcilable.[2]

Thus, the love theme in Ransom's poems is not that of the conventionally romantic kind and certainly not from within the experience; it deals almost exclusively from the outside with the disintegration of lovers who cannot fulfil their desires.

There are many examples in Ransom's verse that examine love from a number of perspectives. I have chosen "Spectral Lovers", "Parting at Dawn", "Parting, without a Sequel", "The Equilibrists", "Two in August", "Morning", and "Good Ships".

"Spectral Lovers", almost a debate between mind and body, is a detached and ironical portrait of two unnamed people who respond to the enticements of an April

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[1] From *Antique Harvesters.*

[2] Parsons, H. T., *John Crowe Ransom*, Twayne Publishers, Inc. New York, 1969, pp. 60-61.

season with appropriate feelings of erotic attraction but who succumb to the restraints of honour and timidity, and deny their bodies as effectually and completely as they would if they were purely spiritual beings:

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

The opening line creates the atmosphere for the phantom relationship between two lovers. "Haunted" is a preparation for the idea that the lovers have a spiritual beginning to their relationship, but also points forward to its frustrated outcome. The lovers appear spectral because they are walking in the mist, but more importantly they do not behave as lovers, for they "go frozen apart in fear". For the most part the lovers are viewed with objective omniscience, but the last stanza suddenly introduces the viewpoint of a first-person narrator: "They passed me once in April, in the mist." The speaker's presence, which Parsons considers "gratuitous"[3], implicates him in the debate. He has been the silent spectator of the lovers in the world of the April night and has entered, at least psychologically, into the conflict between the "batteries of the field" and the "moon of Easter."

The persona brings the reader closer to the lovers and thereby creates sympathy for them, but this sympathy is in turn balanced by Ransom's gentle satire of the young woman who makes "snares" of evasions and of the young man who beheads flowers in the field – and it is plain that it is only the fields that will be deflowered here. The final stanza stresses the sorrowful beauty of "fingers fluttering like a bird / Whose songs shall never be heard."

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[3] Ibid. p. 64.

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 over-romantic attitude of the would-be lovers gives way in the poem to a more absolute unheard song. As with the narrator in "Dead Boy," this speaker remains in the "world of outer dark" and bridges the gap between personal and impersonal experience. The presence of the persona also posits the world of contemplation against the world of action, another aspect of the dualities set up in the main section of the poem[4].

"Parting at Dawn", is another poem about failure in love and honour, in this case taking the form of a disenchanted aubade. It has a paralysing aesthetic distance and shifting irresponsible irony. No feeling for the characters is allowed; the lovers are referred to as "them", and nowhere in the poem do they receive a greater particularity; they remain completely anonymous. In the first three lines an atmosphere of self-denial is bluntly established:

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 -

Night is conducive to love but instead we get a factitious Stoicism. "A broken whispering" of love betokens weakness, a cowardly lapse from the commitment implied in the notion of "previous night". The next two lines reinforce this austerity; for, with the return of the dawn, the lovers get back their correct perspective upon passion. "White dawn", "Stoics", "cold" light and "the morning star" are a cluster of antitheses to the romantic love:

Stoics are born on the cold glitter of light

[4] My reading is influenced by Cleanth Brooks's in "The Doric Delicacy," p. 66.

> 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.

Again, at line 6, the lovers are addressed by the hidden narrator of the introductory lines. The effect Ransom seeks here is the intensification of the inward struggle by the counterposing the sexual innuendo of "wine" and "frantic rain" against the extreme austerity of lips, and eyes drained "most dry" and "barren coenobite". But the very formal and rhetorical address in its suggestion of a half-revealed agenda keeps the reader from any urgent feeling about the struggle.

The poem has another ironic turn to take. If the lovers who have renounced emotion should discover, ten years later, that their aborted emotional relationship still seems authentic and important, then they may conclude that they were wrong about the idealism of love that led them to self-denial.

The tone of the poem is unpleasant. There is a smugness about the possible futility of human existence and human values. The goddess evoked in the poem is not love but philosophy, who teaches that all must die, love included. The little death of parting anticipates the death of love itself, which will survive neither the world of men nor the time-heavy domestic world of the woman. Philosophy's cold asceticism will require but ten years to prove her law, the poet says:

> 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.

In "Parting, Without a Sequel" the irony freezes out any possible emotion or feeling. The trick seems to be to present a character who has conflicting emotions, conflicting feelings and interests, and to assume that they cannot be resolved.

Awareness of this frequent human difficulty would usually call for a response of pathos from the reader. Here, Ransom is trying for a kind of anti-Victorian freshness in the withholding of a sympathetic response, in a serenely uncommitted, dispassionate portrayal of the central female character. Both the title and the emotional posture of the author are very stiff, perhaps because they rely too heavily upon a novel-like situation and description which the author is anxious to defuse.

The opening lines work through a projection of the woman's anger upon the words she writes:

> 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.

Here is a successful example of Ransom's delicate method of indirection. The woman's emotional state is conveyed by precise physical description in the third stanza: fright mingles with anger and regret:

> 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.

This stanza, employing again the word "Stoic", is a nice example of the disinclination to weep being poised between fear and regret; and Ransom tells obviously and directly what the woman has to fear "the ruin of her younger years."

In "The Equilibrists", a similar conflict occurs between "Honor" and passion, but a first-person narrator comments upon the lovers in the second half of the poem:

At length I saw these lovers fully were come
Into their torture of equilibrium;
[...]
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?
[...]
But still I watched them spinning, orbited nice.
Their flames were not more radiant than their ice.

Obviously, Ransom here chooses to render the encounter with dualities through a third party rather than through one of the participants in the "drama." Parsons considers the technique gratuitous and ineffective: "I suppose Ransom uses this stage-prop narrator, this choric monologist, as an expedient transition to the more satisfying distance-creating device, the Donnean, and Marvellian metaphysical image"[5].

This reading ignores the importance of the psychological progression evident in the persona's response. We can see from a poem like "Necrological", for example, Ransom does not need a first-person speaker to create distance. An alternative to Parsons' view is that Ransom is interested in consciousness itself and in the way that consciousness perceives duality.

The theme in "Two in August" is about the end of love. However, it seems to have three possible levels of meaning varying from the literal to the very abstract and symbolic: (1) an account of the unexpected and irrational break-up of a marriage; (2) an ironic comment upon the incapability of man in achieving the perfection or the ideal; and (3) the wide gap between mind and body. The poem is also very remarkable for its repressed violence and hidden chaos. The image of the world in the poem that Ransom presents creates an ironic tone and this is the possible reason for

[5] Parsons, H. T., *John Crowe Ransom*, p.72

the overwhelming satire, which shows the irrational destruction and overthrow of a supposedly ideal marriage.

The opening lines suggest this ideal life and marriage as well as the emotional commitment that helped to build up this apparently perfect union of love. Nevertheless, what the events of the poem show is that whoever loves deeply is exposed to the danger of emotional destruction.

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

In this state of deep sensitivity to one another, even silence and words became brutal and cruel. After stones and knives the poet shifts, to calm the reader with "…night is for loving or sleeping, /Sweet dreams or safekeeping". But no explanation is offered as to why this man and wife have quarrelled. The third stanza repeats the patterns of the first two, beginning in a somewhat detached and abstract statement of ignorance and progressing to violence, the fraught atmosphere in the first stanza has moved on to "individual tigers in their blood". On the second level of meaning, this stanza implies that man's subconscious, brute nature rebels against the loss of individual identity implicit in passionate love.

She flees the marriage chamber to pace through the house incapable of reconciling the situation. The night, which was meant, for loving is now black and the clock remarks not time present but only time past. The man who was treading the lawn all night is now perhaps leaving altogether.

> 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.

From this point on the story moves further into symbolism. Instead of singing the birds are crying in complete fear. The black of the night arises from man's depths to extinguish love. The "night-mastered birds" are symbols of the proximity of love and hate; usually seen as contradictory, here they are presented as related to one another. But this relation is destructive in the sense that both create feelings beyond conscious control. The man retreats through "a long ditch of darkness" in a world made of incoherent and incomprehensible codes.

> 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.

The poem loses its touch at the two lines in the second stanza which perhaps are meant to suggest the uneasy marriage of the mind and heart,

> Yet he of the wide brows that were used to laurel
> And she, the famed for gentleness, must quarrel

The woman's behaviour may suggest the heart's action under the stress of emotion, when she flees. The heart is deprived of its role as the agent of tenderness and love and reduced to an emotionally futile, physical function. Moreover, the exiled intellect is divorcing him from the passions, but in doing so, he is deprived of the world of meaning. But the stereotyped gender roles undermine the diagnosis by becoming simply pompous - the "laurelled" brows are especially unfortunate.

The poem is trying to illustrate the sad limitations of man trying to achieve and live up to his best ideals. Those who come close to the ideal of perfection in emotions are the most vulnerable to disappointment. While those with "comfortable minds" and "furnished souls" as E. E. Cummings calls them endure complacently enough without passion and without despair.

The theme in "Morning" is about rationalism and practicality. Ralph is awakened one morning to a vision of the lambent beauty in the meadow beyond his window, and to a vision of a heightened kind of life with his wife Jane; we notice that it suggests some sort of a religious awakening: the silence is "blessed" and he is about to "propose to Jane" not as before, a dull partnership, but a little miracle, that they "go walking/ Through the green waves" of clover. But suddenly

> His manliness returned entire to Ralph;
> The dutiful mills of the brain
> Began to whir with their smooth-grinding wheels

And it becomes "simply another morning, and simply Jane." The irony is, however, unsurprising and schematic and the characters ciphers.

In "Good Ships", the man and the woman are the "good ships" who meet on the "high seas" in a high society "on the loud surge/ Of one of Mrs. Grundy's Tuesday teas." The reference of Mrs. Grundy suggests that it is fear of convention that will be the dominant mood of the poem. Their social and emotional poise render them "So seaworthy one felt the could not sink". They exchange the small talk of their society, "the nautical technicalities," and part forever, "most certainly bound" for the safety and dullness of "port." "Still there was a tremor shock them, I should think": even in this most mundane of settings they are momentarily shaken by a mutual recognition of passion. The moment passes:

> Beautiful timbers fit for storm and sport
> And unto miserly merchant hulks converted.

It is not an aristocratic code that rules them; their society is not aristocratic in any sense, but merely a modern commercial one. These good ships travel also for purposes of trade.

In the changes Ransom made to this poem after its first printing, he was mostly concerned to sharpen the metaphor. The second line originally reads: "Who speak,

and then unto eternity diverge." He changed the overly explicit "unto eternity" to the more maritime "unto the vast." In line thirteen quoted above, he changed "meant" to "fit" which goes better with "timbers." Another change Ransom made is that of "stormy sport" to "storm and sport" which not only improves the rhythm, it adds more to the sense of merged dichotomies.

Death

Till in one day the dream of Death appear —[6]

In one of his conversations Ransom remarked that "...the great subject of poetry, the most serious subject, is death..."[7] Death or the prospect of death occupies over one-third of the poems Ransom chose to reprint.[8]

Ransom's treatment of death is striking. He treats death, not only as a dark reality; he is also concerned with the proper attitude towards mortality. The nature of the subject can easily lead to disillusion, morbidness and self-pity; the poet's challenge is to strive for a proper sense of balance.

It calls from Ransom a toughness and sophisticated acceptance of bitter reality which is the counterpart of the detached and ironic treatment of love we saw in the preceding section. Death is a very difficult literary topic as it can encourage emotional overstatement, and lead to loss of control. This sense of emotional overstatement may come from the reader's perception of a possible disparity of relationship between the emotional treatment as such and the experience of its effects in real life - with the consequent suspicion that the author has improper manipulative designs on the reader.

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[6] From *Eclogue.*

[7] From a conversation reproduced on p. 21 of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's collection of interviews with Robert Frost, Ransom, Robert Lowell, and Theodore Roethke entitled *Conversations on the Craft of Poetry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1961). Quoted from M. E. Bradford, "A Modern Elegy: Ransom's 'Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter'" *The Mississippi Quarterly* Vol. xxi, No. 1, Winter 1967-68, p. 43.

[8] See History of the published poems.

Ransom has many poems that treat death as their main subject. We can immediately instance ten poems on the theme: "Piazza Piece", and "Necrological", where death is a framing context to the poem; "Janet Waking" and "Here Lies a Lady", where death is explored through a set of attitudes, and "Emily Hardcastle Spinster", "Hilda", "Dead Boy", "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter", and "Puncture" where death is reflected through narration. What is unusual about Ransom's treatment of death in these poems is that in each of them there is a kind of fiction, or artifice which elicits distinctively placed emotions and attitudes towards death. We may find that in one poem "a proper mode of psychological control and behaviour is played off against its contrary; in another, the funeral ceremony of a woman becomes an ironic substitute for the marriage ceremony;" in some other poems "deaths of a boy and a girl are treated from fresh perspectives."[9]

Thus, according to Parsons, we may group these poems in three distinct groups: in the first two poems death appears as an *atmosphere*. In the second couple of poems, death is mysterious and a kind of *disillusion*. And in the last four poems, death is in the form of an anecdote based mainly on a persona's, narrator's, or observer's *narration*.

I. Atmosphere

"Piazza Piece" and "Necrological" can be used to illustrate Ransom's use of contextual atmosphere to create aesthetic distance. Characters in these two poems are presented in such a way as to control sentimentality in the development of the theme in the poem.

"Piazza Piece", presents Death and the Maiden through the convention of a courtship dialogue (as in the Claudius poem). She is conventionalised and

[9] Parsons, H. T., *John Crowe Ransom*, p. 41.

unchanging like the elderly suitor, Death. Irony finds its way into the poem through the witty turns of phrase like, "gentleman in a dustcoat", in which Death is described as protecting himself against his own element, dust, to preserve his suitor-like neat appearance among the vines. Ransom characterizes Death by using colours and sounds to vivify the scene. Faint words and "the spectral singing of the moon" associate Death with an audible warning of the destruction that awaits beauty and youth. "Grey man" supports the notion of Death as an elderly gentleman and contrasts with the colour elements of roses and vines. There is no narration or action, rather we are simply presented with a scene. As readers we cannot participate in the poem but are held as immobile spectators, chilled by the ambient atmosphere.

The subject of "Piazza Piece" is not actual death but a future death, or better, a constant presence of death in life as the young girl becomes half aware of it while waiting for her "true love". But it is an incomplete reading of the poem to think of her just as an excessively romantic girl waiting for her beloved to come and kiss her. True, the scene is a romantic and archetypal one. But besides the borrowing mentioned before there are echoes of *Romeo and Juliet*. It is like Capulet's orchard, when Juliet in her balcony first becomes aware that her words have been overheard:

> But what grey man among the vines is this
> Whose words are dry and faint as in a dream?

It is, of course, Death. The title of the poem invites the ironic comparison to Shakespeare's Italian setting (*Piazza* in Italian indicates a public place but in the South it means *porch*).

Ransom's grey man takes a gentle and understanding tone:

> Your ears are soft and small
> And listen to an old man not at all,
> They want the young men's whispering and sighing.

His lesson, though, is cruel:

> But see the roses on your trellis dying
> And hear the spectral singing of the moon;

Even should Juliet's expectations be fulfilled and her true love come, that they marry, and that they even raise a family. But Death can wait, and meanwhile Juliet, must feel his presence at every turn. Nor does Death have to wait long, relatively speaking: "I must have my lovely lady soon".

Although Death is a somewhat disreputable gentleman, given the eavesdropping, his speech, like the young lady's, is quite formal. The theme Ransom presents in his poem is the confrontation between innocence and death. The lesson of the gentleman was the lesson of the knowledge of death. He appears as a living person but holds in his "dustcoat" death and finiteness:

> 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.

"Necrological" utilizes medieval, archaic, and Latinate diction to establish its medieval setting . The atmosphere of the poem, which is developed through the harsh tone and horrible sights, is suffused with the feeling of death. This whole setting is conveyed by sharp, precise visual details and colours.

Irony and distance in the poem are achieved through two techniques: the narrative uses a friar as a central exploratory figure who is neutral and anonymous; his feelings are concealed and though the language sounds elevated and chivalric it is spoken from an emotional distance.

Ransom further avoids any sentimentality that may be aroused by a poem dealing with large-scale death by keeping the reader away from any involvement in the action or from any exciting interest in the personalities of the characters who are generalized, diffused, and remote.

The riddling young friar of "Necrological" may be regarded as a monist at the point of turning into a dualist. He starts from Ransom's point of preoccupation in his first book *Poems about God,* which is the debate of soul and body, the struggle between the material and spiritual. Now Ransom uses this figure of a friar to settle this issue or debate. The point is resolved at the moment the friar sees the corpses. The night before he had said his "paternosters":

> The friar had said his paternosters duly
> And scourged his limbs, and afterwards would have slept.

But the friar's mind is "unruly," he cannot sleep, and at dawn he leaves the monastery to face directly the cause of his troubles- he saw history- a field still strewn with the dead bodies of a recent battle. The friar makes his way to the nearby battlefield and sees the dead bodies by the light of dawn. At this point Ransom uses an imagistic technique of associating a particular colour (white) with deathliness. The dead men had been stripped of their clothing by their slayers, and the stark dawn light showed their bodies "whitely bare". The great number of dead men is suggested by the white cast which the bodies impart to the whole field, "white like meads of asphodel". Then by a precise distinction another colour also associated with death is used to refine upon the chilling whiteness. The corpses were not entirely white, for they had been bloodily despoiled by "the grey wolf". By this contrast between red blood and grey Ransom controls the tone of the stanza and creates an image of the after-battle scene. Additionally, Ransom enhanced the sense of horror when he kept the description indirect. An unreal eerie quality is further sustained by the word "fabulous." He argues:

> The people were dead - it is easy he thought to die -
> These dead remained, but the living all were gone,

He perceives that:

> ...that heroes' flesh was thus;
> Flesh fails, and the postured bones lie weather-beaten.

It is a trial for the soul. The friar is thinking the body is irrelevant. The circumstances of the deaths are irrelevant, and the disposition of the body afterward. But "beneath the blue ogive of the firmament," the foundation of what is lasting, the friar is confused by what fails. The "gory" bodies are "fabulous," but it does not seem to matter, because they are eaten by the "grey wolf."

Since flesh fails, the friar seems to have been right to give up his life to contemplation. Yet the scene of a dead knight stimulates his mind to think of another kind of life. He recognises that there is another kind of devotion:

> 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.

And there is a sword which he finds:

> 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.

When we leave the friar he is sitting with head bowed "as under riddle," his dilemma unresolved,

> So still that he likened himself unto those dead
> Whom the kites of Heaven solicited with sweet cries.

Bartholomew, who led the victorious soldiers and wrought all this death, is himself not free from death. As a soldier, he is inextricably connected with it and will soon be struck down in his turn.

The grim panorama is completed by two sharply drawn pictures contrasting the warmth and passion of the recent life with the irremediable chill of present death. The dawn's blue sky frames a couple mentioned above in an iconic posture, a grief-stricken leman clutching the knees of her dead warrior. It is like sculpture, marmoreal

and still. An attitude of love in life is now an attitude of grief in death. Their lost vigour as a couple is suggested by his "mighty" knees, and her "flame" that had "warmed his tent". To complement this motif is the picture of the sable stream in which lie the white horse and its rider:

> 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 word "spilled" is excellent for conveying the precariousness of the life substances that support man and beast. "The great beast had spilled there his little brain, / And the little groin of the knight was spilled by a stone." Brain and groin, the seats of life, are shown as fragile - and possibly insignificant.

The poem ends with a quiet climax, a delicate extension of the deathliness, as the friar identifies himself with the corpse-heavy landscape and, in imagination, blends into it. His consciousness is absorbed by the sights of death, and he becomes thoroughly at one with deathliness.

Ransom's classical and medieval readings appear clearly in this poem as well as in many other poems as we will discuss later on. The use of "Wight" in the first published versions of the poem in *The Fugitive* was changed to "Knight" in *Chills and Fever* but restored again in the Fugitives Anthology of poetry. The title of the poem itself "Necrological," is significant: the word "Necrology" was once used by newspapers as a formal alternative for "Death Notices" and still so used in PMLA.

The poem is suffused with the feeling of death, conveyed by sharp, precise, visualized details, and a sombre mood is quickly established with the friar's ascetic ritual.

II. Disillusion

"Janet Waking" and "Here Lies a Lady" deal with the topic of emotional control in the face of death. The attention is focused either on somebody who is learning about death or on someone who is actually dying. Because these poems are interested in the question of sympathy for the characters involved, Ransom introduces a persona into each to exert effective control over tone and response.

"Janet Waking," a poem about a child's difficult and painful awaking to the reality of death, is preserved from obvious pathos by an alternation between perspectives, a little girl's, and an adult's. The poem illustrates a kind of mock tragedy with sympathetic over-tones. Ransom is creating two ironies here: juxtaposition of serious and trivial (the poet's exaggerated interest in the death of the little girl's pet hen) and that implied by contrast between the title "Janet Waking" to reality and her mistaken interpretation of that reality. The poet disappears from the situation and objectively records the events. In achieving this distance or objectivity, the speaker becomes aware of the irony at the same time as the reader. Chucky's death represents Janet's first encounter with reality. She slept "beautifully" in innocence, "till it was deeply morning." Her refusal to be "instructed" stands for a universal quandary of humans confronted with the irrationality of Nature. Ransom's revision of the second line in the third stanza, "Running across the world upon the grass" (*Selected Poems* 1969), which was originally "Running on little pink feet upon the grass" (*Two Gentlemen in Bonds* 1927), suggests Ransom's attempt to secure his distance from the situation and achieve a more objective view, giving universal and comprehensive application of the irony. Nevertheless, the tone of the poem changes when the poem shifts to heroic glory and religious perspective:

> 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.

The lines carry mocking exaggeration of the poet towards what Janet is doing for the death of her pet hen. In the meantime, we notice the first and only personal reference to Ransom when he says, "Janet implored us" Ransom distinguishes very cleverly between his mockery and his sympathy. Janet did not delude herself that all this is a bad dream — she just cannot understand the fact of death:

> Janet implored us, "Wake her from her sleep!"
> And would not be instructed in how deep
> Was the forgetful kingdom of death.

Ransom here infuses his feelings with Janet's. "Forgetful kingdom of death" shows the common human flaw in the face of love and death.

"Here Lies a Lady" treats death with a good deal of puzzlement and confusion. The narrator remains so anonymous and quizzical the reader is at a loss to guess the appropriate response. The attitude is characterised by irony and detachment with the speaker reporting the action as if from a great distance.

> The poem ends with an attitude so devoid of emotion that it is disconcerting. First, the address to the "Sweet ladies" is so impersonal that we utterly lose touch with a specific personality who had suffered an illness leading to death. The archaic language and the self-conscious rhetoric increase the already excessive aloofness. Then comes the bizarre question, "But was she not lucky?" ... Ransom chooses to end the poem with a tone so cold that it seems non-human. This may be consistent with the poem's many detached and objective effects, but it seems like a contrived flight from the legitimate human emotion that we are invited to share in the second stanza. In combatting the sentimental elegy Ransom has been caught in the counter-trap of callousness and non-human detachment.
>
> Is the lady lucky to be relieved of the oscillations between pointless fury and cold inertness? Is she lucky to die with people around to mourn? Is she lucky to have so symmetrical a death? *She* did not bloom long; *she* did not thole toughly.[10]

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[10] Parsons, H. T., "The Civilized Poetry of John Crowe Ransom," *Perspective*, Vol, xiii, No. 4 Autumn, 1964, p. 251.

It is difficult to know how to take the tone of the poem. The first line announces, as though we were standing before a monument in a reflective mood, that it is about to trace the outlines of the life of one of high estate. But we do not find the principle behind this life: the lady was "the delight," like a child or pet, equally of a husband, an aunt, an infant, but equally of her doctors, chattily called "medicos," who in "marvelling sweetly on her ills" remind us a little of the kites with their "sweet cries" at the end of "Necrological":

> Here lies a lady of beauty and high degree.
> Of chills and fever she died, of fever and chills,
> The delight of her husband, her aunt, an infant of three,
> And of medicos marveling sweetly on her ills.

Even her death is irreverently described in sing-song, and "fever" uncovers a pun in the first line on "high degree". The point of her life seems in fact to be a pointless death.

The tone of the first stanza does not invite us to sympathize with her. However, the tone and the action later on alter the emotion. The lady does, after all, die and her death comes after a disturbingly undignified illness of *chills and fever*:

> For either she burned, and her confident eyes would blaze,
> And her fingers fly in a manner to puzzle their heads -
> What was she making? Why, nothing; she sat in a maze
> Of old scraps of laces, snipped into curious shreds -
>
> Or this would pass, and the light of her fire decline
> Till she lay discouraged and cold, like a thin stalk white and blown,
> And would not open her eyes, to kisses, to wine;
> The sixth of these states was her last; the cold settled down.

The significance of her alternation between chills and fever suggests life itself as a kind of sickness. The lady's manner of dying reveals Ransom's swinging and divided self in the irresolvable war between spirit and body, between chilly reason and feverish emotion. She went through a six-cycle illness in her wifehood and motherhood. And as she goes on in the poem from chill to fever the poem itself goes

through chills and fever; in the final stanza the poem shifts the tone once again with a bizarre question. The question gives us an ironic detachment of altogether the wrong kind from the subject of the poem:

> Sweet ladies, long may ye bloom, and toughly I hope ye may thole,
> But was she not lucky? In flowers and lace and mourning,

The question could be an attempt at a light touch on the word *lucky* - either in the sense of her being fortunate in her high degree or in that of having at last escaped from long suffering.

But the poem's introduction of death as a kind of maze or, puzzlement in which the lady lies in her feverish state before dying is presented in a rhythm that verges on the jaunty:

> In love and great honor we bade God rest her soul
> After six little spaces of chill, and six of burning.

III. Narration

In "Emily Hardcastle Spinster", Ransom uses a shift in pronouns to distinguish between common and personal experience. Initially, the poem introduces a community of mourners: "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." In the third stanza the poem's perspective narrows from communal to personal consciousness.

> 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 her 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, now using the first-person singular pronoun, remembers his own past and reveals the poem's true subject, the ironic substitution of the ritual of burial for the ritual of marriage. The dignity of the ritual belongs to the social level of the poem; the ironic recognition, to the personal level.

The two points of view express conflicting attitudes toward Emily Hardcastle, one sympathetic, the other critical. G. R. Wasserman indicates that sympathy can become a function of Ransom's irony through just such a shift in point of view; also, it can mitigate the ironic reductions of what he calls Ransom's "deluded" characters[11]. Emily Hardcastle, like Miriam Tazewell, has remained "deluded" about the nature of human experience and about the permanence of human values and expectations. Ransom uses virginity as a symbol for all human ideals, especially moral ideals that deny the dualistic nature of the individual. As part of society, the narrator can appreciate the decorum that Emily Hardcastle has preserved. His own respect for decorum emerges through his participation in the burial ritual and in the ritual of courtship. As observer of the ironic outcome of her life, he can perceive her failure to balance decorum with a realistic awareness of natural processes.

"Hilda" is a pair of sonnets Ransom restored to print, somewhat revised, in his *Selected Poems* of 1962. "Hilda" was printed for the first time in *Harper's Magazine* in 1926 as a single sonnet titled "Ghosts," which corresponds to the present sonnet II. The ghosts belong apparently to women who could never bring themselves to love, now lonely, regretful, guilty, appearing in the speaker's garden to cling about the quince bushes and roses, haunting the world of mortal beauty to which they had been afraid to commit themselves. They are like apparitions ascended from the hell of their wasted lives. They:

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[11] Wasserman, G. R., "The Irony of John Crowe Ransom," *University of Kansas City Review*, Winter 1956; rpt. In Young T. D., ed., pp. 143-155.

Come as blanched lepers crying, "Do not spurn us,"
Ringing in my ears, wetting my eyes,
Obsequious phantoms and disbodied sighs.
Soon they are frightened and go fast;

The image is indicative of how wasteful and useless this life is. Yet they are "clamorous" to be remembered and loved and cry. And among them:

But Hilda! proudest, lingering last alone,
Wreathing my roses with blue bitter dust,
Think not I would reject you, for I must
Weep for your nakedness and no retinue,
And leap up as of old to follow you;
But what I wear is flesh; it weighs like stone.

Hilda had been the great beauty of the speaker's youth as described in sonnet I:

To walk and wear her beauty as in a play
To be enacted nobly on a great day;
And stormily we approved the bosom-swell,

The speaker had been wooing her and this parallels the garden scene of sonnet I:

For her touch and smell
I brought bright flowers, till garlanded she stood
Scared with her splendor, as in the sight of God
A pale girl curtsying with an asphodel.

Hers was not merely the shyness of young girls, but fear "as in the sight of God": the distrust of love:

No, No, she answered in the extreme of fear,
I cannot.

The flowers have died on the "dropping of those petals/Rode the Estranger." The "Estranger" here strongly suggests death. This was to be her noble role, her "great day." This heroically swept her up and away from the lover. "I was a clod mumbling to catch her ear." "Clod" here is carries two meanings: not only in the sense of "dullard" but also, in the sense of flesh\earth.

In sonnet, II the situation is reversed: Hilda becomes the suitor, her ghost seeking rest in the devotion of her old lover. The lover would give his love if he could. Nevertheless, what is there left to which he can fasten his human love? His memory is of "the bosom swell" and "the tunes tinkling". He is not all spirit yet, all smoke and "disbodied sigh". He addresses her as if he were addressing a naïve person:

> Think not I would reject you, for I must
> Weep for your nakedness and no retinue,
> And leap up as of old to follow you;
> But what I wear is flesh; it weighs like stone.

The final line echoes the final line of sonnet one:

> I was a clod mumbling, to catch her ear.

In sonnet II:

> But what I wear is flesh; it weighs like stone.

The most significant revision Ransom made in the sonnets for *Selected Poems* are in these two concluding lines. In *Two Gentlemen in Bonds,* the concluding line of sonnet I read simply: "I was such earth as whispered in her ear." The word "earth" fits the theme but does not fit the feelings of the rejected lover nearly as well as "clod." "Whispering" there suggests the serpent's whispering to Eve that Ransom indicates here and in "Armageddon" but this is not quite to the point, if the point was to indicate the lover's hopeless clumsiness towards Hilda. So, he describes himself as a "clod mumbling." The concluding line of sonnet II originally read: "but flesh hath monstrous gravity, as of stone." The theme is brought to a sharper focus by ambiguity implicit in the word "wear" and the rhythm is better fitted to the sense by the stresses on the three final syllables:

> It weighs like stone

That is, a secondary stress on "like," primary stress "weighs" and "stone."

"Dead Boy"[12] begins as first-person narrative. In this respect it resembles "Winter Remembered" but the speaker's interest is directed to the funeral rite rather than to grief.

> 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.

The tone is cool and distant, with a touch of levity in the description of death as a "transaction", and he is further distanced by being placed in the "outer dark". The various ways of perceiving an idea (death) or a situation become evident in the responses of neighbours, mothers, distant kin, preacher. The poem does not set out to give us facts about the death. Even if he were to try to set out some objective facts about it, they would fade away in the multiplicity of point of view.

As seen through the speaker's eyes, "Dead Boy" becomes an unlikely elegy for an unlovely boy. But the poem has a surprise for us. In death the child is assimilated to his ancestors and the mourning becomes not a personal, but a dynastic ritual. It is a process such as Ransom's describes in his essay "Forms and Citizens," personal grief is sublimated almost created through public ritual. As Thornton H. Parsons notes, "he allows the poet to avoid direct confrontation with grief and death."[13]

> 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.

But surprise turns to something like shock in the last verse as we realise that this was an only son of elderly parents and dynasty has turned into a dead end:

> But this was the old tree's late branch wrenched away,

[12] First published as *The Dead Boy* in the "Sewanee Review" in 1924.
[13] Parsons, H. T., *John Crowe Ransom*, p. 53.

Grieving the sapless limbs, the shorn and shaken.

The speaker in the poem provides a link with tradition because he is distanced from the events and the perception of community and kinship enables him to perceive the ritualistic and universal components of the experience. In this respect, the boy takes his value not from himself but from tradition. This poem has personal qualities but confirms Professor Young's observation, about Ransom's attitude toward traditional values:

> Although the culture of the Old South is doomed, as all things are doomed to time and change, one needs to participate in the traditions of that culture, for only in a sensitive awareness of the past can one find a sense of stability and permanence in the flux of an ever-changing world.[14]

"Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" depends on the polarity between two facts which have been introduced in the first stanza: the child being active, and the awaiting death. The poem develops these two facts, and being side by side in the first stanza irony and distance creep in. Ransom once said: "Every time I reprint my poems I tinker with them - and especially towards tightening up the meters. But I never wanted to tinker with this one."[15]

> When Ransom writes of death he keeps it at a distance by keeping its victim at distance, as we have seen in "Necrological": not at "safe distance", but at a dignified distance. And he keeps the bereaved at a distance too, when these take the death hard, as in "Dead Boy," or he shows even the bereaved keeping a stern self-control. Robert Penn Warren's analysis of the way these effects are obtained through the diction and phrasing in "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" is well known.[16]

The poem is in the form of a participatory fiction. Its narrative action is sustained by the narrator's first-hand account of the events. Dangerous emotion is

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[14] Ibid, p.23.
[15] *Conversations...*, p. 22. Quoted from Robert Buffington, *The Equilibrist: A Study of John Crowe Ransom's Poems, 1916-1963*, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville 1967, p. 57.
[16] "Pure and Impure Poetry", *The Kenyon Review*, vol. V, No. 2 Spring, 1943, pp. 228-254.

present right from the first line in the phrase "little body" but already the narrator has established a degree of control by the use of the word "speed". Thus, the narrator creates a considerable emotional distance from death.

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

"Lightness in her footfall" suggests gracefulness. The narrator here is trying to make the girl attractive before "speed" moves in. But speed comes first. She is graceful, but clamorous when she plays by herself. The word "wars" in the second stanza conveys this meaning and in this respect the narrator pulls the reader into the polarities as they develop in the poem.

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

The narrator's mock-annoyance at the rude disturbance is focused upon the geese, "Who cried in goose, Alas." The tone and emotional control in the poem lies in the choice of words. The poem's diction works on two levels: irony and narrative action. For example "Astonishes" in the first stanza signifies the sudden and abrupt death of the girl. "Brown study" is an effective and gentle synonym for death; moreover it has an ironic relevance to the personality of the girl alive. "Vexed" shows the intrusion of the narrator in the action of the poem because it mirrors his emotional perspective. However, we can apply "vexed" also to death as being vexatious to human beings.

The stillness of the active girl has made the others' reaction "sternly stopped" and has made them confront death directly. "Primly propped" ends the poem with implicit horror:

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

The word "ready" in the first line in the last stanza marks ironically its climax as it comes at the end. In the stanza one speaker announces that the gathered mourners are "astonished" at the death of John Whiteside's daughter. In stanzas two, three, and four they are made to understand why. But the placement of the first line in the last stanza of the poem forces them to look at its first four quatrains and to ask how they explain the "readiness" of the bereaved, who were before "astonished" and "unready" the bells to ask what has changed their mood and prepared them to complete the funeral for which they have gathered. The dead girl puts the mourners in mind of the girl alive; the contrast between the two serves and explains the state of being astonished. The narration of the action in the poem makes a transition between grief as an expression and as a state of mind.

"Puncture" is one of Ransom's most curious poems about death. It begins with a dense but unknown narrative context. Further, while the narrator holds the emotion in the poem, it is not in the right way and we may be invited to take his emotion somewhat ironically. The complexity of the poem lies in the narrator's misinterpretation both of the situation and of the emotion. Both atmosphere and character are revealed from the first stanza:

> Darkness was bad as weariness, till Grimes said,
> "We've got to have a fire." But in that case
> The match must sputter and the flame glare red
> On nothing beautiful, and set no seal of grace
> On any dead man's face.

The statement of the first stanza may suggest a relief from the oppressive but as yet undefined circumstances until the reader reaches the rest of the stanza and discovers

the reason for the narrator's reluctance to have a fire: dead men are hereabouts, and the fire would make their forms visible.

> And when the flames roared, when the sparks dartled
> And quenched in the black sea that closed us round,
> I looked at Grimes my dear comrade and startled
> His look, blue-bright - and under it a wound
> Which bled upon the ground.

The colloquialism of Grimes's opening remarks sets one scene but the narrator's stilted phrasing provides a sharp contrast almost as if from another narrative. "Set no seal of grace/On any dead man's face" is an excessively formal way of saying that corpses are not attractive. It is preparation for the narrator's rhetorical speeches to Grimes.

The firelight leads to the discovery of Grimes's secret by his companion. Later in the poem we realize that he had hoped not to reveal that he has been wounded. These men are soldiers, and the cause of their wariness is implicit: they have just survived a battle.

The dying man's short sentence, "No, it's an old puncture.../Which takes to bleeding sometimes," contrasts with the narrator's nervous speech:

> "Why, Grimes, I never knew your mortal blood
> Had wasted for my sake in scarlet streams,
> And no word said. A curse on my manhood
> If I knew anything! This is my luck which seems
> Worse than my evillest dreams."

Because Grimes knows that he is dying and because he does not want to deceive himself, he resists the offer to bandage him, and this distracts the other with the grim suggestion that the dead men be ministered to instead. When we read the speech of Grimes, we may appreciate his courage but at the same time we can notice his use of irony even while he is dying:

> "Get away. Go work on the corpses, if you wish,
> Prop their heads up again, wrap their bones in,

For they were good pious men."

Here Grimes speaks before he dies. His words reflect his serene ability to detract from his own plight. In such condition as death he shows no regret, frustration, or bitterness, on the contrary he shows irony.

> I could not find it. It was too melancholy
> Sitting by Grimes my fortress who reared his head
> Breached in the left wall, and subsiding slowly
> To the defunctive posture of the stained dead
> That now not even bled.

The following stanza suggests ambiguity and distance. It suggests literal response by the narrator, but it is a nice understatement of the importance and frustration of anybody who does not know what to do while a person he loves and reveres is dying. Distance is brought in this poem by fusing love and death at the same time, and in the same person.

One of the surprising shifts of the poem is the pathos we feel for the narrator in his need to do something when no action is appropriate:

> I, not to weep then, like a desperado
> Kicked on the carcasses of our enemies
> To heave them into the darkness; but my bravado
> Quailed in the scorn of Grimes; for even these
> Were fit for better courtesies.

We understand his enormous admiration for Grimes and his overwhelming sense of loss. We know why he behaves so barbarously. Nevertheless, he can not be excused for his violation of the "courtesies". The climax of the poem is prepared for:

> Blue blazed the eyes of Grimes in the old manner -
> The flames of eyes which jewel the head of youth
> Were strange in the leathery phiz of the old campaigner -
> Smoke and a dry word crackled from his mouth
> Which a cold wind ferried south.

Though Grimes is very near to death, he responds to an enormity; he rebukes his companion for violating the corpses. Grimes's last word is uttered in the service of emotional tone to defend his behaviour.

These poems about death reveal that Ransom's struggle between proper gentility and chivalric politeness is at war with his desire to be cruelly witty on subjects that have been current during his time. Religion and duality are still the two main veins that Ransom seeks his subjects from.

Although Ransom was attacking the idea of religion in his later poems starting from 1924, we find that he shifts his concern right after *Poems about God* 1919, to two main themes, namely human dualism and mortality. The narrative action of his poems is recollected through the medium of the persona's consciousness. Thus, while poems such as "The Equilibrists"[†] and "Spectral Lovers" concern characters who are unable to accept their dual natures, the persona in each of these poems holds in balance the two conflicting forces, reason, and emotion. The shift in Ransom's poetic practice can be observed in his persona. As there was a conflicting force between romanticism and realism, we find that this conflict is shown by his persona and in each poem; we feel the developing attitude in Ransom towards his concept of nature and human life. Within each poem, Ransom makes dramatic consciousness of what he called the "matured" dualist, and he allows the dualist to express a variety of attitudes towards mature knowledge such as religion, sex, and death.

To explain Ransom's theme of mature dualism we may go back again to his essay "Thoughts on the Poetic Discontent." In this essay, Ransom argues that individuals in any community start their lives in the dualist mood. This mood puts the individual in comparison and contrast to the objective world. Then we give up this

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[†] First published as *History of Two Simple Lovers* in *The Fugitive*, vol. iv, March-December 1925.

mood and view the world as a "mystical community" in which self and non-self are interconnected. Finally, we reach the monism mood that gives way to the "matured" dualism that balances both romantic and critical mood. The mature dualist acknowledges the discrepancy between the ideal and the actual.[17]

In conclusion, one might ponder the penetrating observation of a man sensitive to Ransom's handling of ambiguous effects: "Both the subjects and the treatment of the poems are Impractical, so far as Ransom's war of the worlds (Feeling and Power) is concerned...but the mocking precision of the vocabulary, the sharp intelligence of the tone, are always acknowledging or insisting that we can live only by trading with the enemy — that the heart has its reasons, a mighty poor grade of them too — that the poet himself is an existence away from the Innocent Doves he mourns for"[18].

[17] *The Fugitive*, 4, June 1925, pp. 63-64.
[18] Parsons, H. T., *John Crowe Ransom*, p. 99.

The Divided Self in the Agrarian Faith

In the course of his poetic development, John Crowe Ransom was like the pendulum of a clock swinging continuously according to the hands of his time. He was swinging between old and new, modernism and tradition. In the 1920s, he was a Fugitive, initially fleeing from the past and the old South: "The Fugitive flees from nothing faster than from the high caste Brahmins of the Old South."[1]

The Fugitive ceased publication in 1925 and the group began to disband. But despite the break-up of the group, Ransom and Davidson were keen to maintain contact between the members. Their idea finally was to explore further an idea for a book that the other members of the group had only discussed casually. Ransom, Tate, Davidson, and Warren were the four Fugitives involved who were primarily interested in planning and printing *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, which was published in 1930.

Thus it was that Ransom played an important role in the foundation of the Agrarians who were to characterise themselves as being deeply rooted in a set of conservative values and traditions - which had a more than passing resemblance to those of the once despised Brahmins.

The changes in Southern political, social and literary life from the Civil War until the early part of the twentieth century provoked confusion and some disillusion among many poets in the Southern states and Ransom in particular. There is a constant uncertainty about the present, and a nagging fear of the future. At the same time, he evinces a constant desire to appropriate the past into an over-arching sense of rootedness.

The Southern past lures Ransom's mind in many ways, but is best understood through imaginative literature, in this case a Southern literature that is by writers born, or living within the Southern states. Like all literature, it takes many forms and will provide the reader with access to the experience and reflection of its author. And

[1] *The Fugitive*, Vol. i, No. i, April, 1922.

while Southern literature is part of a wider American literature and shares many of its characteristics, it is also has its own distinct types and preoccupations.

The conflict between the North and the South resulted in a number of splits both within American society and, when confronted with a conflicting variety of codes and principles, within individuals themselves. Northern industrialization with its emphasis on progress and social fluidity was having a heavy impact on a largely agricultural, hierarchical community and this both stimulated and provoked the literary output of many men of letters at that time. The ideological debate of the Southern thinkers on these events led to a heightened awareness of polarities and contradictions: Agrarianism against Industrialism, Black against White, Chivalry against Chauvinism, Aristocracy against People, Old Politics against New Politics, and Past against Present. When we study the literature of the South, we see these conflicting issues reappearing time and again often enough in the form of splitting and fractured identities, characters at war with themselves, a constant sense of tension and disruption.

The confusions in Ransom's mind, as also with many of his contemporaries', were typified in their reactions to the Scopes Trial of 1925. The trial was the result of a deliberate flouting of the 1925 Tennessee statute forbidding the teaching of evolution and generated an enormous amount of national publicity. The trial, Donald Davidson wrote in 1957, "broke in on the literary concerns" of many of the poets of that time "like a midnight alarm". Typically, the Fugitives saw the matter almost exclusively in terms of tradition and myth. Ransom, Davidson, Warren, and Tate "began to remember and haul up for consideration the assumptions that as members of the Fugitive Group, we had not bothered to examine." One of the assumptions they had to examine closely was that "the South still possessed at least the remnants, of a

traditional, believing society".[2] A year after the trial, in 1926, Allen Tate wrote to Ransom urging him "that we must do something about the Southern history and the culture of the South." One year later, in 1927, Ransom published what was to be his last book of verse; *Two Gentlemen in Bonds.* This last book before the beginning of the Agrarian movement shows a Ransom distracted between two contradictory worlds; which might be called Old South and New - though these designations are themselves largely mythic in nature.

Much of the poetry in *Two Gentlemen in Bonds* is in the same style as that of *Chills and Fever* three years before and indeed a number of the poems found there have already been discussed in the previous chapter. But the volume invites some further discussion not only because of the interest of some individual poems, but also because of its attempt at an overall structure and a new concern for architecture. And while there is a thematic and stylistic continuity with what has gone before, there is also a sharpening of tensions and polarities that foreshadow Ransom's growing participation in Agrarianism.

But before we go on to a discussion of Agrarianism, some preliminary examination of the general structure of the book might be useful, for while controversy would lead Ransom into rigidities of thought and attitude he later avoided, the engagement with poetry still allowed the fruitful expression of these mixed moods and attitudes. Accordingly, poetry would become a kind of iconography of the self; or a kind of mirror reflecting what is inside the self rather than just the surface. When we discussed civil strife in chapter 3, we did not mean only social strife with one man against another, but also strife between man and his own self. Because of this self-strife man becomes divided within himself and torn between two identities in the process becoming an individual with "dual citizenship".

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[2] Davidson, Donald, *Southern Writers in the Modern World,* University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1958, pp. 29-30.

This duality of citizenship as an issue appeared in various manifestations among the Fugitives and in the Southern literary scene in general. Moreover, it was not Ransom's feeling only: it also became a common topic among many novelists and poets alike. The split in ego or the divided self, within the Fugitive literature for example, often enough appears in the form of a persona who will have an uncertain or ambiguous relation to the poet or the novelist himself, but who certainly acts as a focus for the expression of his creator's conflicted self.

In chapter seven of *All the King's Men*, Robert Penn Warren unobtrusively gives his narrator Jack Burden a chance to describe himself at twenty-one: a member, still in good standing, of the Burden's Landing Community and in love with his childhood sweetheart, Anne Stanton. Moreover, the seventeen year-old girl is in love with,

> a youth not beautiful, not brilliant, not industrious, not good, not kind, not even ambitious, given to excess and confusions, thrown between melancholy and random violence, between the cold mire and the hot flame, between curiosity and apathy, between humility and self-love, between yesterday and tomorrow. What she had succeeded in creating out of that unpromising lump of clay scooped up from the general earth nobody has ever known. But in any case, in her loving she was also re-creating herself....[3]

The self-portrait of Burden given here echoes an earlier description offered by Ransom's persona in "Dead Boy":

> 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.

Syntactically, the descriptions are strikingly parallel, but they also echo in their choice of diction, their tactic of definition by negatives and polarities, and their manipulation of the narrative stance. The choice of Warren's novel for comparison is not meant to

detract from the originality of either (there is quite a different shift of focus in their respective last lines) but to illustrate the way in which Ransom's ambivalent narrative style in his poems after 1920[4] finds an echo and common tone in one of his contemporaries' novels.

Ransom had been exploring what we may call a fiction-like style in his poems even before he published *Two Gentlemen in Bonds* (1927). And in these narratives there is a continuous effort towards reconciliation of the imperfections of the human nature, a need for self-unity, and self-knowledge in the midst of ineluctable dualism.

Much of Ransom's poetry is concerned, in various manifestations, with a divided man living between polarities, between possibilities and impossibilities. This man acknowledges his duality - in which mind and body, as studied in "Painted Head", are "so hardly one they terribly are two."

Further, in many of his poems, Ransom creates a dramatic persona to articulate a seemingly objective view of man or woman struggling between polarities. This persona's observations and ambivalences help to distance Ransom, the creator of the persona, from the action of the poem (See chapters 1 and 6). But it is also the detached and ironic objectivity of the speaker which both suggests and negates the possibility of a unified vision: the irony suggests a comprehensive point of view, but the frequent abruptness of the intrusion just as often undermines it. And although this persona is often sympathetic he is rarely wholly so, and his relationship to Ransom himself remains problematic, with a consequent confusion about the degree of implication in the infirmity of the characters themselves.

During the 1920s, the drama in Ransom's poetic output becomes more distanced and this produces "the irony of wisdom out of innocence, the clarity of human outline

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[3] *All the King's Men*, New York, 1946, p. 299.
[4] The poem first appeared in three versions in, *New York Evening Post*. 13, 16, 18, 24 February, 1920.

when set in the light of nature, the shock of truth out of naiveté."[5] The resulting Ransom "voice" then emerges out of the dimension of the persona, with both the tension and the loving interplay between a man and his heritage, the drama of simultaneous difference and identification.

James H. Justus argues that:

> The persona emerges out of the self-delusions of idealism, innocence, and narcissism into the shattering knowledge that he participates in evil, that he shares, even exacerbates, the already imperfect human condition, and that to recognize this complicity is to take the first step toward healing his divided self.[6]

Thus, it is a main focus of discussion in the present chapter to illustrate the divided self as seen in John Crowe Ransom's *Two Gentlemen in Bonds* and to place it within the context of the controversy that gave rise to and surrounded the publication of *I'll Take my Stand.* The discussion is not so much concerned with an analysis of the poems as with a structure and pattern that does not appear in any of Ransom's previous volumes.

Two Gentlemen in Bonds works at two levels: as a logical conclusion to the first two parts of John Crowe Ransom's last book of verse and as an icon of Ransom's divided self. The second level depends on how far we understand the first. Nevertheless, before we analyse these two directions we may say that the main theme of this set of poems is to represent the duality of man's experience. Buffington believes:

> What he takes from these poems is the "haunting dualism of man's experience," something simultaneously offered and denied, man's ability to retain his sanity in a world that demands that he hold two opposing ideas in the mind at the same time. Above all else, this poetry of "the master's old age" reveals a strong urge to resolve some of the conflicts, to ease some of the

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[5] Warren, Robert Penn, "Notes on the Poetry of John Crowe Ransom at his Eightieth Birthday," *Kenyon Review*, xxx, June, 1968, pp. 326, 335.
[6] Justus, James H., "A Note on John Crowe Ransom and Robert Penn Warren," *American Literature*, xli, No. 3, November, 1969, p. 429.

tensions that accrue to man as he attempts to maintain in perilous balance some of the contrarieties of modern life: heaven and hell, fire and ice, reason and emotion, love and honour.[7]

It was not only book reviewers who showed some interest in the volume in general but also many colleagues. John Gould Fletcher found Ransom's distinguishing characteristic his "definite sense of geographic location" and his "praiseworthy determination to grapple only with themes that arise from that location."[8] This is true in so far as Ransom's poetry in his last book of verse depicts the Southern American life in its details where "*noblesse oblige*, a tolerant mellowness made slightly bitter by defeat and sane and rational humour... still prevail." The review, Ransom said, had done him the "honor of more inward examination" than he had had before.

Allen Tate commented on the volume in the *Nation* for March 30, 1927 arguing:

> Mr. Ransom is the last pure manifestation of the culture of the eighteenth-century South; the moral issues which emerge transfigured in his poetry are the moral issues of his section, class, culture, referred to their simple, fundamental properties...
>
> Two of Mr. Ransom's qualities in especial connect him with the culture which in its prime registered its genius in politics and law; rationalism and the code of *noblesse oblige*. These qualities, informing every poem, dictate the direction of his artistic vision from all starting-points whatever. Rationalism, not in the sense popularized by the philosophies, but in the older and purer sense of the humane tradition, a tradition lying at the very core of the old Southern order, stiffens his poetry with an irony and lucidity, and a subtlety, which elevate it with a unique distinction in the present American scene. His rationalism is the evaluating instrument of the code of honor; it gives the code profundity and edge; it is the weapon of casuistry. The system of casuistry appears in a kind of solemn dandyism, but back of the dandyism lurks a profound stoicism, and an immovable detachment which feeds upon an intellect always sufficient unto itself. All the emotional cries of Mr. Ransom's poems, even the occasional essays into sheer lyricism like "Vision by Sweetwater," hinge upon the single conviction — *noblesse oblige*. There are, of course, two sides to the medallion; in poems like "The Equilibrists" and "Dead Boy" more vaguely

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[7] Young, Thomas Daniel, *A Biography of* Gentleman in a Dustcoat *John Crowe Ransom*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1976, pp. 470-71.

if not more subtly in the sonnets "Two Gentlemen in Bonds," Mr. Ransom can render a beautiful commentary upon his tragic personal vision because he accepts the code within which the characters struggle; elsewhere, when he cannot accept their code, as in "Amphibious Crocodile," he pours out the meager yet venomous acid of his satire. In every poem he is either the satirist or the ironist; and as a fine minor artist he has always the same thing to say, in new and unpredictable images. [9]

What is important about Tate's comment on the volume is that Ransom's *Two Gentlemen in Bonds*, presents a dualistic attitude towards life and regionalism. Duality in vision and regionalism present, accordingly, a kind of mimetic mirroring of life that Ransom used to live within. In this sense, we can say that these poems are a kind of iconography of Ransom's owns self. Terms like *rationalism* and *noblesse oblige* which Tate used in his article, assert and give evidence of the iconography of the poems, as far as they concern Ransom himself.

As a response to Tate's comment, Ransom wrote:

What is important in your witness was that my stuff presents the dualistic philosophy of an assertive element *versus* an element of withdrawal and respect. Your terms *rationalism* and *noblesse oblige* are nearly as ultimate and pure as could be stated in discourse. If you are right, I am happy — I've put unconsciously into my creative work the philosophy which independently I have argued out discursively. I write this in no arrogance, of course — understanding well that the aesthetic quality is always a specific quality and is not guaranteed by the philosophy under it — a matter of practice, not theory. But what rather astonishes me is that having given me such a gorgeous dichotomy of interest you now seem to take it all back by saying that I rest on a couple of specific concepts (casual, local little things?) and exhibit a fairly simple and coherent (and special?) coherence. (Viewed now in your sentence as not a dichotomy at all, merely two chance concepts out of many.) If your original diagnosis were right, then I raise the dualistic issue which is fundamental and not special; I do a variety of what we all must do. And as for the simplicity of my product, you know I have always been offensive in talking about maturity and seeming to make it a personal advantage of my own that I have achieved maturity by comparison with others who might be mentioned... My object as a poet might be something as the following, though I

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[8] *Monthly Criterion*, vi, July, 1927, pp. 168-72. Quoted in ibid, p. 181.

> won't promise to stick by my analysis: (1) I want to find the Experience that is in the Common Actuals; (2) I want this experience to carry (by association of course) the dearest possible values to which we have attached ourselves; (3) I want to face the disintegration or nullification of these values as calmly and religiously as possible. That is a simple program hard to realize.[10]

Ransom concluded his letter by saying that he will not allow Hegel to "solve a pair of contradictions with a triad." This is a firm refusal to solve problems of duality or contradiction by means of some glib "synthesis". Ransom's basic belief in this last book of verse is that duality, as an essential nature of his poetry should remain unshaken. He closed his letter with the slogan: "Give us Dualism, or we'll give you no Art."

If we turn back now to the idea of the interrelationship among the poems, it may be noticed that though Ransom certainly wrote a fair number of the poems before grouping them in this particular order, his arrangement of them in three sections is intended to bring out a distinction he thought implicit in the previous volume *Chills and Fever* (1924). This distinction may help in understanding the poems of the whole book. The "Manliness of Men" poems are philosophical ones. They are mainly concerned with the poet and his knowledge. They also indicate the proper attitude towards the world he must live in. The poems in "Innocent Doves" are about the victims of the world, who suffer without knowledge, without a clear sense of direction or philosophy in the world.

The third part is presented as being a result of the previous two parts, though not, as previously suggested, as a kind of synthesis. At the centre we have two persons or one person of split personality. One of them regards the victims of the previous part with tenderness and pity and the other does not. The sequence of the poems presents us with duality in its starkest terms. We also feel there is a kind of

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[9] *Nation*, cxxiv, March 30, 1927, p.346.
[10] Young, Thomas Daniel and George Core Ed; *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge and London, 1985, p. 168. Ransom to Tate sometime in the Spring of 1927. The letter is without a date.

isolation in the poems. No longer is there a persona to comment, point an irony or shift a perspective. There is only an uninflected narrative voice.

Detailed discussion of this sonnet sequence will be postponed till later in this chapter. We want instead to begin with a look at the uses of memory and nostalgia.

> 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.

The opening of "Vision by Sweetwater" indicates a remarkable lyric nostalgia - this is the speaker's childhood, a memory of undiluted sweetness. But this impression of fantasy, of a daydream suddenly gives way to nightmare. There is an impression that something terribly evil has or will take place, its source and nature mysterious.

The girls beside the river, the willows, clouds and grass draw gradually to the speaker's mind an old knowledge: he feels he has seen all this before, and he fishes for the memory beneath the surface feeling. It comes to him finally out of a past he could not remember, a kind of racial memory: what he sees here is the setting for tragedy.

In the third line we are warned that the actual girls are not the ones seen by the speaker; he is lost in some sort of a dream, perhaps of nostalgia. Then in the second stanza we are warned further that something terrible will happen, or any way could, as the "little colony all hens" goes walking near the "steep turn".

The "strange quick tongue" of the last stanza lets us know that the recognition, when it comes, will not be 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. What is not definite and does not need to be is whether one of the girls actually did scream, or whether the imagination of the speaker completed its own vision, creating the scream, as it were, offstage. The

speaker is by now switching between himself as both young and old, with both states implicated in the moment of vision, past and present fused in the knowledge of the implacable movement of time.

A slightly different treatment of childhood and experience can be seen in "First Travels of Max." This too is about loss of innocence. Little Max leaves the light and ordered security of his home to venture into Fool's Forest, and comes back wiser than he was. He might be taken for Captain Carpenter as a child, who tries to make good, years later, his threat to go back and cut the witch's head off.

Max, youngest and, as tradition in the family would have it, best of the Van Vrooman clan (Vrooman meaning True man in Dutch) was, even so, a rebellious sort, which we should have guessed, even before he slapped his nurse, when the poet is careful to point out how his curls will not be "subdued to the cap." This time he is rebelling because he has been told to stay in his own world, not to ask questions and not to go into worlds he is not prepared for.

Max's experiences turn out to be intellectual and sexual. In the Forest he goes forth confident as anyone is apt to who has never been put down very hard, whose world has turned always to his pleasure. This has been Max's world. He was not only wealthy; he was the youngest child. He still imagined that things would be as they ought to be; that here, as at home, the world would not be far from what he commanded. This, together with the natural ability of a young boy to believe his fancies, turns the stone to a revolver and the stick to a sword. It is interesting that the sword is Saint Michael's; Max apparently is feeling already that he has a mission, a vengeance to wreak.

Identifying himself with Michael, Max identifies himself also with the fairies, who are "whipped in an inch of their lives; weeping forbidden/ To play with strange scared truant little boys". We cannot imagine that Max was ever beaten at all, but he

surely feels that he has been put upon most cruelly and that he was forbidden to play with the other children.

Snakes, the first hint of sexual knowledge, and other crawling things are waiting on him in the darkness of the forest, but no symbols of innocence, no bird and no rabbit. The suggestion of the snake as a sexual knowledge is confirmed by the picture of Eden: "There were no flowers nor apples. Too much age". It is an Eden ruined, and decayed.

The black tar pool that seems to rise up to meet him, shifts us from Genesis to Dante. Max becomes a traveller through the inferno, with no guide. Then quickly he is the good Calvinist again. He is afraid the devil will have him for his small sins, and he prepares to do battle until, like any Calvinist worthy of the name, he realizes the futility of that and resigns himself to fate and goes on.

Max comes to wisdom here but something sexual is happening too - on the literal level, perhaps the inevitable and natural experimenting. Whatever we are to make out of it, the suggestion is there "to slip into the spider's fingers...Max raised his sword...sheathed his point" and this prepares us for the Red Witch we meet on the other side of the pool.

At first she seems not to realize that Max is there, and he is allowed to watch her naked, apparently since he notices the colour of her bosom. The new knowledge is still intellectual in nature, but this comes through an understanding which is now tinged with sexuality and disgust:

> There in the middle of the wood was a Red Witch.
> Max half expected her. He never expected
> To find a witch's house that would be red and dirty,
> Or a witch's bosom wide and yellow as butter,
> Or one that combed so many obscene things
> From her black hair into her scarlet lap;
> He never believed there would attempt to sing
> The one that taught the rats to squeal and Bashan's
> Bull to bellow.
>
> "Littlest and last Van Vrooman, do you come too?"

> She knew him, it appeared, would know him better,
> The scarlet hulk of hell with a fat bosom,

Max knows from what the witch says to him and because she appears to know him that he is not the first of his family to come here or to be known by the witch and realizes that his father has been here before him. Now an important part of his childhood is gone, his innocence as a defence tool is now flawed.

Max returns home chilled by the witch's laugh and her song:

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

The last stanza again places the action firmly in the past. Max has become domesticated and tamed, the imaginative adventure of Fool's Forest safely behind him in his accommodation to the adult world. But the narrator holds the balance- not of resolution, but of viewpoint - and is concerned with man's ability to maintain purity within a world which requires duality in citizenship and contradicted personality holding opposing ideas at the same time.

This attitude of holding contradictions in balance, of understanding the tragedy of time and experience may be thought of as one of the special functions of poetry. That this complexity of vision does not always hold can be seen in the movement that was gathering force at the time Ransom was writing these poems: the Agrarians.

The urge to perceive meaning in history has been an age-old preoccupation but it took on a particular intensity among many of the literary and political movements immediately after World War I. This urge is not without its difficulties: there is, at the outset, a tendency to look back nostalgically upon some lost traditions and values, but immediately there arises a division or conflict between these traditions and the zeitgeist. In this sense, man has to constantly reread his history and to rearrange his experience in effort to understand and cope. In the late 1920s and 1930s, the Agrarians initiated their movement to carry out this task in their own fashion.

Allen Tate, for example, one of the Agrarian thinkers, related the idea of history to his literary theory of art. He claims that history and art present an "image of man". This image is shown to be inextricably related to its past. Tate contrasted this historicized image of man with those modern views of humanity which emphasises human progress and self-transformation and ignores its historical limitations.

In this understanding, man is especially a product of history. The literary output of the Agrarian movement virtually associated history and tradition with the Old South. One example of the ensuing literary productions is Allen Tate's (historical) novel, *The Fathers*. The novel concerns the crisis of a family during the Civil War period. It deals with the conflict between the way of life in the Old South, and the capitalistic way of life imposed by the North. These two ways of life are presented in the novel through two fathers, Major Buchan, an Old South landowner, and his son-in-law George Posey, a merchant from the North. The central theme of the novel revolves around the inability of Posey to cope with the arbitrary elements in human nature, represented here by sexuality and death, which are beyond human control and which Tate refers to as "Original Sin or Evil". These two aspects limit humanity and prevent man from attaining his ideal state. However, the Southern way of life has developed structures to cope and deal with them.

From Allen Tate's point of view it is the image of man as burdened with "Original Sin" that distinguished the Southern way of life from that of the North. Iconically, the South embodies a sense and assimilation of history and tradition in contrast to the ahistorical North.

It was from within such an awareness that the Agrarians launched their movement in the hope of attaining a comprehensive change in the Southern community's way of thinking.

It follows that the Agrarian movement would have many aspects: political, economic, social, agricultural, religious, scientific, and literary. But analysis of these

aspects is not the subject discussed here. The chapter concerns itself more with the relations these aspects had with the Southern literary scene.

Nevertheless, a brief historical discussion of the Southern conservative tradition, which is the main area in which Ransom and the other Agrarians began to establish their defence in opposition to the new beliefs, may help inan understanding of the movement and its aesthetics.

A dominant factor in the literary history of the American Southern region has been its preoccupation with an agricultural society. The bulk of the Southern social fabric (black and white), prior to the Civil War, was primarily engaged in the cultivation of the soil. Thus, the economic and social status of the agricultural classes had largely determined Southern life and its patterns of thinking. Defeat of the South in the Civil War inflicted upon the whole region drastic changes in society's hierarchal and agricultural systems and had an immense impact on the literary productions of the Southern thinker and audience. In the aftermath of the war, there were financial devastation, agriculture ruin, social and economic dislocation. The South was viewed (and viewed itself) as a conquered and defeated region and the North dealt with the Southerners as such.

The mythic social system that the pre-war South became was of an ordered society of well-defined classes. Each man supposedly lived a self-sufficient existence, free from preoccupation with the competitive struggle. Rank and birth entailed high-minded and chivalric behaviour. Thus, the essence of Southern belief of distinctiveness was based on stability, tradition, class structure, and a dominant idea of social rank.

The Northern system, on the other hand, was seen as progressive and industrial with a social system which valued change and revered science. The North was seen as trying to implant their way of thinking and new system. This system was tried by battle; the victors dictated peace and imposed their terms by force. By 1877 with the

end of Reconstruction and the establishment of a new regime in the South, as C. Vann Woodward has shown in *Reunion and Reaction*, there was need for a new adjustment, the outcome of which was the so-called Compromise of 1877 which was intended to end political and economic struggle between regions. As part of that adjustment, the South was *de facto* allowed the principle of "white supremacy" and a promise of a share in the new economic spoils. Thus, Woodward says: "the South became bulwark instead of menace to the new order"[11].

From the time of the antebellum Southern period, the Southern conservative tradition had provided an important critique of the American national progress in many ways. The Southern conservative thinking had been fundamentally in confrontation with such challenges as the celebration of the free market, material progress, and the advance of democracy.

The pre-Civil War Southern thinkers' critique of the free society emerged from their defence of slavery as a social system. Paradoxically, they agreed with the European socialists that capitalism would put the entire world into unresolved dilemma. From their viewpoint, slavery alone could ensure progress without the social dislocation, political upheaval, and the moral confusion that tormented bourgeois society. For these men and women who took seriously the biblical injunction to be their brothers' keepers, slavery seemed the best means of preserving a Christian social order in the modern world.[12]

When industrialism was brought to the southern regions and transformed the practices of agriculture, the old regime and the rural qualities lingered in the memory of Southerners and became the subject of powerful myths, myths that told of a way of life that was no longer available. Thus, their history became a story that one could tell

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[11] *Reunion and Reaction*, Boston, 1951, p. 246.
[12] Genovese, D. E., *The Slaveholders' Dilemma: Freedom and Progress in Southern Conservative Thought 1820-1860*, Columbia S.C., 1992. Quoted in Mark G Malvasi, *The Unregenerate South: The Agrarian Thought of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson*, Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge and London, 1997, p. 2.

as if from personal memory. Among these myths were: romanticised love, the persistence of pessimism and the sense of evil and imperfection, which were the most distinctive tradition and heritage which formed the thought of the region and the philosophical frame within which it thought and felt; love for classical learning — that love which predated the glorification the Greek state which the Southerners of the 1840s developed to justify the idea of slavery; a sense of place and soil, associated with agrarian culture; valuing of the past so that history became a record of inestimable value; the theme of the family as a basic social unit; a deep sense of the individual dignity of man and his relation to the group; the study of the particular rather than the general; the ability to live at ease with an unresolved paradox, and reverence for gracious living and good manners.

Following the war, in the ten years of the Reconstruction (1866-1877) the southerners were dealing with two codes: the type of social class they were used to, and the new social system imposed by the conquerors. The destruction of the South after the war, and the loss of human potential on the battlefield, resulted in social dislocation of the southerners in general and the men of letters in particular. The new farming system established in the south synchronized with the cultivation of a new literary scene characterized by loss of cause, divided selves, and deaf ears on the part of the audience.

Absence may be the best possible word to describe the southern literature prior to 1865. Being agrarian, most of the writers of that time were isolated from the centres of publishing and marketing. Their literary production tended towards the local and a dominant topic was the defence of slavery. "The Southern literary mind, following the political mind, closed itself around the slavery issue and suppressed the ironic dimension of Southern subject matter." "If you didn't believe in slavery, you couldn't say anything or you left." (L. P. Simpson, "Antebellum Southern Literature" in *The History of Southern Literature.*) With the exception of Edgar Allan Poe, who

became a northern expatriate, there was but one writer who can make a claim to literary stature; William Gilmore Simms of South Carolina. His writings are distinctively southern in the sense "of time and history, a love of Southern landscape, a respect of Southern institutions, and a firm belief in class stratification and enlightened upper-class rule."[13] After 1865, literature in the south began to flourish. Though the southerners were defeated in the battlefield, they did not accept any moral defeat. Thus, they turned to the production of a literature constantly coloured by a kind of epic frame.

Such literature is often characterized by a conflict between the industrialized system dictated by the North and the agricultural system of the South as we have seen in Allen Tate's novel *The Fathers*. Alongside this there were two dominant features governing the literature of the south at that time: defeat in the civil war and the issue of slavery.

The old social and political, and moral vision proved impossible to sustain. Emancipation in 1865 was felt to have destroyed all those social relations that nurtured the Southern conservative thinkers and they began to associate the deepening crisis of the modern world and man with the steady development of a godless capitalism.

During the twentieth century as legatees of this conservative tradition, the Agrarians condemned the rise of the profit motive, the savagery of unrestrained economic competition, the growing obsession with material acquisition, the separation of ownership from the control of property, and the destructive exploitation of nature. They viewed socialism in one form or another as the logical outcome of the ascendancy of corporate capitalism and the centralization of power in the state.

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[13] From Encyclopaedia of Southern Culture, p. 895.

Additionally, these "conservative thinkers also denied that this imposing analysis of capitalism originated in the antebellum defence of slavery. They have been so intent to dissociate themselves and their tradition from slavery that they have denied it was the foundation of the antebellum Southern social order".[14]

But slavery was woven into the pattern of Southern life. Moreover, slavery had weakened the Southern position both during and after war. This had its own impact on such movements as the Agrarian. Thus, the Agrarian movement viewed itself as a kind of protest against the new order and democracy and the failure of justice in civil affairs of the South.

The inability to defend slavery or participate in the political life of the new South hampered the Southern conservatives but did not paralyse them. During and after the late 1920s, the Agrarians had undertaken to reinterpret southern history and to re-examine the Southern tradition and defend its values according to the perspectives of their time. Their efforts produced a defence of their own contribution to American social, culture, political, and economic discourse. But the confusions introduced by slavery, on the one hand and persistent avoidance of a modern resolution on the other meant that their contribution remained weak and problematic.

The treatment of slavery in Owsley's contribution is symptomatic: slavery was an unfortunate and un-avoidable contingency that encumbered the development of the South and offered nothing essential to the order of Southern society or to the character of its people. Following Owsley, Davidson, for example, understood the South not as a slave society at all but as a traditional, agrarian society inhabited by "plain folk" who had created a unified, homogenous culture: a kind of extended family, clan, or tribe. Similarly, Ransom and Tate, with somewhat different emphases, remained convinced that slavery had prevented the South from becoming the kind of society it

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[14] Genovese, D. E., *The Southern Conservative Tradition: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism*, pp. 79-80.

should have been. Tate argued that the South should have become a modern feudal society composed of Southern lords and Southern serfs who would assume the stewardship of traditional European values; hierarchy, duty, chivalry, reverence, piety, and faith.

These interpretations of Southern history are best described as *head in the sand* interpretations. Southern conservative thinkers in the twentieth century have wanted nothing to do with slavery or its legacy, which embarrassed and horrified them, mostly into a guilty silence. Nevertheless, as Eugene D. Genovese has pointed out on more than one occasion, "they have yet to figure out how to defend and develop a world view the roots of which have been severed".[15]

The Agrarian movement as a whole made little or no political or social headway, although individual members contributed fiction, poetry, and criticism both to Southern literature and literature as a whole. Another of the group's publications was a book of essays entitled *Who Owns America*, edited by Herbert Agan and Allen Tate. Agrarians, English Distributists, Catholic Traditionalists, and other prominent literary figures in England contributed essays. Although this group disintegrated, many of the members continued to engage in social commentary and political activism. Ransom, for a while, held debates in many cities in front of rather large audiences and drafted, but did not complete, a treatise on Agrarian economics. In general, the importance of this group was that it provided a literary context for many of the south's most influential writers.

The Agrarian credo called for measures that "might promise to stop the advances of industrialism, or even undo some." If they could not prevent the defection of an entire generation of Southerners to the "American industrial ideal", the Agrarians argued that the South would become an undifferentiated replica of the

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[15] Genovese, D. E., "Critical Legal Studies as Radical Politics and World View", *Yale Journal of Law & Humanities*, III, 1991, pp. 153.

filthy industrial cities of the Northwest and Midwest. Ransom, Tate, Davidson, and their compatriots believed that the South stood or fell upon Southerners' willingness to resist the encroachments of industrialism and the allure of the market. They held little hope for survival of the Southern tradition in a world governed by industrial councils and chambers of commerce.[16]

The Southern Agrarians refused to divest themselves of their cultural heritage, or indeed, to define the Southern tradition with reference to its defects. The South, they asserted, was not a moral abomination among the nations of the earth; the slaveholding class could boast of a multitude of extraordinary men and women who were courageous, socially and morally responsible, God-fearing, and tough. Old-fashioned, homemade, long-discredited Southern ways might yet halt the threatened emergence of a new barbarism.

Thus, the Agrarians struggled to confront the tragedy of their own history, which was embodied most fully in slavery and Civil War. After all, Southerners knew defeat intimately. They had witnessed the destruction of their world and, almost alone among citizens of the United States, understood what it meant to lose all that they cherished. As Tate put it, Southerners had placed their faith in history, and in 1865, history had disappointed them.[17]

Ransom, Tate, and Davidson did not lament everything in the lost values of the South; initially, at least, they set out to discredit the romantic vision of the old South with emancipation of defeat. They understood that the creation of this romantic vision of the old South by the generation who survived the Civil War was one Southern response to the frustration, anger, shame, insecurity, and fear that arose from defeat. But they struggled to recover instead a complex history of the South that the postbellum generation of the Southern writers and thinkers had sentimentalised,

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[16] "The Statement of Principles", *I'll Take my Stand*, pp. xxxvii-xlviii.
[17] Tate, A., *Memories and Opinions, 1926-1974*, Chicago, 1975, pp. 35-38

distorted, or repressed. The Agrarians sought to use the history of the ante-bellum South not to console a people anguished by military defeat, economic collapse, political violence, and social disharmony, but to find in that history a vision of order that would enable them to resist the chaos of the modern age.

As the Fugitive movement was operative in the South in the early to mid 1920s, so was the Agrarian in the late 1920s and 1930s. The urge for public action was a powerful factor in the groups' writing. However, where a belief in progress led many thinkers to Marxism, the Southern intellectual was drawn in other directions. The South remained a distinctive region with a distinctive set of attitudes, as Harry Ashmore has claimed: "it is the only distinctive region left in America"[18].

Generally, *I'll Take My Stand* contrasted the responsible, code-ordered life of a society based on rural life with the chaotic and predatory irresponsibility introduced by finance capitalism. Its first aim was to influence public opinion and urge individuals in the community to stick to their traditions and moral codes. According to Tate the idea of "doing something about the South" originated in 1926. The Agrarian movement, which lasted for six years during the 1930s, was an aesthetic and political movement that developed out of the Fugitives' poetic creation during the 1920s. In other words, the Fugitive movement carried the seeds of Agrarianism. Not long after the Fugitive group started to disperse the writers involved took a more political turn and began to organize their energies towards isolation and regional defiance. The book urged Southerners to spurn modernism and reaffirm their belief in ordered, tranquil, and "religious" life that is close to nature.

In the Statement of Principles they encouraged Southerners to protest against and oppose industrial inroads upon their inherited culture, the intrusion of false ideas of progress and prosperity emanating from the old enemy, the North, which

[18] *An Epitaph for Dixie*, New York, 1958, pp.172-189

threatened to destroy the South's traditional society. It constituted a kind of intellectual Civil War, with the Agrarian as the new confederates:

> Each renaissance had its richest development through the friendship, by no means always serene, of the various members of the group within it. Each had a particular town as its locale. Each found its impulse in a single high-minded man. It shows further by the establishment of a magazine that had an important influence in the group itself and a small but active band of readers outside the group. And the group identified with each movement made itself not the spokesman of the majority opinion in the country but instead an unusually significant minority voice[19].

Twelve Southerners wrote this "Southern manifesto". The contributors included historian Frank Owsley, a psychologist, Lyle Lanier, a political scientist H. C. Nixon, biographer John Donald Wade, and authors Stark Young and Andrew Lytle. Warren and the twelve Southerners agreed to a statement of principles that appeared as an introduction to the book. He listed the group as Southerners "well acquainted with one another, of similar tastes... and perhaps only at this moment aware of themselves as a single group of men" (xxx). The essays urged the South not to surrender its "*moral, social, and economic autonomy*" to the prevalent industrial ideal. Some of the contributors joined with the writers in a later symposium entitled *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence* (1936).

"Rejection" and "disillusion" may be the best possible words that describe the Agrarian's rebellion. They rejected industrialism and the prevailing American way. They fought against the imposition of democracy, becoming disillusioned by it because of the rise of industrial society and the defeat of the South in the Civil War. They referred to democracy in the North as a "plutocracy" which defaced the ideals of the fathers. They ascribed their defeat in the Civil War to the industrial capabilities in producing more arms. For the Agrarians, industrialism along with science and

[19] "The Southern Renaissance", *American Heritage*, II, 1955, p. 744.

technology had long been the enemy of the traditional South. However, what is the agrarian concept of the society?

The principles they declared did not propose any particular measures. So what exactly was meant by the "restriction of Agrarian Principles?" How could an Agrarian Economy survive alongside a powerful industrial economy? How should an Agrarian family, conduct its daily affairs, and satisfy the normal demands of human existence?

In short, the Southern Agrarians were a group of frankly reactionary, conservative writers who espoused a return to the social economy of the pre-industrial South. The Agrarians were divided between modernists (represented by Ransom) and the romantics (represented by Tate), "alternately conceiving history as a myth and seeking an ineffable union with southern culture".

Many critics preferred other features to explain the essence of the Southern way of life and character. The North has been as determined to maintain a white civilization as the South. John Crowe Ransom presented an illuminating commentary on Southernism in other terms than race or antagonism.

For the Agrarians, it was the legend of their land and its past virtues, which they chose as their antidote to progress, and the theory of class conflict. Their motives were clearly expressed by Stark Young when he wrote in *I'll Take My Stand*:

> If any thing is clear, it is that we can never go back, and neither this essay nor any intelligent person that I know in the South desires a literal restoration of the old Southern life, even if that were possible; those days are gone, and if by some chance they should return, we should find them intolerable. But out of any epoch in civilization there may arise things worth while, that are the flowers of it. To abandon these when another epoch arrives is only stupid, so long as there is still in them the breath and flux of life....It would be childish and dangerous for the South to be stampeded and betrayed out of its own character by the noise, force, and glittering narrowness of

the industrialism and progress spreading everywhere, with varying degrees from one region to another[20].

Thus, the Agrarian way was a myth of the good order of the past used as a weapon of attack against the new order of the present brought to their region. The Southern writers had found in the Agrarian myth a legend, a fruitful subject through which the themes of order, tradition, grace, good manners, those good and surviving qualities of the old South, could be expressed. Moreover, these elements, stripped of their sometimes weird economic and political expressions, gave Southern writing a depth of meaning, grace of expression, and intensity of feeling unique in its time. These qualities are clear in much of the poetry of the Agrarians and aspects of them may be seen especially in Ransom's two volumes *Chills and Fever* and *Two Gentlemen in Bonds*.

The Agrarians drew their themes from the culture of their region. The South for them was a *subject* to talk about rather than a *theme* which may form the basis of a work of art. They tried to give their region belief, conviction, and loyalty rather than doubt, scepticism, and distrust. They were very sensitive to the currents of their time. Their response was a combination of regional tradition and inner self; their subjects taken from the history and soil of the South.

Ransom, in the introductory "Statement of Principles" which he wrote for *I'll Take My Stand*, embarked on what can be called the central objection of the Agrarians to technology when he remarked: "Religion can hardly expect to flourish in an industrial society. Religion is our submission to the general intention of a nature that is fairly inscrutable; it is the sense of our rôle as creature within it". Ransom argued that technology gave the community "the illusion of having power over nature" and made man "lose the sense of nature as something mysterious and contingent".

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[20] *I'll Take My Stand*, p. 328.

The Agrarian movement and its manifesto show us the controversial aspect of the artists' attitude in that very few American artists have strongly approved of the social reality in which they have found themselves. When they have not ignored it, or fled it as expatriates, (Eliot for example) they have generally denounced or ridiculed it. The radicalism of the artist puts him in one of two groups: a group of the past or of memory and because this involves a powerful myth of past times, it can become a kind of escapism or migration into the past in search of a desirable life of the mind. The other group is the progressive in which the artist hopes to cope with the new technological culture. However, even hope in progress is a kind of escape in that it implies a submissive attitude to dictated values. Both imply struggle and social failures. The first assumes escapism and the second assumes that the new values dominate humanity. This reminds us of Robert Frost's conservative distrust of every thing popularly called "progress".

What, then, is the relationship between the manifesto of the Agrarian movement and the literary output of the group? The agrarian poetry operated in the south as a documentation of the basic attitudes towards human experience and towards man's place in the society. This raises two questions: is there any actual society, which has ever been good enough for the artist, the saint, or the philosopher to want to save it? Is the Agrarian movement a cultural revolution based on the struggle between science and literature or is it only a demonstration of the cultural alienation of the South? The former state offers the prospect of art, the latter a kind of category error.

As 'agrarianist' Ransom sees the agrarian life the most possible way of life man should lead, and the most civilized for man's experience. Ransom objected to industrialism and industrial society because it separated man from the good life through dividing man's identity between polarities and imposes abstractions on experience and emotion: love hatred, sacrifice, good and evil, life and death.

His objection to contemporary industrial society was that it denied the individual the attainment of the good life, by providing a chaotic, fragmented existence, dividing human experience into little isolated compartments, setting apart emotion from intelligence, and promoting a dehumanized abstract version of human life.[21]

In his poetry, Ransom tries to fuse the polarities of the agrarian way of life and the industrial. So there is no surprise that the literary message seems to change over the time from the Fugitives and Agrarians years to suit this mission of bridging the gap in man's experience.

For Ransom, however, the need for fusion comes from more sources than simply the conflict between the agrarian and the industrial. There were doubts and inhibitions right from the beginning.

Consider, for a moment, one of Ransom's most famous poems, "Philomela". Ransom does not use the traditional story except as ironic frame. Instead, he improvises his own myth and links it to its origins. Secondly, Ransom is projecting his own attitude, adapting it to his status as a poet in the new South.

Wit in the poem shifts the reader's attention from its biographical interest to ironic soliloquy on the nightingale, which becomes a part of Ransom's self iconography. In fact it is a two-way irony: directed at the self and at the object. However, much of the irony in the poem encompasses the classical and Anglo-European tradition as well:

> 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.

This two-way irony raises a question: can classicism be transplanted into a community like the South? Despite the self-stylisation in notions like the "Athens of

[21] Rubin, D. L., *Writers of the Modern South: THE FARAWAY COUNTRY*, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 1966, p. 165.

the South", the nightingale's song seems irretrievably flat. Ransom is divided between his roots as Southern American poet and his classical learning. Ransom not only belongs to a society with its own traditions and values but also to a culture derived from Europe, and his dilemma lies here:

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

In *God without Thunder* Ransom embarked again on the problem in the epilogue of the book. He argued:

> For better for worse, a man is a member of his own race, or his own tribe. He will have to prosper or suffer as it prospers or suffers. The religion that he requires must have the character of being his own social institution that suits him quite near at home, he will have to go without one.[22]

So we notice that Ransom has his own interpretation of the traditional story of Philomela and he only brings it up to consider its rejection. This theme is taken up again, more comically, in "Crocodile". But there the very distance achieved by the broad comic effect indicates the severity of the dissonance, and Crocodile at last returns to his swamp.

This rending of self between traditions and dualities is the topic of the sonnet sequence in *Two Gentlemen in Bonds.* Ransom presents the tale of two brothers in twenty sonnets. He presents them as if they are characters in a kind of drama; indeed, he first presents the main characters and others in a form of a leadenly jocular *dramatis personae.*

The poems which follow tell us about strife between the two, one worldly and the other ascetic. Paul, the active man of the poems, delights in nature and physical sensation, but as his times demand, he plays the mercenary game and accepts the ruinous conventional standards by which the active man must live. Meanwhile,

[22] Ransom, J. C., *God without Thunder*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1930, PP. 325-26.

Abbott, his counterpart, is presented as a philosophic idealist who keeps to his rat-infested tower, defying the world and able to retain only his bleak integrity and his hopes for death. These two characters remind us of the Christ and antichrist in "Armageddon".

The action of these sonnets set in perhaps in the sixteenth or seventeenth century – it is never made clear. The two brothers are co-inheritors of their father's estate: Paul, a man of large animal appetites, athlete, an extrovert - "a smile always in waiting" - and at the end something of a politician; and Abbott, a thin and pale intellectual who

> could talk in Latin, music, mime,
> Or sonneteer with Petrarch in his prime,
> He had a prince's powers, but what he willed
> Was to go down to dust with the unfulfilled
> Rather than stint himself with space and time.

When the king pays them a visit, Abbott, rather than pay obsequious homage and be part of a vulgar entertainments, moves to the tower and there decides to remain for good, dedicated to meditation and misanthropy. Paul, left to play host alone, wins the king's favour and with the royal blessing marries his beautiful cousin Edith, who before had been somewhat undecided between him and Abbott: "How noble is man thinking," she once had said. At the end of the sequence, the notoriety of the brothers,

> Paul waxing great and thirsting for the power,
> Abbott a death's-head gibing from a tower;

has awakened the spirit of their father who contemplates from the tomb the split nature of his human progeny:

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

That is the final sonnet, but the theme is just as clear in the first sonnet. Because it is so clear and static and because there is little story and no characterisation beyond the outlining of the two types, the result is a constant repetition of the obvious. Nevertheless "Rain" a speech by Abbott, can stand-alone and in fact is printed separately under another title.[23]

This set of poems had clearly hoped to open a window on the conflicting tensions between two identities where one is strict and the other is more hopeful - if also more innocent – two dreamers, still struggling within the same person. The technique of the poems is very different too. In the previous poems we have examined, we have been accustomed to seeing a persona who establishes the distance from the subject at which the persona is located. In addition, it is this distance which is so often a source of irony in the poem. This is a kind of irony that only operates when the persona is rigorously detached from the world of the subject and located at considerable distance. Thus, irony - the index of distance, the mark of uninvolvement - enriches the poet's objectivity. In the case of "Two Gentlemen in Bonds" it is hard to apply these characteristics where the persona is actually the subject of the poems. In most of his narrative actions, Ransom keeps himself different from or alt least does not identify himself with a particular set of values or a group of people. But in "Two Gentlemen in Bonds" it is Ransom himself who appears as the divided self or an individual with a dual citizenship.

In the volume *Two Gentlemen in Bonds*, the distinction between the first two sets of poems contributes to the last section. "The Innocent Doves", is about the gentle ones who are caught in an indifferent world; the Blue Girls, Janet and her hen, and the lost lady. In "The Manliness of Men", we will ignore the title for the moment and notice the following: "Our Two Worthies" opens the section and "The

[23] "Proud Heart Rained Upon", *The Measure*, No.52, June, 1925, p.11.

Equilibrists" closes it. What is the logic behind this order? This is the one line, one theme unites them. The "Worthies" are Jesus the Paraclete and Saint Paul the Exegete, between whom, the poet says, let there be no "schism". However, the schism is unavoidable.

Schism runs all over the section until we reach "Two Gentlemen in Bonds". We see schism in "Dead Boy" between the view held by the family and that held by the observer. In "Puncture" schism is between Grimes and the admiring narrator, between man and nature in "Semi-Centennial", between the husband and wife in "Two in August", among the birds in "Somewhere is Such a Kingdom", between reality and dream in "Persistent Explorer", and "Morning", between the two views of the "Dog", between the lovers of "Jack's Letter", between the literal and poetic evaluation in "Antique Harvesters", and between the obsession which "Man without sense of direction" suffers and the natural peace he needs. "The Equilibrists" ends this part of the volume and also deals with schism; the beautiful lovers are made for each other, and just like Paolo and Francesca in Dante's poem, they are caught like "two painful stars" in the "equilibrium" of their "prison world".

Thus, most of the poems in this section involve schism. The split here of two kinds: split of ideas - as the word schism implies - and split of the personality of the personae in the poems. Nevertheless, what has the name of this section has to do with this split? When Ransom presents a survey of the world through this set of poems with one run-on idea of schism, he implies that this world of the and duality exhibits the way of man fulfils his "manliness".

If we compare these sonnets to the rest of Ransom's poems we find a striking change and shift of style and language: no narration, narrator or narrative "I", sonnet form, and dramatic framework achieved by the assigning of characters and roles.

The first shift in style we notice is that there is no narration of the action and there is almost no action to identify. Moreover, there is no "I" narrator whose commentary explains the action or gives distance to the materials of the poem.

Of course, pronouns occur in the poems as part of the normal processes of narration, but they do not indicate any other viewpoint as we had become used to seeing:

> She wouldn't go in her green riding habit
> To canter with him and hollo to every rabbit
> That bounced across to thicket or to grass.
>
> Too much she listened to Abbott's music of words:
> "O the wild flood! How noble is man thinking!
> But we, my cousin, are filled with eating and drinking.
> Should we not read philosophy?" But Paul said,
> "Edith, my brother's a fool and out of his head,"
> And saw her thoughts fly over him like birds.

Ransom's first experiment with sonnets dates back to 1914 when he presented his first sonnet "Sunset". The encouragement Ransom received from the Fugitives at that time perhaps suggested to him that he might carry on using this style in his poetic career but in fact he did not and his second experiment came almost 13 years later in 1927. Ransom's avoidance of sonnet style may be attributed to two reasons: Ransom was fond of changing and adding words, lines and whole stanzas, the poem being in continuous process. Writing sonnets would end the poem as it is and it would be hard for him to change because of the tight meter and rhyme scheme Secondly, it would control and limit his choice of words and themes in directions he was not perhaps willing to follow.

The last shift in style is in his use of a dramatic apparatus to assign characters and roles. The whole collection appears to start as a play rather than a set of sonnets. Moreover, there is a dramatic development of the events in the sonnets with the titles of the sonnets working as interludes and scenes for them. But the infirmity of purpose shines through and the sequence never takes on any life.

This set of sonnets is Ransom's last mode of verse. The image of two conflicting brothers and the disparity between what man needs and wants and what he can reasonably achieve, show the basic theme Ransom brooded on throughout his poetic career: man's dual nature and the conflict of body and soul and the inevitable misery that follows man's unwillingness to accept his position and condition in the universe.

In 1937 Ransom accepted a position at Kenyon College, Ohio. He had for some years ceased to write verse and he was henceforth to cease writing about politics and social problems. He had left the South.

Computing Irony and Distance

Up to this point, a number of the principles of selection and analysis used in this thesis have remained unexamined. It is the purpose of the present chapter to make some of these clearer by means of an investigation of two aspects of John Crowe Ransom's language and style. Our reading in the previous chapters has suggested that there is, over a relatively short period, a considerable change in Ransom's poetic manner: for example, from a rather crude and uninflected sarcasm in the early poetry [**ep**] (*Poems about God*) to a more subtle and nuanced irony in later poetry [**lp**] (*Chills and Fever* and *Two Gentlemen in Bonds*). What concerns us here is whether we can be more precise about this change; for although irony is, by definition, an unmarked trope, the ease with which readers detect its occurrence suggests the presence of linguistic cues in addition to those of context, idiom and circumstance discussed in Chapter 1. Perhaps we can specify clusters of markers that will suggest ways of charting this phenomenon.

There were two problems encountered this part of the research: first there was no complete electronic text of Ransom's poetry. So the first task was to create a machine-readable form through scanning. The second was to specify a suitable text analysis program which would meet with the requirements and needs of the research.

Concordance programs were used to examine the following features as plausible loci for irony and distance effects:

1. **Modal verbs and modal markers.**
2. **Shift in verb tenses.**
3. **Pronouns.**
4. **High-frequency content words.**

The last category requires a short comment: statistically, all individual content-words are, compared to function words, rare and when they occur are strongly topic-dependent. For this reason they are not often of much use at the statistical level. What we are doing here is using them as pointers rather than as proofs. Further, this

study does not examine just raw occurrences, but collocations of features.

The study falls into two steps: first, examining these collocations to see how far they could be possible markers of irony and distance through a study of their contextual meanings and secondly we compare some of them to similar examples from William Carlos Williams and Allen Tate. A reference to some of the poems that underwent poetic revision may help to make the study clearer. This study may also suggest some interesting links between Ransom's themes and his choice of words.

1. Modal verbs and modal markers

What is the purpose of looking at modal verbs? Modal verbs tend to suggest uncertainty, the conditional and tentative, may often be seen as pointing to irony and distance in the context. And it is in the space of distance that irony will gain a foothold. The following chart shows a comparison between early modal verb frequency (emodf) and later modal verb frequency (lmodf). For comparison it includes two non-verb forms **if, perhaps** and a non-modal **dare**:

Modal verbs	emodf	%	lmodf	%
can	16	0.198	19	0.076
cannot	2	0.025	8	0.032
can't	0	0	3	0.012
could	11	0.136	34	0.136
couldn't	3	0.037	2	0.008
may	2	0.025	29	0.116
might	1	0.012	13	0.052
must	9	0.111	42	0.169
ought	3	0.037	0	0
shall	13	0.161	35	0.140
shalt	1	0.012	0	0
should	4	0.049	16	0.064
shouldst	0	0	1	0.004
will	23	0.284	64	0.257
won't	1	0.124	1	0.004
would	24	0.297	79	0.317
wouldn't	1	0.012	2	0.008
perhaps	5	0.062	1	0.004
if	22	0.272	89	0.357
dare	1	0.012	3	0.012
total words	8088		24915	

The chart shows the comparative density of modal verbs between the later poetry and

the early. A first glance shows that the use of **can** declines a little, **cannot** increases slightly, while **may, must, should** and **would** are all more definitely up in frequency. Closer analysis of this chart prompts selection of some of the significant figures from which we can go to the relevant lines to see how they work. It is not necessary, at this point, to make allowances for Ransom's frequent use of narrative or persona - though something will be said later about the intrusive "I".

Raw frequencies are not by themselves necessarily indicative, e.g. **must**: its use increases, but the increase is weighted by Ransom's habit of using it as an emphatic futuritive (although one that rarely suggests a happy future). A different example is **cannot** which rises from 2 instances in the early poetry to 8 instances in the later. The shift is very small - however, it indicates a feature of Ransom's change in style between early and later poetry. Early poetry reflects a serene amateurism of directness, a naïve faith in exploitation of the poet's personality. With the later poetry comes a revulsion against sentimentality and the parallel obsession with the doctrine of aesthetic distance. This shift of approach is accompanied by a shift in style and structure. Instances of "cannot" show two things: Ransom is distancing himself from the subjects of the poems and secondly, it hints at something like confusion. One of the examples of this distance and confusion is in "Somewhere is Such a Kingdom":

> 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.

The second line in the stanza undermines the knowledge the speaker has seemed to give us in the first line. Moreover, distance and confusion in the second line is double-layered: an intrusion of "I" (which we will discuss later in the section on

pronouns) and the modal "cannot". The speaker in the poem *cannot* be certain that the lives of the birds are idyllic -however they may seem at the moment - a tone emphasised by an echoing "cannot" seven lines later. Does evil exist among them or is it the speaker's projection? Whichever the case, he knows from his own experience what it could be like:

> 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.

But though he finally decides that the bird kingdom must be like the human - "Have not these gentlemen wives?" - he is stubborn:

> But when they croak and fleer 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?

Distance and confusion are working together through different tools especially in the last two lines of this stanza. The use of "dare" before pronoun "I" enforces the uncertainty and confusion which slide into the cool agnosticism of "if" followed by two negatives, capped here by a question mark. All these markers take a part in the suggestion of the speaker's distance from a committed emotion and contribute to the anonymity and absence of Ransom.

When we analyse the distribution of "dare" we find that in its first use Ransom employs it in a quite typical way. As noted, "dare" is not a modal verb, but it is included here because it has some of the same effects. Ransom uses it only once in the early poetry and there it indicates a self-reflective sarcasm (or rather a sarcasm reflected on the ostensible speaker). He uses it thrice in later poetry to indicate distance and confusion. The example in the early poetry is found in "The Ingrate":

And thought my poor befriended man
Would never dare to disagree.

There is a nice tension in between the two lines. In the first line we have a circumstance which suggests that the speaker is doing his interlocutor a favour ("befriended") just by talking to him. "Befriended", however, also suggest that he is not his friend at all but is a comparative stranger - a Russian - who is being placed in the position of acting like a friend - though "dare" strongly suggests his subordination. The Russian is, of course, going to disagree, whence the rather heavy irony.

When we look at how Ransom uses "dare" in his later poetry we find it often in the company of "if" and of the two negatives in the context already noted:

And dare I think it is absurd
If no such beast were, no such bird?

A similar case is that of "cannot" which develops the theme of distance in Ransom's poetry and may help us track the move from sarcasm in the early poetry to a more mature deployment of irony in the later.

A. From sarcasm to irony

"He cannot answer all that pray." This is the second occasion in which the modal verb "cannot" occurs in Ransom's early poetry. The line is from "November" in *Poems about God* (1919). The poem is a good example of his early sarcastic manner. Ransom uses "cannot" in a scornful way. "Cannot" in this line suggests that God experiences a kind of a prayer overload i.e. he gets so many men and women praying every day that he simply cannot answer them all. The tone of the line betrays no uncertainty or confusion and carries the generalising suggestion that, judging by the results, God is simply not up to the task at hand. In this context we can take "cannot" as a fairly straightforward marker of sarcasm. Moreover, a combination of "if" and "cannot" is skilfully utilised, not to express confusion, but to suggest that the sarcasm also implies rejection (though beyond the immediate sarcasm there remains a possible mutuality in this rejection):

If God had heard my prayer then,
The good folk couldn't point and say
As mother says they're pointing now:
Behold, one stands in the sinners' way!
The stiffest sceptic bends his neck
And stands on no more vain parley
If such as she would have him come,
Worship with her in the Baptist way,
Accept the fables as he can,
A Jewish God, a Passion Play;
And such a lover never comes
To fondling dirty drabs for pay.
But God had another man for her,
He cannot answer all that pray.

In the opening line of the stanza the speaker uses "if" to introduce a thesis soon to be discounted. Almost immediately in the remaining part of the stanza we see the sarcastic tone. This tone is first implied by "If God had heard my prayer then," where the line indicates quasi-regret for his invalid position. This line echoes with the last one in the stanza when the speaker uses the woman's prayers to claim that God will not at all be able to fulfil what she is asking so earnestly in her "Baptist way".

"An old one you cannot open with conversation." The line is from "Old Man Playing with Children". This line is preceded by "But I will unriddle for you the thought of his mind". The word "unriddle" hints at an uncertainty and confusion about the old man and how his mind works. "One" here flickers away towards generality, and "cannot" opens a gap between the seeming confidence of the speaker and the conversational inscrutability of old age. Irony here is twofold: between speaker and subject (and reader), and between the openness of the old man in children's games and his conservative conversation. A complex reflective irony lies in the speaker's willingness to solve the puzzle of the thought of the old man's mind even in the teeth of the inability to start a "conversation". That "cannot" blanks out immediacy of identification and opens what follows to the resources of a chilling irony:

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?

We find another instance in "Man without Sense of Direction", where it is the protagonist himself: "That cannot fathom nor perform his nature." Though the title indicates a case of confusion and disintegration of thought, the poem does not offer a diagnosis of any kind; all it does offer is a baffled puzzlement. And this could be the first striking irony of the poem. The speaker concentrates, in a quizzical way, on the man's inability, as a creature, to "perform his nature" and leaves the loss of direction for the reader to diagnose and solve. The man's inability to love properly is the poem's main focus. But because he has no direction – "cause, time, nor country" – he cannot find the commitment necessary for love. This imagery at some points in the poem is tragic-comic. Ransom fuses the use of "cannot" as a modal verb with the description of the man as "hero" or "darling" to show the confusion and emotional impotence of the man's nature. The mixed mood the speaker puts the reader in arises from two sources: first we may to some extent sympathise with the man's inability to love, but on the other hand there is a vein of mockery because he is supposed to be "Of noblest mind and powerful leg" but is yet in this state of bewilderment. The "cannot" stands as an introduction to the unpicking of the epithet "horrible" and the irony cuts deeper than the mere confusion - as the title may indicate for some readers.

B. More tentative

As marks of a more tentative attitude towards the materials of his poems, we can consider Ransom's increased use of words like "may" and "might". "May" rises from 2 occurrences in the early poems to 29 in the later poetry, and "might" increases from one instance to 13. The trend is emphasised by the fact that Ransom never uses "might" as a noun; "mighty" occurs several times, though rarely unambiguously. In fact, these two words are obvious candidates for the creation of authorial distance, as they create uncertainty and ambiguity in a poem and may or may not be accompanied

by irony. However, in one away or another, in later Ransom's poetry, this kind of distancing mechanism usually does lead to irony. But how do "may" and "might" create distance? And how may distance lead to irony in this respect? To answer these two questions we may refer to Ransom's concept of ambiguity.

In the first instance, "may" and "might" create uncertainty simply because their modal function is to detract from the assurances of plain assertion and hence invite alternative possibilities. Ambiguity occurs when we have two possible levels of meaning for a subject. Ransom argues: "[A]mbiguity will occur if a poem invites two different readings of meaning."[1] The possibility of two levels of meanings creates some sort of a diffuse response between the subject, reader and the speaker. There may, of course, be other ways of achieving this effect, for example, in the use of a persona. However, to stay with our modals for the moment, where there are two possible meanings in a poem the reader cannot be confident which one to adopt especially when they are seemingly opposite to each other - like good and evil in "Armageddon". "Ambiguity occurs properly, I should think, where there are two possible senses in which to take an item, and they are opposite senses to that both cannot hold at once, and the poem does not decide between them... And if the oppositions are moral ones, between good things and bad things, the effect is ironical... Ambiguity is chiefly an ironical device."

In the poetry, we can see this uncertainty in Ransom's use of "may" uses it to express an ironic optative in which the subject of the pronoun is given an unlikely hope or wish - as in "Here Lies a Lady". Whether this expresses a genuine wish is improbable and it seems unclear what the fulfilment of the wish would involve: "Sweet ladies, long may ye bloom, and toughly I hope ye may thole," is offered as if it is simply that the speaker is hoping they will be healthy and flourish.

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[1] John Crowe Ransom, *The New Criticism*, (Connecticut: Norfolk, New Directions, 1941), p. 102.

The occurrences of "if" rise from 22 in early poetry to 89 in the later. "If" mainly suggests condition or sometime possible regret - as in "if only". Its appearance in the early poetry tends to show regret overwhelmed by sarcasm as in the following example from "November":

> If God had heard my prayer then,
> The good folk couldn't point and say
> As mother says they're pointing now:
> Behold, one stands in the sinners' way!
> The stiffest sceptic bends his neck
> And stands on no more vain parley
> If such as she would have him come,

In the later poetry "if" suggests the conditional with its consequent tones of uncertainty. Uncertainty is further reinforced in those cases where "if" is followed by "might" (4 times) or by "may" (6 times). The general sense we gain from their appearance together suggests a delicate and tentative evasion adding to the estrangement of both reader and speaker from the matter of the poem, forcing a distance in which irony is allowed free play. For example (with hints of jocularity) in "Philomela":

> Philomela, Philomela, lover of song,
> I am in despair if we may make us worthy,

Despairingly in "Nocturne":

> And might yet go to the ball,
> If head would concede to heart

And absurdly in "Three Mountebanks Spiel":

> He may not bruise that flesh nor eat.
> He may not rend him limb from limb
> If Agnus do but bleat on him.

Slightly different is "Spectral Lovers":

> "This is the mad moon, and shall I surrender all?
> If he but ask it I shall."

Where (as with "Nocturne") context supplies the further irony that "he" will ask

nothing of the sort.

2. Shifts in verb tenses

Another possible marker for distance is shift in verb tense, though this topic needs some care. One common use of tense shift - from narrative past to present - actually decreases distance by giving greater immediacy to the account. But in the examples we shall examine, while they use the same shift, it here signifies changes of perspective. A move into present tense, sometimes in the form of a possible subjunctive, can shift the context of the standard narrative past (as can future/subjunctive). This shift in verb tense works to produce ironic detachment from the narrative action in the poems. When we offer a narrative we generally preserve consistency of tense unless some change is logically demanded. This tense is, accordingly, explanatory of when and how the action-sequence of a poem or a novel takes place. But when we encounter a suddenly shift to present or even future we may find ourselves looking for an irony - or being simply puzzled. One poem that illustrates this is "Old Mansion".

> 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.
>
> Here age seemed newly imaged for the historian
> After his monstrous chateaux on the Loire,
> A beauty not for depicting by old vulgarian
> Reiterations that gentle readers abhor.
>
> ...
>
> To assert: Your mansion, long and richly inhabited,
> Its porches and bowers suiting the children of men,
> Will not for ever be thus, O man, exhibited,
> And one had best hurry to enter it if one can.

There are two shifts at work here: first to the generalising present, and then, more interestingly, to the future. This shift adds an ambiguity to the stance of the poem and detaches the speaker from the narrative. It also suggests some sort of portentous riddle and the reader, already uncertain about those "châteaux on the Loire", searches

for the source of this authoritative voice and when or where this new action might take place.

Another poem which utilises this technique is "Parting at Dawn".

> 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, Madame, till your house-clock sounds;
> And if no Leith flows beneath your casement,
> And when ten years have not brought full effacement,
> Philosophy was wrong, and you may meet.

The speaker in the first two lines begins in a past tense, then suddenly, within the sentence, shifts to the present simple (in the third line) with the verb "assures" and again, to a generalising "Stoics are". The puzzle this technique causes is that the locus of the action is shifted and the silence of the night is suddenly irretrievable. What began as a narrative suddenly becomes comment and general lesson.

This is made more imprecise by the unfocused "then", despite which the speaker maintains the present simple tense until the last line of the poem when he said: "Philosophy was wrong, and you may meet" - which perhaps takes us back to the "broken whispering" time set. The poem is about love and honour. On top of the puzzlement and distance arising from the tenses' mixing, there is an additional factor in the abstract anonymity of the lovers themselves. The speaker does not allow any sympathetic feelings for the lovers - they are identified only by a lofty "you". Confusion, puzzlement, irony, and distance all swirl around the shifting tenses and distant stance of the speaker. However, there is another ironic turn in the poem: embedded in the variable tenses is one of those "if-may" conjunctions, together with a

sudden intrusive "you" (see next section) and the implication that if the lovers who have renounced emotion should discover, "ten years" later, that their aborted relationship still seems possible, they may then conclude that they were wrong about their idealism.

3. Pronouns

The problem to be highlighted with pronouns is the use of intrusive "I" and "you", collusive "we, us, our", deictic "this" (especially in connection with imperatives) and the impersonal "one".

The following chart shows the frequency of pronouns in Ransom's early and later poetry:

Pro.	eprof	%	lprof	%
I	166	2.052	240	0.963
he	83	1.026	283	1.136
me	38	0.469	40	0.161
she	35	0.432	127	0.509
it	74	0.914	205	0.823
they	53	0.655	127	0.509
we	30	0.37	84	0.337
you	48	0.593	102	0.409
him	29	0.358	105	0.421
his	78	0.964	395	1.589
her	44	0.544	212	0.851
Us	12	0.148	37	0.149
Them	12	0.148	57	0.229
My	90	1.112	138	0.554
Ye	6	0.074	44	0.177
Thee	2	0.024	4	0.016
Your	19	0.234	84	0.337
Thy	4	0.049	11	0.044
Our	9	0.111	55	0.221
Their	26	0.321	103	0.413
total words	8088		24915	

The raw numbers seem to offer very little: the fall in frequency of "I/me/my" is attributable to Ransom's general avoidance of the type of first-person narratives that feature so strongly in *Poems About God*. But closer examination shows something interesting.

Many of the effects in Ransom's later poetry depend upon a shift between the

third and first person pronoun in the course of a narrative. This takes the form of a persistent intrusion of the first person speaker or commentator. The use of the third person consequently becomes a signal of distance.

Ransom achieves this distance by creating a persona (narrator or speaker) who detaches himself from the subject of the poem. An apparently neutral persona's viewpoint in a poem will frequently be interrupted by an intrusion of "I" where nothing in the narrative actually requires it. The general curve line in the chart shows a very slight increase of all the pronouns but a decline in "I/me" only. The other pronouns mark a focus on anonymity and detached narration. These features are interrupted by outbreaks in the use of "I". "I" distracts the reader from the simple continuity of the narrative in the poem, and even seems to merge the speaker's voice with that of Ransom.

From among many examples of this technique we might look at "The Equilibrists". Narrative begins right from the first line in an abstract third person - although there are uncertainties about precise voice. But when the action reaches the seventh stanza there is an "I" for which there was no logical requirement but which does suggest that much of the forgoing was not description as much as commentary and adds much to the puzzlement and ambiguity of the poem:

> 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.

Naturally, Ransom uses pronouns in the course of narration but this particular technique shows an avoidance of any involvement in the action of the poem – sometimes by simply concealing any name and relying only on the bare pronoun thereby keeping the proper context concealed. This technique alternates between a strong persona and impersonal narrative.

The use of a strong persona in Ransom's poetry raises questions about

appropriateness and responsibility: is this persona in any sense presenting Ransom's own perspective? Or is that Ransom remains objective, allowing the persona to work upon the reader's responses as if this presence exists simply as an additional element of the narrative action in the poem? Ransom through the persona presents himself as one capable of directing the reader's mind to the message delivered in the poem but any distancing from this voice would open further perspectives of irony. The sensibility of the persona, as a rhetorical device, with his impersonal narrative, sharp wit and sarcasm (Pig) and pervasive irony in later poetry sets a tone that operates between polarities – and perhaps it is this that Ransom seeks.

4. Some Content words.

Though Ransom began writing poetry among the Fugitives in their casual meetings between 1914 and 1922, and then later among the Agrarians, we find him rather a solitary poet in the sense that he withdrew from the revolution in taste and technique launched by T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Instead, Ransom became a quasi-symbolist. But Ransom's adherence to aesthetic distance and/or the anonymity (or at least detachment) of the poet from the subject, suggests that Ransom depends on metaphor rather than symbol.

There are any numbers of words which occur in Ransom's poetry of which a reader would expect a symbolic level of meaning. But quite a few of these words turn out to be of virtually no symbolic import at all. For example *skull* occurs once in the poetry, and as we might anticipate, reinforces the sense of mortality but it is also accompanied by *tall*, which may suggest nobility. But it remains at the stage of collocation, with very little other work to do. And so it is with the "tall skull" of "The Equilibrists."

Among the content words, colours suggest themselves as candidates for possible usages that may point to Ransom's deployment of metaphor. Throughout his poetry Ransom relies heavily on a use of "black" and "white", but besides these we find that

the most frequent colours are: "blue", "white", "red", and "green", in that order.

Before we go to an analysis we might briefly look at the chart below. It represents the fifty most frequent content words in each of his published collections. They are arranged in alphabetical order for quick reference:

PaG	Chills	Gents
air	april	air
back	beauty	bird
bells	black	birds
cold	bring	black
come	came	blood
day	christ	blue
did	cold	came
do	come	cold
dumb	day	come
yes	dead	do
face	deep	each
father	did	earth
fool	do	eyes
go	earth	face
god	even	go
god's	eyes	god
good	face	good
green	fire	great
heard	go	green
heart	god	grey
heaven	good	head
home	great	hear
house	green	heard
just	head	heart
know	heard	king
like	heart	lady
little	hell	let
looked	house	like
lord	lady	little
love	leaves	long
made	like	love
man	little	man
men	long	men
mother	love	much
night	made	old
old	man	pale
poor	men	poor
said	night	rain
saw	old	said
say	red	say
see	said	sweet
still	sweet	tower
tell	think	two
thing	took	water
things	tree	white
time	well	Word
trees	went	Words
well	white	Yellow

went	wind	Yet
woman	young	Young

A quick glance shows that in *Poems about God* (PaG) the only frequent colour word is "green". The nature of the Ransom's first book of verse *Poems about God*, calls for no extensive use of metaphoric language. The book mainly deals with the experience of a fifteen year-old boy with a religious (Methodist) way of life. Additionally, the poems are more descriptive than narrative; and are closely involved with what the boy feels or experiences about his situations. This direct self-absorption pushes the language of the book away from metaphor - most frequently towards blunt, sarcastic or portentous statement. The nine occurrences of the word "green" are (with a single metaphoric exception) simply describing nature: lawn, springs, leaf, and water.

If we stay with "green" and add three more colours (black, red, and white) we see a remarkable difference between (PaG) and *Chill and Fever.* In *Chills and Fever* Ransom announces a change in principles, techniques, and themes. He has become less sentimental in his approach and the poems are no longer moralistic or directly concerned with the some (supposed) surrogate's experience. Ransom has moved sharply towards irony rather than sarcasm. To this end, he cultivates anonymity to conceal his identity rather than explore it and for much of the time is absent from the action which is now couched in a somewhat eccentric language. Unsurprisingly, the use of colour as metaphor became more evident. The period of *The Fugitive* displays the same tendencies as *Chills and Fever* – something to be expected, as they were in the same period of time. By the time we reach 1927 Ransom has added to his four standard of black, green, red some new ones: blue, grey, and yellow.

What do these colours mean to Ransom? Moreover, how do they work metaphorically in the poem? The answer would take us again to the analysis of the poems or at least the places where we encounter these colours. Moreover, using

colour in Ransom's poems has some link with his general understanding about the poem's structure.

Ransom's poetic process depends on polarity. He depends on juxtaposition of opposites and pulls one against another; head and heart, passion and chastity, innocence and knowledge. Colours in this respect play an important role in Ransom's poems because each colour holds a conventional meaning of its own. So we notice that Ransom uses red for anger, passion, and evil. Here are some examples from the poems:

"First Travels of Max"

> There in the middle of the wood was a Red Witch.
> To find a witch's house that would be red and dirty,

"Captain Carpenter"

> Or burnt in two beneath my red heart's flame

"Dog"

> Blaze two red eyes as hot as cooking-coals

The furious and proud red bull challenges Ransom's "Dog", the predator and worrier of the cows. The bull is still red when he attacks the invader, and then even the sky is red. Finally, the dog, beaten and sent to his box, has "two red eyes". The red of Captain Carpenter's heart is all passion and fury. Ransom also paints him scarlet.

Innocence, playful, nobility, and pure are represented by blue:

"Noonday Grace"

> Thanks for a platter with kind blue roses,

"Men"

> And kept their blue eyes blue to any weather.

"By the Riverside"

> A clean blue air for his breathing-space,

"Miller's Daughter"

Which are a blue stillwater.

"Blue Girls"

Twirling your blue skirts, travelling the sward
...
Practise your beauty, blue girls, before it fail;
...
Blear eyes fallen from blue,

"Her Eyes"

They were china blue.

"Painted Head"

The big blue birds sitting and sea-shell flats

Blue is innocence, playfulness, purity. The relative innocence of the woman's world in "Prelude to an Evening", the purity she protects, is suggested by the "blue bowls" whose water she keeps fresh: "Freshening the water in the blue bowls". The "Man without Sense of Direction" who is lifeless, cold to the world, must love his lovely woman, whose head is rinsed in blue air:

> Words, sunlight, the blue air which rinses
> The pure pale head which he must love?

Ralph in "Morning" rests at the side of his woman with playful thoughts dancing over him like "imps", and lets "his stare penetrate dazedly into the blue air". The clearest use of blue in this sense comes in "Blue Girls" where the maidens or students are exhorted to be like the blue birds that "go walking on the grass", that chatter in the air, to gather their rosebuds and enjoy living. They will lose their youth and with it their illusions, very like the lady with the terrible tongue, who has lost her illusions, her zest for life, and her innocence, who has lost her "blue".

Green in Ransom's poems suggests equilibrium between extremes. It suggests peace, well-being, and youth. The house of the Van Vroomans, in "First Travels of Max" sits on a green slope, where it stands with irony for peace and protection as "slope" suggests. The "Vaunting Oak" puts forth "green banners of peace", as

Ransom points out the colour of the "banners" in order to be sure that we understood the invisible side of the scene to be the leaves. On the other hand, he did not tell us the colour of the grass in "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" where the geese used to run ahead of her on the green grass, where they dropped their feathers like snow.

Yellow (31 times) is pleasant, restful, inviting, with an undertone of mystery. It carries a hint of something dangerous which is asleep and will or might wake up suddenly. In "Vaunting Oak" again, before the lovers could get to the tree, a flat place with flowers of "yellow kinds...had to be traversed." Here Ransom tells the reader that the girl "had been instructed of much mortality." The colour implies that she will soon be instructed of more, and she is. The tree which for her represents endurance, strength, and stability, proves to be hollow.

Black is the colour of foreboding, the unknown, and the sombre. The witch in "Eclogue" is black, as is the devil Captain Carpenter meets, and the "Spectral Lovers" rise out of the black ground. On the other hand, white is sometimes the colour of death; often, however, it signifies purity and sensuality. A number of times these last two are taken together, where the sensuality is heightened by the purity, as in "The Equilibrists": the unattainable body of the woman is a "white field ready for love". The woman in "Spectral Lovers" is a city of "white peace". The bride of "In Process of a Noble Alliance," is dressed in "funeral white". Ransom fuses purity and sensuality with a sense of death in "Necrological" where white corpses are scattered about a white field.

Grey (21 times) suggests hopelessness, isolation, and death. It is obvious, in this sense especially, that Ransom does not treat death as fact but as effect. Death appears to the young lady of "Piazza Piece" as a "grey man"; the man in "Good Ships" who goes through life without living it has an ashy complexion.

A typical use of blue and grey occurs in "Judith of Bethulia". Here, though, Ransom goes further to blend the qualities which the colours suggest:

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

...

The heathen have all perished. The victory was furnished,
We smote them hiding in vineyards, barns, annexes,
And now their *white* bones clutter the holes of foxes,
And the chieftain's head, with grinning sockets, and varnished -
Is it hung on the sky with a hideous epitaphy?
No, the woman keeps the trophy.

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

Judith hides her white body from the lusting young men behind "grey or blue veils". The veils are blue because she is virginal and innocent, pure of body and heart. The white of her body is the white of untouched sensuality and desire. The grey veils tell of the death she brings to Holofernes, and the intimations of death which the young men have afterwards.

The following chart compares Ransom's content words to those of Allen Tate and William Carlos Williams:

JCR		AT		WCW	
god	95	light	71	love	56
old	87	day	63	white	52
man	84	eyes	61	do	49
little	80	time	60	flowers	48
said	63	dead	59	time	42
come	61	death	55	flower	39
eyes	60	man	52	go	37
must	60	men	52	green	37
head	54	night	52	leaves	37
love	54	air	50	thing	36
do	53	long	43	come	33
heart	51	love	43	had	33
house	51	cold	42	wind	33
went	51	old	41	say	32
good	50	little	40	trees	32

men	48	eye	37	long	31
go	47	come	36	man	31
woman	46	head	36	world	31
day	45	let	36	sea	30
white	44	blood	35	old	29
still	43	dark	34	red	29
cold	42	heart	33	sky	29
young	42	see	33	think	29
made	41	say	31	head	28
water	41	face	30	see	28
long	40	hair	30	yellow	28
know	39	go	29	end	27
poor	39	life	29	sleep	27
say	39	said	29	sun	27
green	38	mind	28	water	27
can	37	sea	28	air	26
earth	37	world	27	blue	26
night	37	feet	26	men	26
well	37	know	26	well	26
blue	36	sun	26	eyes	25
came	36	think	25	mind	25
took	36	hand	24	way	25
air	34	last	24	young	25
face	34	saw	24	cold	24
let	34	sky	24	know	24
sweet	34	still	24	let	24
black	33	white	24	little	24
great	33	fear	23	rain	24
dead	31	green	23	day	23
did	31	well	22	spring	23
heard	31	being	21	edge	22
lady	31	black	21	grass	22
see	31	house	21	hand	22
yellow	30	living	21	new	22

What is striking here is that despite his rage against abstraction, Ransom's vocabulary is less concrete than either Tate's or Williams'. There are fewer colour words, fewer *things* than in either of his contemporaries. It may be that persistent irony pushes the writer away from engagement with the stuff of the world and encourages a tendency towards sententiousness.

Though it is not easy to locate irony in any work of art Ransom's use of such elements as colours, polarities, diction, verb tenses, modals, pronouns, and content words makes it possible to point to some tentative locations of irony in his text. Ransom is unusual for the ubiquity of his use of this device and we might expect to

find some light drift on linguistic will indicate this. When we compare his frequency list to those of Allen Tate and William Carlos Williams we find that Ransom is working in a slightly different linguistic register. Ransom is trying to change the way the reader is accustomed to look at the world. He invites his reader to stand back, look and draw some lessons – even if the lesson is that nothing is to be learned.

The elements discussed in this last chapter are some of the things Ransom makes use of to say more than he says, to enrich the undermeanings and make the lines echo with suggestions. These elements are important to his poetry and his reader's full understanding of his poems.

Conclusion

Throughout his poetic career John Crowe Ransom showed a persistent dedication to the insight and mode of thought that he called dualistism. Bound in with this attitude were his classical humanist training and Methodist upbringing. In his poetic practice, Ransom opposed human reason to a nonrational natural order, which he accepts empirically as the condition of reality. The apprehension of Nature's indifference and mystery is tempered with a sensuous appreciation of her careless bounties and beauties. As a true humanist, he insisted upon the cultivation of body and mind, senses and reason, and set himself equally against puritan asceticism and irrational indulgence.

Ransom's irony finds its most productive sources in this duality of the human condition: it is a kind of ironical opposition between man's desires and his potentialities, between his moral propensities and the world's indifference. In Ransom's own point of view, neither science nor religion can resolve and balance these oppositions.

Ransom's irony is particularly obvious in the disparity between the tone and the ostensible subjects of his poems, something which may confuse the reader at first, but at last helps to present Ransom's dualistic view of his subject and to enlarge the reader's understanding and sympathy for the people in the poems, who are caught between the world as it ought to be and the world as it really is.

The originality of Ransom's poetry lies not in irony but in its technique in the poems. The balanced dualistic view enables Ransom to create a world distinctly his own. This world has its mystic aspects, many intimately connected with his condition as sone of both old and new South.

His poetry has always been notable for its lucid and highly sophisticated

intellectualism: imagery and diction are always under strict control. John Crowe Ransom's poetry knows the effects it tends to and creates and goes directly for them. It is this route and goal that has been the subject of this thesis.

Appendix
I
History of Publication

[1] [Independent. 25 August, 1917]

[1] The Swimmer.

> ["The Swimmer", is the first poem published for Ransom. Vivienne Koch cites the poem as "The Wicked Swimmer" twice; first, in a book edited by B. Rajan *Modern American Poetry*, London: Dennis Dobson Ltd, 1950, p. 36, and another article titled; "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom" in *Sewanee Review* Vol. LVIII, 1956, p. 228.]

[2] [Independent. 27 October, 1917]

[2] What the Old Leaf Said. <Text?> ["Fall of Leaf"]

[3] [Enclosed in a letter to Christopher Morley. 19 May, 1918]

[3] The House [Unpublished poem] [Manuscript enclosed in a letter to Christopher Morley]

[4] [Independent. 27 July, 1918]

[4] One Who Rejected Christ.

[5] [Independent. 22 February, 1919]

[5] Sunset

> [First poem ever Ransom wrote; he wrote it in 1916, first cited in a casual meeting with the Fugitive group. However, Ransom before publishing the poem he read it for Donald Davidson at "Vanderbilt Stile"]

[6] [Selected Letters. P. 105 17 March, 1919]

[6] Minerva [Unpublished poem] [Manuscript enclosed in a letter to Christopher Morley]

[7] [Poems about God. New York: Henry Holt And Company 27 March, 1919]

> [First manuscript was of 29 poems 4 June 1917. Some poems in *Poems about God* were previously published in different magazines such as *Evening Public Liberator, Independent*, "The Swimmer", "Noonday Grace", "Sunset", and "One Who Rejected Christ" *Contemporary Verse*, "Roses" and *Liberator*. Most of the poems revised a year ago before publishing them in one volume. On 9th of August 1918 some poems appeared as manuscript as they were recommended by Ransom to be included in the volume; "Sunlight", "The House", "Geometry", "What the Old Leaf Said", "The Power of God", and "Superfluity"]

[7] The Swimmer.
[8] Noonday Grace.
[9] The Ingrate [Never again]

[10] Sunset.
[11] One Who Rejected Christ.
[12] Grace.
[13] Moonlight.
[14] Street Light [Never again]
[15] Darkness.
[16] Geometry [Never again]
[17] The Lover.
[18] Dumb-Bells [Never again]
[19] Overtures ["Two Gentlemen Scholars" in A&B versions]
[20] Under the Locusts.

> [In *Selected Letters* November 20, 1923, p. 126 Ransom suggested different title "Lean Locust Branches" for this poem.]

[21] Worship [Never again]
[22] The Cloak Model
[23] By the Riverside
[24] The Bachelor [Never again]
[25] Roses ["The Rose"]
[26] November [Never again]
[27] A Christmas Colloquy [Never again]
[28] The Power of God [Never again]
[29] The Resurrection
[30] Men [Never again]
[31] The Christian [Never again]
[32] Morning
[33] April [Never again]
[34] Wrestling
[35] Prayer [Never again]
[36] Friendship [Never again]
[37] The Four Roses
[38] The School
[39] Sickness [Never again]

[8] [Independent. 12 April, 1919]

[40] Noonday Grace.

[9] [Independent. 28 June, 1919]

[41] Darkness.
[42] Under the Locusts.

[10] [Harper's Magazine. December, 1920]

[43] Ghosts ["Hilda" cited in Selected Letters, p. 152 June 18, 1926]

[11] [New York Evening Post. 13, 16, 18, 24 February, 1920]

[44] Garden Sonnets: I. Sweet Will His Sonnet Set Out II. He Burns for Her
[45] Sonnet of a Selfish Lover I ["The Dead Boy" and "Dead Boy"]
[46] Sonnet of a Sure Heart. <Text?> ["Sure Heart"]

[12] [New York Evening Post. 1 March, 1920]

[47] Sonnets of a Selfish Lover II. <Text?> ["Dead Boy"]

[13] [New York Evening Post. 6 March, 1920]

[48] Sonnets of a Selfish Lover III. <Text?> ["Dead Boy"]

[14] [New York Evening Post. 12, 18, 20 March, 1920]

[49] Sonnet of a Pastoral Pair: **I.** They Take to the Fields **II.** They Praise the sun **III.** They Brave the Night. <Text?> [Dead Boy]

[15] [New York Evening Post. 25 March, 1920]

[50] Sonnets of a Selfish Lover: **IV.** <Text?> They Hail the Sunrise

[16] [New York Evening Post. 5 April, 1920]

[51] On a Superior Woman. <Text?> ["Triumph"]

[17] [New York Evening Post. 24 April, 1920]

[52] April Absence [Never again]

[18] [The Sewanee Review. January, 1922]

[53] An English Sonnet. <Text?> ["Winter Remembered"]

[19] [The Fugitive. Vol. I. April-December, 1922]

[54] Ego ["Plea in Mitigation"]
[55] Night Voices.
[56] To a Lady Celebrating Her Birthday
[57] The Handmaidens [Never again]
[58] Epitaph.
[59] Destitution Raiseth Her Voice [Never again]
[60] The Sure Heart ["Sonnet of a Sure Heart"]
[61] Necrological
[62] Boris of Britain [First appearance]
[63] The Vagrant
[64] Poets Have Chanted Morality [Never again]
[65] Fall of Leaf
[66] Youngest Daughter ["Romance of a Youngest Daughter"]
[67] In Process of a Noble Alliance ["In The Process of the Nuptials of the Duke", "Grim Wedlock"]

[20] [Double Dealer. November, 1922]

[68] On the Road to Wockensutter

[21] [Selected Letters. P. 119 February, 1923]

[69] Yellow River. <Text?> [Cited in a letter to Allen Tate]

[22] [Nashville Tennessean. 17 March, 1923]

[70] In Process of a Noble Alliance

[23] [Literary Review. 24 March, 1923]

[71] Here Lies a Lady

[24] [Vanderbilt Alumnus. November, 1923]

[72] Nostri in Memoriam Doctissimi. <Text?> [In memory of Herbert Cushing Tolman]

[25] [The Winter Owl. November, 1923]

[73] Winter Remembered
[74] An American Addresses Philomela
[75] Yellow River

[26] [Literary Review. 3 November, 1923]

[76] Emily Hardcastle, Spinster

[27] [Armageddon. 5 November, 1923]

[77] Armageddon

[28] [The Fugitive. Vol. II. February-December, 1923]

[78] Philomela ["An American Addresses Philomela"]
[79] Grandgousier
[80] Conrad at Twilight ["Conrad Sits in Twilight" & "Master's In the Garden Again" as A&B forms]
[81] April Treason
[82] The Inland City ["Inland City"]
[83] *Agitato Ma Non Troppo*
[84] Spectral Lovers
[85] Nocturne
[86] First Travels Of Max
[87] Blackberry Winter ["Raspberry Winter", <Text?>]

[Cited as "Raspberry Winter" in an article by Vivienne Koch titled "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom" in *Sewanee Review* Vol. LVIII, 1956, p. 230.]

[88] Lichas to Polydor
[89] Good Ships
[90] Judith of Bethulia
[91] Spiel of the Three Mountebanks
[92] Rapunzel Has Submitted Herself to Fashion
[93] Number Five
[94] Vaunting Oak ["Ilex Priscus"]

[In *Selected Letters* November 20, 1923, p. 126 Ransom suggested the following titles for this poem: "Great Oak", "American Oak", "Throes of Oak", "Mortal Oak", and "Vaunting Oak".]

[95] Old Man Playing With Children

[29] [The Bowling Green. 30 April, 1924]

[96] Sonnet of a Sure Heart ["Sure Heart"]
[97] They Praise the Sun
[98] They Hail the Sunrise

[Three parts of a poem called "Sonnet of a Pastoral Pair"; which later became "The Dead Boy then "Dead Boy"]

[30] [Selected Letters. P. 134, 6 May, 1924]

[99] Religio Medici Kentuckiensis. <Text?>

[Cited in a letter to Allen Tate (there is a footnote in the letter saying that the poem was never published! but it is published in the same year in *Palms*)]

[31] [Palms. 1924]

[100] Applied Elastics. <Text?> [Never again]
[101] Religio Medici Kentuckiensis. <Text?>

[32] [Literary Review. 2 August, 1924]

[102] Miriam Tazewell

[33] [Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger. 13 August, 1924]

[103] Miriam Tazewell

[34] [The Sewanee Review. 1924]

[104] The Dead Boy
["Sonnet of a Selfish Lover" then as "The Dead Boy" then finally as "Dead Boy".]

[35] [The Fugitive. Vol. III. February-August, 1924]

[105] Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter [First appearance]
[106] Captain Carpenter
[107] Prometheus in Straits
[108] Ada Ruel ["The Tall Girl"]
[109] Old Mansion ["Southern Mansion"]
[110] Blue Girls
[111] Adventure This Side of Pluralism ["Kingdom Come"]
[112] Parting at Dawn ["At Dawn"]
[113] Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son.

Later in three versions as:
A. The Vanity of the Male
B. The Vanity of the Bright Young Men
C. The Vanity of the Bright Boys

[114] The Last Judgement (Fresco) ["Fresco"]
[115] Virga [Never again]

[36] [Chills and Fever. New York: Alfred A. Knopf 29 August, 1924]

[This volume was originally under the title of [Philomela]. It consists of 49 poems 37 were first appeared in The Fugitive magazine five for the first time none of them appeared in *Pomes about God* the rest, seven poems, were published in *Double Dealer*, *Literary Review of New York Evening Post*, *Armageddon*, and the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*.]

[116] *Agitato Ma Non Troppo*
[117] Spectral Lovers
[118] Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter
[119] Winter Remembered ["An English Sonnet"]
[120] Triumph ["A Superior Woman"]
[121] Two Sonnets: I. Yea II. Nay [Never again]
[122] Spring Posy [Never again]
[123] To a Lady Celebrating Her Birthday
[124] Vaunting Oak ["Ilex Priscus"]
[125] In Process Of the Nuptials of the Duke ["In Process of Noble Alliance"]
[126] Parting At Dawn ["At Dawn"]
[127] Miriam Tazewell
[128] Here Lies a Lady
[129] The Tall Girl
[130] Fall Of Leaf ["What the Old Leaf Said"]
[131] Rapunzel Has Submitted Herself to Fashion
[132] The Vagrant
[133] Boris of Britain
[134] April Treason
[135] First Travels of Max
[136] Grandgousier
[137] Miss Euphemia [Never again]

[138] Winter's Tale [Never again]
[139] Emily Hardcastle, Spinster
[140] Number Five
[141] Good Ships
[142] Youngest Daughter ["Romance of a Youngest Daughter"]
[143] Necrological
[144] Armageddon
[145] Epitaph
[146] Judith of Bethulia
[147] Conrad Sits in Twilight ["Conrad in Twilight"& "Master's in the Garden Again" A&B]
[148] Nocturne
[149] Blackberry Winter ["Raspberry Winter"]
[150] Lichas to Polydor
[151] Spiel of the Three Mountebanks
[152] Night Voices
[153] Adventure This Side of Pluralism ["Kingdom Come"]
[154] On the Road to Wockensutter
[155] Prometheus in Straits
[156] Plea in Mitigation ["Ego"]
[157] Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son
[158] Old Man Playing With Children
[159] Captain Carpenter
[160] These Winters [Never again]
[161] Old Mansion
[162] Inland City ["The Inland City"]
[163] Philomela

[37] [Grace after Meat. London: Hogarth Press October-November, 1924]

[This volume was a manuscript titled "*Philomela*" containing 46 poems sent to Robert Graves, July 11, 1922. On the 4th of January 1923: one year before the publication of *Grace after Meat.* The volume consists of *Poems about God* and recent work. Ransom did not like the title Robert Graves has chosen for it and suggested the following titles instead: "Under the Locusts", "Lean Locusts Branches", "Great Oak", "American Oak", "Throes Oak", "Mortal Oak", and "Vaunting Oak", none of them has been used.]

[164] An American Addresses Philomela ["Philomela"]
[165] The School
[166] Grace
[167] By the Riverside
[168] Resurrection
[169] Winter Remembered ["An English Sonnet"]
[170] Under the Locusts

[In Selected Letters November 20, 1923, p. 126 Ransom suggested "Lean Locust Branches" for this poem.]

[171] The Cloak Model

[172] Wrestling
[173] The Lover
[174] Necrological
[175] Adventure This Side of Pluralism ["Kingdom Come"]
[176] Night Voices
[177] In Process Of the Nuptials of the Duke ["In Process of Noble Alliance"]
[178] At Dawn ["Parting at Dawn"]
[179] Armageddon
[180] Two Sonnets
[181] Judith of Bethulia
[182] Moonlight
[183] Ilex Priscus ["Vaunting Oak"]

> [Ransom consulted a Latinist and naturalist for this title that means 'Holm-oak' which is evergreen. Ransom thought about "Quercus Prisca" as a title; however, the poem first published as "Vaunting Oak".]

[38] [Literary Digest. 7 February, 1925]

[184] Here Lies a Lady

[39] [Southwest Review. April, 1925]

[185] Antique Harvesters

[40] [Literary Review. 11 April, 1925]

[186] Eclogue

[41] [The Fugitive. Vol. IV. March-December, 1925]

[187] Piazza Piece
[188] Eclogue
[189] The Miller's Daughter
[190] Jack's Letter
[191] Semi-Centennial ["Birthday of an Ageing Seer"]
[192] The Two Worthies ["Our Two Worthies"]

[42] [Measure. No. 52. P.11 June, 1925]

[193] Proud Heart Rained Upon ["Rain"]
[194] Husband Betrayed ["Farmer Husband"]
[195] Janet Waking
[196] History of Two Simple Lovers ["The Equilibrists"]
[197] Lady Lost
[198] Moments of Minnie
[199] Amphibious Crocodile ["Crocodile"]

[43] [Guardian. October, 1925]

[200] Dog

[44] [Literary Digest. 13 February, 1926]

[201] Lady Lost

[45] [In Memoriam: Herbert Cushing Tolman. 1926]

[202] Nostri in Memoriam Doctissimi [Never again]

[46] [New Republic. 22 September, 1926]

[203] Little Boy Blue

[47] [Atlantic Monthly. October, 1926]

[204] Parting, Without a Sequel

[48] [Harper's Magazine. December, 1926]

[205] Ghosts ["Hilda"]
[206] Morning

[49] [The New Republic. 1927]

[207] Ilex Priscus ["Vaunting Oak"]
[208] What Ducks Require

[50] [Two Gentlemen in Bonds. New York: Alfred A. Knopf 21 January, 1927]

The Innocent Doves

[209] Vision by Sweetwater
[210] Eclogue
[211] Piazza Piece
[212] Moments of Minnie
[213] Husband Betrayed
[214] Miller's Daughter
[215] Blue Girls
[216] Her Eyes
[217] Parting, Without a Sequel
[218] Hilda ["Ghosts"]
[219] In Mr. Minnit's House [Never again]
[220] Janet Waking
[221] Little Boy Blue
[222] Lady Lost

The Manliness of Men

[223] Our Two Worthies ["The Two Worthies"]

[224] Dead Boy ["Sonnet of a Selfish Lover"]
[225] Puncture
[226] Semi-Centennial
[227] Two in August
[228] Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom
[229] Persistent Explorer
[230] Morning
[231] Dog
[232] Jack's Letter
[233] Antique Harvesters
[234] Man without a Sense of Direction
[235] Survey of Literature
[236] Amphibious Crocodile ["Crocodile"]
[237] Fresco ["The Last Judgement (Fresco)"]
[238] The Equilibrists ["History of Two Simple Lovers"]

Two Gentlemen in Bonds: A tale in twenty sonnets

[239] Pink And Pale
[240] Thinking, Drinking
[241] In Air [Never again]
[242] Thought, Distraught [Never again]
[243] Meeting in a Garden
[244] Epithalamion of a Peach
[245] Swine, Wine ["Bad News"]
[246] L'etat C'est Moi
[247] Misanthropy ["Misanthrope"]
[248] Vain Protestations [Never again]
[249] Tones and Caparisons [Never again]
[250] Disappointment of a Thrall ["Kingdom Come"]
[251] In Bed, Not Dead
[252] Primer of Science ["Primer for Statesmen"]
[253] Fait Accompli
[254] Implacable Tower [Never again]
[255] Features of Creatures [Never again]
[256] Rain ["Proud Heart Rained Upon"]
[257] Wrong [Never again]
[258] Weep or Sleep ["Injured Sire"]

[51] [Contemporary Verse. February-March, 1927]

[259] Morning

[52] [New Republic. 27 April, 1927]

[260] What Ducks Require

[53] [New Republic. 20 February, 1929]

[261] Autumn Love (English sonnet in Italian parts)

[54] [Saturday Review of Literature. 15 June, 1929]

[262] Old Man Pondered (English sonnet in Italian parts) [Never again]

[55] [New Republic. 14 August, 1929]

[263] The Feasting of Maionides and Stephen Daedalus. <Text?> [Never again]

[56] [Selected Letters. p. 212 15 July, 1933]

[264] Autumn Grief to Margaret. <Text?> ["To Margaret"]

[57] [The Saturday Review of Literature. Vol. XI, P. 137 29 September, 1934]

[256] Autumn Grief to Margaret ["To Margaret"]

[58] [New Verse. August, 1934]

[266] Prelude to an Evening

[59] [Saturday Review of Literature. 6 October, 1934]

[267] Autumn Grief of Margaret

[60] [The New Republic. 26 December, 1934]

[268] Painted Head ["Painting: A Head"]

[61] [Southern Poets. 10 March, 1936]

[269] Spectral Lovers
[270] Here Lies a Lady
[271] Judith of Bethulia
[272] Blue Girls
[273] Our Two Worthies
[274] Autumn Love

[62] [Kenyon Review. Vol. I Autumn, 1939]

[275] Phi Beta Kappa. <Text?> [Never again]

> [Cited, as "Phi Beta Kappa", in B. Rajan (ed.) *Modern American Poetry*, London: Dennis Dobson Ltd, 1950, p. 62. Nevertheless, later under two different titles; first as "Address to the Scholars of New England" then, "To the Scholars of Harvard"]

[276] Address to the Scholars of New England

[63] [Measures. 15 July, 1939]

[277] Captain Carpenter
[278] Painting: A Head

[64] [New Poems 1940. 17 March, 1941]

[279] Address to the Scholars of New England

[65] [The Prose and Poetry of Today: Regional America. 1941]

[280] Lady Lost

[66] [A Vanderbilt Miscellany. 5 May, 1944]

[281] Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter
[282] Janet waking
[283] Dead Boy
[284] Spectral Lovers
[285] Necrological

[67] [Selected Poems. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1945]

> [This edition of *Selected Poems* consists of 42 poems 20 appeared in *Chills and Fever*, 17 in *Two Gentlemen in Bonds*, and 5 in different periodicals.]

[286] Captain Carpenter
[287] Old Mansion
[288] Piazza Piece
[289] Eclogue
[290] Her Eyes
[291] Parting, Without a Sequel
[292] Janet Waking
[293] Lady Lost
[294] Two in August
[295] Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom
[296] Antique Harvesters
[297] Puncture
[298] Dog
[299] Man without a Sense of Direction
[300] Survey of Literature
[301] The Equilibrists ["History of Two Simple Lovers"]
[302] What Ducks Require
[303] Prelude to an Evening
[304] Of Margaret
[305] Painted Head
[306] Address to the Scholars of New England ["To the Scholars of Harvard" and "Phi Beta Kappa"]
[307] Winter Remembered ["An English Sonnet"]
[308] Miriam Tazewell
[309] Dead Boy
[310] Spectral Lovers

[311] Necrological
[312] Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter
[313] The Tall Girl
[314] Good Ships
[315] Emily Hardcastle, Spinster
[316] Parting At Dawn
[317] Vaunting Oak
[318] Spiel of the Three Mountebanks
[319] Here Lies a Lady
[320] Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son
[321] Conrad in Twilight ["Conrad Sits In Twilight"]
[322] Armageddon
[323] Judith of Bethulia
[324] Blue Girls
[325] Philomela
[326] Old Man Playing With Children

[68] [Love. 1946]

[327] Yea

[69] [Selected Poems. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1947]

[328] Winter Remembered
[329] Miriam Tazewell
[330] Dead Boy
[331] Spectral Lovers
[332] Necrological
[333] Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter
[334] The Tall Girl [Ada Ruel]
[335] Good Ships
[336] Emily Hardcastle, Spinster
[337] Parting at Dawn ["At Dawn"]
[338] Vaunting Oak ["Ilex Priscus"]
[339] Spiel of the Three Mountebanks
[340] Here Lies a Lady
[341] Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son
[342] Conrad in Twilight
[343] Armageddon
[344] Judith of Bethulia
[345] Blue Girls
[346] Philomela
[347] Old Man Playing With Children
[348] Captain Carpenter
[349] Old Mansion
[350] Piazza Piece
[351] Eclogue
[352] Vision by Sweetwater
[353] Her Eyes
[354] Parting, Without a Sequel

[355] Janet Waking
[356] Lady Lost
[357] Two in August
[358] Persistent Explorer
[359] Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom
[360] Antique Harvesters
[361] Our Two Worthies
[362] Puncture
[363] Dog
[364] Man without a Sense of Direction
[365] Survey of Literature
[366] The Equilibrists ["History of Two Simple Lovers"]
[367] Prelude to an Evening
[368] What Ducks Require
[369] Of Margaret
[370] Painted Head
[371] Address To the Scholars of New England

[70] [Selected Poems. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1952]

[372] Winter Remembered
[373] Miriam Tazewell
[374] Dead Boy
[375] Spectral Lovers
[376] Necrological
[377] Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter
[378] The Tall Girl [Ada Ruel]
[379] Good Ships
[380] Emily Hardcastle, Spinster
[381] Parting at Dawn ["At Dawn"]
[382] Vaunting Oak ["Ilex Priscus"]
[383] Spiel of the Three Mountebanks
[384] Here Lies a Lady
[385] Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son
[386] Conrad in Twilight
[387] Armageddon
[388] Judith of Bethulia
[389] Blue Girls
[390] Philomela
[391] Old Man Playing With Children
[392] Captain Carpenter
[393] Old Mansion
[394] Piazza Piece
[395] Eclogue
[396] Vision by Sweetwater
[397] Her Eyes
[398] Parting, Without a Sequel
[399] Janet Waking
[400] Lady Lost
[401] Two in August

[402] Persistent Explorer
[403] Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom
[404] Antique Harvesters
[405] Our Two Worthies
[406] Puncture
[407] Dog
[408] Man without a Sense of Direction
[409] Survey of Literature
[410] The Equilibrists ["History of Two Simple Lovers"]
[411] Prelude to an Evening
[412] What Ducks Require
[413] Of Margaret
[414] Painted Head
[415] Address To the Scholars of New England

[71] [Poems and Essays. New York: Vintage Books August-September, 1955]

[416] Winter Remembered
[417] Miriam Tazewell
[418] Dead Boy
[419] Spectral Lovers
[420] Necrological
[421] Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter
[422] The Tall Girl
[423] Good Ships
[424] Emily Hardcastle, Spinster
[425] Parting at Dawn
[426] Vaunting Oak
[427] Spiel of the Three Mountebanks
[428] Here Lies a Lady
[429] Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son
[430] Conrad in Twilight
[431] Armageddon
[432] Judith of Bethulia
[433] Blue Girls
[434] Philomela
[435] Old Man Playing With Children
[436] Captain Carpenter
[437] Old Mansion
[438] Piazza Piece
[439] Eclogue
[440] Vision by Sweetwater
[441] Her Eyes
[442] Parting, Without a Sequel
[443] Janet Waking
[444] Lady Lost
[445] Two in August
[446] Persistent Explorer
[447] Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom
[448] Antique Harvesters

[449] Our Two Worthies
[450] Puncture
[451] Dog
[452] Man without a Sense of Direction
[453] Survey of Literature
[454] The Equilibrists
[455] Prelude to an Evening
[456] What Ducks Require
[457] Of Margaret
[458] Painted Head
[459] Address To the Scholars of New England

[72] [A Southern Reader. 1955]

[460] Dead Boy
[461] Judith of Bethulia
[462] Two in August

[73] [Hika. Winter, 1956]

[463] Spectral Lovers
[464] Painted Head

[74] [The Fugitive Poets. 10 march, 1956]

[465] Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter
[466] The Vanity of the Blue Girls
[467] The Vanity of the Bright Young Men
[468] Conrad in Twilight
[469] Necrological
[470] Janet Waking
[471] Piazza Piece
[472] Old Mansion
[473] Philomela
[474] Amphibious Crocodile
[475] Captain Carpenter
[476] The Equilibrists
[477] Painted Head
[478] Antique Harvesters

[75] [New York Times Book Review. 24 November, 1957]

[479] Blue Girls
[480] Dead Boy

[76] [New York Times Book Review. 8 December, 1957]

[481] Piazza Piece

[77] [Selected Poems. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 21 June, 1963]

The Innocent Doves

[482] Miriam Tazewell
[483] Spectral Lovers
[484] The Rose
[485] Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter
[486] The Tall Girl ["Ada Ruel"]
[487] Piazza Piece
[488] Lady Lost
[489] Blue Girls
[490] Janet Waking
[491] Eclogue
[492] Vaunting Oak
[493] Two in August
[494] Emily Hardcastle, Spinster
[495] Moments of Minnie
[496] Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom
[497] Parting at Dawn
[498] Good Ships
[499] Romance of a Youngest Daughter
[500] Vision by Sweetwater
[501] April Treason
[502] Judith of Bethulia
[503] Her Eyes
[504] Parting, Without a Sequel
[505] Hilda

The Manliness of Man

[506] Winter Remembered
[507] Dead Boy
[508] First Travels Of Max
[509] Necrological
[510] Captain Carpenter
[511] Spiel of the Tree Mountebanks
[512] Nocturne
[513] Dog
[514] Blackberry Winter
[515] Armageddon
[516] Old Man Playing With Children
[517] Prometheus in Straits
[518] Our Two Worthies
[519] Philomela
[520] Crocodile
[521] Survey of Literature
[522] Old Mansion
[523] On the Road to Wockensutter
[524] Morning

[525] Jack's Letter
[526] Persistent Explorer
[527] Puncture
[528] Man without a Sense of Direction
[529] Antique Harvesters
[530] The Equilibrists
[531] To the Scholars of Harvard
[532] What Ducks Require
[533] Painted Head

Two Gentlemen in Bonds

[534] Pink and Pale
[535] Thinking, Drinking
[536] Epithalamion of a Peach
[537] Bad News
[538] L'etat C'est Moi
[539] Misanthrope
[540] Kingdome Come ["Disappointment of a Thrall"]
[541] In Bed Not Dead
[542] Primer for Statesmen
[543] Fait Accompli
[544] Rain
[545] Injured Sire

Sixteen Poems in Eight Pairings

[546] A. Overtures
B. Two Gentlemen Scholars (A Pastoral)
[547] A. Conrad Sits In Twilight
B. Master's In the Garden Again
[548] A. *Agitato Ma Non Troppo*
B. *Agitato Ma Non Troppo*
[549] A. Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son
B. The Vanity of the Bright Boys
[550] A. Semi-Centennial
B. Birthday of an Aging Seer
[551] A. Here Lies a Lady
B. Here Lies a Lady
[552] A. Of Margaret
B. Of Margaret
[553] A. Prelude to an Evening
B. Prelude to an Evening

[78] [Kenyon Review. 1963]

[554] Prelude to an Evening

[79] [Southern Review. 1968]

[555] The Vanity of the Bright Young Men ["Tom, Tom, The Piper's Son"]

[80] [Selected Poems. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 4 August, 1969]

The Innocent Doves

[556] Miriam Tazewell
[557] Spectral Lovers
[558] The Rose
[559] Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter
[560] The Tall Girl ["Ada Ruel"]
[561] Piazza Piece
[562] Lady Lost
[563] Blue Girls
[564] Janet Waking
[565] Eclogue
[566] Vaunting Oak
[567] Two in August
[568] Emily Hardcastle, Spinster
[569] Moments of Minnie
[570] Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom
[571] Parting at Dawn
[572] Good Ships
[573] Romance of a Youngest Daughter
[574] Vision by Sweetwater
[575] April Treason
[576] Judith of Bethulia
[577] Her Eyes
[578] Parting, Without a Sequel
[579] Hilda

The Manliness of Man

[580] Winter Remembered
[581] Dead Boy
[582] First Travels Of Max
[583] Necrological
[584] Captain Carpenter
[585] Spiel of the Tree Mountebanks
[586] Nocturne
[587] Dog
[588] Blackberry Winter
[589] Armageddon
[590] Old Man Playing With Children
[591] Prometheus in Straits
[592] Our Two Worthies
[593] Philomela
[594] Crocodile
[595] Survey of Literature
[596] Old Mansion

[597] On the Road to Wockensutter
[598] Morning
[599] Jack's Letter
[600] Persistent Explorer
[601] Puncture
[602] Man without a Sense of Direction
[603] Antique Harvesters
[604] The Equilibrists
[605] To the Scholars of Harvard
[606] What Ducks Require
[607] Painted Head

Two Gentlemen in Bonds

[608] Pink and Pale
[609] Thinking, Drinking
[610] Epithalamion of a Peach
[611] Bad News
[612] L'etat C'est Moi
[613] Misanthrope
[614] Kingdome Come ["Disappointment of a Thrall"]
[615] In Bed Not Dead
[616] Primer for Statesmen
[617] Fait Accompli
[618] Rain
[619] Injured Sire

Sixteen Poems in Eight Pairings

[620] A. Overtures
  B. Two Gentlemen Scholars (A Pastoral)
[621] A. Conrad Sits In Twilight
  B. Master's In the Garden Again
[622] A. *Agitato Ma Non Troppo*
  B. *Agitato Ma Non Troppo*
[623] A. Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son
  B. The Vanity of the Bright Boys
[624] A. Semi-Centennial
  B. Birthday of an Aging Seer
[625] A. Here Lies a Lady
  B. Here Lies a Lady
[626] A. Of Margaret
  B. Of Margaret
[627] A. Prelude to an Evening
  B. Prelude to an Evening

[81] [Kenyon Review. 1969]

[628] Two Gentlemen Scholars [A better version for "Overtures" of *Poems about God* 1919.]

[82] [Sewanee Review. P. 26-29 January-March, 1971]

[629] Kingdom Come ["Adventure This Side of Pluralism"]

[83] [Michigan Quarterly Review. 1971]

[630] Farmer Husband. <Text?> ["Husband Betrayed"]
[631] Grim Wedlock. <Text?> ["In Process of Noble Alliance"]
[632] Kingdom Come ["Adventure This Side of Pluralism"]

[84] [Sewanee Review. 1973]

[633] Four Threesomes; Or Three Foursomes? [Never again]

> [The last poem Ransom wrote. The poem is a revision of "Old Man Pondered" which had appeared for the first time in *Saturday Review of Literature* had been collected in the 1963 *Selected Poems*, and had been omitted from the 1969 *Selected Poems*. The poem later appeared as "The Eye Can Tell", in *Southern Review* 1983 and *Selected Letters*, where it is said according to Robert Penn Warren have been written in late winter 1973.]

II
Anthology

II
John Crowe Ransom's Poems

[A note on the text. All of the poems in this anthology are taken from the last publication of each poem in the *Selected Poems* (1969) except *Poems about God* (1919) which are from the first and only edition. "The House" and "Minerva" are from MSS of John Crowe Ransom's letters and autobiographies.]

The Swimmer

IN dog-days plowmen quit their toil,
And frog-ponds in the meadow boil,
And grasses on the upland broil,
And all the coiling things uncoil,
And eggs and meats and Christians spoil.

A mile away the valley breaks
(So all good valleys do) and makes
A cool green water for hot heads' sakes,
And sundry sullen dog-days' aches.

The swimmer's body is white and clean,
It is washed by a water of deepest green
The color of leaves in a starlight scene,
And it is as white as the stars between.

But the swimmer's soul is a thing possessed,
His soul is naked as his breast,
Remembers not its east and west,
And ponders this way, I have guessed:

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

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

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

What do I need of senses five?
Why eat, or drink, or sweat, or wive?
What do we strive for when we strive?
What do we live for when alive?

And what if I do not rise again,
Never to goad a heated brain
To hotter excesses of joy and pain?

Why should it be against the grain
To lie so cold and still and sane?

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

Fall of Leaf

With a rocking and guffawing,
Winter set his wind to blowing.
Oaken leaves of pale or brown,
Hickory leaves of sere,
Leaves of ash that tumbled down,
Weary, weary were.

Farthest from the living green
The sumac pitched his blood-red scene;
But pale or red the leaves were failing,
His dear hearts and hers;
Dick and Dorothy were quailing,
Summer foresters.

Dick and Dorothy look forth
And every quarter is a north.
Each old comrade is forlornest,
Bush, and trumpet-vine, and tree;

Is it jest? Or in good earnest
Goes the sombre colloquy?

"Dorothy, the year's played out,
His green young armies all in rout.
Some are pale and some are bleeding,
Green the summer long,
And the rattle-throats are pleading
With a foe too strong."

"Dick, the play is done for them
And every leaf that grows on stem.
And leaves and lovers have in common
That the leaves are dry and blown,
And the husk of man and woman
Withers on the bone."

"Dorothy, we grow no younger,
Need we play it any longer?
Methinks eastward is a gate
Rusted, and a slim white spire;
Go tell them you come cold and late
To help them tend their fire."

"Dick, those are the Holy Rood
And sweet Saint Margaret's sisterhood.
Fearful are the maids, nor many,
Narrow is their bed;
They must open not to any
Woodwife wrapped in red."

"Dorothy, then westward come
Where the night-bells promise home.
For the arduous dome is black
But the gate is golden;
They will joy to have us back,
Loyal and beholden."

"Dick, they tend Saint Gregory's tomb,
The strictest monks in Christendom.
Tenants of a godly house,
Of cleanly gear and hollowed,
They will think but little use
Of woodman stained and yellowed."

"Dorothy, then will you tell
The way that goes from Lovers' Hell?
All the potent charms are said,
We that clasp are cold and wearied;

Heartless lovers are as dead
That walk the earth unburied."

"Dick, they found the ending good,
The Babes that ventured in the Wood.
So tell the leaves that die and fall,
As we lie a-shiver,
Stop and stitch us one nose pall
To hide us deep for ever."

The House

With such strong arms I shut my love about,
She rested there; which was to me a token,
This was a house she could not walk without,
Securely bricked, and never to be broken.
Alas, the tight imprisonment was vain,
'Twas much too wide and physical for hearts;
When we had come most near, and scarce were twain;
We had not met; some soul and secret parts

Escaped the snare; and most unperjured lips
That bargained sweetly for our souls exchange
Must lie, and love be blocked with this eclipse,
That she and I would live and still strange.
And as for Death, whose stroke disservers men,
What fool would make a firm possession then?

One Who Rejected Christ

THERE'S farmers and there's farmers,
There's many a field and field,
But none of the farmers round about
Can haul such harvest-wagons out
As I from an acre's yield.

There's plenty and plenty of farmers
That leave the ground by the fence,
Thinking it's nice if a patch of roses
Should scratch out the hay and tickle their noses
With nice little wild-rose scents.

I'm not like other farmers,
I make my farming pay;
I never go in for sentiment,
And seeing that roses yield no rent
I cut the stuff away.

A very good thing for farmers

If they would learn my way;
For crops are all that a good field grows,
And nothing is worse than a sniff of rose
In the good strong smell of hay.

Sunset

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

The meadows are very wide and green,
And the big field of wheat is solid gold,
Or a little darker than gold.
Two people never sat like us by a fence of cedar rails
On a still evening
And looked at such fat fields.
To me it is beautiful enough,
I am stirred,

I say grand and wonderful, and grow adjectival,
But to you
It is God.

Cropping the clover are several spotted cows.
They too are kind and gentle,
And they stop and look round at me now and then
As if they would say:
"How good of you to come to see us!
Please pardon us if we seem indifferent,
But we have not much time to talk with you now,
And really nothing to say."
Then they make their bow,
Still kind and calm,
And go their way again
Towards the sunset.
I suppose they are going to God.

Your eyes are not regarding me,
Nor the four-leaf clovers I picked for you,
(With a prayer and a gentle squeeze for each of them),
Nor are they fretting over dress, and shoes,
And image in the little glass,

Restlessly,
Like the eyes of other girls.

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

We are a mile from home,
And soon it will be getting dark,
And the big farm-bell will be ringing out for supper.
We had better start for the house.
Rover!
O here he is, waiting.
He has chased the rabbits and run after the birds
A thousand miles or so,
And now he is hungry and tired.
But he is a southern gentleman

And will not whimper once
Though you kept him waiting forever.
He knows his mistress' eyes as well as I,
And when to be silent and respectful.
I will try to be as patient as Rover,
And we will be comrades and wait,
Unquestioningly,
Till this lady we love
And her strange eyes
Come home from God.

Minerva

Minerva had no pride of pedigree,
And so they shot her, bent of a broken leg,
Without a grief: then they looked butcheringly
On the unprovided babe she left to beg.

But who came cursing, like the tall corn slanting.
Beautiful, proud, and furious with anger?
It was the farmer's slender daughter, panting,

And pitiful to orphans in their danger.

You flew your ribbon from his yellow head,
Managed his bottle over many a meal,
Now he is big, and tramps the flower-bed,
And still nobody dares pronounce him veal.
But I made little marvel of this calf,
Being not the whole of history, not half.

Noonday Grace

My good old father tucked his head,
(His face the color of gingerbread)
Over the table my mother had spread,
And folded his leathery hands and said:

"We thank thee, Lord, for this thy grace,
And all thy bounties to the race;
Turn not away from us thy face
Till we come to our final resting-place."

These were the words of the old elect,
Or others to the same effect.

I love my father's piety,
I know he's grateful as can be,
A man that's nearly seventy
And past his taste for cookery.
But I am not so old as he,
And when I see in front of me
Things that I like uncommonly,
(Cornfield beans my specialty,
When every pod spills two or three),
Then I forget the thou and thee
And pray with total fervency:

Thank you, good Lord, for dinner-time!
Gladly I come from the sweat and grime
To play in your Christian pantomime.

I wash the black dust from my face,
I sit again in a Christian's place,
I hear the ancient Christian's grace.

My thanks for clean fresh napkin first,
With faint red stain where the fruit-jar burst.

Thanks for a platter with kind blue roses,
For mother's centerpiece and posies,

A touch of art right under our noses.

Mother, I'll thank you for tumbler now
Of morning's milk from our Jersey cow.

And father, thanks for a generous yam,
And a helping of home-cured country ham,
(He knows how fond of it I am.)

For none can cure them as can he,
And he won't tell his recipe,
But God was behind it, it seems to me.

Thank God who made the garden grow,
Who took upon himself to know
That we loved vegetables so.
I served his plan with rake and hoe,
And mother, boiling, baking, slow
To her favorite tune of Old Black Joe,
Predestined many an age ago.

Pearly corn still on the cob,
My teeth are aching for that job.

Tomatoes, one would fill a dish,
Potatoes, mealy as one could wish.

Cornfield beans and cucumbers,
And yellow yams for sweeteners.

Pickles between for stepping-stones,
And plenty of cornmeal bread in pones.

Sunday the preacher droned a lot
About a certain whether or not:

Is God the universal friend,
And if men pray can he attend
To each man's individual end?

They pray for individual things,
Give thanks for little happenings,
But isn't his sweep of mighty wings
Meant more for businesses of kings
Than pulling small men's petty strings?

He's infinite, and all of that,
The setting sun his habitat,
The heavens they hold by his fiat,

The glorious year that God begat;
And what is creeping man to that,
O preacher, valiant democrat?

"The greatest of all, his sympathy,
His kindness, reaching down to me."

Like mother, he finds it his greatest joy
To have big dinners for his boy.

She understands him like a book,
In fact, he helps my mother cook,
And slips to the dining-room door to look;

And when we are at our noon-day meal,
He laughs to think how fine we feel.

An extra fork is by my plate,
I nearly noticed it too late!

Mother, you're keeping a secret back!
I see the pie-pan through the crack,
Incrusted thick in gold and black.

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

There's no telling what that pie can be,
But tell me that it's blackberry!

As long as I keep topside the sod,
I'll love you always, mother and God.

The Ingrate

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.

He was a frosty Russian man
And wore a bushy Russian beard;
He had two furtive faded eyes
That some old horror once had seared;
I wondered if they ever would

Forget the horrors they had feared;
Yet when I praised my pleasant field
This stupid fellow almost jeered.

"Your moon shines very well, my friend,
Your fields are good enough, I know;
At home our fields in the winter-time
Were always white, and shining so!
Our nights went beautiful like day,
And bitter cold our winds would blow;
And I remember how it looked,
Dear God, my country of the snow!"

Moonlight

He feigned a fine indifference
To be so prodigal of light,
Knowing his piteous twisted things
Would lose the crooked marks of spite
When only moonbeams fit the dusk
And made his wicked world seem right.

But we forget so soon the shame,
Conceiving sweetness if we can
Heaven the citadel itself
Illumined on the lunar plan;
And I the chief of sinners, I
The middlemost Victorian!

Now I shall ride the misty lake
With my own love, and speak so low
That not a fishy thing shall hear
The secrets passing to and fro
Amid the moonlight poetries.
O moonshine, how unman us so?

Street Light

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

Under the lamp a woman stands,
The lamps are shining equal well,
But in her eyes are other lights,
And lights plus other lights will tell:

He loves the brightness of that street
Which is the shining street to hell.

There's light enough, and strong enough,
To lighten every pleasant park;
I'm sorry lights are held so cheap,
I'd rather there were not a spark
Than choose those shining ways for joy
And have them lead me into dark.

Darkness

When hurrying home on a rainy night
And hearing tree-tops rubbed and tossed,
And seeing never a friendly star
And feeling your way when paths are crossed:
Stop fast and turn three times around
And try the logic of the lost.

Where is the heavenly light you dreamed?
Where is your hearth and glowing ash?
Where is your love by the mellow moon?
Here is not even a lightning-flash,
And in a place no worse than this
Lost men shall wail and teeth shall gnash.

Lightning is quick and perilous,
The dawn comes on too slow and pale,
Your love brings only a yellow lamp,
Yet of these lights one shall avail:
The dark shall break for one of these,
I've never known this thing to fail.

Geometry

My window looks upon a wood
That stands as tangled as it stood
When God was centuries too young
To care how right he worked, or wrong,
His patterns in obedient trees,
Unprofited by the centuries
He still plants on as crazily
As in his drivelling infancy.

Poor little elms beneath the oak!
They thrash their arms around and poke
At tyrant throats, and try to stand
Straight up, like owners of the land;
For they expect the vainest things,

And even the boniest have their flings.

Hickory shoots unnumbered rise,
Sallow and wasting themselves in sighs,
Children begot at a criminal rate
In the sight of a God that is profligate.
The oak-trees tower over all,
They seem to rise above the brawl,
They seem - but just observe the hoax,
They are obscured by other oaks!
They laugh the weaklings out of mind,
And fight forever with their kind.

For oaks are spindling too, and bent,
And only strong by accident;
And if there is a single tree
Of half the size it ought to be,
It need not give him thanks for that,
He did not plan its habitat.

When tree-tops go to pushing so,
There's every evil thing below;
There's clammy fungus everywhere,
And poison waving on the air,
A plague of insects from the pool
To sting some ever-trusting fool,
Serpents issuing from the foot
Of oak-trees rotten at the root,
Owls and frogs and whippoorwills,
Cackling of all sorts of ills.

Imagine what a pretty thing
The slightest landscape-gardening
Had made of God's neglected wood!
I'm glad man has the hardihood
To tamper with creation's plan
And shape it worthier of man.
Imagine woods and sun-swept spaces,
Shadows and lights in proper places,
Trees just touching friendly-wise,
Bees and flowers and butterflies.

An easy thing to improve on God,
Simply the knowing of even from odd,
Simply to count and then dispose
In patterns everybody knows,
Simply to follow curve and line
In geometrical design.

Gardeners only cut their trees
For nobler regularities.
But from my window I have seen
The noblest patch of quivering green
Lashed till it never quivered again.
God had a fit of temper then,
And spat shrill wind and lightning out
At twinges of some godly gout.

But as for me, I keep indoors
Whenever he starts his awful roars.
What can one hope of a crazy God
But lashings from an aimless rod?

Dumb-Bells

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

One and two, three and four,
Cleave the air and smite the floor!
Five and six, seven and eight,
Legs apart, shoulders straight!
Thirty fat men grunt and puff,
Thirty bellies plead, Enough!

Dumb-bells up, dumb-bells down,
Dumb-bells front, dumb-bells ground!
Thirty's God has just the girth
To pull the levers of the earth,
They made him sinewy and lean
And washed him glittering white and clean.

Dumb-bells in, dumb-bells out,
Count by fours and face about!
Put by dumb-bells for to-day,
Wash the stinking sweat away
And go out clean. But come again;
Worship's every night at ten.

Worship

I know a quite religious man
Who utters praises when he can.

Now I find God in bard and book,
In school and temple, bird and brook.

But he says God is sweetest of all
Discovered in a drinking-hall.

For God requires no costly wine
But comes on the foam of a crockery stein.

And when that foam is on the lips,
Begin then God's good fellowships.

Cathedrals, synagogues, and kirks
May go to the devil, and all their works.

And as for Christian charity,
It's made out of hilarity.

He gives the beggar all his dimes,
Forgives his brother seven times.

"I love the rain," says thirsty clod;
So this religious man of God.

For God has come, and is it odd
He praises all the works of God?

"For God has come, and there's no sorrow,"
He sings all night - will he sing to-morrow?

The Bachelor

The wind went cold as the day went old,
And I went very sad,
Till I saw something by the road
That brought me round and glad.

The keen wind nipped me northerly
And bent me back almost,
And I was the worst discouraged man
Abroad on any boast,

The road was rocks and wilderness
And never a sign of a town,
It tapered up a wicked hill,
I tried to curse it down,

But like an undefeated man
I mounted, slow and hard:

And round the top was a little house
With a woman in the yard.

She was a housewife in her yard,
Tending her husband's place;
The broom was busy in her hand,
The goodness in her face.

She brushed the yard, she brushed the step,
She made the leaves to spin,
Tidying up her husband's place
Outside as well as in.

I knew no woman and no house
And night was just ahead;
Yet I went cheerful down the hill
Rested and warmed and fed.

For some man had a woman there
To keep his board and bed;
"I have seen women by these bad roads,
Thank God for that," I said.

November

There's a patch of trees at the edge of the field,
And a brown little house that is kept so warm,
And a woman waiting by the hearth
Who still keeps most of a woman's charm.

She traffics in her woman's goods
And is my woman of affairs.
Yet not so fast, my moral men,
November's most poetic airs
Are heavy with old lovers' tales,
How hearths are holy with their prayers,
How women give their fragrance up
And give their love to the man that dares.
Now who goes heedless hearing that?
At last we trade, we laissez-faires.

O moralizers, it is hard
When I am not a candidate
For holy wedlock's offices,
That mother has picked me out a mate,
And couldn't have made a sorrier choice
Than that same Smiley's daughter Kate,
Who prays for the sinners of the town
And never comes to meeting late,

Who sings soprano in the choir
And swallows Christian doctrine straight.
Of all the girls deliver me
From the girl you haven't the heart to hate!
Piety: O what a hideous thing!
And thirty-odd pounds she's underweight.

The winds of late November droop
(Poor little failures) very low,
As up and down the farm they pass,
Pass up and down, and to and fro,
And look for a home they are not to find,
For they were homeless years ago...

But years ago I knew a girl,
Beautiful, fit for a Grand Vizier's,
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.
I took the note into my heart,
And so did other cavaliers.

If God had heard my prayer then,
The good folk couldn't point and say
As mother says they're pointing now:
Behold, one stands in the sinners' way!
The stiffest sceptic bends his neck
And stands on no more vain parley
If such as she would have him come,
Worship with her in the Baptist way,
Accept the fables as he can,
A Jewish God, a Passion Play;
And such a lover never comes
To fondling dirty drabs for pay.
But God had another man for her,
He cannot answer all that pray.

November winds are weak and cold,
They lie at last beneath the blue
And sleep in the fields as cold as they.
I know but one good thing to do,
So hearken, all ye mutineers:
Every man to his rendezvous!

My woman waits by the hearth, I say,
And what is a scarlet woman to you?
Her sins are scarlet if you will,
Her lips are hardly of that hue,

And many a time I've seen her sit
Beside the hearth an hour or two,
And set the pot upon the fire
And wait until she's spoken to.
A hateful owl is roosting near
Who mocks my woman, Hoo, Hoo, Hoo,
But the pot sings back just as shrill as it can,
And the angry fire-log crashes through;
And there the woman waits and I,
Ponder the ways of God - and rue!

A Christmas Colloquy

The country farmer has his joys
Of little city girls and boys
When brother Thomas brings his brood
Of motherless brats in Christmas mood
To try our country air and food.
And O what splendid pies and cakes
Their pleased and pretty grandma makes!
And O what squeals and stomach-aches!

Poor Thomas shepherds him a flock
Of city souls as hard as rock,
And though they will not fill his larder
He only preaches Christ the harder.
But Ann, though seven years my niece,
Is still a pagan little piece,
And as she often hints to me
She hates the sound of piety.
Fair Inez is my ancient setter
Who lies by the fire when we will let her:
Alas, this amiable dog
Heard all the bitter dialogue
That passed between my niece and brother
Misunderstanding one another.

Ann:
Father, what will there be for me
To-morrow on the Christmas tree?
Have you told Santa what to bring,
My pony, my doll, and everything?

Thomas:
My daughter, Santa will know best
What to bring you, and what the rest.
But father and his little girl
And everybody in the world
Should dwell to-night on higher things,

For hark! The herald angel sings,
And in a manger poor and lowly
Lies little Jesus, high and holy.

Ann:
Father, don't talk of little Jesus,
You're only doing it to tease us,
It isn't nearly time for bed,
And I want to know what Santa said.

Thomas:
Jesus is better than any toys
For little sinning girls and boys,
For Jesus saves, but sin destroys.
And O, it gives him sad surprise,
There must be tears in Jesus' eyes,
When little girls with bad behavior
Forget to own their Lord and Savior.

Ann:
I didn't, you know it isn't true!
I say my prayers, I always do,
I know about Jesus very well,
And God the Father, Heaven, and Hell.
O please don't say it any more,
You've said it so many times before,
But tell me all about Santa instead,
And about the horns on his reindeer's head,
And what he will bring me on his sled.

Thomas:
This night he was born on earth for us,
And can my daughter mock him thus,
And care more for her worldly pleasures
Than Jesus' love and heavenly treasures?
For Jesus didn't like to be
So crowned with thorns and nailed to tree,
But there was a sinful world to free,
And out he went to Gethsemane -

Ann:
And left the twelve and went apart -
Father, I know it off by heart,
Please, father, please don't finish it out,
There's so much else to talk about!
I ask about Santa, and there you go,
And now you're spoiling my Christmas so,
And you are the wickedest man I know!

Disgraceful scenes require the curtain,
But lest the moral be uncertain,
I briefly bring the good report
That valiant Thomas held the fort,
And wicked Ann was quite defeated,
In vain denied, in vain entreated,
In vain she wailed, in vain she wept,
And said a briny prayer, and slept.
While Inez, who had been perplexed
To see good kinsfolk so much vexed,
When peace descended on the twain,
Lay down beside the fire again.

The Power of God

If the power of God were mine, and the ample turn,
I never could dwell in my law, which is 'stablished and stern,

But my pity would plague me still! In the fare of my state
I would summon my ministers often to reprobate:

"Do ye see them walk on the unwaked streets of the town?
Are they not of my handmaidens, burdened and bending down?

It is not yet day, and my tale of the stars not told,
But already they bear of their burdens, and tremble of cold.

Do ye heed not her, ye stony and reconciled,
One gathering sticks for a fire, who is heavy with child?

And one was so heavy with sleep that she watched not, and slept
Till it nearly was dawn, and then she arose and wept.

Previsal I made, and the burning of quenchless gold,
Yet still they bedevil my kingdom, the dark and the cold.

There is labor appointed, I know not if it shall cease,
Yet anon cometh night, and my daughters shall lie in peace.

What avoideth my glory of firmaments keeping the way,
If the poor soft flesh must trouble before the day?

Or spectacular stars, as they race to encircuit the deep,
If my littlest people is driven, and needeth sleep?

For my absolute heaven is high, and nothing dependeth,
Yet it twitcheth my heart, when weeping of women ascendeth.

Then arrange ye again how the people's task be done,

There shall no woman toil till they see my sign of the sun."

Men

"How many goodly creatures are there here!"
Miranda doted on the sight of seamen,
The very casual adventurers
Who took a flood as quickly as a calm,
And kept their blue eyes blue to any weather.
This was the famous manliness of men;
And when she saw it on the dirty strangers,
She clapped her pretty hands in sudden joy:
"O brave new world!"

The Christian

I heard a story of a sailing man.
He was a surly sort of mariner,
He used to swear at all the seven seas,
And rode them dauntless up and down the earth.

But when he sickened of the windy wash,
He took to wife a proper village woman
And put her in a precious little house;
And there he weathered many winter seasons,
Knocking the ashes neatly from his pipe
Upon the tended hearth.

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

Morning

The skies were jaded, while the famous sun
Slack of his office to confute the fogs
Lay sick abed; but I, inured to duty,
Sat for my food. Three hours each day we souls,
Who might be angels but are fastened down
With bodies, most infuriating freight,
Sit fattening these frames and skeletons
With filthy food, which they must cast away
Before they feed again.

April

Savor of love is thick on the April air,
The blunted boughs dispose their lacy bloom,
And many sorry steeds dismissed to pasture
Toss their old forelocks, flourish heavy heels.
Where is there any unpersuaded poet
So angry still against the wrongs of winter
Which caused the dainty earth to droop and die,
So vengeant for his vine and summer song,
As to decline the good releasing thaw?
Poets have temperature and follow seasons,
And covenants go out at equinox.

The champions! For heaven, riding high
Above the icy death, considered truly;
"My agate icy work, I thought it fair;
Yet I have lacked that pretty lift of praise
That mounted once from these emaciate minstrels.
They will not sing, and duty drops away
And I must turn and make a soft amend!"
At once he showered April down, until
The bleak twigs bloom again; and soon, I swear,
He shall receive his praise.

Prayer

She would not keep at home, the foolish woman,
She would not mind her precious girls and boys,
She had to go, for it was Sunday morning,
Down the hot road and to the barren pew
And there abuse her superannuate knees
To make a prayer.

She had a huge petition on her bosom -
A heavy weight for such a lean old thing -
Her youngest boy made merry in the village
And had not entered into the communion;
And having labored with him long for nothing
She meant to ask of God to save him yet.
Thank God she asked that favor!

The manner of it echoes still in heaven.
Before she dared to utter her desire
The strange old woman made approach to God
With many a low obeisance and abasement,
As having done so many things she ought not,
And left undone so many things she ought,
And being altogether very wicked;
She testified she had not kept his temple,

Which was her heart, all swept and white and ready;
She testified it - O the shameless woman,
The spotless housekeeper!

Now God sat beaming on his burnished throne
And swept creation with appraising eye,
Finding, I fear, not all was free from blemish,
Yet keeping his magnificent composure;
But wearing certain necessary airs,
To suit with such incumbency of court,
He still at heart was quite a gentleman;
For when he saw that aged lady drooping
And wearying her bones with genuflections
For her unworthiness, he fell ashamed
To think how hard it went with holy women
To ease their poor predicaments by prayer:
There on his heaven, and heard of all the hosts,
He groaned, he made a mighty face so wry
That several seraphin forgot their harping
And scolded thus: "O what a wicked woman,
To shrew his splendid features out of shape!"

Friendship

I viewed him well, the visible fat fool,
And yet I took him in; for I contended,
Friends are not sent in order of our choosing,
They come unsuited like the gifts of God.
I would not do a perfidy to friendship,
I let him past the private inner gate
And made him be at home among my treasures
Like my true friend.

Now I am ground with a grim torture daily
That I have been befriended by a fool.
He forages at will upon my garden,
He noses all its pretty secrets out,
And still the fool finds nothing to his liking.
Meeting a modest velveteen affair,
Peevish he hangs his sad and silly head:
"Alas! Such unsubstantial gaudy goods!"
Thus he meets pansies; meeting zinnias,
He nearly faints at such a rioting:
"Alas! What fruit will these red wantons bear?"
And not a perfume spills upon the air
But his malicious nose suspects a poison,
As he goes browsing like an ancient ass,

An old distempered ass.

I'd almost rather be a friendless man
And have my house my own. The prying fool
Asks me the queerest idiotic questions:
"O friend, is this the harvest of your hands?
How will you stand before the lord of harvests?
These are the gardens of your idleness;
Where is the vineyard, friend?"

The Four Roses

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

So one was taken. But the three,
They spread their petals just the same,
They turned no decent pale for grief,
They drew no fragrance back for shame.

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

Sickness

The toughest carcass in the town
Fell sick at last and took to bed,
And on that bed God waited him
With cool, cool hands for his frantic head,
And while the fever did its dance
They talked, and a good thing was said:
"See, I am not that Scriptural!
A lesser, kinder God instead."

Fever must run its course, and God
Could not do much for the countryman.
At least he saved him certain dreams:
"I die! O save me if you can,
I am a bruised, a beaten slave,
I march in a blistering caravan,
They dash a stone upon my head -
Ah no, but that is God's white hand."

God plucked him back, and plucked him back,
And did his best to smoothe the pain.
The sick man said it was good to know
That God was true, if prayer was vain.

"O God, I weary of this night,
When will you bring the dawn again?"
The night must run its course, but God
Was weary too with watching-strain.

A cluck of tuneless silly birds,
A guilty gray, and it was dawn.
The sick man thumped across the floor
And slid the curtain that was drawn:
"O pale wet dawn! O let it shine
Lustrous and gold on the good green lawn!
The lustre, Lord!" Alas, God knows
When sad conclusions are foregone.

The sick man leant upon his Lord,
On that imperfect break of day,
"Now, Lord, I die: is there no word,
No countervail that God can say?"
No word. But tight upon his arm,
Was God, and drew not once away
Until his punctual destiny.
To whom could God repair to pray?

Now God be thanked by dying men
Who comrades them in times like these,
Who dreads to see the doom come down
On these black midnight canopies
And on this poisonous glare of dawns.
The whole world crumples in disease,
But God is pitying to the end,
And gives an office to my knees.

Hilda

I

The dearest was the one to whom it fell
To walk and wear her beauty as in a play
To be enacted nobly on a great day;
And stormily we approved the bosom-swell,
And the tones tinkling. For her touch and smell
I brought bright flowers, till garlanded she stood
Scared with her splendor, as in the sight of God
A pale girl curtseying with an asphodel.

No, No, she answered in the extreme of fear,
I cannot. On the dropping of those petals
Rode the Estranger, scorning their sweet mettles,
Blossoms and woman too; him she looked at,
Not me who praised; she was too honest for that,
I was a clod mumbling, to catch her ear.

II

The perished were the fairest. And now uprise
Particular ghosts, who hollow and clamorous
Come as blanched lepers crying, "Do not spurn us,"
Ringing in my ears, wetting my eyes,
Obsequious phantoms and disbodied sighs.
Soon they are frightened and go fast; a smoke
Which clung about my quincebushes, then broke,
And while I look is smeared upon the skies.

But Hilda! proudest, lingering last alone,
Wreathing my roses with blue bitter dust,
Think not I would reject you, for I must
Weep for your nakedness and no retinue,
And leap up as of old to follow you;
But what I wear is flesh; it weighs like stone.

Dead Boy

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.

The Sure Heart

As we two walked in the path, came neighbours' daughters night,
Fluting like birds they passed, and calicoed bright and clean,

And beautiful else had been their bosoms poutering by,
"But ye are a cloud," I said, "too much between."

Beauty waylaid me once, in a depth of woody grot,
It was a fox in his fern, it was a wing's blue sheen,
In her window's weed the balsam: but how did ye prosper not!
With an image of her I filled your empty scenes.

Up once I rose and hasted in fury of heared-of things,
To travel the splendid sphere that twirleth in its fame;
But the wars and the ships and towns, and the pestilent roaring kings,
These angered me for they fought unknowing her name.

Lonely the moons will rise, loudly the brave will shout.
Now meanly the house is reared, but my dear love keepeth therein:
Ye kingdoms may fight and fail, ye stars as ye please go out,
O world I have honered not, be off and spine!

Triumph

Athens, a fragile kingdom by the foam,
Assumed the stranger's yoke; but then behold how meek
Those unbred Cæsars grew, who spent their fruits of Rome
For ever after, trying to be Greek.

I too shook out my locks like one born royal;
For she dissolved in tears, and said my barbarous name,
And took my oath, she was so piteous and loyal:
Vote the young Cæsar triumph, spread his fame!

But oh, I find my captive was not caught.
It was her empty house that fell before my legions;
Of where her soul inhabits I have conquered naught;
It is so far from these my Roman regions!

Winter Remembered

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 centre.

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 went, 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.

Ego

You have heard something muttered in my scorn:
"A little learning addleth this man's wit,
He crieth on our dogmas, Counterfeit!
And no man's bubble 'scapeth his sharp thorn.

"Nor he respecteth duly our tall steeple,
But solitary poring on his book,
Heareth our noise and hardly offereth look,
Nor liveth neighbourly with these the people."

With reason, friends, I am complained upon,
Who am a headstrong man, sentenced from birth
To love unusual gods beyond all earth,
And the easy gospels bruited hither and yon.

So I bring hurt upon mine own sweet kin,
And on my scholars, the young simple snails,
Treading their tumuli to holy grails;
I make reproach, then my deep grief sets in.

But, friends! acquit me of that stain of pride:
Much has been spoken solemnly together,
And you have heard my heart, so answer whether
I am so proud a fool, and godless beside.

Sages and friends, too often have you seen us
Deep in the midnight conclave as we used;
For my part, reverently were you perused;
No rank and primacy being hatched between us;

For my part, much beholden to you all,
Giving a little and receiving more;
Learning had stuffed this head with but lean lore
Betwixt the front bone and the occipital;

Anatomy, that doled my dubious features,
Had housed within me, close to my breastbone,
My daemon, always clamouring, Up, Begone,
Pursue your gods faster than most of creatures!

And if an alien, hideously at feud
With those my generation, I have reason
To think to salve the fester of my treason:
A seven of friends exceeds much multitude.

Night Voices

By night and inky fog,
Unseen they hoped of all the synagogue,
Two pale high-fronted youths withdrew apart
Upheaving each his bitterness of heart
In a dark duologue:

"I have the whole hearsay,
They titled thee a little God to-day.
But didst thou promise to annul the tomb,
Complaisant with that frighted breed to whom
Thou fellowest in clay?"

"I sped their tremulous hope
For pity of a darkenling horoscope.
For thou art Nicodemus, and thy sect
Hath schooled them so funereal, O stiff-necked,
Ye stinted all their scope."

"Our order doth not use
To ease them with false tidings of good news.
Our fashion is a jealous elder God
Who tempereth sometimes the chastening rod,
But raiseth no dead Jews."

"Ye slay the cripples' hope,
Who would but slough their warty envelope,
The meek laborious who would mirth and play,
The tight-lipped righteous travailing for that day
When rock-bound graves may ope."

"Friend, these lies profit not
When carcasses so visibly do rot.
As well run forth and cry there is no Rome!
Still would the legionaries scourge them home,
Though they had fain forgot."

"Nay, this hope lasteth more,
And maketh the mortal mark bite not so sore.
Our Jewry is fanatic, and I said,
In three days must each tomb unclasp his dead!
Nor heard such joy before."

"Take heed, high-hearted youth,
For they will kill thee save thou speak them sooth,
And they will say attentive to thy grave,
"The little carpenter's promises were brave,
But carrion telleth truth."

"O dogma'd Pharisee,
The hope I startle flitteth wide of me;
Suppose in thy turn thou shouldst firmly swear
That I had cleft the tomb and breathed the air,
Would it not flutter free?"

As further on they walked,
Out of old passion in the heart they talked,
And when the grey morn glimmered overhead,
They found they trod the gardens of the dead,
And spectre-white they stalked.

To a Lady Celebrating her Birthday

Too quick the annual sun returns,
Mounts to the ledge and scans the pillowed face
Whereon four seasons hardly have writ the trace,
Though even he on his timeless circuit mourns
That faintlier his fire burns.

Bring proper gifts to beauty then:
Bring topaz, emeralds, gold, and minerals rare,
Musk that will ever be sweet on mortal air,
Bright stiff brocades outlasting the short ken
Of usual mortal men.

Bring only tokens fixed and sure:
Bring kind affections, merited deep and strong,
And though poor hearts never have lasted long,
Swear splendidly to how they shall perdure
As true as now, as pure.

But bring no gift of trembling flowers:
Dear comrade, never on pain of pain suppose
From the blowing of any little wasted rose,
Up clomb the enemy in the airy towers
To number beauty's hours.

Ah, but I think you clearly know:
Sure eyes, you have observed on what hard terms
Beauty has respite from voracious worms;
Her moment comes; thereafter fast or slow
Her daily funerals go.

Dear love, rise up and proudly sing:
For even foreboding soldiers deep at night
Make up no prayers against to-morrow's fight;
They fling sweet oaths on high, not honouring
The dismal nearing Thing.

Come to the company and play:
For even that sinful Babylon when surprised
Put not her sackcloth on nor sacrificed;
The revel roared, and few stood off to stay
And greet the mournful day;

Unearthèd liquors were poured out,
The burghers dined, in no constricted rage
At sudden death as fearsomer than age,
The harlots danced, the elders at least with shout
Tossed brittle bones about.

Small, small my heart inclines to boast:
What can a virtuous poor pale lover do
Who's prey to dissolution quick as you?
This day smells mortuary more than most
To me upon my post.

Know this, though desperate our cases:
Thus will I hold you out of other harms
Till these be palsied paralytic arms;
Then be we grizzled polls and yellow faces
In these respective places.

The Handmaidens

There is reason for scandal now, said we in France:
Was it ever other in war than a devils' dance?
Now the Force felt half-discredited in this light,
The women were working, and we still asleep in the night
We crept out of billets and answered to roll with sneezing,
But the women were deep in their duty with fingers freezing
We limbered the cannon and rattled to Fontevrault,
Shapes darker than darkness flitted and let us go;
And the Saumur wives went burdened, and heavily lent:
Could Heaven not darkly see? Yet on they went.

And plainer than seeing, and out of all seasons, the sound;
The clack of their sabots smiting the frosty ground.
But strange! having one observed how crimes are done,
I can find them here, as otherwhere under the sun,
And I am ashamed now how I carried my head so high:
"Of God's own country I am a citizen, I!"
God suffers abuses here and suffered them there:
Is there too much business, think you, under his care
So quick is my pity, I never can keep it down,
Beset by the provocations thick in this town,
Where saints and sinners have juxtaposition so odd,
They ill consort with the fame of the only God.
I am plagued with pity, yet scared of giving it scope;
My powerless kind affords but a little hope;
For the world and its fine reformers are soon estranged,
The war's well over and look! there is nothing changed.
But God on his throne, I fancy, one of these days,
Will smell of the hideous brew in hot amaze;
He will summon all Heaven, and sooner than day has broken,
His angles will stand on the carpet and hear it spoken:
"Are your eyes gone blind? For ye look not very low,
If you see not the woman, how meek and poorly they go.
It is not yet day, and our tale of the stars not told,
But the handmaidens bear their burdens and tremble of cold.
Do ye heed not her, ye stony and reconciled,
One gathering sticks for a fire and heavy with a child?
And many are heavy with sleep, and they watched not but slept;
Now it neareth dawn, and up they have started, and wept.
We are high on an absolute heaven, and nothing dependeth,
Still it twitcheth our heart when weeping of women ascendeth
Say not, 'But a small sound of weeping, not much tears:'
Doth the Lord God need the thunder to tickle his ears?
We appointeth the strength in flesh and the pith in bones,
Endurance we measured them straitly, the little ones:
The vigils are early, the burdens uneasy to heave:
The thin bones verily ache, the flesh doth grieve.
We descried not the issue, devising the distant and soon,
Commending our young creation that first Sabbath noon,
For the woman we fashioned delicate, fairer, slight,
With intent of warmth for her day and sleep by night.
And season she still hath to go by the sun as of old,
But she falleth, poor wretch, to the devils of dark and cold.

"Now man, doth he up and constrain her, bone of his bone?
When he stretcheth his hand in sleep the woman is gone.
It is writ he shall toil, he shall fight, he shall weep: and he can:
But ye have not to hear at this hearing the pity of man;
Say not that his road runneth steeply assuming the sin,
For we stomach it hard how he swelleth up in his skin.

Abject from the Garden ye heard him howl at the portal
But the curse sitteth easy now on the stubborn mortal
He braggeth and gameth, and brawleth the best of the time,
Nor faileth to gird at us with a villain rhyme,
He marshalleth kingdoms like ant-packs, holloweth ships,
He seeketh the bear in the ice and cometh to grips.
Not lions, deities, dead men shall catch him afeared!
A valiant tune doth he sing to his red little beard.
He picketh up fire and putteth it under a seat,
Whereon he shall ride, nor blister himself with heat,
Throught the earth, through the air, for he thinketh it little ado,
And he findeth our hidden things, and whistleth 'Pooh!'
So he deemeth him king, yet cometh at length to complain
Of the dearth in his belly, and home to his pots again.
And the foolish woman is glad - O ye dubious queens!
She hath rubbed on the pot till it shone, then hath put in the beans;
While he was impounding his pleasures, pursuing his brawl,
She swept out his litter and knocked off the flies form the wall;
She hath put out a pickle, a pudding, a book, and a chair,
And his house hath order, if very small looks to spare.
His house is a squat thing, twenty by some eighteen,
But it keepeth him dry, and the woman keepeth him clean.
We impute to the hutch which his hares inhabit the pattern,
Such a box did he built for himself and the woman his slattern.
She hath gathered a poppy to stick in the blue of the crock,
But he tweaketh the blossom and maketh a sour 'Poppycock!'
Our intent was to chasten them, scuttling from Eden forth
To the taste of our scourge: but what was the lesson worth?
They are ripe for our hand, such twain, such an unkempt case,
He supping his sup by the sweat of the woman's face!

"Ye seraphim, elder, and more in our service rehearsed,
Ye remember the lady Eve as she walked at first;
Ye others may witness not to the lily Eve,
Yet of certain her daughters ye've gathered scope to believe.
A little beauty was vaunted after we smote,
For Delilah her bosom, for Sheba her tawny throat:
Madam Helen, a heathen, was not of a favor uncouth,
And ye know how her rumor and upseated the youth;
Much men and ships drew after her into battle,
They had seen no beauty before, they were witless cattle.
But fair as the moon was Eve, and clear as the sun,
Like terrible bannered armies in Lebanon;
Her breasts like the delicate Heshbon roes twin-born,
Her teeth were Hermon's sheep that are even shorn;
And the Rose of Sharon dwelt in Adam's court,
And Adam delighted and published our good report.
But they sinned! and we stiffened our back and exceedingly sware
The curse of the broken commandment upon the pair.

The life we remitted, on pain of the toil and tilth
Which meaneth, to handle the spade and the pot and the filth;
She must grabble and worry and tug, her face must sweat:
And we demned her bones to the bending, so bend they yet.
Ye have read that the lily need toil not, neither spin,
And the lily remaineth lily and knoweth no sin;
And the one is fair as the other, and either ye pluck
Is complected a lily, and taketh no smell from the muck.
But the daughters of Eve drop out of her favor clean,
They are used too badly, ill-favored, shrewish, and lean;
And one is snaggled of tooth, and one hath a wen,
And this is a fish face, and this one a peckish hen;
Nor to borrow of names from the flowers bettereth those,
The blear-eyed Dahlia, Viola, or Lily, or Rose.
What availeth the fame of our firmament keeping the way,
If the flesh of the women is troubled before the day?
Or spectacular stars as they race to encircuit the deep,
If out littlest people is driven and needeth sleep?
True it hardly beseemeth the Lord to forgive them the sin,
For the word went out, and we suck not the old words in;
We are ancient of days and travel an old way slowly,
We pity the woman's case but mend it not wholly:
There is labor appointed, we know not if it shall cease:
But at least by night shall the handmaidens lie in peace.
So arrange ye again how the people's task be done;
There shall no woman toil till they see our sign of the sun:
There shall none go creeping and cold till appeareth this token!
Remember and heed that the will be done! We have spoken."

Epitaph

Napoleon took many captures and is dead,
Julius brought unto Rome many victories,
Nor did Alexander expire on a wastrel's bed;
But this was a somewhat greater captain than these.

He took a city too, O Eminences.
It was a city reared stubborn against a foe,
Furnished it was with no frail few defences,
But it fell to the intrepid Generalissimo.

Its two towers compacted of a tough masonry,
The right tower squat against the thunderbolts of Heaven,
The left tower sheer on the brink like a mighty tree
From the bottom of Hell, and terrible to the craven.

He was a lone besieger of a grim defence,
He was scarred, and weary of circling it round after round,
He battered incessantly upon its fundaments,

At last he bestrode it thundering to the ground.

A lone besieger, so Cæsar's ghost had said,
Leading no soldiers; but he had known black magic,
And mustered invisible regiments to his aid,
For he triumphed; and the envious Cæsars took it as tragic.

Destitution Raiseth Her Voice

Ye fatted in your fortresses,
Behold! that fretful tribe the poor
Come crying thinly on your house
With "Open us your door!"
Your bricks are tight, your jowls are firm,
Ye sit aside and lock the shelf,
Yet may these urgent pilgrims be
Lord Jesus, poor himself.

King Croesus shut his golden gate
To let no muddy almsmen in.
"The King" old wizard Solon said,
"Unkings him by that sin"
And soon the proud man hanged was,
The golden king upon the tree,
Begging the poor to stop and wet
Him parching piteously.

Ye all I know are beggars born
And walk by favor on the earth.
Once in the strict and sightless womb
Ye cried to come to birth,
Then wept ye next for mother's milk,
Nor think ye now ye earn your bred,
If ever upon Sabbath morn
Lord Jesus hungered.

Necrological

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 grey 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 foemen.

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.

Boris of Britain

If ever your sleep goes bad,
Have in the chymist that Boris had.
When Boris' head was blown with trouble,
This man pricked the bubble;
For Boris, loath to take to his bed,
To the cunning chymist took his head;
But Boris' heart knocked louder and louder,
As chymist mixed him the green powder
And he shook it, and he shook it,
And with misgiving took it.

How did Boris get to court?
By a conveyance of a sort,

Hardly wood, hardly steel,
Beetle's wing, snail's wheel -
Sprawled upon the chymist's bed
Boris lay an hour like dead,
For the chymist went to look
And saw him there at three o'clock,
So he deposeth in a book;
One minute after, in the court,
Was Boris, arguing a tort
Boris in his periwig,
Looking learned, talking big.
It was the great Boris - none
Could get a sweeter justice done.

What did Boris do there?
Got deliverance of a snare.
Poison brewing at the bone
Exploded against the chymist's one.
Too many prisoners in docks,
Liars in the witness box,
Advocates hired to the devil,
Fed his ingrowing evil.

Accused was in a stinking tale
Concieved in terror of the gaol,
When to the whole court's surprise
Old Boris thunders, Lies! Lies!
And for not telling what he knows,
Old Boris smites him on the nose.
Gentlemen are on their feet,
Boris willing to repeat,
And there's your easy barrister
As mad as the March-most hare.
Up with hate, contempt, grudge,
Which in the white bosom lodge!
Order, order! It was not,
Boris too infernal hot,
Drew his fist and let 'em have it,
Got it back as good as gave it,
Went for eye and went for wig
Of coward, tattler, meddler, prig.

Boris darted in and knocked 'em,
Boris laid about and crocked 'em,
Jurors, gentlemen, and clients,
Neo-British bobby giants:
A man by pea-green powder charmed,
For down he dropped unharmed.

Now the barrister is disbarred.
'Twould have hit the old Boris hard;
This was not he - the wind in the head
Escaped when Boris dropped like lead.

Boris, a single-minded man,
Has turned an honest publican,
With a preference for quiet
But an aptitude for riot;
Serves the trade without deceit
And shows the merry ones the street;
And as for the lass named Nellie - no man
Has a helpfuller woman.

The Vagrant

Now what can he want,
The vagrant, the lout,
Who leers in the parson's face,
Lolls with tongue out?

Nothing that you have,
Men with a motor car;
God keep you your high hats
And fine things that are!

With a knot in his bosom
And a bee in his brains,
He goes full of pictures
Around the flat lanes.

His breeches are patchy,
His shirt full of thread,
But the hair's plastered neat
On his great hollow head.

Then think you he means
To harm our precious daughters?
Why, gentlemen, he fishes
In deeper waters.

Lou Margaret, Kittie,
Em with the country curls,
Are sweet bites for red lips,
Very fine girls;

But he visits with others,
With the Queen Guinevere,
Troy's women, Eden's,

Towns not near.

So leave him leering,
Loitering in the lanes;
There's no mischief in him
But a bee in his brains.

Poets Have Chanted Mortality

It had better been hidden
But the Poets inform:
We are chattel and liege
Of undying Worm.

Were you, Will, disheartened,
When all Stratford's gentry
Left their Queen and took service
In his low-lying country?

How many white cities
And grey fleets on the storm
Have proud-builded, hard-battled,
For this undying Worm?

Was a sweet chaste lady
Would none of her lover.
Nay, here comes the Lewd One,
Creeps under her cover!

Have ye said there's no deathless
Of face, fashion, form,
Forgetting to honor
The extent of the Worm?

O ye laughers and light-lipped,
Ye faithless, infirm,
I can tell you who's constant,
'Tis the Eminent Worm.

Ye shall trip on no limits,
Neither time ye your term,
In the realms of His Absolute
Highness the Worm.

Youngest Daughter

Who will wed the Dowager's youngest daughter,
The Captain? filled with ale?
He moored his expected boat to a stake in the water

And stumbled on sea-legs into the Hall for mating,
Only to be seduced by her lady-in-waiting,
Round-bosomed, and not so pale.

Or the thrifty burgher in boots and fancy vest
With considered views of marriage?
By the tidy scullery maid he was impressed
Who kept that house from depreciation and dirt,
But wife does double duty and takes no hurt,
So he rode her home in his carriage.

Never the spare young scholar antiquary
Who was their next resort;
They let him wait in the crypt of the Old Library
And found him compromised with a Saxon book,
Claiming his Truelove kept that nook
And promised sweet disport.

Desirée (of a mother's christening) never shall wed
Though fairest child of her womb;
"We will have revenge," her injured Ladyship said,
"Henceforth the tightest nunnery be thy bed
By the topmost stair! When the ill-bred lovers come
We'll say, She is not at home."

In Process of a Noble Alliance

Reduce this lady unto marble quickly,
Ray her beauty on a glassy plate,
Rhyme her youth as fast as the granite,
Take her where she trembles, and do not wait,
For now in funeral white they lead her
And crown her queen of the House of No Love:
A dirge, then, for her beauty, Musicians!
Ye harping the springe that catches the dove.

On the Road to Wockensutter

"Sahara doth not keep her livid hell
Wholly unto herself," said Herodote;
"Sirocco scourgeth even the greenlands well,
The pulver of her brimstone scratched my throat."

Brady had little Latin and less Greek,
Not his to verify the obscure citation,
But Brady knew no waterfall nor creek
Nor Arctic tremor stayed his oxidation.

By sixty fiery miles they call a trail

Red Rock communicates with Wockensutter,
And Brady, who had started on a rail,
Pursued his march diminishing like butter.

For Brady had deployed the manifold
Beneath the holy principle of Venus,
Till desert ladies named him greasy and old,
And the empanelled peers pronounced it heinous.

"She was my Star, and now forbidden me?"
Cried Brady, his faith quivering with outrage;
Then heard and saw the yellow pert pewee
Who flashed across the acrid sea of sage.

Noon of the second day made his ascension,
The Brady marched emblistered for the goal
And to the pewee made offensive mention
Of words that scored the tablets of her soul.

"A simple shotgun with a choke were best,"
Says Brady, looking for a spot to sit;
But now eluded of Burd Helen's breast
He adds, "Could any human engine hit.

"Venus you are, and we are long acquainted,
I know your signs in any shape and weather,
And even if mortal dared, I have not wanted
To harm a little bird that's false of feather.

"And look, Transfigured! How rightly you betray
To a right man your woman's beauty and bounty,
But I have given my oath. 'Tis sad to say,
My Wockensutter lies in Christian County.

"You smile? I melt - by virtue of my hot rock.
Hadn't we best say farewell altogether?
I'm balancing my years against my luck
Hoping I'll never wonder which or whether."

Here Lies a Lady

Here lies a lady of beauty and high degree.
Of chills and fever she died, of fever and chills,
The delight of her husband, her aunt, an infant of three,
And of medicos marveling sweetly on her ills.

For either she burned, and her confident eyes would blaze,
And her fingers fly in a manner to puzzle their heads -
What was she making? Why, nothing; she sat in a maze

Of old scraps of laces, snipped into curious shreds -

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

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.

Philomela

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.

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

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

Emily Hardcastle, Spinster

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

Armageddon

Antichrist, playing his lissome flute and merry
As was his wont, debouched upon the plain;
Then came a swirl of dust, and Christ drew rein,
Brooding upon his frugal breviary.

Now which shall die, the roundel, rose, and hall,
Or else the tonsured beadsman's monkery?
For Christ and Antichrist arm cap-a-pie,
The prospect charms the soul of the lean jackal.

But Antichrist got down from the Barbary beast
And doffed his plume in courteous prostration;
Christ left his jennet's back in deprecation
And raised him, his own hand about the waist.

And then they fingered chivalry's quaint page,

Of precedence discoursing by the letter.
The oratory of Antichrist was better,
He invested Christ with the elder lineage.

He set Christ on his own Mahomet's back,
Where Christ sat fortressed up like Diomede;
The cynical hairy jennet was his steed,
Obtuse, and most indifferent to attack.

The lordings measured lances and stood still,
And each was loath to let the other's blood;
Originally they were one brotherhood;
There stood the white pavilion on the hill.

To the white pavilion went the hierarchs,
If they might truce their honourable dispute;
Firm was the Christian's chin and he was mute,
And Antichrist ejected scant remarks.

Antichrist tendered a spray of rosemary
To serve his brother for a buttonhole;
The Christ about his adversary's poll
Wrapped a dry palm that grew on Calvary.

Christ wore a dusty cassock, and the knight
Did him the honours of his tiring-hall,
Whence Christ did not come forth too finical,
In his egregious beauty richly dight.

With feasting they concluded every day,
And when the other shaped his phrases thicker,
Christ, introducing water in the liquor,
Made wine of more ethereal bouquet.

At wassail Antichrist would pitch the strain
For unison of all the retinue;
Christ beat the time and hummed a stave or two,
But did not say the words, which were profane.

Perruquiers were privily presented,
Till, knowing his need extreme and his heart pure,
Christ let them dress him his thick chevelure,
And soon his beard was glozed and sweetly scented.

And so the Wolf said Brother to the Lamb,
The True Heir keeping with the poor Impostor,
The rubric and the holy paternoster
Were jangled strangely with the dithyramb.

It could not be. There was a patriarch,
A godly liege of old malignant brood,
Who could not fathom the new brotherhood
Between the children of the light and dark.

He sought the ear of Christ on these doings,
But in the white pavilion when he stood,
And saw them featured and dressed like twins at food,
Profound and mad became his misgivings.

The voices, and their burdens, he must hear,
But equal between the pleasant Princes flew
Theology, art, the old customs and new;
Hoarsely he ran and hissed - in the wrong ear!

He was discomfited, but Christ much more.
Christ sheds unmannerly his devil's pelf,
Takes ashes from the hearth and smears himself,
Calls for his smock and jennet as before.

Christ and his myrmidons, Christ at the head,
Chanted of death and glory and no complaisance;
Antichrist and the armies of malfeasance
Made songs of innocence and no bloodshed.

The immortal Adversary shook his head:
If now they fought too long, why, he would famish;
And if much blood was shed, he would be squeamish.
"These Armageddons!" he said; and later bled.

Grandgousier

Dry bones,
  Dry brains,
 And priest to pray—
Belly that groans
Of its long thirst-pains,
It is all that remains
Of the Grandgousier.

You fitted his muzzle,
Bishop Bamboozle;
Bishop Bamboozle,
You voided his guzzle.
You shall have crowns.

And angel gowns.
Your delicate snout
Had nigh snuffed out

When the member observed 'em:
Bitters and stout
And cider at spout,
And the wenches that served 'em.
Each spidery chink
Was a freshet of drinkables,
Clink-clink-clink
Was a sound of unthinkables,
Your clerical ear
Went crack to hear.

Take water and ice it,
And give him, you say?
Lemon, and slice it,
Sugar, and spice it,
For Grandgousier?

Weary is weary,
Doctor O'Dreary,
Says Grandgousier;
But it's O to be beery,
Mirth-mad-merry,
And rolling away!

Will you give him to guzzle,
Bishop Bamboozle,
A sponge from a jar
Of the rank vinegar?

For to sip where he lies,
Till he ups and dies—
And this is his day—
Till the pink puffed eyes
See the old Paradise
Of the Grandgousier.

Conrad at Twilight

Conrad, Conrad, aren't you old
To sit so late in a mouldy garden?
And I think Conrad knows it well,
Nursing his knees, too rheumy and cold
To warm the wraith of a Forest of Arden.

Neuralgia in the back of his neck,
His lungs filling with such miasma,
His feet dipping in leafage and muck:
Conrad, you've forgotten asthma.

Conrad's house has thick red walls
And chips on Conrad's hearth are blazing,
Slippers and pipe and tea are served,
Anchovy toast, Conrad! 'Tis pleasing,
Still Conrad's back is not uncurved,
And here's an autumn on him, teasing.

Autumn days in our section
Are the most used-up thing on earth,
(Or in the waters under the earth),
Having no more colour nor predilection
Than cornstalks too wet for the fire,
A ribbon rotting on the byre,
A man's face as weathered as straw
By the summer's flare and the winter's flaw.

Conrad, rise up, and steel your soul
And smite an anvil, draw a sword
(See William James and Henry Ford)
And point you to a mightier goal!
But Conrad has not answered a word.

April Treason

So he put her in his picture
In the part he had appointed,
She was lips for smiling faintly,
Eyes to look and level quaintly,
Length of limb and splendors of the bust
Which he honoured as he must.

Queen of women playing model,
Pure of brow but brain not idle,
Sitting in her silence meetly,
Let her adjective be stately;
So he thought his art would manage right
In the honest Northern light.

But he fashioned it too coldly,
April broke-and-entered boldly,
Thinking how to suit the season's
Odor, savor, heats and treasons:
Painter! do not stoop and play the host
Lest the man come uppermost.

Yet he knew that he was altered,
When the perfect woman faltered,
Languish in her softly speaking,
Anguish, even, in her looking:

All the art had fled his fingertips
So he bent and kissed her lips.

He and Venus took their pleasure,
Then he turned upon his treasure,
Took and trampled it with loathing,
Flung it over cliffs to nothing;
Glittering in the sunlight while it fell
Like a lovely shattered shell.

Strict the silencethat came onward
As they trod the foothill downward,
One more mocking noon of April,
Mischief always is in April;
Still she touched his fingers cold as ice
And recited, "It was nice!"

The Inland City

She lies far inland, and no stick nor stone of her
Ever has looked on the sounding sea,
And how should she speak of her swift barks and roadways
And white sloops crowding to lift and be free?

"Ye towers and steeples, and belfries and crosses,
Toll for the doomed ships passing to sea.
But ye walls and gateposts, and ye halls and gardens,
Moor in my little boats vigilantly!"

Agitato Ma Non Troppo

I have a grief,
(It was not stolen like a thief)
Albeit I have no bittern by the lake
To cry it up and down the brake.

There hath been none like Dante's fury
When Beatrice was given him to bury;
Except, when the young heart was hit, you know
How Percy Shelley's reed sang tremolo.

"If grief be in his mind,
Where is his Fair Child moaning in the wind?
Where is the white frost snowing on his head?
When did he stalk and weep and not loll in his bed?"

I will be brief,
Assuredly I have a grief
And I am shaken; but not as a leaf.

Spectral Lovers

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

Over the shredding of an April blossom
Scarcely her fingers touched him, quick with care,
Yet of evasions even she made a snare.
The heart was bold that clanged within her bosom,
The moment perfect, the time stopped for them,
Still her face turned from him.

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

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

"Do I reeling with the sap of April like a drunkard?
Blessed is he that taketh this richest of cities;
But it is so stainless the sack were a thousand pities.
This is that marble fortress not to be conquered,
Lest its white peace in the black flame turn to tinder
And an unutterable cinder."

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 seanson's moon-gold and amethyst,
Who touch quick fingers fluttering like a bird
Whose songs shall never be heard.

Nocturne

Where now has our young Adam
Gone from his sultry Eden,

And where is that Goat-footed
Chasing his willing maiden?
Our man shall cut few capers
In his dark seersucker coat,
With gravest eye subduing
The outrageous tie at his throat;
Wondering if he should carry
His dutiful flesh to the ball,
Or open books that are symbols
And rules and manual.

The intellect bore so hard
Upon the tortured blood,
It dried to a quaint quintessence
The dignities of manhood;
The rivers have passed the bridges
And riding far and free,
Have pitched his boats of passion
Into the sportive sea;
No storm is in this dusk
But there's a distant flash
That signals brine and foam
And booming floods that thrash.

But still the plum-tree blooms
Despite the rocks at root,
Despite that everyone knows
Its wizened and little fruit;
And the white moon plunges wildly
Like an ubiquitous ghost,
Seeking her own old people
Who are a long time lost;
Till he is almost persuaded
And might yet go to the ball,
If head would concede to heart
A trip to the bacchanal.

First Travels of Max

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.

"Become Saint Michael's sword!" said Max to the stick,

And to the stone, "Be a forty-four revolver!"
Then Max was glad that he had armed so wisely
As darker grew the wood, and shrill with silence.
All good fairies were helpless here; at night
Whipped in an inch of their lives; weeping, forbidden
To play with strange scared truant little boys
Who didn't belong there. Snakes were allowed there
And lizards and adders - people of age and evil
That lay on their bellies and whispered - no bird nor rabbit.
There were more rotten trees than there were sound ones.
In that wood timber was degenerate
And rotted almost faster than it grew.
There were no flowers nor apples. Too much age.
The only innocent thing was really Max,
And even he had beat his little sisters.

The black tarn rose up almost in his face.
It was as black and sudden as the pit
The Adversary digs in the bowels of earth;
Bubbles were on it, breath of the black beast
(Formed like a spider, white bag for entrails)
Who took that sort of blackness to inhabit
And dangle after bad men in Fool's Forest
"Must they be bad?" said casuistical Max.
"Mightn't a good boy who stopped saying his prayers
Be allowed to slip into the spider's fingers?"
Max raised his sword - but what can swords do
Against the Prince of the Dark? Max sheathed his point
And crept around the pool.

There in the middle of the wood was a Red Witch.
Max half expected her. He never expected
To find a witch's house that would be red and dirty,
Or a witch's bosom wide and yellow as butter,
Or one that combed so many obscene things
From her black hair into her scarlet lap;
He never believed there would attempt to sing
The one that taught the rats to squeal and Bashan's
Bull to bellow.

"Littlest and last Van Vrooman, do you come too?"
She knew him, it appeared, would know him better,
The scarlet hulk of hell with a fat bosom,
Pirouetting at the bottom of the forest.
Certainly Max had come, but he was going;
Unequal contests never being commanded
On young knights only armed in innocence.
"When I am a grown man I will come here
And cut your head off!" That was very well.

And no true heart beating in Christendom
Could have said more, but that for the present would do.

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

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.

Blackberry Winter

If there be a power of sweetness, let it lie,
For being drunken with steam of Cuban cigars
He takes no pungence from the odor of stars,
And even his music stops on one long sigh.

Still he must sing to his virgin apple tree
Who has not borne him a winey beauty of red;
The silver blooms and bronzy nubs drop dead
But the nonpareil may ripen yet, maybe.

Bestarred is the Daughter of Heaven's house, and cold,
He has seen her often, she sat all night on the hill,
Unseemly the pale youth clambered toward her, till
Untimely the peacock screamed, and he wakened old.

The breath of a girl is music of fall and swell.
Trumpets convolve in the warrior's chambered ear,
But he has listened; none is resounding here,
So much the wars have dwindled since Troy fell.

Lichas to Polydor

Who Regretted all his Years of Serving Cytherea
Her huge affirmative emblazed thy sodden skies,
It was a sign had puffed up great the mortalest worm that dies;
But now thou knowest her sworn a spinster, and her true-tokens lies.
Rained her endearments thick as snow and covered thee,
Thy prayer was not appeased; naked and unrewarded must thou flee.
Not so had served thee Thalia, Charis, or Melpomene.
Much better marriages thou hadst becoming to thy station:
Remember the Powerful Ladies, unreluctant to thy passion,

Thou less than the bandy-legged of the heathen congregation!

Good Ships

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.

Judith of Bethulia

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

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

But a rare chance was the girl's then, when the Invader
Trumpeted from the South, and rumbled from the North,
Beleaguered the city from four quarters of the earth,
Our soldiery too craven and sick to aid her -
Where were the arms could countervail this horde?
Her beauty was the sword.

She sat with the elders, and proved on their blear visage
How bright was the weapon unrusted in her keeping,
While he lay surfeiting on their harvest heaping
Wasting the husbandry of their rarest vintage -
And dreaming of the broad-breasted dames for concubine?
These floated on his wine.

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

The heathen have all perished. The victory was furnished,
We smote them hiding in vineyards, barns, annexes,
And now their white bones clutter the holes of foxes,
And the chieftain's head, with grinning sockets, and varnished -
Is it hung on the sky with a hideous epitaphy?
No, the woman keeps the trophy.

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

Spiel of Three Mountebanks

THE SWARTHY ONE -
Villagers who gather round,
This is Fides, my lean hound.
Bring your bristled village curs
To try his fang and tooth, sweet sirs!
He will rend them, he is savage,
Thinking nothing but to ravage,
Nor with cudgel, fire, rope,
May you control my misanthrope;
He would tear the moon in the sky
And fly at Heaven, could he fly.
And for his ravening without cease
I have had of him no peace;
Only once I bared the knife
To quit my devil of his life,
But listen, how I heard him say,
"Think you I shall die today?
Since your mother cursed and died,
I am keeping at your side,
We are firmly knit together,
Two ends tugging at one tether,
And you shall see when I shall die
That you are mortal even as I."
Bring your stoutest-hearted curs
If you would risk him, gentle sirs.

THE THICK ONE -
Countrymen, here's a noble frame,
Humphrey is my elephant's name.
When my father's back was bent
Under steep impediment,
Humphrey came to my possession,
With patient strength for all his passion.
Have you a mountain to remove?
It is Humphrey's dearest love.
Pile his burden to the skies,
Loose a pestilence of flies,
Foot him in the quick morass
Where no laden beast can pass,
He will staunch his weariless back
And march unswerving on the track.
Have ye seen a back so wide,
So impenetrable hide?
Nor think you by this Humphrey hill
Prince Hamlet bare his fardels ill?
Myself I like it not for us
To wear beneath an incubus,
I take offence, but in no rage
May I dispose my heritage;
Though in good time the vast and tough
Shall sink and totter fast enough.
So pile your population up,
They are a drop in Humphrey's cup;
Add all your curses to his pack
To make one straw for Humphrey's back.

THE PALE ONE -
If ye remark how poor I am,
Come, citizens, behold my lamb!
Have you a lion, ounce, or scourge,
Or any beast of dainty gorge?
Agnus lays his tender youth
Between the very enemy's mouth.
And though he sniff his delicate meat
He may not bruise that flesh nor eat.
He may not rend him limb from limb
If Agnus do but bleat on him.
Fierce was my youth, but like a dream
I saw a temple and a stream,
And where I knelt and washed my sore,
This infant lamb stood on the shore,
He mounted with me from the river,
And still he cries, as brave as ever:
"Lay me down by the lion's side

To match my frailty with his pride.
Fain would I welter in my blood
To teach these lions true lionhood."
So daily Agnus would be slain
But daily is denied again,
And still the hungry lions range
While Agnus waits upon a change;
Only the coursing lions die
And in their deserts mortify.
So bring us lion, leopard, bear,
To try of Agnus without fear,
And ye less gentle than I am,
Come, be instructed of my Lamb.

Rapunzel Has Submitted Herself to Fashion

Rapunzel, and Rapunzel,
All this day will I cry upon you,
Accusing, Was it well
How the old witch has enviously undone you?

Undone of your tangled snare
By which the midnight moon was sifted and stranded;
Forlorn of the rippling stair
Whereon the secret lover had ascended.

For when it came to night,
And the breath-shortening of the most shut hour,
Should he have mounted light
And delivered you with a kiss, and possessed the tower.

But the beldame spat between
The crooked blades of shears,
And put her warty hands to the sheen
Of your hair, and hacked it off, and maybe hacked your ears.

Do you sit at the casement still,
Braving the ruins of your smile but wanly?
Prince there shall come not till
He may climb to his kiss on a rippling ladder, only.

Number Five

"Come in out of the night", said the landlord.
"Hang up your caps, men, and I will pass the gin."
And what for us thirsty pirates but walk right in,
Me with my lips locked tight, saying not a word?

Five hang-dog men, and I was number five.

"Give us a drink then, mate. It's terrible loud
And it's terrible bitter under the storm-cloud,
And we be blown to deader than alive."

God bless strong drink that's given to the weak.
Five of us sat to the bottle, but I was one,
For thinking of what so desperate had been done,
I couldn't drink to my mates, lest I might speak.

"Here's one won't take his drink. Now is he proud?
This is a rummy lad," says the proprietor.
Says he, "I've not seen this young beauty quieter".
Thinks I, "Now it is going to come out loud".

And here comes the girl, and looks us in the face -
Never she'd seen us faces more in evil
Nor us great hulks with more power of the devil -
But finally she sits down in the sixth place,

And presses my hand. But I turn like a hare,
I run to the window over the black water,
Thinking if I may tell them what's the matter;
Happen it's dark, but I know what is down there.

But open field is better. And I slide down
And howl in the storm, with let for my slippery tongue
That never to girls nor priests may tell the wrong -
And I run by the river where the dead things drown.

Vaunting Oak

He is a tower unleaning. But how he'll break
If Heaven assault him with full wind and sleet,
And what uproar tall trees concumbent make!

More than a hundred years and a hundred feet
Naked he rears against cold skies eruptive;
Only his temporal twigs unsure of seat,

And the frail leaves of a season, who are susceptive
To the mad humors of wind, and turn and flee
In panic round the stem on which they are captive.

Now a certain heart, too young, and mortally
Yoked with an unbeliever of bantering brood,
Observed, as an eminent witness of life, the tree;

She exulted, wrapped in a phantasy of good:
"Be the great oak for his long winterings

Our symbol of love, better than the summer's brood!"

Then the venerable oak, delivered of his pangs,
Put forth profuse his green banners of peace
And testified to her with innumerable tongues.

And what but she fetch me up to the steep place
Where the oak vaunted? A flat where birdsong flew
Had to be traversed, and a quick populace

Of daisies and yellow kinds, and here she knew,
Instructed well by much mortality,
Better than brag in this distraught purlieu.

Above their pied and dusty clumps was he
Standing, sheer on his hill, not much soiled over
By the knobs and broken boughs of an old tree.

She looked and murmured, "Established there, forever!"
But, that her pitiful error be undone,
I knocked upon his house, a sorrowing lover,

And like a funeral came the hollow tone.
"The grand old fellow," I grieved, "holds gallantly,
But before our joy has lapsed, even, will be gone."

I beat more sternly, and his dolorous cry
Boomed till its loud reverberance outsounded
The singing of bees; or the coward birds that fly

Otherwhere with their songs when summer is sped,
And if they stayed would perish miserably;
Or the weeping girl remembering her dread.

Old Man Playing with Children

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."

Miriam Tazewell

When Miriam Tazewell heard the tempest bursting
And his wrathy 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 strong 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.

Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter

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

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

Or harried unto the pond

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

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

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.

Captain Carpenter

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
And 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 pinched out his sweet blue eyes.

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 on 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 stout 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.

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.

Prometheus in Straits

Windy gentlemen wreathing a long verandah,
With tongues busy between illicit potations
Assailing all the acta and/or agenda
Of previous and/or present administrations:
Observe that I'm carefully jotting no memoranda
Lest I seem to identify your wits with your nations's.

But now approaches the radiant band, all spinster
Of spirits weaving delirious rhythms of chatter
About old picture galleries and Westminster;
My sensitivity's out of this world, it is utter;
I wish I were a patriarch jungle monster;
The parrots' bonnets, yes; but stop the twitter.

To the colleges then, and the modern masterpieces?
Not now, though I risk the damage of your inference;
Before your explications respect ceases
For centers lost in so absurd circumference;
You have only betrayed them by your exegesis
And provoke me to gestures not of deference.

Though I be Prometheus my mind may have wandered
In bringing my pious offices to this people;
Where all must be teachers, nullity is engendered
And doctrine perishes crying for an ear which is simple;
The prophet is solicited before he has well thundered
And escapes with credit if he do not turn disciple.

At least my function concerns itself with your planet
And due distinctions of faith and fact and fiction;
I will go somewhere by a streamside abounding with granite
And but little human history and dereliction;
To the Man Unknown I will raise an alter upon it
And practise my knees with bruises of genuflection.

Ada Ruel

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."

Old Mansion

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.

Here age seemed newly imaged for the historian
After his monstrous chateaux on the Loire,
A beauty not for depicting by old vulgarian
Reiterations that gentle readers abhor.

It was a Southern manor. One hardly imagines
Towers, arcades, or forbidding fortress walls;
But sufficient state though its peacocks now were pigeons;
Where no courts kept, but grave rites and funerals.

Indeed, not distant, possibly not external
To the property, were tombstones, where the catafalque
Had carried their dead; and projected a note too charnel
But for the honeysuckle on its intricate stalk.

Stability was the character of its rectangle
Whose line was seen in part and guessed in part
Through trees. Decay was the tone of old brick and shingle.
Green shutters dragging frightened the watchful heart

To assert: Your mansion, long and richly inhabited,
Its porches and bowers suiting the children of men,
Will not for ever be thus, O man, exhibited,
And one had best hurry to enter it if one can.

And at last, with my happier angel's own temerity
Did I clang their brazen knocker against the door,
To beg their dole of a look, in simple charity,
Or crumbs of wisdom dropping from their great store.

But it came to nothing - and may such gross denial
Which has been deplored duly with a beating of the breast
Never shorten the tired historian, loyal
To acknowledge defeat and discover a new quest.

The old mistress was ill, and sent my dismissal
By one even more wrappered and lean and dark
Than that warped concierge and imperturbable vassal
Who bids you begone from her master's Gothic park.

Emphatically, the old house crumbled; the ruins
Would litter, as already the leaves, this petted sward;
And no annalist went in to the lords or the peons;
The antiquary would finger the bits of shard.

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.

Blue 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.

Adventure This Side of Pluralism

Angered with a braggart kind
Prescribing others from its yoke
And seeming jauntily designed,
I rent my smooth locks and I spoke.

- Lordly, have ye intimations
Of your heightened pedigree,
That ye taunt the other nations
With the limp of bastardy?

Rear ye higher than the stallion,
Creep ye lower than the snail,
As ye tread your suave cotillion,
Satyrs robed in swallowtail?

But likest brethren fall apart,
And who can tie the miscellany,
Plato, Scythian, weevil, and wart?
One is one, but these be many.

It was an ancient man and hale,
Doctor of Genealogy,
With wisdom on his clean eyeball
Who heard and answered me;

His daughters wedded with the plague,
His pigeons wiven with the fox,
All the jewels in his bag
Gone in shipwreck on the rocks;

No losses now to mend or mourn,
He sat beneath his garden tree,
Reading; but saw my visage torn
And lifted up his voice to me:

– Aforetime there was one God only,
Simplex was his name, none other.
But ah, Simplicity was lonely,
Nobody saying Father.

Was the Almighty but barren Chief?
The feudal heart without the fief?

Who the members of his State,
Where the largess of his lions,
Unless he mightily begat
Other Gods, with liberal reins?

Each dark sun and vaguest moon
Lightless in the deathy quiet
Pricked his continence, waiting on
His voice. And now it boomed FIAT!

The fir-tree quivered on his base,
And the hoptoad found his fettle,
There was a doggie full of grace,
And the tight-suited beetle.

Out of joy they took their form,
Jubilant they broke and sped,
But first the able-bellied worm
And last the improvident biped.

All were patterned prettily,
And born of love, but even so
Their young mouths cried terribly,
"Ego, I am, Ego."

If he wrought them for obeisance,
Did Simplicissimus missed his mark,
So promiscuous with his essence,
Obsolescent Hierarch?

For the Stark, Prime, Simple,
When lie multiplied his One,
Took the holies of his temple
And conveyed his throne.

Yonder's a yellow garden weed,
Tallest, proudest there, who muttered,
"I'm the ultimate of breed
And a God, well accoutred."

Have you heard the Ave sung?
Here's the heifer, cuckoo, ape,
Gander's bill and parrot's tongue
Chanting Body and taking Shape.

Phoebe vibrant in the tree,
Running water, April pigments,
Mirrors changing endlessly:
"We are wholes and not fragments."

Man was the youngest child
But knew the son its own Father?
It was thoroughly beguiled
With its own image rather.

The fond may have proposed his praise,
I when I bended on good knee
As a novice in those days
To my mad Aunt Piety.

Hear the Sweet-hearts and Free lances,
Man and woman, beast and thingdom:
"We are Powers enough and Princes
To affirm his proper kingdom."

My son, the motley and the pied,
The swarming and oblivious brood,
Have waded deep in regicide
And little know of common good.

Go tell those Dignities Respective,
Noses counted to Four Hundred,
Tribes and orators invective,
Whom they slay are kindred.

Parting at Dawn

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, Madame, 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.

Tom, Tom, The Piper's Son

Grim in my little black coat as the sleazy beetle,
And gone of hue,
Lonely, a man reputed for softening little,
Loving few -

Mournfully going where men assemble, unfriended, pushing
To sell my wares,
And glaring with little grey eyes at whom I am brushing,
Who would with theirs -

Full of my thoughts as I trudge here and trundle yonder,
Eyes on the ground,
Tricked by white birds or tall women into no wonder
And no sound –
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 –

How one said, "This ambulant worm, he is strangely other
Than they suppose" –
But one, "He was sired by his father and dammed by his mother,
And acknowledges those"–

And then: "Nay, nay – this man is a changeling, and knows not -
This was a Prince
From a far great kingdom – and should return, but goes not -
Long years since" –

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 I appeared 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!"
The Last Judgment

To his angel company drowsing on their strings,
"Go call my trumpeter!" said the King of Kings.

So Gabriel gat him up from the trumpeting station
And winged into court with testy deliberation.

"Let Him wait. For I and my trump who have waited are old,
Our wind is short, our joints are harsh and cold."

But Jahveh's front was darkening like nightfall:
"Blow on thy trump, man! But what hast thou done there-withal?"

"'Tis boxed for keeping, sire. So noble a pelf,
'Tis fast in lock, and reposeth high on the shelf."

"Recover thy trump, and sound through all the earth
An instant cease to the works of death and birth."

The ancient hasted to do his Lord's command,
On high his pinions creaking on either hand,

Unwrapped his trump, and beginning pale as the tomb
By littles he purpled his check on Crack-o'-Doom.

The frantical sinners heard it, and sinned right on,
They were not probationers now but damned and done;

They clutched at their gold, and merry whores, and gin,
And cursed this day that sundered them from sweet sin.

Laborious others, hunched by squat machines,
Rose as by habit to doff their greasy jeans;

It was a good hour till whistle, and they were glad
To go out sooner than yesterday they had.

But a widow woman laughed at the shapes of Doom,
Brandished at Heaven's host her crazy broom:

"Ye have tarried I think by the way. The war is done.
Your summons had been timelier seven years gone.

My two sweet boys are naked dissolute bones
As a million other murdered mothers' sons.

Search France and find them. I shall thank you well
When ye dispose us in official Hell."

But how they inveighed on the tedious courts of Heaven,
Those queens, ungrovelling at Omnipotence even!

With such a wrack their empires had been strewn,
They had not marvelled at Gabriel's quaint tune;

Had shot precipitate like inverted rain
By routes converging to the heavenly plain;

And if they quaked in the transit, and felt pain,
Quite soon were grounded safe on the firm plain.

Luisa unlocked her smile, the rose and flaxen
Who published a sleepy beauty that was Saxon;

For since she was chosen once of Bonaparte,
All other women's husbands pricked her heart.

But swarthy and blotched was simpering Jezebel,
So late with the worms, so soon to be bride of Hell.

Then Cleopatra enacted every wile
That had ensnared the antique world at Nile;

When Antony had burst her coil asunder
And clattered to the field with Roman thunder,

The queen had not endured for her honor's repute
To be of a single old lover destitute;

Nor had her mirror comforted her in rage,
Discovering the creeping cracks of age;

She got a little snake, too sweet to hiss,
And propped him up for his long voluptuous kiss;

His venom mixed with the woman's milk and honey;
No doctors then would hire for the kingdom's money;

He sucked her sweet breasts with all his little strength
Till Egypt was quit of its curse at no great length.

But now in Heaven her harlotries were renewed,
For she loosed the cerements wherewith she was gewed;

Her side was buckled, but she undid the clasp
And showed her small round bosom kissed by the asp.

Virga

I am virga, a rod ?
I am commandment, lex ?
My soul's the antic boy
I must keep in for duty;
But he is plagued with devils
(The chief among them sex)
And crying for the whiteness
Of the bosom of beauty.

Poor soul, I keep him one day
Whipt and wept in charge,
I preach him to repentance
For his glorious fault;
Tomorrow he repays me
Incontinence as large,
Restores again the savor
That's forbidden in the salt.

For the body of my lady
Is a terror to me ?
I would run to my house,
Like a fox, harried hard ?
But my young courageous rebel
Is compound curiously,
Her honorable beauty
Is fire to his petard.

So I took him out of town,
And I walked him in the country,
I put my young scholar
Unto a quiet school:
I bade him watch the shrub folk,
The chaste garden gentry,
For leaf and twig are lovely
But the sap runs slow and cool.

For the green ones grew upward,
Or they folded, or they leant,
From the sun they got the light,
From the earth sufficient lease,
Though their furniture was naught
Yet they aged in content,
And without a passion in them
They could praise God without cease.

And I marked one duteous bird
That delivered him of song:
His notes thin and heartless
Came chanting from the tree
Like words of spinster ladies
That have been loveless long,
And lately are perfected
In sweet gentility.

One foolish wind was loose
Upon the peace of air,
And soon he had distempered
A sea of wheated hill;
But it seemed the wheat was bowing
In a pharisaic prayer
For the sinful souls like mine,
Not so beautiful and still.

I will sanctify this soul.
I will make him harbor there
Till obedience has purged him

Of his bravery, of his stain;
For I will keep him growing
Like the green things in the air,
Till he is washed to purity
By wind and sun and rain.

Two Sonnets

I. YEA

It was beside the fire that I had lit,
Out of the rain that drummed upon my roof,
She leant against my bosom, fluttering it,
And stared beyond my world, far, far, aloof.

And neither spoke and thus we might have sat
Till angry Gabriel trumpeted for change,
But she said, "Heart of stone, look not like that!
O unconcessive husband, you are strange."

For joy I could not answer, being taxed
By such a star, so distant in the sky,
With being cold. But think how the poor heart waxed,
The chidden wonder of women, the huge I!

And I played the god; disdaining her no more
I smiled, and drew her closer than before.

II. NAY

With such strong arms I shut my love about,
She rested there, which was to me a token
This was a house she could not walk without,
Securely bricked, and never to he broken.

But no, the tight imprisonment was vain,
Too physical and wide to catch a heart;
When we had come most near, and scarce were twain,
Some soul was still unmet, and much apart.

Therefore I knew the most unperjured lips
That ever sweetly bargained love's exchange
Must lie; and love be blacked with this eclipse,
That she and I could live and still be strange!

And as for death, whose stroke dissevers men,
What fool would hope for firm possession then?

Spring Posy

Running to meet us came neighbours' daughters nigh,

Fluting like birds, and calicoed bright and clean;
And beautiful else had been their bosoms poutering by!
"But ye are a cloud," I said", too much between".

I was waylaid in a depth of woody grot:
Was it a fox in his fern, was it a wing's blue sheen?
In her widow's weed the balsam? But how ye prospered not,
When full of her images I saw not your scene!

Up once I rose in a fury of heard-of things
To travel the splendid sphere that twirleth in its fame;
But the wars and ships and towns, and pestilent roaring kings,
These angered me, and why? They fought unknowing her name!

Miss Euphemia

Out of her house she crept,
Which was her winter's gaol,
Hearing the rumour that now
Was the birds' common tale -
Birds for all the ladies,
And husbands at church-door -
In fine, a spring was promised
As fifty years before.

A phase of green and tender
Was on the mortal clay,
But white upon her stick went
Miss Euphemia,
To count up all her tulips
That celebrated March,
Out of the frore escaping
To the blue upper arch.

Into her house she fled,
Buffeted back to prison,
And sought the very great-chair
From which she had arisen;
Down sat in her whiteness -
Bitter how she laughed -
Opening doors to March, yet
Quaking in his draught.

Nor scarcely can she, dwindling,
Throw down a bridge of dream
For a broken lady's traverse,
Neat-footing on the beam;
She had too much of winter,
And all her ways were lost,

And she sits with us only
Till next Pentecost.

Winter's Tale

Now the winter's frosty freight
Bows the tree and crowns the stump,
Yet sits poor Drury lone and late,
Watching his great cats jump.

Man of oak, is this your honour,
Buried in a mighty house,
To give your seven cats their humour,
Like a plaything, or a mouse?

Never your brethren toiled so hard,
Under the summer skies;
But now they use their long reward,
Wintering not so foolishwise.

Here's winter's ease, nor yet are any
Ladies laughing through his house;
Only truant thoughts of Jenny
Scampering through him like a mouse,

Jenny tripping through his head
As he met her in the wood;
But Drury wonders, is afraid,
If he could, or if he should;

And nods, while paw and claw and fang
Are flashing by the ingle -
Truly these be tiger's young
In this Kilkenny tangle.

But Tom the Tawny gave a cry!
And he took a mighty spring
To the oaken ledge, and by,
Like a mad, free thing;

And then, on seeing him go,
Old Drury started after,
In a good three-inch of snow,
And a winter-wind laughter.

Look at Drury's black coat
And the kit's red jacket!
Listen, Drury's great throat
In the hell-cat's racket!

Will you rhyme us their whither?
Oh, skipping and skating
To the bricks in the weather
Where the woman was waiting.

She cracked open her door
To the cat of Kilkenny:
Here is Tom on your floor,
Here is Drury, good Jenny.

What became of all those?
Well, Jenny she cried;
Tom vanished - God knows
If he lived or he died;

And Drury was corrected
Of being long a ninny,
When his wander-wits contracted,
And his arms took hold of Jenny.

These Winters

Time was when the gods we gentleman deride
Visited us with winters that were cold;
And I could assist at a thousand stories told
Of black turned white, and flood solidified
(All but the red, which was at early tide),

And of our smoky breath that stained the air
As we slipped like roes between the earth and the sky
And, out of ourselves with glory, made outcry;
But the little devils of sense were frozen where
There was such purity of atmosphere.

And were we ever driven into house?
We were the brave who would be purified
And a great weather was emptied on our pride;
But weather or we have changed; for we make mows
At the present gods, and say Where Nows, Where Nows,

And are diverted in our tepid ease
With asking if the gods, as we are told,
Will blot the sun with such a pall of cold
That gentlemen pink and slippered even as these
Shall dance like locusts on the winter breeze.

Antique Harvesters

(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.

Eclogue

JANE SNEED BEGAN IT: My poor John, alas,
Ten years ago, pretty it was in a ring
To run as boys and girls do in the grass -
At that time leap and hollo and skip and sing
Came easily to pass.

JOHN BLACK SAID: I'll interpret what you mean.
Our infant selves played happily with our others,
The cunning me and mine came not between
Which like a sword is, O sweethearts and brothers
Numberless, who have seen.

JANE SNEED: I tell you what I used to do.
For joy I used to run by river or wood
To see with what speed all came trooping too;
Those days I could not quit you if I would,
Nor yet quit me could you.

JOHN BLACK RETURNED: But now, Jane, it appears
We are sly travelers, keeping good lookout
Against the face whose ravage cries for tears;
Old friends, ill met; and supposing I call out,
"Draw nigh, friend of those years" -

Before he think of any reason why,
The features of that man resolve and burn
For one long look - but then the flame must die.
The cold hearts in us mortally return,
We must not fructify.

JANE SNEED SAID BITTERLY: Why, John, you are right.
We were spendthrifts of joy when we were young,
But we became usurious, and in fright
Conceived that such a waste of days was wrong
For marchers unto night.

JOHN BLACK SAID: Yes, exactly, that was when
It happened. For Time involved us: in his toils

We learned to fear. And every day since then
We are mortals teasing for immortal spoils,
Desperate women and men.

JANE SNEED CONSENTED: It was nothing but this.
Love suffereth long, is kind - but not in fear.
For boys run banded, and simple sweethearts kiss,
Till in one day the dream of Death appear -
Then metamorphosis.

JOHN BLACK SAID: To explain mistrust and wars,
Theogony has a black witch with hell's broth;
A preposterous marriage of fleshless stars;
Or the Fiend's own naked person; or God wroth
Fingering his red scars.

And philosophy, an art of equal worth,
Tells of a flaw in the firmament - spots in the sun -
A Third Day's error when the upheaving earth
Was young and prime - a Fate reposed upon
The born before their birth.

JANE SNEED WITH GRIM LIPS MOCKED HIM: Who can tell -
Not I, not you - about those mysteries!
Something, John Black, came flapping out of hell
And wrought between us, and the chasm is
Digged, and it digged it well

JOHN BLACK IN DEPRECATION SAID: Be sure
That love has suffered a most fatal eclipse;
All brotherhood, filialities insecure;
Loves compounding honey on their lips
With deep doubts to endure.

JANE SNEED SIGHED SLOWLY: I suppose it stands
Just so. Yet I can picture happiness–
Perhaps there wander lovers in some lands
Who when Night comes, when it is fathomless,
Consort their little hands;

And well, John Black, those darkened lovers may,
The hands hold much of heat in little storage,
The eyes are almost torches good as day,
The flame of each to the other flame cries Courage,
Soon heart to heart slide they;

JOHN BLACK'S THE LAST SAY THEN: O innocent dove,
This is a dream. We lovers mournfully
Exchange our bleak despairs. We are one part love

And nine parts bitter thought. As well might be
Beneath ground as above.

Piazza piece

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

The Miller's Daughter

I have seen, O, the miller's daughter
And on her neck a coral necklace lies
And yellow glint of corn is in her eyes
Which are a blue stillwater.

The strange miller hath strange daughter
For he is pink and painfully doth walk
And life demandeth of them little talk
Beside the small millwater.

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

At daylight some vague bird
Tinkles his little bell and she comes down
Coiling her hair as queens would coil a crown.
Yet queens are too absurd.

And so am I, poor bookish hind,
Who come by fabulous roads around the hill
To bring the famous daughter of the mill
No combs to sell, no corn to grind,

But too much pudding in my head

Of learned characters and scraps of love
Which O that she might peck at (dainty dove!)
And words vain to be said.

What then to do but stare -
A learned eye of our most Christian nation
And foremost philosophical generation -
At primary chrome of hair,

Astronomied Oes of eyes
And the white moons I tremble to behold
(More than my books did shake me, or a tale told)
And all her parts likewise.

She dwells beside a water,
She counts the bins and ties the sacks pardee
And cleaves my closest thought, and is to me
A long-dreamt miller's daughter.

Jack's Letter

Do not imagine that Jack and Rose apart
Can thrive much, for they cannot lie together
Nor under the same roof or the same weather.
These are the moons of absence grieving the heart

If I knew any gods upon the hill
I'd ask the kindest: Wet your lips and bless
The little ones that die of separateness,
Absent and impotent and unspoken still.

But Jack has wits which he would put to use;
He would convey to Rose his pent-up love
And duly receive acknowledgment thereof.
A letter is his proper and pure excuse.

Too cold and dry he finds the paper sheet,
And atrabilious and sour is ink;
He'd set his matter forth but stops to think
His passion must in transit lose its heat;

So plants on four sides of the folio
Himself in bulbs of cunning charactery,
But Rose must guess the cipher, seeing she
Must water him with tears if he would grow.

The glade is not so green now, Jack says there;
The fish have all gone down the dwindling stream;
The birds have scattered and become a dream;

Himself works with his flower and goes nowhere.

Here then lies Jack beneath a penny seal.
The dainty lady of the superscription
If she have very delicate perception
With eyes may see and with sharp fingers feel.

The post is gone, and the event will tell.
If only she will hug it to her bosom
Her parcel soon will thicken to a blossom
Which would be soft to hold and sweet to smell.

Semi-Centennial

When the green army battled and drove North
The black army, one old fugitive crept forth
From his hole beside the hearth, wearied a little
With fixing his blue eye on ash and spittle.

He hopped outdoors stiff-legged on his stave
To quiz the spring and see if it would grave
Bright images on a mind so weathered and hard
It scarcely received the print of his backyard.

He was a small man with head larger than most,
And so much it had kept, and so much lost,
It could not buzz and spin with giddy mirth
At these quick salad hues that gauded earth.

Business brighter than that had been enacted
Day after day within the curled compacted
Grey hemispheres - music and histories
Enveloping more than April novelties.

If the grey cloud of thought for once was stilled
At the great cycle fifty times fulfilled,
Yet it was feathers that quivered, grass, the bee,
The foal, the firstling yellow bloom - not he.

He leaned upon the earth and turned his eyes
About the word and said with no surprise -
"I am a god. I may not seem to be,
The other gods have disinherited me.

"The better part of godhead is design.
This is not theirs only, for I know mine,
And I project such worlds as need not yield
To this commanded April on the field.

"And it is ample. For it satisfies
My royal blood even thus to exercise
The ancestral arts of my theogony.
I am a god, though none attend to me."

And he watched, with large head resting in the sun,
The gods at play, and did not envy one.
He had the magic too, and knew his power,
But was too tired to work it at this hour.

The Two Worthies

All the here and all the there
Ring with the praises of the pair:
Jesus the Paraclete
And Saint Paul the Exegete.

Jesus proclaimed the truth.
Paul's missionary tooth
Shredded it fine, and made a paste,
No particle going to waste,
Kneaded it and caked it
And buttered it and baked it
(And indeed all but digested
While Jesus went to death and rested)
Into a marketable compound
Ready to lay on any wound,
Meet to prescribe to our distress
And feed unto our emptiness.

And this is how the Pure Idea
Became our perfect panacea,
Both external and internal
And supernal and infernal.

When the great captains die,
There is some faithful standing by
To whom the chieftain hands his sword.
Proud Paul received - a Word.

This was the man who, given his cause,
Gave constitution and by-laws,
Distinguished pedagogue
Who invaded the synagogue
And in a little while
Was proselyting the Gentile.

But what would there have been for Paul
If the Source had finished all?

He blessed the mighty Paraclete
For needing him, to miss defeat,
He couldn't have done anything
But for his Captain spiriting.

He knew that he was competent
For any sort of punishment,
With his irresistible urge
To bare his back unto the scourge,
Teasing his own neck
In prodigious shipwreck;
Hunger and rats and gaol
Were mere detail.

Paul was every inch of him
Valiant as the Seraphim,
And all he went among
Confessed his marvelous tongue,
And Satan fearing the man's spell
Embittered smote the gates of Hell.
So he finished his fight
And he too went from sight.

Then let no cantankerous schism
Corrupt this our catechism
But one and all let us repeat:
Who then is Jesus?
He is our Paraclete.
And Paul, out of Tarsus?
He is our Exegete.

Rain

"Rain is a long susurrance; makes no loud
Clamor, yet mutes the terrible bugles; no night
Yet darkens the insupportable sunlight
And flame-borrowing bush and feather; a cloud
And cool upon your heads, poor wrinkle-browed
Percipiences! Not true Styx, yet a river
Washing the wounded senses of their fever;
A barrier wall let down; or a makeshift shroud.

"Yes, think of the happy dead who fall in the valleys
Of gentle rivers - eyeballs opening wide
To the comfort of that unlit undusty tide –
Ears flowering green and huge beyond the bawling
Of air - and a brief sweet season of tumbling, crawling,
On legs and arms among the waterlilies."

Husband Betrayed

And so he called her Pigeon,
Saying to himself, "She flutters walking
And in sweet monotone she twitters talking."
Nothing was said of her religion.

There was wood-wildness in her, - say a dove.
For doves are pigeons not domesticated
And whoso catches one is soon frustrated,
Expecting quick return of love.

At all events she had a snowy bosom
And trod so mincingly that you would say
She only wanted wings to fly away,
Easy and light and lissome.

She pecked her food with ravished cries,
She sunned her bosom by the wall in the morning,
Preening prettily in the sun and turning
In her birdwise.

But there was heavy dudgeon
When he that should have married him a woman
To sit and drudge and serve him as was common
Discovered he had wived a pigeon.

Janet Waking

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 purply 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.

The Equilibrists

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.
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.

Lady Lost

This morning, flew up the lane
A timid lady bird to our birdbath
And eyed her image dolefully as death;
This afternoon, knocked on our windowpane
To be let in from the rain.

And when I caught her eye
She looked aside, but at the clapping thunder

And sight of the whole world blazing up like tinder
Looked in on us again so miserably
It was as if she would cry.

So I will go out into the park and say,
"Who has lost a delicate brown-eyed lady
In the West End section? Or has anybody
Injured some fine woman in some dark way
Last night, or yesterday?

"Let the owner come and claim possession,
No questions will be asked. But stroke her gently
With loving words, and she will evidently
Return to her full soft-haired white-breasted fashion
And her right home and her right passion".

Moments of Minnie

We must not honor a girl of Minnie's kind
Whose charms are more endearing than her mind,
If we are the casuists we think we are,
Yet it oppressed me when an evil star
Had thralled so lazy and beautiful a creature
And scarred and misshapen her most tender feature.

Mouth-corners were pulled down, and the outleaning
Of her soft lips drew back their gallant meaning.
Pain is hideous; it pinched the vaulted line
To a flatness terrible, yet no doing of mine.
And pain is primitive; it undid words
And left her no more speech than tuneless birds.
She uttered and I heard that which could not
Be foreseen, nor yet afterwards forgot:
Oh, Oh, Oh! not a word, and not a name,
And no tears flowed, yet wry and dry it came
Till I trembled, and I fled, I had to find
Distance for a contagion-catching mind.

I wash my mind of those old memories.
Better now to reconstitute the trees
And the bridegroom scarlet bird of April crying
To his brown one embowered; then the flying
Mirth that bubbled off this woman's mouth
From secret wells abundant as the South
Which spilled their joy too thickly to be speech.
Ah, Ah, Ah! she sighed deeply, and each
Breathing was a new Ah! until I heard
What never issues on a lettered word.

Amphibious Crocodile

In due season the amphibious crocodile
Rose from the waves and clambered on the bank
And clothed himself, having cleansed his toes which stank
Of bayous of Florida and estuaries of Nile.

And if he had had not water on his brain,
Remember what joys were his. The complete landlubber
In a green mackintosh and overshoes of rubber –
Putting his umbrella up against the rain

For fear of the influenza – sleeking his curls–
Prowling among the petticoats and the teacups –
Visiting the punchbowl to the verge of hiccups–
Breaching his promises and playing with the girls.

At length in grey spats he must cross the ocean
So this is Paris? Lafayette, we are here.
Bring us sweet wines but none of your French beer!
And he weeps on Notre Dame with proper emotion.

This is Rive Gauche, here's the Hotel Crillon.
Where are the brave poilus? They are slain by his French.
And suddenly he cries, I want to see a trench!
Up in the North eventually he sees one

Which is all green slime and water; whereupon lewd
Nostalgic tremors assail him; with strangled oaths
He flees; he would be kicking off his clothes
And reverting to his pre-Christian mother's nude.

Next on the Grand Tour is Westminster, and Fleet Street.
His Embassy must present him to King George.
Who is the gentleman having teeth so large?
That is Mr. Crocodile, our renowned æsthete.

To know England really one must try the country
And the week-end parties; he is persuaded to straddle
A yellow beast in a red coat on a flat saddle.
Much too gymnastical are the English gentry.

Surely a Scotch and soda with the Balliol men.
But when old Crocodile rises to speak at the Union
He is too miserably conscious of his bunion
And toes too large for the aesthetic— regimen.

It is too too possible he has wandered far
From the simple center of his rugged nature.

I wonder, says he, if I am the sort of creature
To live by projects, travel, affaires du coeur?

Crocodile ponders the marrying of a wife
With a ready-made fortune and ready-made family;
The lady is not a poem; she is a homily,
And he hates the rectangular charms of the virtuous life.

Soberly Crocodile sips of the Eucharist
But as he meditates the obscene complexes
And infinite involutions of sexes
Crocodile could be a psychoanalyst.

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

Of all the elements mixed in Crocodile
Water is principal; but water flows
By path of least resistance and water goes
Down, down, down; which is proper and infantile.

The earth spins from its poles, and is glared on
By the fierce incessant suns, but here is news
For a note in the fine-print column of Thursday Reviews:
Old Robert Crocodile has packed and gone.

His dear friends cannot find him. The ladies write
As usual but their lavander notes are returned
By the U.S. Postmaster and secretively burned
He has mysteriously got out of sight.

Crocodile hangs his pretty clothes on a limb
And lies with his fathers, and with his mothers too,
And his brothers and sisters as it seems right to do;
The family religion is good enough for him.

Full length he lies and goes as water goes,
He weeps for joy and welters in the flood,
Floating he lies extended nearly a rood,
And quite invisible but for the end of his nose.

Dog

Cock-a-doodle-doo the brass-lined rooster goes,
Brekekekex intones the fat Greek frog,
These fantasies do not worry me as does
The bow-wow-wow of dog.

I had a doggie who used to sit and beg,
A pretty little creature with tears in his eyes
And anomalous hand extended on a leg.
Housebroken was my Huendchen, and so wise.

Booms a big dog's voice like a fireman's bell.
But Fido sits at dusk on Madame's lap
And bored beyond his tongue's poor skill to tell,
Rehearses his pink paradigm, To yap.

However. Up the lane the tender bull
Proceeds unto his kine; he yearns for them,
Whose eyes adore him and are beautiful;
Love speeds him, and no treason or mayhem.

But having come to the gateway in the fence,
Listen! again the hateful barking dog,
Like a numerous army rattling the battlements
With shout, though it is but his monologue,
With a lion's courage and sting-bee's virulence
Though he is but one dog.

Shrill is the fury of the royal bull,
His knees quiver, and the honeysuckle vine
Expires with anguish as his voice, dreadful,
Cries, "What do you want of my bonded lady kine?"

Now the air trembles to the sorrowing Moo
Of twenty blameless ladies of the mead
Who fear their lord's precarious set-to.
It is the sunset and the heavens bleed.

The hooves of the brave bull slither the claybank
And cut the green tendrils of the vine; the horn
Slices the young birch into splinter and shank
But lunging leaves the bitch's boy untorn.

Across the late sky comes master, Hodge by name,
Upright, two-legged, tall-browed, and self-assured,
In his hand and cudgel, in his blue eye a flame:
"Have I beat my dog so sore and he is not cured?"

Old Hodge stays not his hand, but whips to kennel
The renegade. God's peace betide the souls
Of the pure in heart! But in the box in the fennel
Blaze two red eyes as hot as cooking-coals.

Little Boy Blue

He rubbed his eyes and wound the silver horn.
Then the continuum was cracked and torn
With tumbling imps of music being born.

The blowzy sheep lethargic on the ground
Suddenly burned where no fire could be found
And straight up stood their fleeces every pound.

The old bellwether rose and rang his bell,
The seven-days' lambs went skipping and skipped well,
And Baa Baa Baa, the flock careered pellmell.

The yellow cows that milked the savoury cud
Propped on the green grass or the yellow mud
Felt such a tingle in their lady blood,

They ran and tossed their hooves and horns of blue
And jumped the fence and gambolled kangaroo,
Divinely singing as they wandered Moo.

A plague on such a shepherd of the sheep
That careless boy with pretty cows to keep!
With such a burden I should never sleep.

But when his notes had run around the sky,
When they proceeded to grow faint and die,
He stuffed his horn with straw and put it by.

And when the legs were tired beneath the sheep
And there were spent and sleepy cows to keep,
He rubbed his eyes again and went to sleep.

Parting, Without a Sequel

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.

Morning

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 whir 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.

What Ducks Require

Ducks require no ship and sail
Bellied on the foamy skies,
Who scud north. Male and female
Make a slight nest to arise

Where they overtake the spring,
Which clogs with muddy going.

The zone is unready. But the pond,
Eye of a bleak Cyclops visage, catches
Such glints of hyacinth and bland
As bloom in aquarelles of ditches
On a cold spring ground, a freak,
A weathering chance even in the wrack.

The half-householders for estate
Beam their floor with ribs of grass,
Disdain your mortises and slate
And Lar who invalided lies,
The marsh quakes dangerous, the port
Where wet and dry precisely start.

Furled, then, the quadrate wing
From the lewd eye and fowler's gun
Till in that wet sequestering,
Webtoed, the progeny is done,
Cold-hatched the infant prodigy tries
To preen his feathers for the skies.

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

Vision by Sweetwater

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?

Her Eyes

To a woman that I knew
Were eyes of an extravagant hue,
They were china blue.

Those I wear upon my head
Are sometimes green and sometimes red,
I said.

My mother's eyes are wet and blear,
My little sister's are not clear,
Poor silly dear.

It must be given to but few,
A pair of eyes so utter blue
And new;

Where does she keep them from this glare
Of the monstrous sun and the wind's flare
Without any wear,

And were they never in the night
Stricken by artificial light
Much too bright,

And had this splendid beast no heart
That boiled with tears and baked with smart
The ocular part?

I'll have no business with those eyes,
They are not kind, they are not wise,
They are two great lies.

A woman shooting such blue flame
I apprehend will get some blame
On her good name.

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At last, which he so richly has deserved,
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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.

In Mr. Minnit's House

Mr. Mortimer Minnit
Owned the house and all in it,
Among whose far-famed treasures
Be these our present pleasures:

A poor lady daughter
Who was weak as water,
A granddaughter and grandson
And whatever description of fun
They might manage to find
With either matter or mind;
Anne with her bird,
Her bright yellow bird,
And Mortimer III
With a cat that purred.

These children played all mornings; played
But remembered to be afraid
That if their grandfather heard
He might say the sharp word,
To stop their running and yelling
And their hurting and telling

And put them to their spelling.

O but he was fierce,
His eyes could pierce.

Whereupon,
In the course of their fun,
They played always very gently
Till one morning - evidently
When the snow came down too whitely
And too thoroughly if politely
Covered the earth and drove them in
And predisposed them unto sin -
They became too rude and naughty,
Not quiet as grown-up folk and haughty,
They made faces, pinched, and balked,
When they might have sat and talked,
And they quarreled,
Not carolled.

Quit touching my bird,
That's my yellow bird,
Quit stroking my cat,
Can't you hear that,
I don't care, I don't care,
Don't you dare, don't you dare.

All that they said we don't repeat
While Anne was stamping on both feet,
Till crimes involved, one after the other,
Bird and Tomcat, sister and brother,
And vile tragedy unrolled
In a progress threefold.

First. Mortimer took his sister's hair,
Which was most beautiful yellow hair,
Grabbed it in both his fists
And turned it with horrible twists,
He pulled it very hard,
The cruel young blackguard,
He gave it such a raking
And he gave her such a shaking
She was aching and aching;
And his little sister Anne
Was still screaming as she ran
For comfort of the pale and sickly
Lady: O Mother, come quickly.

Second. Old Tom was too loyal,

With white whiskers and blood royal,
Eying the yellow bird
That twittered and stirred,
And his master with his hands
In his sister's yellow strands;
He leaped up on the table
As only a cat is able
And swung from the cage
To accomplish an outrage;
Seized that bird in his paws
And with teeth and sharp claws
Made her to sing no more
But to lie upon the floor
With her yellow feathers spattered
And her little pieces scattered.

Third. Mortimer was a proper villain
But young and not completely fallen.
When he saw the bird in slaughter
His eyes oozed with righteous water,
He caught up the hearthbroom
And chased the cat around the room
And through the hall and through the house
Exactly as Tom would chase a mouse,
Running harder and harder
To do a bloody murder
On an unspeakable wretch
Whom he could not catch.

But every quarrel
Must publish its own moral.
Mr. Minnit had an ear,
It could not help itself but hear
So great a noise; and now his roar
Contributed to make it more
Until it made it nothing; all
Must cease from theirs to hear his bawl.
They came listening in the hall,
The boy with broomstick, and his sister,
And his mother with none to assist her,
And climbed dutiful up the stair
To assemble at Mr. Minnit's chair;
Whose face was stern and pale
For all the world to quail.

Mr. Minnit was amazing
With his eyes blazing.

So tightdrawn was his cheek,

His jaws could hardly open and speak
As he heavily and slowly
And with rage and melancholy
Addressed Mortimer III:

What was a cat? what was a bird?
It mattered little as to these,
Their lives and deaths and destinies,
But hang a man as high as Haman
If be abused the smallest woman.
And be bad infinitely rather
That both Mortimer and his father
Had not been born, than live till they
Should practise their unchivalry
Upon the slightest yellow hair
Of Anne, or Anne's mother there -
The trembling lady - and must Anne
By the harsh hand of any man
Come to be such another broken
Mouse of a woman, timid-spoken,
And never lift up her poor head
Between the rocking-chair and the bed?
O hideous if the tainted blood
Infect young Mortimer's manhood –
As for his father –
He stopped there
At Mortimer's most wondering stare;
Mortimer twitched and fumed;
Then the old man resumed:

As Mortimer III grew older
He would be both slier and bolder,
He would discover a number of ways
To torment some poor lady's days,
To taunt her with her pain,
To make her salt tears rain
Till the fountain drained itself dry
And scarce amounted to an eye,
And her hands eternally shook
Under the needle or the book,
And she turned color and fled
If a loud word was said,
Hiding herself in the closet
If she should even suppose it;
God help them, there would come no joy
Ever on earth from such a boy!

They expected Mr. Minnit
Would have resources infinite

To use this subject now he was in it.
But the tyrant of the town
Had weakened, and now he broke down;
He was too old to take any courage,
Would they go down and send up his porridge?
His age was on him, his voice not stout,
Would they please just get out?
And it was the first time Mortimer had
Seen the old eyes crying and sad.

Puncture

Darkness was bad as weariness, till Grimes said,
"We've got to have a fire." But in that case
The match must sputter and the flame glare red
On nothing beautiful, and set no seal of grace
On any dead man's face.

And when the flames roared, when the sparks dartled
And quenched in the black sea that closed us round,
I looked at Grimes my dear comrade and startled
His look, blue-bright - and under it a wound
Which bled upon the ground.

"They got you? I have only lost a hat,
I would have sold the affair for three thin dimes,
But they have stuck your side. It must be looked at
And mended." "No, it's an old puncture," says Grimes,
"Which takes to bleeding sometimes."

"Why, Grimes, I never knew your mortal blood
Had wasted for my sake in scarlet streams,
And no word said. A curse on my manhood
If I knew anything! This is my luck which seems
Worse than my evillest dreams."

But when I would have comforted his white flesh
With ointment and flowing water, he said then,
"Get away. Go work on the corpses, if you wish,
Prop their heads up again, wrap their bones in,
For they were good pious men."

I, not to weep then, like a desperado
Kicked on the carcasses of our enemies
To heave them into the darkness; but my bravado
Quailed in the scorn of Grimes; for even these
Were fit for better courtesies.

Blue blazed the eyes of Grimes in the old manner -

The flames of eyes which jewel the head of youth
Were strange in the leathery phiz of the old campaigner -
Smoke and a dry word crackled from his mouth
Which a cold wind ferried south.

Two in August

Two that could not have lived their single lives
As can some husbands and wives
Did something strange: they tensed their vocal chords
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.

Somewhere Is Such a 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.

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.

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?

But when they croak and fleer 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?

Persistent Explorer

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

He strode much faster, till on the dizzy brink
His eye confirmed with vision what he'd heard:
"A simple physical water." Again he demurred:
"More than a roaring flashing water, I think."

But listen as he might, look fast or slow,
It was common water, millions of tons of it
Gouging its gorge deeper and every bit
Was water, the insipid chemical H_2O

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

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

Deafening was the sound, but never a voice
That talked with him; spacious the spectacle
But it spelled nothing; there was not any spell
Whether to bid him cower or rejoice.

What would he have it spell? He scarcely knew;
Only that water and nothing but water filled
His eyes and ears, nothing but water that spilled;
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 be would throw this continent away
And seek another country - as he would do.

Man without Sense of Direction

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
That cannot fathom nor perform his nature.

The larks' tongues are never stilled
Where the pale spread straw of sunlight lies;
Then what invidious gods have willed
Him to be seized so otherwise?

Birds of the field and beasts of the stable
Are swollen with rapture and make uncouth
Demonstration of joy, which is a babble
Offending the ear of the fervorless youth.

Love - is it the cause? the proud shamed spirit?
Love has slain some whom it possessed,
But his was requited beyond his merit
And won him in bridal the loveliest.

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

Whether by street, or in field full of honey,
Attended by clouds of the creatures of air
Or shouldering the city's companioning many
His doom is on him; and how can he care

For the shapes that would fiddle upon his senses,
Wings and faces and mists that move,

Words, sunlight, the blue air which rinses
The pure pale head which he must love?

And he writhes like an antique man of bronze
That is beaten by furies visible,
Yet he is punished not knowing his sins
And for his innocence walks in hell.

He flails his arms, he moves his lips:
"Rage have I none, cause, time, nor country -
Yet I have traveled land and ships
And knelt my seasons in the chantry."

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

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

Survey of literature

In all the good Greek of Plato
I lack my roastbeef and potato.

A better man was Aristotle,
Pulling steady on the bottle.

I dip my hat to Chaucer
Swilling soup from his saucer,

And to Master Shakespeare
Who wrote big on small beer.

The abstemious Wordsworth
Subsisted on a curd's-worth,

But a slick one was Tennyson,
Putting gravy on his venison.

What these men had to eat and drink
Is what we say and what we think.

The influence of Milton
Came wry out of Stilton.

Sing a song for Percy Shelley,
Drowned in pale lemon jelly,

And for precious John Keats,
Dripping blood of pickled beets.

Then there was poor Willie Blake,
He foundered on too sweet cake.

God have mercy on the sinner
Who must write with no dinner,

No gravy and no grub,
No pewter and no pub,

No belly and no bowels,
Only consonants and vowels.

Pink and Pale

Paul, pinked with dozing, stood from the couch wherein
Digestion was assisted after lunch -
Roast chines and gravies, pudding, swigs of punch,
His manhood being strong and it no sin
To feed - then stretched and tucked his loose ends in
And singing till he had sung himself outside
He went to banter Abbott, or to ride.
Poor company Abbott kept his next of kin.

For everything that Paul was, Abbott was not;
His legs were two long straws, his face was chalk,
He would not ride nor run nor drowse, but walk
The wood in thought more passionate than another's;
You wouldn't believe that two such men were brothers;
Yet it was credited, the same sire begot.

Thinking, Drinking

A young girl cousined them, whose character was
A wise bright head, and grey eyes beautifuller
To Paul than his brave manhood seemed to her,
Though he was Greek enough for Phidias,
And she could ride. But about this Michaelmas
She wouldn't go in her green riding habit
To canter with him and hollo to every rabbit
That bounced across to thicket or to grass.

Too much she listened to Abbott's music of words:
"O the wild flood! How noble is man thinking!

But we, my cousin, are filled with eating and drinking.
Should we not read philosophy?" But Paul said,
"Edith, my brother's a fool and out of his head,"
And saw her thoughts fly over him like birds.

In Air

But Abbott when he sought him was nowhere.
Paul said not all his eggs therefore were addled,
Not much: "For let my gelding Trey be saddled."
And he flies like a young rich landlord god on air,
The earth his wealth, ethereal, yet aware
Of the tread of the dark wood mold and turfy rye,
Rich smell of horse in his nostril, wind in his eye,
And galloping through the autumn all his care.

The country beauty flushed him up to the ears.
He put the gelding to the hurdles, and Trey
Must take them every one in Paul's own way,
For if his spirit failed him and he shrank,
Right back Paul drove him rowelling his flank,
But clicking the boards he gave his master fears.

Thought, Distraught

Abbott proceeded soberly, with rhyme.
He heard the lone birds' cries, and his own tongue
Made melancholy more than the birds had sung.
The man could talk in Latin, music, mime,
Or sonneteer with Petrarch in his prime,
He had a prince's powers, but what he willed
Was to go down to dust with the unfulfilled
Rather than stint himself with space and time.

He was a specter gibbering under trees
Which preened their yellow feathers, while he thought,
"Flutter, then, flutter, for you shall fly distraught!"
He waved his black sleeves like an evil prophet,
Death is in every verse or not far off it;
Far down he hung his own head, mortal as these.

Meeting in a Garden

"Garden of no fruit! Lichen on a stone!
And what is life but a barren laborious tree
Too streaked and scored with black mortality?"
Abbott said several dooms with firm intone,
And had more worlds to sentence, he had not done,
When trot, trot, trot, and squeezing under the wicket

Where one peach hung there came a fellow to pick it;
It was his heathen brother, famished and blown.

Paul had a smile always in waiting. "Brother,
Can you have kept this only peach for me?
If you want half of it though, I will agree."
But Abbott wanted nothing, he never took pleasure,
And now he glared on Paul and took his measure.
There was a fool in the family, one or the other.

Epithalamion of a Peach

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

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

Swine, Wine

It happening in that country that the King
Came now that way victorious in battle
Where he had slain some folk and taken their cattle,
His Chamberlain told Sir Paul a proper thing
For doing: Make ready with feast and furnishing
To lodge the King three days; it would be good
If the King favored his bed and savored his food,
For service improved a man in the sight of his King.

Now purple and linen, or poultry and beef and swine,
He loved not for themselves, but must accept
For his belly's sake, for his body and bed well-kept;
It would impoverish his country house
If the Court descended for a week's carouse.
No more he napped in innocence after wine.

L'etat C'est Moi

Abbott previsioning the pestilent swarm

Of royal locusts: "Expect now, Brother Paul,
A trifling inconvenience; that will be all.
These levies and tributes keep you out of harm,
The thieves the King has slain cause no alarm,
But you have to pay a price for this relief:
Strong Kingdoms always manage to get their beef,
Le roi lui-meme, by grace of ces gendarmes.

"It doesn't matter if your King's a fraud,
A gross pig's-bladder prickable as any,
A man whose nose runs probably more than many,
Whose beard shines with its gravy; he is the King,
The State; you are his man, his littlest thing -
Or would you go in hiding and be outlawed?"

Misanthropy

"But I am not of the King's table; nor his stable.
Once we were sovereigns, but there's been interchange.
In the mother-house I dwelt severe and strange
Till they ripped me out by the heels and cut the cable,
A Form whose fixity always turns to fable
By the force of things; am enamoréd yet of that womb
Which yields no analogue but one, the tomb,
Where Kings may lie and hear their Kingdoms babble.

"My compliments to your King. Say I'm not in.
I'll move to the Northern tower; your misanthrope,
Too firm to be wheedled by fat King or lean Pope,
And all the papal prayers and all King's power
Shall not convey me from my absolute tower.
But you have sensitive skin, so save your skin."

Vain Protestations

"What sort of notion is this, Abbott, dear man?
It isn't as if one had to bring oneself
To kiss the royal bottom of the Guelph,
Can't you control your devils any better than
To sputter this obscene blab, you Caliban
And hadn't you rather acknowledge a higher power
By simple gesture than mould in your ratty tower
In cold and loneliness and hate unchristian?"
"But no, Cousin Paul! You can't scare a man like him,
That isn't the way! Abbott, for your brother's sake,
For the tenants, the land, a father's good name, don't make
A breach in the etiquette of the royal visit -
But Paul! there's something splendid about this - or is it
Terrible, rather - or eerie - or what synonym?"

Tones and Caparisons

Well, the fool wilfully had chosen his spare
Entertainment - and rooks flapping in his face–
And rats whiskering at his toes and every place–
And a crust and a cold house are philosopher's fare–
So his patriot brother hastened to prepare
The King his welcome. Edith with little heart
Helped him, and thought on Abbott's nobler part,
Till listen! a silver music of fanfare.

Strange how she managed more color then, and less cold.
Kings are divine - it is declared by tones
The horn-blowers send through the skies - caparisons
Heaven-golden on the horses - plume and lance
Their blue-eyed angels at the morning dance;
For their divinity is manifold.

Disappointment of a Thrall

To an honest knight if the lucky break befall
That his King visit him, lord of his life and breath
Whose ministers post and cry, "Thus saith, Thus saith,"
His paths prepared by a Chamberlain master of all
Husbandry whispering, "Spare no expense, Sir Paul",
Noised in the East with horn and hoof and drum,
But weathering West till his plumy host are come
And stand in the gate to hail the loving thrall:

Why, the young heart bursts for shame if such a King,
Helped from his horse, his foxface peaked with travel,
His bowels infirm, his water stopped with gravel,
Must to bed, with a pair of leeches by bedside
And Bishop saying prayers against his pride.
He'll have no stomach for speech of welcoming.

In Bed, Not Dead

"We never dreamed he'd be so bad" said thrall,
And Edith tossed her bright cloud, "Abbott was right,
I cannot endure this creature in my sight."
But they got him in bed and he made no fuss at all,
One day they nursed him, then he put on his shawl
And made them fashion a throne of cushions and things
Where he held court in the old manner of Kings,
Whose minions bowed till they almost got their fall.

The fishy hue of the King's eye was not fast,

It veered to a negative green or a yellow smile,
But brain behind was busy in whichever style;
Now this inconstant orb perused Sir Paul
And his pretty calves, which would do for a Seneschal
If aught was above the shoulders; those were vast.

Primer of Science

The King, to a backward scholar of common laws
Politico-biological: "Little brown birds
Seem bent on pleasing us with songs without words
But actually dwell forever upon their craws
The fiercer beasts work ravin to glut their maws;
The serpent travels in fact upon his belly,
A hardy soul, but according to Machiavelli
This creature has no ear for public applause

"He never could found a State. But a King can,
By policies wholly according with appetite,
Teaching his subjects the law of Divine Right,
Then with a show of honor despoiling them.
He must tickle with love, and rule by stratagem.
Now give me heed, Sir Paul, and play the man."

Fait Accompli

He summons Edith, which is Paul's own desire.
He finds her very fair, but the face is flushed
And the grey films averted. That storm is hushed
In which she had cried like prophetess on fire
(While the maid smoothed her tangles and attire)
Upon the impossible Kings who broke your peace
And ruled you body and soul beyond release.
He smiles on the timid doe now come to his lair.

He's taken Edith's little left hand, to lay
On Paul's overpowering right. There's no recourse
Except in Paul's recital: "For better, for worse".
On whom is she smiling? "I wish you many joys,
My Kingdom will be better by many boys
If Heaven reward your union, which I pray".

Implacable Tower

But what from the tower? There was a man shut there,
Vainglorious he may have been, stiff-necked;
His stars conspired together to deject
Him from conspicuous glories; he lived on air
And would not taste earth's sweetness; great and spare

And pale, his ghost still haunted the slight girl
Who, husbanded now with her fair lord the churl,
Must run away to the gloom of the tower stair.

Paul took his wine and slept, and his thought swirled
From dream to dream through Christendom. But Paul's bride
Climbed up, with a great rat scampering at her side,
Reached the top step of Abbott's Northern tower
And listening at his door, at the very hour
Heard bitter doctrine descending on the world.

Features of Creatures

"Fool, Fool", was Abbott's word; he turned that name
Outward upon a world of pretty creatures
With rooks' pleasant voices and rats' sweet features,
Born of their mothers noble yet sunk in shame,
Mouthing and nosing, flapping and creeping to fame, -
Inward upon himself if in their faithless ways
He'd sniffed at gold, love, glory in other days
Or anywise had forgot to honor his Dame.

But Fool had the world said too, because he dwelt
Lone in his tower, long after the occasion
Of minatory Authority's invasion;
The King had gone and Paul restored his right
Yet he clung to his cold and poverty and night
And leaned in the rain; the rain came down unfelt.

Wrong

The sire of Paul and Abbott had lain long
In his clammy lodgment of no sunlight nor noise,
With handsome revenues left upon his boys,
And over him having been said much sermon and song
And from sweet Christian chimes much Ding, Dee, Dong,
And having earned his decease he intended now
To keep it. So the insufferable pow-wow
In his sons' house did him most unfilial wrong.
It pricked him wide awake. He was aware
That his two sons, his own hope and the mother's,
Damaged his name and were notorious brothers,
Paul waxing great and thirsting for the power,
Abbott a death's-head gibing from a tower;
His spectral image writhed as in nightmare.

Weep or Sleep

"Now I remember life; and out of me

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

"Yet would it be precarious, wanting to weep
From eyes unfastened, or to shudder with brittle joints.
I am a spectre, even if at some sore points
A father in ill repute with his own issue.
O Lord defend my poor old fragile tissue!
But I'll not risk it. I will turn and sleep."

Of Margaret

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

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

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

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

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

Prelude to an 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.

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

Painted Head

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.

To the Scholars of Harvard

When Sarah Pierrepont let her spirit rage
Her love and scorn refused the bauble earth
(Which took bloom even here, under the Bear)
And groped for the Essence, sitting in himself,
Subtle, I think, for a girl's unseasoned rage.

The late and sudden extravagance of soul
By which they all were swollen exalted her
At seventeen years to Edwards' canopy,
A match pleasing to any Heaven, had not
Her twelve mortal labors harassed her soul.

Thrifty and too proud were the sea-borne fathers
Who fetched the Pure Idea in a bound box

And put him into a steeple, to have his court
Shabby with an unkingly establishment
And Sabbath levees for the minion fathers.

The majesty of Heaven has a great house,
And even if the Indian kingdom or the fox
Ran barking mad in a wide forest place,
They had his threshold, and you had the dream
Of preference in him by a steepled house.

If once the entail should fall on raffish sons,
Knife-wit scholar and merchant sharp of thumb,
With positive steel they'd pry into the steeple,
And blinking through the cracked ribs at the void
A judgment laughter would rake the cynic sons.

Yet like prevailing wind New England's honor
Carried, and teased small Southern boys at school
Whose heads the temperate birds fleeing your winter
Construed for, but the stiff heroes abashed
With their frozen fingers and unearthly honor.

Scared by the holy megrims of those Pilgrims,
We thought the unhumbled and outcast and cold
Were the rich Heirs traveling incognito,
Bred too fine for the country's sweet produce
And but affecting that dog's life of pilgrims.

There must have been debate of soul and body,
The soul storming incontinent with shrew's tongue
Against what natural brilliance body had loved,
Even the green phases though deciduous
Of Earth's zodiac homage to the body.

Perfect the witch was, foundering in water,
The blasphemer that spraddled in the stocks,
The woman branded with her sin, the whales
Of ocean taken, with a psalmer's sword,
The British tea infusing the Bay's water.

But they reared heads into the always clouds
And stooped to the event of war or bread,
The secular perforces and short speech
Being surly labors done with the left hand,
The main strength giddying with transcendent clouds.

The tangent Heavens teased the fathers' strength,
And how the young sons know it, and study now
To make fresh conquest of the conquered earth,

But they're too strong for that, you've seen them whip
The laggard will to deeds of lunatic strength.

To incline the powerful living unto peace
With Heaven is easier now, with earth is hard,
Yet a rare metaphysic makes them one,
A gentle Majesty, whose myrtle and rain
Enforce the fathers' gravestones unto peace.

I saw the youngling bachelors of Harvard
Lit like torches, and scrambling to disperse
Like aimless firebrands pitiful to slake,
And if there's passion enough for half their flame,
Your wisdom has been valiant, sages of Harvard.

Four Threesomes; Or Three Foursomes?

Three times he passed our park where with me went
Sweet Hope, the fair and gentle, and it was strange
That not once glancing did his vision range
Wayward on me and my dear innocent,
But strictly nursed his own predicament.
Dying before his death? His eyes seemed true
As ours, he walked with it, it was as blue,
Yet could be monstrous in its fixed intent.

And I'm for telling how. In his long years
Close watched and dangerous, many a bright-barbed hate
Burning had smote upon the optic gate
To enter and destroy; but his quick gears
Blinked shut the apertures. Else those grim leers
Had won to the inner house, where sat my Hope
Who fancied him. He made her misanthrope
But bled her carriage with his softer spears.

He's given to scorn. For he must guard as well
Against alluring love, whose brave engine
Was perilous too for lone sitter-in,
So hard consented with her little cell;
Her tender looks vainly upon him fell,
He would not answer them, lest one light arrow
Be sharpened with a most immortal sorrow;
So had he kept his ticket shut of Hell.

Nearly upright he walks for one so old,
Thrice-pondered; and I dare not prophesy
What age must bring me. But I look round bold
To seek my enemies out, and leave untold

The side-ways watery dog's glances I
Keep fawning on her; Hope will never scold.

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