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*Grace After Battle:  
World War One and the Poetry of John Crowe Ransom*

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David A. Davis

"Personally, I had no such experience as you did in the war," John Crowe Ransom wrote to Robert Graves in 1924, "but other experience and perhaps sympathy and imagination help to supply me with the background to understand and to want to commit myself" (*Selected Letters*, 138). While Graves, like many writers who experienced trench combat, found the brutality of the First World War profoundly affecting, Ransom, who served in the American Expeditionary Force as a First Lieutenant of Artillery, experienced the war from a different perspective.<sup>1</sup> For Ransom, who saw little combat duty, World War One was chiefly an intellectual engagement, yet it had a profound, and surprising, impact on his poetic development. Before the war, Ransom had begun to experiment with poetry, and he published his first collection of poems, *Poems About God*, while in the army, but at the end of his service in France he discovered the poetry of the French Symbolists, whose poetics had a significant impact on his mature style. After the war, he abjured his early sentimental poetry and began to write in the spare, sinister style that would be his trademark and that would influence his poetic circle, the Nashville Fugitives.

After graduating from Vanderbilt University in 1910, Ransom studied at Christ Church, Oxford University, on a Rhodes scholarship, reading the "Greats," and philosophy in the original language, including the work that would most affect his literary theory, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (Young, 51). When Ransom first arrived at Oxford, he felt a sense of provincialism because his background in philosophy and psychology extended little further than the textbooks of Noah K. Davis, but, always a precocious student, he soon gained a reputation for insightful and rational thought. The son of a Methodist minister, Ransom came to Oxford with a fundamental southern evangelical background, but exposure to the theologically critical atmosphere of Oxford forced Ransom into a cultural and religious crisis, leading him to examine his faith in the Church of his father and the land of his youth (Singal, 203). Also while at Oxford, Ransom developed an understanding of contemporary European politics. He frequently traveled on the Continent, visiting France, Switzerland, and Italy, and, though preoccupied with his studies, he felt an interest in the political tumult of the time. After taking a degree with "the best of the seconds,"

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he left England and returned to America (Young, 67). Ransom taught Latin at the Hotchkiss School in Connecticut for a year and then returned to his alma mater, Vanderbilt, as an Assistant Professor of English in 1914.

As Ransom settled into the routine of teaching composition courses in Nashville, war broke out in Europe. An ocean and half a continent away from the fighting, Ransom regarded the war with his customary philosophical insight, and he wrote an article, "The Question of Justice," about the major combatants in the war that appeared in the *Yale Review* in July 1915. Surprisingly, Ransom, a self-avowed Anglophile, argues on behalf of both England and Germany, and criticizes America's complacent neutrality. He describes the war in Europe as a question of ownership, and his article describes two types of justice. First, he explains static justice, which he attributes to Aristotle, as the status quo's tendency to pass down land and material among members of the same community. On the other hand, he describes creative justice, a Platonic notion, as "that justice which gives to each man in the proportion that his strength and effort merit" ("Question", 685). According to Ransom's argument, the issue of America's neutrality, whether or not to join the war, and on which side, would be resolved when the correct form of justice emerged.

In practical terms, according to Ransom's article, the Germans and the Allies were fighting over territory. Germany, owing to its "genius and enterprise," felt justified, as an example of creative justice in practice, in seizing more land to accommodate and supply its swelling population and productive economy ("Question", 690). Naturally England, in accordance with static justice, sprang to defend herself and the sovereignty of threatened nations from the German threat. Ransom casts no blame on either Germany or England; instead, he shames America. He says, "We have now and have had the natural position of arbiters, and the world has expected something from us by way of a solution of this thing of wars and armaments. But we have not the temper of arbiters" ("Question", 697). Unfortunately, Ransom, like the ambivalent United States, could not commit to either position. His final conclusion reads, "England carries one flag, and Germany the other. Either standard is a worthy; and when the two advance against each other, we but witness another act in the perennial human tragedy" ("Question", 698). At the time Ransom wrote the article, anti-German tension ran high in America, so publishing it did require a strong measure of intellectual courage on Ransom's part. Fortunately for Ransom's imminent military career, his pro-German statements never came to haunt him.

A year after "The Question of Justice" appeared, a German U-boat sunk the *Lusitania*, and the United States, prodded to defend static

justice, joined the war on the side of the Allies. Ransom enlisted in the army almost immediately, and, on May 12, 1917, he received his orders to report to Officers' Training Camp at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia. Ransom, with his usual studious zeal, excelled as an officer cadet, and he found the military instruction interesting, especially the mathematical principles of artillery. Eventually, he found time in the training regimen to work on some poems that he had begun writing the previous year, yet he evidently focused his attention on his training. He wrote home on several occasions to report that he was "the only member of [his] unit who made a perfect score" on periodic quizzes (Young, 98). Ransom impressed his superior officers, who recommended him for commission as a Captain, but a moratorium on training promotions prevented him from leaving OTC higher than a First Lieutenant. In August, Ransom received his commission, reported to the port of embarkation at New York, boarded a troop ship, and, after a relatively pleasant voyage, arrived at Field Artillery School in Samur, France for advanced training. Ransom continued to excel at training in the artillery, and, in January of 1918, Ransom joined the Fifth Field Artillery in action at the front near the Argonne Forest.

As a soldier, Ransom served conscientiously but without glory. His artillery unit fired horse-drawn heavy guns, and his assignment required that he scour the French countryside finding food and shelter for his unit's horses. Ransom grasped the obvious irony that the army assigned the top man in his class, the one best prepared to operate the unit's guns, to a fairly menial task. In April, however, after about four months at the front, Ransom's career as a combat soldier came to an end. The commandant of the Field Artillery School in Samur requested that Ransom return as an instructor. Back in Samur, he wrote to his mother that he was "positively ashamed to be so well situated and comfortable" (*Selected Letters*, 99). He found lodging in a comfortable apartment and took his meals in the town's best hotel, and he wrote to his mother that "while I have to eat black bread and there are no signs of hotel service nowadays, I am faring a little better than I ever did in my life except at home itself" (*Selected Letters*, 99). During this time, Ransom wrote an essay about the war for the *Vanderbilt Alumnus* that describes his attitude toward the conflict:

War would not be tolerable under any circumstances by finely organized creatures, I suppose, if it were not regarded as the one means and hope of a return to reason and peace. The strange thing about war, however, as I see it, is that it does not grow more tolerable to its victims, like other calamities, as it drags on and on. When the first ardor of war has burnt out, there is only a cold fortitude which keeps it going;

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and it operates against an ever-mounting war-weariness. It is horrible to see how war, as a regimen, a regularity of life, can fasten itself upon a people like a disease which it does not seem possible to cure. (Young, 101)

Although Ransom had limited experience of combat at its most grotesque, his imagination and sympathy allowed him to help Americans at home understand the experience of the soldiers in Europe.

Meanwhile, Ransom applied some of his energy to completing, revising, and circulating his first volume of poems, *Poems About God*. He began writing the poems before enlisting in the army, and, by Christmas of 1917, he felt that the poems constituted a publishable manuscript. Christopher Morley, a friend of Ransom's from Oxford, lived in New York and had connections in the publishing industry, and he acted as a literary agent on Ransom's behalf. In a letter to Morley dated December 26, 1917, Ransom explains his concern about circulating the manuscript:

I fear you will take the vicissitudes of P[oems] about G[od] more seriously than I do. Have become distrustful about the merits of them myself, and am not a bit sore at the poor publishers who don't see them.... At present I have no chance at composition--next to none, that is. Can't even consider the matter. I'd really prefer to let the things alone a while; maybe at my new station I can do something. (*Selected Letters*, 96)

While stationed at Samur as an instructor, Ransom did find more time to revise and compose, and he mailed four more poems to Morley in April. Then, in May, he sent Morley a last poem, some revisions, and an introduction for the volume. By this time, Ransom wished to wash his hands of the project. He wrote to Morley, "The old book is clean done, I think now. That is, it's big enough as far as volume goes, and I've outgrown it till it's getting a bit artificial with me. Hence my desire to wind it up if possible" (*Selected Letters*, 100).

Although Ransom seemed dissatisfied with the volume, Morley did eventually find a publisher willing to print the poems. After circulating the manuscript for months and submitting individual poems to several journals, including *Atlantic Monthly*, *Yale Review*, and *The Independent*, Morley sent the manuscript for a second reading to Henry Holt. At that time, Holt had a young poet from New England on a small retainer to review manuscripts, Robert Frost, who convinced Holt to publish the volume, saying that Ransom's verse "had the art and ... the tune" (Young, 103). Ransom, meanwhile, put the poems out of his mind, and he never saw the proof sheets before print. At a reunion of

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the Fugitive poets at Vanderbilt in 1956, Robert Penn Warren told a story about meeting a man Ransom served with in France, who was with Ransom when he received the first copies of *Poems About God* in the mail. Warren recounts that the man, named McClure, said that Ransom opened the package of books, "inspected it with composure, and then turned to [McClure] and said 'I'd like to give you a copy of this'" (Purdy, 102). In America, the volume got little critical attention and most reviews were mixed, generally praising the young poet's spare language and imagery, and criticizing his old-fashioned sentimentalism.

Ransom offers an insightful critique of the poems himself in the introduction to *Poems About God*. He explains that the war in Europe had a tremendous impact on writing the poems:

Most of these poems about God were complete a year ago, that is about the time when the great upheaval going on in God's world engulfed our country too. Since then I have added a little only, and my experience has led me so wide that I can actually look back on those accomplishments with the eye of the impartial spectator, or at most with a fatherly tenderness, no more. (v)

Ransom separates himself from the poet who wrote the poems and describes himself as "[the poet's] apologist," and he goes on to explain how the poems came to be about God:

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. (vi-vii)

Indeed, all of the poems in the volume share a moment when a person might sincerely use God's name, but, while Ransom executes a fascinating motif; the poems reveal his immature poetic sensibility. Critic Louis Rubin describes *Poems About God* as "apprentice work," but he praises Ransom's theological courage:

What is impressive about the poems in this first collection, however, when viewed in the light of

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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 religious attitude. (16-17)

In *Poems About God*, Ransom defines the parameters for a battle he would wage throughout his career, what Thomas Daniel Young calls the "war against abstraction," as he brings his rationalist training to bear on his own religious background in context with the turbulent political landscape (116).

*Poems About God*, however, is not a volume of war poems. In fact, other than the title page attributing the poems to John Crowe Ransom 1<sup>st</sup> Lieut. Field Artillery, A. E. F., one might not recognize these as poems remotely related to the graphic and disturbing poetry of British war poets like Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, or Edward Thomas. In one poem, however, "The School," Ransom does treat a theme common to war poets; youth's longing for glory, but his facile tone weakens the verse. The poem begins with a student listening attentively to the exploits of ancient heroes in Greek and Roman legend, and the student scorns his own mundane life, saying:

Equipped with Grecian thoughts, how could I live  
Among my father's folk? My father's house  
Was narrow and his fields were nauseous.  
I kicked his clods for being common dirt,  
Worthy a world which never could be Greek;  
Curse 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. (72)

Unfortunately, however, the student lives in the wrong time, and must eventually put aside his longing for the past, so he says, "And what were dead Greek empires to me then? / Dishonored, by Apollo, and forgot" (73). Unlike almost all of the other *Poems About God*, "The School" does not make a reference to God, but the speaker does mention Apollo, who, in this poem about glory and fate, plays God manqué.

*Poems About God* opens with "The Swimmer," a conventional pastoral poem about farm boys leaving their fields to bathe and play in a pond. Chiefly an exercise in rhyme and meter, this poem exemplifies Ransom's poetic immaturity. For example, each stanza of four or five lines uses the same end rhyme, as in the case of the sixth stanza about the swimmer's relationship with the buoyant water:

O my forgiving element!

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I gash you to my heart's content  
And never need to be penitent,  
So light you float me when breath is spent  
And close again where my rude way went. (4)

While Ransom's poetics in this case lack merit, the juxtaposition of boys playing in a swimming hole and the baptismal pool does excite the imagination. The imagery of Ransom's poem also shares much with the imagery of "The Swimmers" by Allen Tate. Both poems depict young boys innocently frolicking in the summer, but Tate's poem takes a more interesting, and disturbing, turn, as a sheriff's posse pulls the body of a lynched man from the pond, thus dashing the boys' innocence. Tate's poem appeared in 1936, long after Ransom wrote "The Swimmer," and Tate, a student of Ransom's at Vanderbilt and fellow Fugitive, certainly read Ransom's poem before writing his version.

The best of the *Poems About God*, "Grace," addresses the imminence of death, a frequent theme in Ransom's poetry. In this case, a pious hired man succumbs to sunstroke while plowing. The hired man's arbitrary fate infuriates the speaker who, pushed into a spiritual crisis, raves,

But this was a thing that I had said,  
I was so forward and untamed:  
"I will not worship wickedness  
Though it be God's--I am ashamed!  
For all his mercies God be thanked  
But for all his tyrannies be blamed!  
He shall not have my love alone,  
With loathing too his name is named." (21)

The speaker, enraged, drags the hired man to the barn, and, amid an explosion of vomit from both hired man and speaker, the hired man dies. Thematically, "Grace" shares some characteristics with the poetry of World War One, for example, "Dulce Et Decorum Est" by Wilfred Owen, which describes the convulsive death of a mustard gas victim, but the poem's agricultural imagery drastically separates it from authentic war poetry. Naturally, the poem's subject invites comparisons with Robert Frost's "The Death of the Hired Man," and Ransom may have had Frost's poetry in mind when composing the poem. Yet Frost's secular poem about death, homecoming, and acceptance has little thematically in common with Ransom's severely theological poem.

According to John Bradbury, Ransom "matured poetically only after the war when he returned to his native soil," but one event that contributed significantly to his poetic development occurred just before he left France (25). Soon after *Poems About God* appeared in print, World War One ended, and the U. S. Army, faced with the prospect of keeping several thousand soldiers constructively occupied during demobiliza-

tion, struck an agreement with European universities allowing American servicemen to study in the meantime. Ransom took the opportunity to study at French Universities in Grenoble and, later, Nancy.<sup>2</sup> While at Nancy, Ransom says, "some nice young ladies introduced me to the poetry of the nineteenth century of France, and I came back with a lot of volumes, and I know that the French Symbolists attracted and perplexed me a great deal. I may not have talked about them, but they were in my consciousness after 1919. Very decidedly" (Purdy 100). Reading French Symbolism radically changed Ransom's poetic style, tempering his religious sentimentalism and juvenile poetics with the key characteristics of his mature style: irony, dualism, and juxtaposition of elaborate and simple language. Ransom found the French Symbolists fascinating, particularly their use of vivid imagery. Late in his career, in 1958, he revisited the French Symbolists in an essay titled "New Poets and Old Muses," explaining his attraction to their writing:

Surely the Symbolists were provided with an astonishing proficiency in what we may call the pure poetic sensibility, of the kind which notes in the physical setting of the action, as for example in the landscape of the physical world, and the fauna and the flora, those configurations and motions which are dramatic in the human sense of the drama. For its implement they cultivated probably the most elevated poetic language in Western history; provided we mean by poetic the language which refuses always to lapse into a rhetorical resonance with a vague meaning, but keeps the edge of its detail vary sharp. (314)

Ransom would emulate both the Symbolists' surgically precise language and their pure poetic sensibility in his own mature poetry.

After the war, Ransom reluctantly returned to Vanderbilt and to teaching English. As a veteran and a published poet, he commanded a great deal of respect in Nashville. Edwin Mims, chair of Vanderbilt's English department, insisted that Ransom receive a raise in salary, and undergraduates, like Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren, and later Cleanth Brooks, Randall Jarrell, and Robert Lowell, flocked to his classes. By 1922 he was at the center of a circle of literary friends, the Fugitives, who published a modest journal of verse and who, collectively, would soon revolutionize literary theory, ushering in the era of New Criticism. Meanwhile, *Poems About God* enjoyed a good reputation among literary circles, and a friend of Ransom's, William Yandell Elliott, studying at Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship, lent the book to Robert Graves, who had returned to Oxford after the war to complete his education. Graves found the poems intriguing and began to correspond

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with Ransom, and he even suggested that *Poems About God* be reprinted in England.<sup>3</sup> Ransom, though flattered, preferred to publish his newer, more mature, poems, augmenting them with some of the *Poems About God*.

Graves took charge of selecting and compiling poems and circulating a manuscript. Graves and Ransom disagreed over some selections, particularly the inclusion of "Grace" from *Poems About God*. Ransom wrote to Graves, "Personally, I'd say 'Grace' is an artistic offense, and I'd rather pose for an artist than exhibit my history. But if you'd like to have written it, my judgment is wrong. Besides, it may strike British readers, who are more used to red meat and regular liquor than ours" (*Selected Letters*, 124). Graves, nevertheless, insisted that "Grace" belonged in the volume, and he even addressed the poem in his introduction to the volume, saying, "We have had a slight disagreement about the poem 'Grace' which Ransom has grown out of liking on the grounds of its hastiness and ugliness, but which I find necessary for the appreciation of the poems of calmer skepticism that follow" (8). The volume's title, too, proved to be a point of contention. Ransom wished for the title to reflect one his new poems, which had recently appeared in *The Fugitive*, "Vaunting Oak," and he even mailed a list of prospective titles, including "*Quercus Prisca*," "Throes of Oak," and "Mortal Oak," to Graves (*Selected Letters*, 126). But Graves disregarded Ransom's suggestions and named the volume *Grace After Meat*, alluding to one of Ransom's poems from *Poems About God*, "Noonday Grace." Ransom had written to Graves that he could not "honestly applaud" Graves's title because, as Ransom says, "I don't believe, aside from the poem it refers to, it has too much relevance to the whole" (*Selected Letters*, 126). Much of the dissension between Ransom and Graves stems from their individual attitudes toward the project. Graves found Ransom's poems fascinating because they reflected "post-European war Tennessee looking at pre-Civil War Tennessee," so Graves valued the archaic southern idioms juxtaposed with free verse that exemplified *Poems About God* (Graves, 9). Ransom, on the other hand, valued his artistic reputation and wanted to present the best work possible. Eventually Ransom and Graves reached a compromise, and Ransom surrendered his complaints to Graves's judgment.

Graves went out of his way to circulate the manuscript of *Grace After Meat*. At one point the poems came to the attention of T. S. Eliot, who had just begun his career at Faber and Faber. Eliot declined to print the volume, but he sponsored Ransom's poems for publication at Hogarth Press, Virginia and Leonard Woolf's publishing house. In 1924, *Grace After Meat* appeared in England under the Hogarth Press imprint. A slim volume, it contained only twenty poems, thirteen of which had not appeared in *Poems About God*. Among the new poems was one of

the finest poems Ransom would ever write and the poem that typifies his mature verse, "Necrological." Obviously, after the experience of World War One and after reading the French Symbolists, Ransom's poetry took a more ominous turn, and "Necrological" reflects Ransom's growing preoccupation with death and evil. Typical of Ransom's mature verse style, he blends archaic and modern language and imagery. In this poem, a monk rouses himself from his meditations, wanders away from his monastery, and happens upon a battlefield littered with corpses. The poem graphically describes the bodies strewn about the ground and decomposing, "some gory and fabulous / Whom the sword had pierced and then the gray wolf eaten," which leads the monk to contemplate mortality, "But the brother reasoned that heroes' flesh was thus; / Flesh fails, and the postured bones lie weather-beaten" (*Selected Poems*, 42). Ultimately, the macabre bodies and the artifacts of war overwhelm the monk, and the poem reads, "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" (*Selected Poems*, 43). Here Ransom juxtaposes the grave reality of mortal combat, as in the trenches of World War One, with the monk's intangible, impotent religious faith.

*Grace After Meat* includes another new poem that shares a similar theme: "Armageddon." Also a blend of archaic language with modern ideas like "Necrological," "Armageddon" dramatizes the struggle between Christ and Antichrist prophesied in the book of Revelation. In Ransom's poem, however, an unusual turn of events takes place. Rather than fighting to the death, Christ and Antichrist recognize each other as brothers. As the poem reads, "The lordings measured lances and stood still, / And each was loath to let the other's blood; / Originally they were one brotherhood" (*Selected Poems*, 55). The combatants, Christ and Antichrist, retire to a white pavilion and, exchanging gifts and sharing wine, feast for days. Ransom describes the unholy scene:

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.  
(*Selected Poems*, 56)

Ironically, a man, "a goodly liege of old malignant brood," raises his voice to question Christ's laxness, and Christ, ashamed and enraged, immediately returns to his conquest, catching Antichrist at a weak moment:

Christ and his myrmidons, Christ at the head,  
Chanted of death and glory and no complaisance;  
Antichrist and the armies of malfeasance

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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.

(*Selected Poems*, 57)

Although Ransom's insistence on archaic language encumbers the poem's meaning, this poem reveals his attitude toward the twentieth century's moral relativism and evil's seductive grasp on humanity.

In the same year that *Grace After Meat* appeared in England, Ransom published his finest volume of verse, *Chills and Fever*, in America. For this edition Ransom eschewed the *Poems About God*, writing, instead, in what Robert Buffington calls "his mature style" (39). Written between 1919 and 1924, in Ransom's postwar years among the Fugitives, *Chills and Fever* contains some of the new poems from *Grace After Meat*, including "Necrological" and "Armageddon," and several of Ransom's most famous poems, such as "Bells for John Whitesides' Daughter," "Here Lies a Lady," and "Captain Carpenter." Three years later, in 1927, Ransom would largely conclude his poetic oeuvre with *Two Gentlemen in Bonds*, his last complete volume of poems. Also drawn from Ransom's postwar Fugitive period, these poems reflect the same characteristics of his mature style--dualism, morbidity, and irony--as *Chills and Fever* and include the last of Ransom's great verses, "Janet Waking," "Blue Girls," and "Piazza Piece."

Although Ransom saw little, if any, combat, one can see that his later poetry reflects the morbid and occasionally violent sensibility that emerged from the battlefields of World War One. Many of the writers who served in the First World War wrote about their experiences in the war in poems, prose, or memoirs, but Ransom never broached the subject directly in any of his writing. Possibly he felt his service was undistinguished and, therefore, not worthy of comment. Fortunately, Ransom addressed the issue himself, obliquely, in an essay in the *Kenyon Review*, "Artists, Soldiers, Positivists," written during the Second World War.<sup>4</sup> The essay responds to a letter from a soldier who criticizes the journal for ignoring the poems being written about the war by poets like Karl Shapiro, John Berryman, and Delmore Schwartz. In framing his reply, Ransom takes a page from his article in the *Yale Review* a generation before, staking out a neutral position. He says, "Art is addicted to peace. Its contribution is not very large if measured by its plea for the military or revolutionary cause, or in general the moral and/or scientific causes which are Positives of human life" ("Artists", 205). In Ransom's opinion, a poem, or any work of art, should stand on its own merits, free from the weighty connotations of historical moment, an

opinion one might expect of the father of New Criticism. Ransom does, nonetheless, grant that a work of art may take significance from historic events:

Aesthetic, then, is an adjective which imputes to its nouns a rather remarkable history: the items it qualifies would be neutral and lacking of human interest for the given occasion, but that there is an item nearby in which the interest is very real, and powerful enough to spread over them too. They are not accessory to this interest though they seem to be, and take care not to conflict with it; they receive it. ("Artists", 207)

Ransom suggests here that writing about a historical event, like a war, is irrelevant, because the literary work should stand independently of its context, but historical context can lend meaning to a work of art. In this context, one could conjecture that Ransom never wrote an overt war poem because he thought writing about the war would be irrelevant, but regardless, understanding the circumstances surrounding his war experience can illuminate a reading of his poems written during and immediately after the First World War.

Eventually, John Crowe Ransom would establish a reputation as an important poet and one of the twentieth century's greatest literary critics and theorists, but, when the First World War broke out in Europe, he had just begun to develop the ironic, rational, menacing style that would become his trademark. After the war, by which time he had published *Poems About God*, experienced life as a soldier, and read the French Symbolists, his unique sense of poetic style emerged. Although Ransom's perspicacious ideology would continue to develop over the course of his career, the key aspects of his poetic style were in place in 1919 when the Fugitives first began to meet. His mature style exerts itself in the famous poems from *Chills and Fever* and *Two Gentlemen in Bonds*, and one can imagine how Ransom's established literary reputation influenced the novice Fugitives. By the late 1920's Ransom would increasingly focus his attention on the Agrarian manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*, and the New Criticism, for which his reputation endures. When Ransom compiled his *Selected Poems* in 1945, he completely omitted the *Poems About God*, likely because he felt that they no longer reflected his poetic sensibility. Nevertheless, reading those early poems, especially in context with Ransom's war experience, lends a greater insight into the development of one of the nation's most formidable literary minds.

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## Notes

1. Graves graphically documents his experience as a British officer fighting in the First World War in his autobiography *Goodbye to All That* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998).
2. Paul Fussell, in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: OUP, 1997), makes an odd assertion about Ransom's poetry. He says, parenthetically, "Those who suspect, by the way, that the poetry of John Crowe Ransom has something to do with the Great War and its legacies can study with profit what he has derived from [Edmund] Blunden" (81). Ransom's knowledge of Blunden, however, seems doubtful, as Ransom never mentions Blunden in any critical works or any correspondence. Perhaps there may be similarities between their poetic styles, but that would be, I think, purely coincidental.
3. Graves and Ransom maintained frequent correspondence between 1922 and 1925. Ransom greatly admired Graves's poetic style, and Ransom begged him to submit poems for *The Fugitive*, which Graves did. Also, Ransom introduced Graves to the poetry of a young woman from Nashville, Laura Riding, who would later become Graves's wife. For more about the Ransom, Graves, and Riding connection, see Kieran Quinlan's "The Colloquy Between John Crowe Ransom and Robert Graves" (*The Vanderbilt Tradition: Essays in Honor of Thomas Daniel Young*, Ed. Mark Royden Winchell, Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 1991, 36-46), and for more about Graves's and Riding's poetry in *The Fugitive*, see *The Fugitive Poets*, edited by William Pratt (Nashville, TN: J. S. Sanders and Co., 1991).
4. In this same essay, "Artists, Soldiers, Positivists," Ransom also addresses the poetry of another World War One poet, Rupert Brooke. Unfortunately for my purposes, however, Ransom discusses one of Brooke's earliest poems, "The Lover," which predates the war. As one might expect, considering Ransom's anti-Romantic predisposition, he finds little good and much bad in Brooke's Keatsian imitation (206).

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