DUALISM AND DILEMMA:
THE POETRY OF JOHN CROWE RANSOM

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by
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The poetry of John Crowe Ransom is a puzzle compounded of ambiguities. His brief narratives in verse at once charm and perplex the casual reader. He pictures a fabulous landscape peopled with characters from folk stories and fairy tales, from classical mythology and religious allegory, but the familiar significance usually associated with the figures is transformed and inverted by the elegance, wit, and light-handed erudition in which they are displayed.

Ransom's view of man in Western society is dualistic; he sees man divided between the romantic and the classical interpretation of the universe, between sensibility and reason as modes of individual response to the world, and between industrialism, the vehicle of progress detrimental to human welfare, and agrarianism, the conservative element in which human well-being flourishes. The schism is older than Western history; the separation has accelerated with the growth of industrialism.

Ransom's poem "The Equilibrists" illustrates the tension between conflicting philosophies. The unnamed lovers are reminiscent of Tristan and Iseult or of Francesca and Paolo in that they are caught in a passionate physical attraction whose consummation is proscribed by the mores of their society. Ransom builds the lovers' tension through a series of contrasting symbols in which the sensuous attraction is represented
by natural objects drawn from the Song of Solomon:

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 ill sped.

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. 1

But the innocent pleasure urged upon the lovers in
Solomon's poetry is not possible for the lovers in
Ransom's poem. Their enjoyment is vitiated by their
awareness of sin. The renunciation of carnality is
explicit in Christian dogma; the code of Christian
chivalry forbids their probably adulterous relationship
as dishonorable:

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.

Impertunate her doves, too pure, too wise,
Clambering on his shoulder, saying Arise,
Leave me now, and never let us meet,
Eternal distance now command thy feet.

Predicament indeed, which thus discovers
Honor among thieves, Honor between lovers.
O such a little word is Honor, they feel!
But the grey word is between them cold as steel. 2

The romantic drive to fulfillment and self-realization is

2Poems and Essays, p. 65.
thus thwarted for the Equilibrist by the sense of obligation to their social order.

A similar dilemma baffles the friar in Ransom's "Necrololgical." As a member of the Carmelite order, the young monk has renounced the world and its activities for a life of contemplation. But the reasoned, intellectual world of the cloister does not satisfy him. He is drawn by curiosity from his monastery bed to the near-by scene of a recent battle. He wanders among the dead warriors despoiled by the already departed victors. Nobles and yeomen alike are prey now for wolves and vultures. A loyal paramour and a fine horse among the corpses emphasize for him both the glittering allure of life devoted to chivalry and the impotence of its panoply to protect its adherents from its fundamental violence.

The youth takes a sword from one of the bodies and examines it with knowing appreciation for its craftsmanship, but there is no suggestion of his using it in a life of action. He is as much baffled by the values of chivalry as by those of his vocation. He cannot choose between them, and his indecision robs him of meaningful life:

Then 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. 3

3Poems and Essays, p. 9.
The problem of ultimate answers mystifies also Ransom's "Persistent Explorer," who can be viewed as a tinker-philosopher transferred to the American continent.

The noise of water teased his literal ears
Which heard the distant drumming and thus scored;
Water is falling--it fell--therefore it roared.
However: That is more than water I hear! 4

The explorer regards the natural world as a source of material means for his personal progress and as the manifestation of divine guidance for their use by which he can transcend his humanity. He searches for occult signs in the physical universe and will not accept the simple concrete fact of the falling water as devoid of theological significance.

He went still higher, and on the dizzy brink
His eyes confirmed with vision what he had heard:
This is but tumbling water. Again he demurred:
That was not only water flashing, I think.

But listen as he might, look fast or slow,
It was water, only water, tons of it
Dropping into the gorge, and every bit
Was water--the insipid chemical $\text{H}_2\text{O}$. 5

There is no revelation of deity in the water for the explorer. He is too sophisticated to dwell on the alternative idea of pantheism which the water also suggests to him:

Tremendous the sound was but there was no voice
That spoke to him. Furious the spectacle
But it spelled nothing, there was not any spell
Bidding him whether cower or rejoice.

4 Poems and Essays, p. 49.
5 Poems and Essays, p. 49.
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. 6

The explorer is thus confronted with a choice of
life values. He can relinquish his search, admit his
own creaturehood and blend with the physical universe;
for him this appears a form of death. He chooses rather
the dynamic, progressive response: to continue his search
for signs of divine will on his own egotistical terms:

There were many ways of dying: witness, if he
Commit himself to the water, and descend
Wrapped in the water, turn water at the end
And flow with a great water out to sea.

But there were many ways of living, too,
And let his enemies gibe, but let them say
That he would throw this continent away
And seek another country,—as he would do. 7

The difficulties besetting romantics who insist on
equating the natural world with human moral purpose are
suggested by Ransom in "Miriam Tazewell." Miriam regards
herself as foster-mother to the flowers in her garden.
She is outraged when a spring storm lays waste her flower
beds.

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. 8

6Poems and Essays, pp. 49, 50.
7Poems and Essays, p. 50.
8Poems and Essays, p. 4.
The storm is a cataclysm only to Miriam. In the broader experience of earth, it is merely a transitory incident. The storm abates, the sun returns, spring arrives, and the solar system maintains its courses. The birds, although temporarily inconvenienced, resume their usual singing. Miriam's community continues its social and ceremonial life. But for Miriam nature has been unmasked as a profligate who annihilates its own offspring. She is not reconciled to a cosmos so alien to her expectations:

To Miriam Tazewell the whole world was villain
To prosper when the fragile babes were fallen,
And not to unstop her own storm and be maudlin,
For weeks she went untidy, she went sullen.

The problem of the right relation of man to nature is a recurrent theme in Ransom's writing. A comment on the loss of this relationship appeared in his introduction to I'll Take My Stand, a collection of essays by twelve southern writers defending the agrarian position.

Religion is our submission to the general intention of a nature that is fairly inscrutable; it is the sense of our role as creatures within it. But nature industrialized, transformed into cities and artificial habitations, manufactured into commodities, is no longer nature but a highly simplified picture of nature. We receive the illusion of having power over nature, and lose the sense of nature as something mysterious and contingent. The God of nature under these conditions is merely an amiable expression, a superfluity, and the philosophical understanding ordinarily carried in the religious experience is not there for us to have.9

The dichotomy described by Ransom's religious and philosophical system is reflected in his pitiable human characters, who suffer from fragmentation of the personality, if not from actual schizophrenia. In Ransom's poems the wholeness of life is represented by the concrete, material universe, which is apprehensible to humans in its tangible, sensuous particularity. Sensibility should therefore enable humans to understand their surroundings and to enjoy their lives in a comfortable environment. But the possibility of an ostensible Eden populated by innocent hedonists is nullified by the human intellect, whose function is analytical rather than synthetical. In Ransom's view, the mind invades the wholeness of sensible life, tearing out parts for scientific investigation and destroying them in the examination.

This aspect of mind destroys the physical passion of Ransom's "Spectral Lovers." At just the moment when the fullness of an April night seems to foster its consummation, the man deliberates on their desire:

considerations pinched his heart
Unfitly for his art.

"Am 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."10

10 Poems and Essays, pp. 6, 7.
Reason remains a permanent bar to the lovers' fulfillment:

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 their quick fingers fluttering like a bird
Whose songs shall never be heard.

The impotence of solitary intellect is underscored in
"Man Without Sense of Direction,"

the darling egg
Of the chosen people... a creature
Of noblest mind and powerful leg
Who cannot fathom nor perform his nature. 11

None of the supposed requisites for human contentment satisfy him. He has family, position, youth, health, a beautiful and acquiescent wife; he dwells in an environment teeming with natural vigor. But the enjoyment of his life is denied him through his inability to sense life in his physical being:

Whether by street, or in field full of honey,
Attended by clouds or 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. 12

11 Poems and Essays, p. 61.
12 Poems and Essays, p. 62.
Ransom's concept of mind and body is worked out in detail in "Painted Head." The speaker is musing on the picture of a human head presented without an accompanying torso. He is reminded that the "dark severance" of mind from body is at least as old as Plato, and that the dissociation of the intellectual from the physical is a continuing human temptation in Western philosophy.

The severed head is an ironic subject for a work of art, as art is a unifying process and not a dissecting agent. A head "truant from the body bush" is a paradox possible only as an artistic representation and not as a living reality. Ransom emphasizes the head's dependence on the body in a crescendo of images from nature, which also carry connotations of classical Greece:

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 increase 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. 13

For the domination of sensibility by reason in the individual Ransom sees a parallel ascendance of industrialism in Western culture. For him, industrialism is a progressive aberration whose ever-accelerating pace is destructive to

13Poems and Essays, p. 73.
human values. The optimum condition for human life is membership in a conservative agrarian society, where human needs are met in the nonchalant largess of nature, and where there is leisure to enjoy the return yielded by toil. The farmer lives at ease with natural productivity:

He identifies himself with a spot of ground, and this ground carries a good deal of meaning; it defines itself for him as nature. He would till it not too hurriedly and not too mechanically to observe in it the contingency and the infinitude of nature; and so his life acquires its philosophical and even its cosmic consciousness. A man can contemplate and explore, respect and love, an object as substantial as a farm or a native province. But he cannot contemplate nor explore, respect nor love, a mere turnover, such as an assemblage of "natural resources," a pile of money, a volume of produce, a market or a credit system. It is into precisely these intangibles that industrialism would translate the farmer's farm. It means the dehumanization of his life.14

This atmosphere permeates the poem "Antique Harvesters," one of Ransom's few specific references to the South. Although it describes a contemporary scene, the chosen details are nearly timeless. Ransom has put an uncharacteristic emphasis on geographic location in the parenthetical addition of a setting, "Scene: Of the Mississippi the bank sinister, and of the Ohio the bank sinister." By framing the poem with feudal allusions, Ransom has flooded the landscape with a golden nostalgia, adding the fascination of long perspective to the simple picture of farm workers pausing in their chores to watch

14Ransom, I'll Take My Stand, pp. 19, 20.
a party of hunters ride by their field. What follows, however, is not a sentimental eulogy from a native son. The heraldic term sinister carries a double meaning in limiting the area bounded by the left banks of the rivers, as the Ohio was the northern limit of legal slavery prior to the American Civil War. Ransom does not insist on feudalism as a perfect social and economic system. In terms nearly devoid of the pomp and dignity which are usually associated with the medieval chase,\textsuperscript{15} he satirizes the hunters as

\begin{quote}
keepers of a rite;
The horn, the hounds, the lank mares coursing by Straddled with archetypes of chivalry.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

The harvesters recognize the depletion of their land and its material poverty. The harvest is "a meager hill of kernels" from "spindling ears," but it is sacred, having grown in soil enriched by the blood of earlier heroes. The workers spurn the suggestion that they leave their static existence and move on to a more profitable, more dynamic area. This would mean abandoning the ritual care of the land, which for them is a religion. In Ransom's view, they are aware, as the advocates of progressive industrialism are not, or have forgotten, that both physical and spiritual welfare are rooted in the land, and that all human life is dependent

\footnotesize

\textsuperscript{16}Poems and Essays, p. 53.
on the perpetuation of a changeless universe.

"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 weariseth.17

Ransom uses a medieval background also for the lovers' problem in "The Equilibrists."18 The suggestion is not that differing ideals of human love were peculiar to the historical period, but rather that human problems may be seen more clearly when examined in historical perspective. The lovers' resemblance to characters from Dante and from the Arthurian romances was noted in an earlier section of this paper. Ransom conveys the conflict between their ideals of love by his use of erotic imagery. The lilies and doves are traditional symbols taken from the Old Testament and represent human passion in harmony with the physical universe and with the naturalistic religion disclosed by the pre-Christian portions of the Bible. In opposition is a guilty deliberation imposed by the chivalric obsession with the concept of honor, expressed in metaphor as the tower and the sword. Both are phallic symbols; both typify the institutions of Christian chivalry. In contrast to the living images of natural

17Poems and Essays, p. 54.
18Poems and Essays, p. 65.
passion, the tower and the sword are inanimate, products of human imagination and ingenuity. In Ransom's inference, romantic love, encumbered by chivalric paraphernalia and preoccupied with the ideal of Christian chastity, is an artificial intellectualization incapable of expressing human emotion or human sensibility. The flight of doves is the communicating link between the two concepts of love; their cry of "Honor, Honor" is the warning which recalls to the lovers the obligation imposed by their moral code.

Ransom underscores the disparity between the ideal and the actual in "Necrological" by contrasting the fictive grandiloquence of chivalric terms with an unexaggerated denotive description of the battle site:

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.

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 grain of the knight was spilled
by a stone.

20 Poems and Essays, pp. 8, 9.
The field of white bodies is compared to a meadow of asphodel, the daffodil of early French poets. The Greeks considered the flower immortal and held that it covered the Elysian fields. As a variety of narcissus, the flower is an allusion to the Greek myth of young manhood doomed by vain love for its own image. To the friar, the corpses are the sober confirmation of a fact he has been schooled in: "Flesh fails."

The fallen stallion and his rider typify the vulnerability of the feudal system of knighthood. The massive power of the war-horse is nullified by the loss of his disproportionate brain; the flourishing virility of chivalry is only a stone's throw from extinction. Ransom extends the liability to all human institutions by the subtle contrast of the arch images suggested by "the blue ogive of the firmament" in the eighth stanza and "the little groin of the knight" in the stanza following. The word groin is an example of the intentional ambiguity characteristic of Ransom's work. It carries a double image; it is the symbol of both the knight's manhood and, as the echo of the word "ogive", a diminished form of the vault of the sky. The two stanzas emphasize the contingency of the universe: everything under the heavens is exposed to possible destruction. In this context, the human element becomes almost immaterial. The dead will be absorbed into the vast economy of earth by the purging action of the nearby stream and by the
scavenger birds, "the kites of Heaven," who are already demanding their prey "with sweet cries," the ambiguous adjective referring ironically to the raucous call of the birds and literally to the untainted result of their function.

Ransom's classical training and breadth of scholarship are evident in his poetic diction. Some words are archaic, as the choice of spoil for plunder and leman for mistress in "Necrological." Some are used in a sense now rare, as rehearsed for recounted; others have a specialized meaning, for example, the heraldic term sable used for the color black in "Antique Harvesters." In each case the choice is appropriate to both the setting and the meaning of the poem. Ransom's extensive use of Latin-rooted, polysyllabic words gives much of his work a formal, contrived, somewhat pedantic flavor. A frequently quoted example from "Janet Waking" describes the killer of a child's pet hen: "It was a transmogrifying bee/Came droning down on Chucky's old bald head/And sat and put the poison." The portentous adjective seems ludicrously out of proportion for the insect, but the description carries a deadly accuracy, for the hen is transformed utterly and grotesquely,

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21 The Oxford Universal Dictionary, C. T. Onions, ed., (London, 1947). All English definitions in this section are from this source.

22 Poems and Prose, p. 45.
shocking the child into awareness of a world larger than childhood and of the tragedy inherent in it.

In some instances Ransom uses the Latin word directly or adapts the Latin to an English form. In "The Equilibrists," the line "A kinder saeculum begins with Death" (stanza 10), conveys a timeless sense of eternity which might be marred for readers who encountered the English form cycle with its several meanings rather than the ponderous Latin word.

In his essay "On Shakespeare's Language," Ransom comments on the place and function of Latinical words in the English vocabulary: "They are in the language but not quite of it...indeed, they (are) specially qualified for expert or precision techniques." Ransom uses this technique in a concluding stanza of "The Equilibrists," by surrounding two isolated Latin derivations with simple, unforced, native English:

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.24

Infatuate gives a precise description of the carnal lovers; they are affected with folly and still confounded and frustrated by their passion. Stuprate is an adjective Ransom appears to have anglicized from the Latin stuprare, "to ravish." The word accumulates pejorative overtones

23Poems and Essays, p. 127.
24Poems and Essays, p. 66.
from its French counterpart stupre, an indecent or shameless act.

That Ransom's felicitous word choice reinforces his meaning can be illustrated in the final stanza of "Miriam Tazewell:"

To Miriam Tazewell the whole world was villain
To prosper when the fragile babes were fallen,
And not to unstop her own storm and be maudlin,
For weeks she went untidy, she went sullen.25

The lady's name is symbolic; it combines Biblical allusion to Moses' sister and surrogate mother, Miriam, with the Italian word tazza, a shallow ornamental bowl or vase. The combination can be interpreted as a superficial well of foster-motherhood. Miriam views the natural world, her flowers' true parent, as both a rival and an infanticide. The world is "villain"—a baseborn farm or country dweller who is capable or guilty of great crimes. Miriam is inconsolable, but she struggles not to be "maudlin," tearfully sentimental, an allusion to Mary Magdalene, frequently pictured as weeping. The effort renders her "sullen"—gloomy, dull and unsociable—in Ransom's view, the unavoidable result of estrangement from the natural world and rebellion against its order.

It should be kept in mind that most of Ransom's poems were written in the decade following the First World War, and that the repudiation of sentimentality conspicuous in them was virtually a universal characteristic of authors

25Poems and Essays, p. 4.
in the post-war era. Van Wyck Brooks has described the period as

a time of lowered vitality... when fecundity, fertility, productiveness are unfashionable qualities, despised and suspect in a writer. No age has ever looked so askance at creative exuberance and abundance as the age whose motto has been Hemingway's "not too damned much," an age in which vitality itself has been regarded as vulgar... How natural that at such a time the cult of wit should have returned again, with the vogue of the metaphysical poets... that has played a large part in contemporary verse. The merciless deflation of sentiment, a characteristic of the post-war mind that accompanies this wish to escape from feeling, has been accompanied in turn by a sort of fragile cynicism... it is assumed that there is nothing to be done about the world and that even religion can be taken as a branch of aesthetics... 26

Ransom's penchant for the metaphysicals is exhibited in his wide use of witty conceits, which invite comparison with those of John Donne's. 27 "The Equilibrists" and Donne's "The Relic" have a marked resemblance with each other, in that both project the continuity of human love beyond death, and both are concerned with the physical and spiritual implications of overwhelming passion. But Donne's lovers have relinquished their material bodies and are content to contemplate passively the "miracle" their love was. Ransom's lovers cannot find surcease in death. Their


sensual tension, irresistible and at the same time
forbidding, is a paradox which plagues them even in their
grave:

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 not touching in each other's sight;
Moulder ed the lips and ashly the tall skull.
Let them lie perilous and beautiful.28

The figure of a spinning orbit suggests a
description of the structure of the atom; the two
concepts, physical desire and spiritual sublimation are
held in equipoise by their own momentum as alternating
forces. The physical beauty of feature which originally
attracted the lovers is ravaged by the grave, but their
ashes still probe their unsolvable dilemma. Ransom
urges that they be left undisturbed with their counter-
balance, "perilous and beautiful."

Paradox is the vehicle for the irony which engulfs
the "Persistent Explorer."29 In stanza after stanza
Ransom stresses the waterfall, until the reader is
saturated with the concept of living water, laden with
its wealth of religious connotations. The Explorer's
nicely-honed, scientific acumen is too specialized for

28 Poems and Essays, p. 67.
29 Poems and Essays, p. 49.
the evidence he is trying to decipher. He thinks in
terms of time-study, quantitative measurement, and
chemical analysis. The waterfall does not inspire him
to meditate on the immanence of God in the universe; he
considers it as tons per minute of H₂O. He is a true
"pilgrim" (stanza 9), in Ransom's opinion, of the
dynamic cult of Western protestantism. He is an untiring
advocate of the gospel of Progress,

a curious development which does not reflect
great credit on the supposed capacity of our
species for formulating its own behavior.
Evidently the formula may involve its prac­titioners in self-torture just as readily
as in the enjoyment of life. In most
societies man has adapted himself to environ­ment with plenty of intelligence to secure
easily his material necessities from the
graceful bounty of nature...But the latter­
day societies have been seized--none quite
so violently as our American one--with the
strange idea that the human destiny is not
to secure an honorable peace with nature,
but to wage an unrelenting war on nature...
Progress never defines its ultimate objective,
but thrusts its victims at once into an
infinite series. 30

Ransom underscores the error in the Explorer's
reasoning by stating the choice in ironical terms. He
considers "ways of dying" (stanza 10), committing himself
to the water, descending from the heights, and entrusting
himself to the beneficence of the natural world; in
Ransom's context this is the choice of meaningful life.
The Explorer insists on his own "ways of living" (stanza
11), getting and squandering, throwing away what has

30 John Crowe Ransom, "Reconstructed but Unregenerate,"
already been acquired in the search for another country to exploit. The duel for space currently engaging technological man on two continents seems foretold by Ransom's acid final phrase, "--as he would do."

A comment on the cult of the adventuring knight-errant contained in Christian philosophy can be read in Ransom's "Captain Carpenter." Like the Persistent Explorer, Captain Carpenter is a soldier of fortune; the goal of his quest is not explained. The poem is a burlesque of the Don Quixote warrior; the allusion of "Carpenter" in the title extends the observation to the Christian persuasion in general. The Captain is an indefatigable innocent who spends his life seeking adversaries who invariably defeat him. He loses his limbs and most of his faculties to a series of rogues and un gallant ladies. He is reduced to only heart and voice; but the notion of surrender does not occur to him. He takes the field with his deficient armament and faces another challenger:

"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." 31

The Captain does not survive the match; the final knave relieves him of his heart. John Lincoln Stewart

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31 Poems and Essays, pp. 33 - 35.
sees this poem as evidence of Ransom's "grudging admiration for those ingenuous ones who manage, against all contrary experience, to preserve their innocence and their aspirations." But the underlying idea remains an indictment of the Christian scheme as a romantic delusion.

In "Armageddon" Ransom treats the Christian theme in a somewhat different manner. Christ and Antichrist both accompanied by suites of feudal retainers, encounter each other and agree to a passage at arms. They plan the tourney in accordance with the intricate rules of chivalry, in which Antichrist's wider experience gives him the dominant voice. His exquisite courtesy so disarms Christ that the discussion is prolonged into a truce, and Christ joins the fallen in the comforts of their camp. He changes his "dusty cassock" for cavalier costume and even permits Antichrist's barbers to comb and perfume his hair and beard. The two pass the days in feasting and conversation, while Christ's followers look on in bafflement and anger. Finally one venerable veteran approaches the pair to remind Christ of his duty, but they have come to resemble each other so closely that he makes the embarrassing mistake of whispering in the wrong ear.

Christ and his company are startled back to their

32John Crowe Ransom, p. 27.
wanted activity. They arm and brandish, somehow managing to avoid a direct confrontation with the enemy. Antichrist has the last word:

The immortal Adversary shook his head; if now they fought too long, then he would famish; and if much blood was shed, why, he was squeamish: "These Armageddons weary me much," he said.33

The wry use of the plural changes "Armageddon" from the awesome title of the ultimate battle between good and evil which in the Christian scheme will doom the mortal world to a petulant term for a series of recurring but indecisive skirmishes, a sort of feud among kin, in which Antichrist participates only to be obliging and well-mannered. The reader choosing sides finds Antichrist presented as the more consistent, winsome, considerate and humane. Ransom's satire suggests that the Christian construction of the difference between good and evil is forced and imaginary.

Delusion as a besetting trait is not restricted to male figures in Ransom's poetical community. The lady in "Parting Without A Sequel"34 is also clinging to a misconception. She has broken with her lover and is sending him a final letter. In romantic fancy, which she betrays by her trite thoughts, she believes herself justified in her action; however, the second stanza

34Poems and Essays, p. 44.
reveals her true feelings. She hopes the messenger, "the blue-capped functioner of doom," will lose the letter and relieve her of responsibility for her decision. Ransom stresses the lady's ambivalent emotionalism by contrast with her father's oak, symbolic of traditional conservatism, patriarchal society and classical stoicism. But the tree is a "vaunting oak;" its spreading shelter is a vain display. There is no security for the lady in the tradition of the past or in the progressive technology represented by the messenger on a bicycle. Ransom underscores the messenger's disinterested objectivity by presenting him in modern dress as Hermes, messenger of the gods and indifferent guide in mortal affairs. The classic wings and caduceus are parodied in the messenger's bicycle with its "serpent's track," implying that the products of technology are no more efficient than the inventions of antiquity for the solution of human problems. The lady is left standing irresolute while "His serpent's track went up the hill forever." She will never achieve self-recognition and self-fulfillment in the romantic sense or accept the solace of traditionalism.

Irony is the device central to Ransom's "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.

Through the brief dialogue between death and the
maiden Ransom exposes the disparity between the girl's
idealized anticipation and the reality common to all
human existence. The goal of her life is a love affair
replete with moonlight and roses, but the suitor
awaiting her is death. Although the roses are dying
and the moon is a specter, the lady is scarcely aware
even of death's urgent voice. She is beguiled by
artificial notions of romance, symbolized by the
trellis, another manufactured object used by Ransom
as a depreciatory image. The banality of the lady's
words emphasizes the irony of her delusion. Her vapid
character was never capable of meaningful life; her
trellis will not protect her against the inexorable
approach of death.

In Ransom's context, death is the culminating
irony. It cancels all the promise and negates all
the expectation of human life, frustrating human will
in its insistence on the mortality of man as the
creature of a contingent universe. The narrator of

35 Poems and Essays, p. 38.
"Emily Hardcastle, Spinster" thus is baffled by the intervention of death in his plans. He and his cronies were confident that Emily would eventually choose one from them for her husband, even though the lady's hard-to-please discrimination had delayed her choice into the years of spinsterhood. The lady is indeed won by a noble suitor, but he is the "Grizzled Baron," death, who thwarts the local swains and leaves them dangling like puppets in the "pepper-and-salt" tweed of their mortality.

Similarly, the death of the child in the often-quoted "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" perplexes the neighbors, who are astonished at the evanescence of the little girl's noisy energy and bustling vitality. By juxtaposing the cancelling finality of death with the vigor of childhood and with the expectation of procreation implicit in the marriage relation, Ransom has concentrated the impact of the pervasive irony in the human situation.

The poetry does not resolve the tensions set up by its techniques. The little dramas highlight varying degrees of gallantry in the search for answers, but none of the characters enjoy an unqualified

37 Poems and Essays, p. 10.
success. Even the victor of "Necrological," Bartholomew, "went to be stricken of other poemen." No part of the human span is privileged. The tenuous innocence of childhood is in reality a sort of ignorance; maturity is a loss of idealism, and a corresponding preoccupation with material security. Old age may have acquired a certain ripeness of understanding but is too enfeebled to act on its insight.

The perspective of the child in "Janet Waking," is limited to her own environment and experience, so that she thinks herself "Running across the world upon the grass"38 between her kitchen door and the hen-house.39 The discovery of death in her pet hen forces on her the shattering realization of the larger world toward which she is moving in maturity. In her grief the child will not accept the platitudes on death offered by the adult world; there is no palliative for the fatal bee sting to the old hen's comb, which in Ransom's description resembles a phallus (stanza 5).

The supposed consolation of sexual love as a panacea for the disappointments of mature life is decried by Ransom's treatment of the theme. For

38Poems and Essays, p. 45.
"Man Without A Sense of Direction" the romantic nostrum of sex does not heal the sickness of his soul. As noted in an earlier section, it does not unite the "Spectral Lovers." In "Prelude to an Evening," both husband and wife are too preoccupied with their own private and imaginary fears to be sustaining companions to each other or effectual parents to the children which their union has produced.

A few of Ransom's characters see beyond the self-absorption of early maturity from the vantage point of old age. There is "Conrad in Twilight," lingering stubbornly in the autumn chill of his withered garden, reluctant to trade the savor of nature even in its less pleasant aspects for the house-bound material comforts awaiting him indoors. In Ransom's comparison of generations, "Old Man Playing with Children," a grandfather, released from the pall of ambition, cavorts with his grandsons in a game of Indians. He will not attempt to justify himself to his chiding son, their father, but answers silently "This life is not good but in danger and in joy." (stanza 3). In his own mind, his purpose is simple and lucid:

40 *Poems and Essays*, p. 68.

41 *Poems and Essays*, p. 23.
"May God forgive me, I know your middling ways, 
Having taken care and performed ignominies 
unreckoned 
Between the first brief childhood and the brief 
second, 
But I will be more honorable in these days."42

The accommodation of conflicting viewpoints is not a true synthesis but merely a temporary reconciliation which will end with the old man's death. In Ransom's context death does not answer human questioners; the friar in "Necrological" and the mourners for John Whiteside's daughter after all their contemplation of mortality are left confounded and perplexed. Christian dogma holds no solution for "The Equilibrist" suspended in Hell or for the antagonists in Ransom's venture into eschatological time, "Armageddon."

Bafflement in a dualism without end is the human condition.

Recurring references to fire and ice, freezing and burning, chills and fever, characterize the victims of schism in the human psyche. They are foolhardy and wrong-headed, at cross-purpose with the natural world although mortally dependent on it, alienating themselves from nature by a romantic pursuit of the will-o'-the-wisp, Progress.

Ransom's poetry attempts to heal the dichotomy and stabilize the tension by a greater emphasis on

42Poems and Essays, p. 32.
classical means: devotion to the land rather than reliance on technology, allegiance to traditional social forms rather than adherence to the innovations of industrialism. In Ransom's own observation:

The dualism...feels like a very modern idea, dating decidedly after the industrial revolution, yet it is as old as civilization, and states the whole misfortune of civilization...(Civilization is an industrial revolution.) Nor will we be delivered unless we shall be educated again into the kind of work that occupied our putative ancestors in a Golden Age: a work that rejected maximum efficiency as servile, and tempered itself constantly with play; a science that never forgot to be a poetry.43

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LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED


Ransom, John Crowe. "The South—Old or New?" *Sewanee Review,* 36 (April 1928), 139-147.


