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Aspects of Ransom's Poetry

by Mark Bricklin

If I had to live in a world of poetry, one of my first choices would be the world created by John Crowe Ransom. It is a mystical and yet a very real world, and the people who inhabit it range from saints and children to lovers and old soldiers. But the most appealing thing of all is that it is a **human** world; all his characters are not warped by disease or failure to live up to some arbitrary set of values, and their problems are as universal as they could possibly be — ignorance, unfulfilled love, old age, and death are good examples.

In order for a poet to handle such time-worn themes as these successfully, his poetry must be fresh, vital, and convincing. Such is Ransom's poetry as represented in his selection of his best works, **Selected Poems and Essays**. Add to these already nebulous requirements a strong sense of rhythm, gentle but keen irony, and the magical embellishment of charm, and you have an even truer picture of his work. But instead of dealing with these abstract terms, let us open the book and take a look at the poems themselves.

METER AND DICTION

Here is **Puncture**, an excellent example of Ransom's use of meter and his unusual diction, or choice of words. It is the story of Grimes, "the old campaigner," who is bleeding to death in a trench. Consider the second stanza:

And when the flames roared,
when the sparkles darted
And quenched in the black sea
that closed us round,
I looked at Grimes, my old com-
rade and startled
His look blue — bright — and
under a wound
Which bled upon the ground.
The feminine ending of the first line is executed with perfect effect: the spark goes flying up in the first syllable and then sinks slowly and fades out in the second. The variation is repeated in the third line with equal success, where the syllables parallel the physical movement expressed.

The narrator offers aid to Grimes, but he refuses it saying that his wound is merely an "old puncture" and he is not worthy of aid anyway. The eighth stanza is the narrator's reaction to Grimes' behavior.

I, not to weep then, like a
desperado
Kicked on the carcasses of our
enemies
To heave them into the dark-
ness; but my bravado
Quailed in the scorn of Grimes;
for even these
Were fit for better courtesies.

The first thing that strikes us in this stanza is the use of such words as "desperado," "bravado," "quailed," and "courtesies." The sum impression that such diction gives is one of distance. But in this case, it is not just aesthetic distance, but an actual dichotomy between the narrator and the work he is doing. The meter encourages this strange emotion, for it is violent and often irregular.

The best metrical effect is found in the last line, which describes the wind blowing the pipe smoke from Grimes' mouth. The fourth line of the stanza is solidly iambic except for an initial inversion, and suddenly, as the smoke is blown backwards, the meter changes to trochaic and the rhythm is sharply reversed:

Smoke and a dry word crackled
from his mouth
Which a cold wind ferried
south.

CHARM

We now have, I trust, some idea of the techniques Ransom uses in

achieving his freshness and rhythm. Another factor mentioned along with these was "charm." Many people associate charm with viscous sentimentality and melodrama, but this is not what I refer to. Real charm, I would think, consists mainly of one or more of three basic qualities. First, and by far the most effective, is a very special attitude which the author has toward his subject matter. Thus **Bambi** enchants people of all ages because of the very human portrayal of all the forest animals. Second is the charm of **style** by which the author may carry the reader along largely on the appeal of his speech rhythm, diction, and phraseology. This, to a large extent, accounts for the popularity of Salinger's **Catcher in the Rye**. The third device is the recollection of childhood, and while this is often used indiscriminately, it is employed with noble success in **Huckleberry Finn**.

OF FIRST IMPORTANCE

In Ransom's best poetry we find excellent use of all three devices, especially the first two, but at no time does the device become more important than the poem as a whole. A few stanzas from **Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter** will illustrate my point:

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

(she) harried into 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 . . .

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.

Ransom's attitude here is very unusual, and we can see why he calls himself an "obscure" poet; that is, he never draws a moral. He does not say that it is better to die young, or that the girl's death was a great tragedy, or that she will be happier playing with angels. He says simply that he and his comrades are "astonished" and "vexed"; his feelings are not in the least tainted by any dogmatic superstructure which tells him how he **should** feel. And the more we read the poem and identify ourselves with the narrator, the more we see how accurately Ransom has described human emotion. The men, probably academic, are used to their conservative, well-ordered lives, and the death of this little girl is a great blow to their superficial orderliness in the face of ever-present death.

As for the diction, in almost every line we find words and phrases so shocking and yet so precise that they are merely entrancing: "such speed in her little body," "no wonder her brown study Astonishes us all," "lying so primly propped" and so on.

EMOTIONAL POWER

Blue Girls, another of Ransom's popular pieces, shows how he can take a theme as common as any and charge with it emotional power. In the first two stanzas, he exhorts young girls to be care-free and happy, to "think no more of what will come to pass than bluebirds that go walking on the grass . . ." Then:

Practice your beauty, fine girls,
before it fail;
And I will cry with my loud
lips and publish
Beauty which all our power
will never establish,
It is so frail.
For I could tell you a story
which is true;
I know a lady with a terrible
tongue,
(Continued on page two)



Professor John Crowe Ransom in academic regalia. (Both of the pictures of Mr. Ransom on this page have appeared in publications before). This photograph was taken at a previous Commencement.

Mr. Ransom Ends Classes

New York Times critic Harvey Breit, in a 1955 review of the **Vintage** Ransom collection, remarked, "a selection of the work of a man of integrity, sensibility and humanity." Characteristics exhibited behind the lectern as well as in print. This June Mr. Ransom will discontinue his teaching assignments at Kenyon. Happily, because of Gutenberg, etc., Mr. Ransom will never stop teaching. The following is a short summary:

A Rhodes Scholar at Oxford from 1910-1913, Mr. Ransom began teaching at the college level at Vanderbilt in 1914, coming to Kenyon in 1937. From 1931 through 1932 he held a Guggenheim Fellowship. During his stay at Vanderbilt he was one of those instrumental in helping to found the "Fugitive" group, who were later known, with some modification of membership as the "Agrarians" or "Young Confederates." The Fugitives consisted of teachers and students at Vanderbilt and of some men from the business and professional world of Nashville who were interested in poetry and philosophy. As their talks together progressed, the idea of publishing a magazine of poetry developed: **The Fugitive**. And, although the literary stream was already flooded with the little magazines, this venture caught immediate attention, so that, when the magazine suspended publication, an anthology of ten of the "Fugitives" was published.

PUBLICATIONS

By the time Mr. Ransom came to Kenyon he had already an established international reputation as a poet and critic. His first book of verse, **Poems About God**, appeared in 1919. In 1924 his next two volumes appeared, **Chills and Fever** and **Grace After Meat**. Two

years later, **Two Gentlemen in Bonds** was published. **God Without Thunder**, a quite controversial prose work, appeared in 1930. By 1938 he had put together his first collection of criticism which was published under the title **The World's Body**. This was followed in 1941 by **The New Criticism**, the title by which the critical school, of which Mr. Ransom is a founder, has since come to be known. In 1945 Mr. Ransom brought together the best of his previously published poems, together with a few which had not had book publication in a volume of **Selected Poems**.

THE REVIEW

In the winter of 1939 Mr. Ransom, in collaboration with the late Philip Blair Rice of the philosophy department at Kenyon, published the first issue of **The Kenyon Review**. The magazine is distributed internationally.

RECOGNITION GROWS

In 1947 Mr. Ransom was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. In 1951 he received the annual Bollingen Prize in Poetry given by Yale University. This award is made on the basis of a poet's entire work. Again in 1951 the National Institute of Arts and Letters presented Mr. Ransom with the Russell Loines Memorial Fund Award. This memorial was established in 1924, and is given periodically to some American or English poet, not as a prize, but in recognition of value. Mr. Ransom was its sixth recipient. Previous recipients included Robert Frost (1931), Horace Gregory (1942) and William Carlos Williams (1948). In 1953 Mr. Ransom was elected a member of the National Academy of Arts and Science. At Kenyon he has held the Carnegie Foundation's chair in Poetry.



Mr. Ransom teaching class. Mr. Ransom has been at Kenyon since 1937. His classes have always been overflowing.

