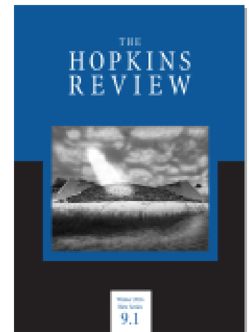
Classic Ransom

Ryan Wilson



The Hopkins Review, Volume 9, Number 1, Winter 2016 (New Series), pp. 6-27 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/thr.2016.0016*

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/609736

Accessed 13 Apr 2017 23:42 GMT

Ryan Wilson

CLASSIC RANSOM

In a 1948 issue of *The Sewanee Review* celebrating John Crowe Ransom's sixtieth birthday, Randall Jarrell remarked: "it is easy to see that his poetry will always be cared for; since he has written poems that are perfectly realized and occasionally almost perfect—poems that the hypothetical generations of the future will be reading page by page with Wyatt, Campion, Marvell, and Mother Goose." No doubt, Mr. Jarrell's estimation of Ransom's work proves just, but his prognostication has proven dubious. In 1991, Brad Leithauser lamented that "for some time now Ransom has been on the wane," and more recently Dave Smith has noted, regarding the poems' lack of availability, that "there is now cause to assert that their appeal, even perhaps their existence, is a matter of some doubt." Worse still, even among those who "purport to admire them," as Anthony Hecht complained in 1994, the poems "are still read with a shocking carelessness." With the Un-Gyve Press recently publishing *The Collected Poems of John Crowe Ransom*, a volume that not only restores Ransom's poems to print after nearly a quarter-century but also brings all Ransom's poems together for the very first time, the matter of the poems' existence has been resolved, but the matter of their appeal has not, and this is our concern. Why should contemporary readers turn to Ransom's poems?

For those interested in American literary history, the poems' appeal should be self-evident. (Alas, "should be" and "is" long ago un-friended each other on Facebook.) Excepting Pound and Eliot, perhaps no poet-critic of the twentieth century exerted so broad and so profound an influence on American letters as Ransom did. A professor at Vanderbilt University and later at Kenyon College, Ransom taught

© 2016 Ryan Wilson

the likes of Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, James Wright, and Anthony Hecht, as well as highly esteemed fiction writers like Andrew Lytle, E. L. Doctorow, and Peter Taylor. Ransom himself won the Bollingen Prize for Poetry in 1950, and his *Selected Poems* won the National Book Award in 1964. Moreover, his students won three National Book Awards and eight Pulitzer Prizes, among numerous other awards, and if one were to list his students' own notable disciples, one could fill a Who's Who volume of American literature the size of a small-town phonebook. Additionally, Ransom was a founding editor of the influential journal, *The Fugitive,* and was the founding editor of *The Kenyon Review,* where he was among the first to publish notable writers like Flannery O'Connor, while his students, Brooks and Warren, were the founding editors of *The Southern Review*, and both Lytle and Tate were instrumental in sustaining *The Sewanee Review*.

As a critic, Ransom wrote more than a hundred essays, characterized by their graciousness, perspicacity, and endless inquisitiveness, as well as three wildly underappreciated full-length prose works, *God Without Thunder* (1930), *The World's Body* (1938), and *The New Criticism* (1941). In fact, Ransom coined the term, "The New Criticism," and though the method of reading commonly—and rather vaguely—called "the new criticism" derives primarily from Brooks and Warren's groundbreaking textbook, *Understanding Poetry*, and from the critical essays written by Brooks, Warren, Tate, and sundry others among Ransom's former students, the method's focus on textual analysis derived, in large part, from Ransom's own understanding of poetry as the synthesis of a logical "structure" and an illogical "texture." Whereas previous generations of critics and professors contented themselves with presenting biographical material about poets or with presenting impressionistic appreciations of Arnoldian "touchstones," leaving readers to figure out how poetry actually worked for themselves, Ransom and his students set about the rigorous analysis of poetry as poetry, and their method gained popularity because it, quite democratically, provided ordinary

American students—generally not born into cultural privilege—with the tools necessary to appreciate poems as works of art.

Furthermore, Ransom was among the first professors to teach contemporary poetry. When he began his career as a professor, English-language literature itself had only been sanctioned within the university for about twenty-five years, and contemporary literature was still considered *outré*. In fact, Ransom's taking up residence in academia, coupled with his efforts to legitimize contemporary literature as a field of study within an academy that increasingly valued the sciences to the exclusion of all else, proved instrumental in establishing university positions for accomplished writers, ultimately resulting in the birth of "creative writing" as an academic discipline.

Finally, however, despite his many and formidable contributions to American letters, Ransom's reputation will live or die with his poetry. Those uninterested in his poems are unlikely to turn to his prose, excellent though it is in its own right. Happily, as the younger generation of American poets shows signs of casting off the aesthetic prejudices of the preceding generations, and of pursuing poetry, once more, as an art and not as mere "self-expression," the time is ripe for a renewed appreciation of Ransom's work. Contemporary readers grown weary of shape without form and the delicious murmurings of tasteless pococuranti will delight in the luminescent ironies and urbane concinnity characteristic of Ransom's poems, which occupy a happy middle-ground between Cole Porter and the colporteur, the lissome and the grave. In fact, Ransom's poems are as finely crafted, as charming, as intelligent, as challenging, and as satisfying as any English-language lyrics of the twentieth century. And yet, because Ransom's manner is so completely his own, so unlike those of his more well-known contemporaries, we might profit from examining the poems' characteristic ambitions and techniques.

In a 1926 letter to Allen Tate, Ransom describes what he calls the three "moments" of human experience. In the first moment, "there are no distinctions"; the first moment is "the original experience," and so

is "unreflective" and "concrete," anoesis devoid of "all intellectual content." It is only in the second moment that "cognition takes place," and this moment abstracts concepts from the first moment, creates ideas out of sensory experiences, and so reduces the first moment in order to shape it, as one must reduce a giant marble slab to shape a Laocoön or a David. The second moment is the beginning of the "cognitive or scientific habit": it allows us to think, and we "unquestionably spend most of our waking lives" in the second moment, "in entertaining or arriving at concepts." However, there is a third moment, in which "we become aware of the deficiency of the second," of the fact that "all our concepts and all our histories put together cannot add up into the wholeness with which we started out." In this third moment, consequently, we turn to the imagination, as images retrieve "the original experiences from the dark storeroom" and "reconstitute an experience which we once had." Of course, the third moment is not a recreation of the first—the remembered image is not the real image, and Humpty Dumpty cannot be put back together again—but rather "the images come out mixed and adulterated with concepts," resulting in a "mixed world composed of both images and concepts; or a sort of practicable reconciliation of the two worlds."

For Ransom, poetry derives from the third moment. Poetry seeks not to eradicate thinking in sensuous delight, nor to eradicate sensuous delight in the pursuit of ideas or morals or meanings; poetry seeks "merely the fullness of life, which is existence in the midst of all our faculties." In the past, Ransom has frequently been mistaken for a Romantic who spurned reality for love of an ideal realm; however, the fact is that he could hardly be further from the willful striving of Romanticism. Why, then, has he so often been mistaken for a Romantic? Let's look at a brief passage from *The World's Body* in which Ransom describes the experience of contemplating art:

> I am impelled neither to lay hands on the object immediately, nor to ticket it for tomorrow's outrage, but am in such a marvel-

> ous state of innocence that I would know it for its own sake, and conceive it as having its own existence; this is the knowledge, or it ought to be, which Schopenhauer praised as "knowledge without desire." The features which the object discloses then are not those which have their meaning for a science, for a set of practical values. They are those which render the body of an object, and constitute a knowledge so radical that the scientist as a scientist can scarcely understand it, and puzzles to see it rendered, richly and wastefully, in the poem, or the painting.

In its criticism of science and "practical values," such a passage may seem to smack of Romanticism, or of Gautier's decadent edict, *L'art pour l'art*. However, as Ransom writes in the letter to Tate quoted above, "we are not really opposed to science, except as it monopolizes and warps us." That is, Ransom does not oppose science as science, or the abstracting mechanism of the "second moment"; to do so would be foolish. Ransom merely opposes that view of life which no longer discerns between reality and the reductive abstractions of the second moment. He would restore our awareness of the value of the "first moment," of what we don't understand, of experience without a practical end, of what exists before our ideas and concepts, or what he calls "the world's body."

This restoration of "the world's body" is, for Ransom, the *telos* of art. Art inconveniently reminds us of that which we are always forgetting: The world is not an idea but a reality, and we are not ideas but real human beings. Perhaps the most difficult task of our time is to recognize the reality of others. Our pride and our barbarous desire for convenience forever tempt us to think in types, to substitute our ideas about people for the people themselves, to reduce ourselves and others to mere names or concepts. We too often approach the world with all the nuance of a high school cafeteria—with "jocks," "nerds," "preppies," and so on, each defined by their table—formulating tags and phrases that pin people into easy classifications as the lepidopterist pins up his lifeless specimens. To avoid this orgulous reduction of human beings into types, or ideas, we must maintain an

abiding inward vigilance and remember that reality is always greater than our understanding of it, that there is a world beyond our words. Civilization requires us to recognize that we ourselves are infinitely intricate, ultimately unique beings whose lives baffle classification and division, and it further requires that we extend this same awareness to others as best we can through the imaginative faculty of empathy. Art's value is that it paradoxically leads us back into contact with the complexities of reality, back to the "first moment"; art will not be explained away by theories, and in its resistance to the abstractions of the "second moment" it reminds us, by analogy, that reality cannot be explained away either. As C. S. Lewis once wrote, "All reality is iconoclastic." Reality is iconoclastic because contact with reality shatters our intellectualized image of it as the Ark of the Covenant shattered the Philistines' icon of Dagon.

In one sense, the iconoclastic nature of reality is Ransom's central theme, and the key to understanding his poems. That is to say, Ransom is a poet of what the Greeks called *καιρός* (*kairos*), or what we might call "timeliness." What, exactly, is *kairos*? We may best understand it by briefly contemplating a few works from antiquity, in which *kairos* was of utmost importance. We might begin with the *Ajax* of Sophocles: here we find the greater Ajax, well-known to readers of Homer's *Iliad*, after he has lost Achilles's armor to Odysseus. Feeling his honor has been damaged by his treatment at the hands of the Atridae and Odysseus, Ajax sets out to kill them all; however, Athena has cast a spell over him, rendering him effectively blind to reality. Thus, believing them to be the Atridae and Odysseus, he has captured a number of sheep, originally gained by the Argives as spoils of war, and he has taken the sheep to his tent and tortured them mercilessly. When Athena's spell is lifted and he finds himself among the slaughtered sheep, not among massacred enemies, he realizes he has disgraced himself and commits suicide. At the heart of the play is the notion that the virtues Ajax possesses are not in all cases virtues, that his heroic pursuit of glory and his heroic conception of honor both work, outside the confines of the

Trojan war, against him, though in the war itself they were of great value to him. Applied without *kairos*, every strength is a weakness.

We find a similar issue at work in the *Oedipus Tyrannos*. While it is commonplace to speak of Oedipus's "tragic flaw," which is a translation of the Greek ἁμαρτία (*hamartia*), a term taken from Aristotle's *Poetics*, such speaking is not terribly accurate. As several scholars have pointed out, Aristotle uses *hamartia*, which literally refers to an arrow missing its target, or a missed shot, as a metaphor, similar in function to our own idiomatic use of "misfire." Thus, the more appropriate translation, as scholars have also pointed out, is something more like "error." This distinction means that Oedipus is not doomed by some innate flaw within his character, but by an error, a "misfire." And what is his error? It is that, having solved the riddle of the Sphinx and saved the entire population of Thebes through the use of his wits, a feat certainly worthy of some pride, he trusts his wits to resolve the new Theban plague and persists in seeking out the truth as he had done previously, leading to his own destruction. Oedipus has proof of his ability to solve problems, as his critical-thinking skills have served to save a nation and to make him king; however, these same skills, applied in different circumstances, make him an exile. Significantly, near the end of the play, Kreon says to Oedipus, πάντα γὰρ καιρῷ καλά, "All things are good *kairoi*," or "in their time." Oedipus's error—his *hubris*—is that he believes his intellectual problem-solving abilities are capable of solving every problem, that what worked once will always work.

Kreon's understanding that different times require different actions, that different moments require different virtues, was of the utmost importance to classical culture. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato writes that the rhetorician, like the physician, cannot apply one method all the time: τούτων τὴν εὐκαιρίαν τε καὶ ἀκαιρὶαν διαγνόντι καλῶς τε και τελέως ή τεχνη ἀπειργασμέννη, or in Jowett's (in)famous translation, "But when he knows the right times (*eukairian*) and wrong times (*akairian*) of all these things he is a perfect and consummate master of his art." Even the

self-restraint engendered by the Greek faith in τὸ μηδὲν ἄγαν—"nothing in excess"—was itself susceptible to excess, and was criticized by Euripides in the *Medea* and in the *Bacchae*, plays which illustrate that there must even be measure for measure itself, as Shakespeare would have it 2000 years later. Unsurprisingly, this theme of timeliness carries into Roman literature, manifesting itself notably in the *carpe diem* of Horace i.11, and in the *aurea mediocritas*—or "golden mean"—that Horace advocates in ii.10. *Kairos* is even a major theme of the New Testament, and Christ's first words in the Gospel of Mark, appearing in verse i.15, are Πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς—"The time (*kairos*) has been fulfilled." In fact, *kairos* itself was eventually made a minor pagan deity, one with a head entirely bald except for a long forelock, as the right moment, or the "opportunity," as we might say, must be grasped from the front or not at all.

Now, our brief jaunt through antiquity hopefully makes it clear that classical culture and Christian culture both believed, as the Birds' tune paraphrasing Ecclesiastes goes, "to everything there is a season." And we should add that this notion bears great significance to our own age, an age in which the hydra-mouths of idealism are constantly telling us to strive for a pure authenticity of selfhood, never to compromise, never to adapt, but always to remain the same in order to avoid charges of "waffling," or of being "two-faced," and so forth. The ancients saw clearly the problem with such an adherence to an abstract ideal: Ajax and Oedipus both destroy themselves in their own ways by refusing to adapt their behaviors to new circumstances. The practice of *kairos,* on the other hand, calls us to live in the world of flux and to adapt, to harmonize our inner worlds with the world without, rather than living exclusively in the realm of ideas, which are constant and deathless. That is, *kairos* requires humility, requires us to cast off our pride, to sacrifice the desire to impose our own abstract principles on the world, and instead to pursue communal harmony, to practice mercy, and to admit that reality is not, ultimately, determined by our individual minds.

To the extent that we live in our minds, and not in time, we lack *kairos*, and in Ransom's poetry, as in antiquity, those who lack timeliness have a hard go of it. In poem after poem, Ransom utilizes a gentle kind of Horatian satire to point up the folly of characters who, for one reason or another, have given up on the world outside the mind and the "first moment," and who have taken refuge in the reductions of the "second moment." To see how Ransom embodies this theme, how he merges matter and manner in order to encourage psychic flexibility and fidelity to "the world's body," we might begin with an analysis of one of Ransom's lesser-known poems, "Miriam Tazewell," which is characteristic of his work's ambitions and techniques. The poem begins:

> 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.

The earth shakes with the force of the storm, and then:

> 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 that year brings forth no flowers. The poem concludes:

> 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.

Here we have a poem about a woman unable to reconcile her "heart full of flowers" to the world that would allow their destruction. If we take the flowers figuratively, we find the philosophical problem at the poem's center a familiar one: how can the world go on after tragedy? Certainly anyone who has ever wandered through despondency after

a loss, or tasted Hardy's "unhope," can sympathize with poor Miriam. Yet, Ransom approaches the poem's problem with a series of ironies, not to avoid feeling but to avoid sentimentality, that purity of feeling which refuses to concede the validity of other points-of-view.

The poem begins by introducing the "tempest" as a type of persecutor of the earth, wielding "wrathy whips": the earth, to Miriam's mind, is being victimized by the storm. And yet, the earth "shook dry his old back in good season," and, furthermore, the "sun ascended to his dominion." Now, Cleanth Brooks has written that Ransom's wit in general "is characteristically achieved by playing the Latin meaning of a word off against its developed English meaning," and, if we implement this method, and extend it a bit, we'll find this poem in particular much richer. For instance, because "dominion" comes from the Latin *dominus*, or "lord," we find that the sun's coming out offers a metonymic presentation of The Resurrection and The Ascension, as suggested by the verb, "ascended," and the pun on "sun" as "son." The earth undergoes a type of reversal, and all the pertinent ironies—that the slave should become master, that the criminal should be the son of God, that the storm with its "wrathy whips" should be "withered against" the sun's "empyrean"—are beyond Miriam's grasp, as is the irony suggested by the pun on "deflowered" in stanza three. Obviously, the lawn has been stripped of flowers, but the phrasing evokes sexuality, implying that the storm has been a sexual or a generative act. Such an irony suggests creation through destruction, or life through death, and supports all the previous ironies.

The irony that destruction is a type of creation manifests itself again when Miriam finds "the whole world was villain / To prosper when the fragile babes were fallen." For Miriam, the world is a "villain" in the sense that it is wicked; however, the Latin term, *villanus*, from which our word "villain" comes, means "farmer." Miriam finds the world a villain because she does not have the necessary grasp of Time, or what Eliot called the "historical sense," to see the world as a *villanus*, a farmer bringing forth new life out of death. That is: Miriam's

existence is fragmentary; she exists only in the present, and, because she cannot, or does not, see the present as a mere part of the whole of Time, she cannot see how her present pain may be part of a greater movement, just as our culture, which long ago eschewed a study of the classics, has a hard time seeing itself clearly because it sees the present moment in isolation, rather than as part of history.

Indeed, our daily usage of hyperbolic rhetoric manifests this same fragmentation, or failure of hermeneutics: we give more or less ordinary events undue emotional significance because they are not contextualized within the fullness of Time. Put differently, an incident abstracted from Time's progression takes on the character of myth, and, in our attempts to describe a given incident, we must turn, lacking the historical sense, to hyperbolic rhetoric and superlatives in order to represent the quasi-mythic quality resultant from our abstraction. Furthermore, such abstraction too often results in our world, as in Miriam's, in despair, in a belief the world is a "villain"; the individual who abstracts a tragic incident from Time cannot see that incident as part of a fuller motion but can only see it as representative of life, as a manifestation of a type, the bad day as a metonym for everyday, and the incident thus becomes a foundational myth in the individual's understanding of the world. In fact, this temporal myopia of ours, as much as anything, may account for the *affaissement* of Ransom's reputation as a poet; for those who have not studied the cultures of the past, who live in the fragmented present of the moment, the poems may seem as difficult as life seems to Miriam. It is in this sense that Ransom's aesthetic is unified and whole; a full appreciation of his style requires of the reader that historical sense his characters lack, requires the reader to view the present in the context of the past, not in isolation.

Of course, the contemporary reader might be tempted to dismiss Miriam's behavior in this poem as myopic and unrealistically sentimental, were it not for the renaming of the flowers as "fragile babes," which, while indicating Miriam's own overestimation of the flowers' value, also puts in our head a more familiar iteration of the poem's phil-

osophical quandary: how can the world go on and be other than evil when children die? The poem's answer to that question, as to Miriam's implied question, is that creation and destruction are inseparable, each requiring the other. But such a vision of the world is hard-won; it is, in fact, a signal of grave maturity. Interestingly, the birds who seem, like the rest of the world, "villain" to Miriam, sing "demurely." It's worth noting that, etymologically, "demure" comes from the Old French, *mur*, meaning "grave" or "mature." Thus we see that nature, in its continuance, has assumed a mature attitude, while Miriam maintains a type of childish indignation at her loss.

It is Miriam's distance from nature—both nature *qua* nature and nature as human nature: Miriam, like Ransom's "Man Without Sense of Direction" is unable to "fathom or perform [her] nature"—that isolates her. She cannot see how nature, in the fullness of time, resolves its ironies because she is blinded by the fragmented idealism of the "second moment," which would hold the world in stasis, and, when reality interrupts her dream of stasis, she goes "untidy" and "sullen." If we recognize that "untidy" comes to us from the Old English, *tid*, meaning "hour" or "time," and that "sullen" comes to us via the Latin term, *solus*, or "alone," we see that not only did Miriam go about ill-kempt and glum, but she also went about *un-timely* and alone. She is untimely because she refuses to appreciate the Spring, refusing to do so merely because it does not match her ideal of what Spring should be, and she is alone because she is separated from all nature, and from the rest of her community, which goes ahead with its "Suppers and cards" and its "bridals."

But we should be clear that the practice of *kairos* in Ransom, as in Euripides, does not mean a complete denial of the emotions. In fact, the reason Miriam cannot purge herself of her grief and go on with her life as nature goes on after a storm is because she does not wish to be "maudlin," to "unstop her own storm." Because she doesn't understand the relationship between the actual storm and the earth, she refuses to allow herself to weep, an act with the potential to be

regenerative and heal her as the storm, ultimately, heals the earth. This refusal to weep is rooted, seemingly, in the inherited and repressively "genteel" manners which would consider displays of grief bad form, or "maudlin." The irony of the term, "maudlin," is that it derives from "Magdalene," as in Mary Magdalene, who was the first to see Christ after the Resurrection. Had Miriam allowed herself to weep, she would have herself partaken in the ironies of nature and of Christianity—we might call them paradoxes—and would have seen in the storm's passing a re-enactment of the Resurrection, allowing her to participate in the world continuing around her and possibly, given the Christian implications of the poem, to save her own soul through the acknowledgement that the world is not the world as she dreams it. But, until she allows herself to exist as a real human being who must adapt to her circumstances, one who is imperfect and sometimes "maudlin," she cannot be other than alone, for she is an egoist, an idealist unreconciled to the materiality of the world and the passage of time.

Before moving on, we might briefly address some of the seemingly infelicitous language within the poem. Why would Ransom use so much old-timey diction and syntax? Was he just a die-hard Victorian? No. Close inspection reveals those phrases that might seem archaic and out of place, such as "wrathy whips" and "with heart full of flowers," make more sense when we understand the tone of the first stanza, which gently satirizes Miriam's Romantic *Weltanschauung*: that die-hard Victorian worldview that would accept the cloying phraseology of "heart full of flowers" and the archaic "wrathy whips." Ransom is merely using a bit of ventriloquism. As for the stanzas themselves, quatrains slant-rhymed *aaaa*—and often the distance between rhymes is quite substantial—they function as reminders that the year maintains a unity through its four seasons, though each season brings a variation, or change, to the former, just as each of the four lines in a quatrain presents a variation, or change, to the shared sonic unit.

In other words, the tone, diction, syntax, style, and form of the poem work in concert to show the poet's ironic distance from Miriam,

who will not allow for imperfection or change because she clings to a beautiful and Romantic idealism, and yet through the direct address in the second stanza and through the understatement of the poem's conclusion, the poet maintains what G. R. Wasserman calls his "special sympathy for his deluded characters." Indeed, as Richard Tillinghast has noted, "The irony of what Ransom accomplishes by word-choice is similar to what Faulkner does in his fiction, giving us the experience of an educated mind looking down into a simpler world." But Ransom always maintains, while looking at this "simpler world" the "special sympathy" for his characters: he is never smug or vicious in his treatment of them, for to be so would be inconsistent, as smugness and viciousness derive from the very idealism that Ransom criticizes, from the presupposition that everyone should conform to one's own particular vision of the world.

In fact, Ransom is none-too-sure that everyone should take his point of view. He does not want to remake the world in his own image or to deny others the dignity of difference. On the contrary, he avoids the self-righteousness of the pedascule by frequently positioning his speakers as inhabitants of "the world of outer dark," like the speaker in "Dead Boy," combining the speaker's shrewd criticism of others with acute self-awareness to place the reader with the speaker in a philosophical double-bind from which no exit is readily apparent. For example, here's "Janet Waking," one of Ransom's most famous poems:

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

She kisses her father and mother (but not her brother), and leaves the house:

> "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.

A bee has stung Chucky on its bald head, and he dies from its "venom":

> 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.

This poem, which bears at least a familial resemblance to Catullus iii (*Lugete, o Veneres Cupidinesque*), has a lot to recommend it, and it has generally, and rightly, been considered a masterpiece. What I most admire about this poem, however, no critic has yet discussed. It is what I think of as, for lack of more precise critical terms, the poem's triangulation of grief. Now Ransom, like the ancients, generally works by a kind of structural chiasmus, or counterpoint, and here the poem's fundamental counterpoint is between sleeping and waking. The poem establishes three kinds of sleeping, and two kinds of waking. The first sleep is Janet's restful sleep in stanza one; the second is Chucky's sleep of death, and the third sleep is Janet's willful refusal to accept reality, or "how deep / Was the forgetful kingdom of death." That is, the third sleep is the waking dream of innocence. Of course, Janet wakes from the first, and Chucky cannot wake from the second, but the third kind of sleep is of the greatest significance, and the "waking" from this sleep lies at the poem's core. Will Janet accept the reality of death, or will she hide from it? The first stanza establishes the distinction between Janet's physical waking and the awakening from innocence that may or may not ensue by revitalizing a generally boring, well-worn pun: Janet slept her literal sleep until it was "deeply morning," but she also sleeps her sleep of innocence until her desire to cling to the dream of innocence, ironically, leaves her "deeply *mourning*." Is Ransom, then, picking on a little girl? Far from it. Her innocence, like her literal sleep, is beautiful—the poem begins with "Beautifully" to emphasize the fact.

The first stanza also subtly sets up the poem's conclusion by establishing that, on waking from her literal sleep, Janet immediately remembers to think of Chucky. On the contrary, Chucky, as a subject in the "kingdom of death" can remember nothing; and, poignantly, the poem suggests that Janet's parents are also "forgetful" subjects in the "kingdom of death," as all mature persons are, insofar as we daily forget the visceral horror of death and, to paraphrase Frost, because we are not the ones dead, turn to our affairs. This turn of the screw, suggesting at once the pain Janet endures because of her innocence and the brutal "forgetfulness" of experience, sets us in the philosophical double-bind where Ransom wants us. If we retain the sleep of innocence, and will not be instructed in "how deep" is "the forgetful kingdom of death," we are, in some sense, asleep to reality, never fully alive but always children; on the other hand, if we are instructed in the depth of death's kingdom, if we have lost our innocence and become adults, we are asleep in another sense, dead to the pathos of being and the *lacrimae rerum*, we who say "forget about it; it's just a hen" or can muster no more response to death than to say, with the mourners in "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter," that we are "vexed." In this last sense, naïve as she may be, Janet is more alive than the rest of her family, and the line break after "weeping fast as she had breath" subtly emphasizes this distinction, suggesting she has a living *spiritus* that the others do not, a suggestion furthered by the metonymic alignment of knowledge and death, brought out by the verbs "communicate" and "translated" in reference to Chucky's death. (This metonym points up the dramatic significance of Janet's "listening" for Chucky: the knowledge of death is the whispering of nothingness, a language she cannot literally hear and will not figuratively hear.) The poem's predicament, then, if we simplify, is a standard one in Ransom: both the Romantic who lives in dreams and the Naturalist who lives without dreams live half-lives, as both discard *kairos* for an idea of the world, the first moment for the second.

Living in Tennessee in the 1920s, the period during which almost all of his poems were written, Ransom saw himself surrounded, as Faulkner did, on the one hand by Romantic neo-Confederates and disciples of the "moonlight-and-magnolias" school who sought to deny the present, and on the other hand by a general tendency in American culture toward consumerism, decadence, and that Naturalistic despair, so prevalent in Dreiser, that sought to deny the past. Over and again, Ransom's poems address these extreme positions and encourage *sophrosyne*, the *aurea mediocritas*, circumspection, and the psychic flexibility of timeliness. In addressing his time's dominant philosophical positions—extreme positions still, *mutatis mutandis*, the dominant ones in our culture today—Ransom subtly and gently holds these positions up against traditional values for contrast, as we have seen in "Miriam Tazewell."

In "Janet Waking," this contrast is established by the figure of Chucky, who at first blush appears to be as real a hen as any strutting around a wheelbarrow in William Carlos Williams, but who also serves as an echo, recalling the grand tradition of bird poems from Alcman's *Kerylos* and Horace ii.20 down through Bryant, Keats, Shelley, Hardy, and Frost. That is, Chucky serves as a figure for the Romantic idealism of Janet's innocence: Chucky's death is the death of Janet's idealistic innocence, and the prompt for her waking to the brave new world of adulthood. In fact, flocks of these Romantic fowl wing through Ransom's poems, so we might do well to address them.

"Lady Lost" provides a kind of key. In that poem, "a timid lady bird" appears in the birdbath outside the speaker's window and "eye[s] her image dolefully as death." As the poem goes on, the bird is described as a "delicate brown-eyed lady" and a "fine woman." Whether the figure is an actual bird or an actual woman remains ambiguous until the poem's conclusion, in which the speaker says: "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." These playful lines suggest that the bird the speaker encounters is an actual bird, with an "owner," but is a bird only because a lady was transformed into a bird by grief in the Ovidian manner of metamorphosis.

Such a transformation makes more sense when we recall that one of Ransom's earliest important poems is about Philomela, who was transformed, according to Ovid, into the nightingale to escape the cruelty of her brother-in-law, Tereus. While birds have long been associated with a kind of Romantic freedom—by Alcman, Horace, Keats, Shelley, Lynyrd Skynyrd, et al.—Ransom's poems, taken as a whole, imply that such transformations are, in their attempt to escape the human grief concomitant with existing in time, their own type of doom, as they separate a man or woman from the "right home and right passion" of human beings. To become a bird is to become all body (Naturalism), and the desire for such a transformation belongs exclusively to the mind's idealization (Romanticism). Indeed, Ransom suggests that Romanticism and Naturalism are flip-sides of the same coin, as both are Manichean attempts to flee from the complexity of human existence into a kind of purity, and, understandable as this desire is for those in distress, Ransom echoes Aristophanes' *The Birds* in satirizing the escapism that informs our desire to inhabit the spotless realms of cloud-cuckoo-land.

That is, the bird/woman of "Lady Lost" places us in Ransom's characteristic double-bind. She is, as a bird, isolated and lonely, and she has been transformed into a bird by human cruelty; while her returning to whoever has "injured some fine woman in some dark way" would return her to humanity, it would also return her to a vicious relationship. In different terms, this same predicament informs the "two evils" of Ransom's "Winter Remembered": "A cry of Absence, Absence in the heart, / And in the wood the furious winter blowing." In both cases, the character must choose between the lonely freedom of the Romantic and the solidarity in pain of the Naturalist. There is no panacea, no cloud-cuckoo-land, no heaven on earth. There is always

discomfort, imperfection, and pain. To accept this is to accept the danger of living in time, of *kairos*, and, as Ransom, in "Old Man Playing with Children," writes, "This life is not good but in danger and in joy." Rather than having us hide in ideal realms, Ransom would have us summon the courage to live in time, would have us reconcile ourselves to human imperfection and mortality, for only through such heroic humility can we find joy, as we must first acknowledge the dilemma of human imperfection before we can work to assuage the suffering it causes. Denial cures nothing. We must accept that we exist in time. The alternatives to *kairos*, as Ransom puts them in the famous "Blue Girls," are to "think no more of what will come to pass / Than bluebirds that go walking on the grass / And chattering on the air," or to become a cynic like the "lady with a terrible tongue."

In their lack of *kairos*, we should be clear, the male characters in Ransom come off no better than the female characters. Although we have looked mostly at poems with female characters, the male characters in "Winter Remembered," "Dead Boy," "Necrological," "Tom, Tom, The Piper's Son," and many more suffer from the same idealism, and are similarly treated. Moreover, in poems where male and female characters appear together, as in "Spectral Lovers," "Vaunting Oak," "Good Ships," and "The Equilibrists," a mirrored and mutual idealism keeps the lovers apart. And it is Ransom's recognition of idealism in men and women, taking the alternate forms of Romanticism and Naturalism, that makes his poems so enduringly relevant. If the dominant strain of American poetry runs, as Harold Bloom says, through the Romantic idealism of Emerson, Whitman, Crane, and Stevens, Ransom offers us a contrary voice, a voice that is not contrary because it rejects idealism outright, but is contrary because it is a humble and circumspect voice that calls us to harmonize our inner lives with the world outside us, an American voice that is also Classical. While his meters, like his subject matter, are definitively Modern, Ransom the poet placed the tradition upon his back and carried it into the new world, as Aeneas carried Anchises, and as Vergil carries Homer, Dante

Vergil, and Eliot Dante. That is, Ransom is a consummate poet: he is deeply traditional, and there is no other poet in any language quite like him—he is wholly "original," necessary, and inimitable.

Consequently, the publication of *The Collected Poems of John Crowe Ransom* should be a cause for celebration. A quarto bound in handsome forest-green boards, printed in a pleasantly legible Garamond font on sturdy paper, the book has a dignity of appearance worthy of the occasion; moreover, Ben Mazer has deftly negotiated between the lay-reader's desire for tidiness and the academic's desire for thoroughness, allowing the poems themselves to stand uncluttered by notes while including separate sections, toward the back of the book, for distinct versions of poems and for textual variants. Mr. Mazer has also generously included some helpful appendices, which include Ransom's introduction to his first volume, *Poems About God* (1919), Ransom's prefaces to his first two separate *Selected* volumes, as well as Ransom's preface and commentary on several poems from his final *Selected* volume and a listing of the contents of each of the several *Selected* volumes. In short, the book is both eminently readable and meticulously thorough, dodging the cumbersome presentation typical of variorum editions without foregoing a punctilious scholarly apparatus. Certainly, lay-readers and scholars alike, both of the present and of the future, owe Mr. Mazer a debt of gratitude for his formidable editorial achievement.

On the other hand, while we admire the Un-Gyve Press greatly for its hand in publishing this long-overdue volume, we cannot say the same for its distribution. The book is not available on Amazon, which will certainly diminish sales, and the Web site for the press itself is a Kafka-esque nightmare, a futuristic labyrinth with more than a little of the *Unheimlich* about it, page after page leading nowhere while forever repeating the more-or-less irrelevant fact that Christopher Ricks is the literary advisor to the press. Attempting to buy the book from the press Web site, one begins to suspect that the Un-Gyve Press is not located in Boston, as purported, but in some unattainable and ferly castle run by

a vertiginously complex bureaucracy of cackling hackers somewhere on a dark mountaintop in farthest Bavaria. Surely, the Web site's design was intended to be "intuitive," but, in fact, it is so baffling and so exasperating that I know of at least one poet whose quest to buy the book was thwarted entirely, and who is, I suspect, in danger of awakening any day now as a gigantic insect.

Still, the volume is well worth the effort. And although its cost may seem somewhat high, I've personally spent far more money over the years in collecting the individual volumes, and I've never made enough money to buy a decent copy of the extremely rare *Poems About God*. While those first poems are not up to Ransom's standard brilliance—hence their being entirely omitted from all Ransom's *Selected* volumes—there are scattered moments, as in "Grace," a poem about a hired man dying in the fields, that contain the seeds of Ransom's mature style, and their availability will certainly prove helpful to scholars of the future. Moreover, this volume's restoration of much-admired poems that Ransom never saw fit to include in his *Selected* volumes, such as "Amphibious Crocodile" and "Little Boy Blue," should offer fresh pleasures even to those in possession of a *Selected Poems*, and the gathering of seventeen previously uncollected poems—including "The House," a 1918 sonnet that seems clearly to adumbrate Ransom's comments on the first and second "moments"—should excite devotees, even if no masterpiece is among them. What's more, Ben Mazer's helpful introduction, a discussion of Ransom's revision process, coupled with the meticulous appendices, provides both novices and initiates with an enchiridion to aid any exploration of the great maker's mind.

As Mazer notes in his introduction, most of Ransom's mature work was written within a span of three years. That is, in three years, he turned out ten or fifteen of the best lyric poems of the twentieth century, a creative feat unparalleled in modernity except by Rimbaud and Rilke. And if Ransom's *Collected Poems* does not, in the end, wind up on shelves next to Wyatt, Campion, Marvell, and Mother Goose, the volume certainly deserves a place next to Hardy, Frost, Stevens, Moore,

Larkin, and Bishop on the shelves of any reader interested in the best lyric poetry of the twentieth century. If the young generation is ever going to return to poetry as a serious art, the poems of John Crowe Ransom cannot be neglected, and the time to appreciate their many splendors is now.