John Crowe Ransom | A study of the literary strategy in his poems

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JOHN CROWE RANSOM:
A STUDY OF THE LITERARY STRATEGY IN HIS POEMS

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B.A., Portland State College, 1965
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[Signatures]
Chairman, Board of Examiners
Dean, Graduate School

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INTRODUCTION

John Crowe Ransom's poetry is generally considered small in scope, minor in importance, poignantly sweet, and of high technical interest. These characteristics are apt, but limited. A broader appreciation of Ransom's poetry can be achieved through analysis of his literary strategy. In an interesting essay devoted to making distinctions between poetry and prose, Robert Heilman notes that "...the poem is a kind of verbal drama, in which the images (and everything else used by the poet—rhymes, connotations, etc.) play their part like actors on a stage." In one of his later essays, Ransom discusses the integration


2 Alan Tate, "For John Crowe Ransom at Seventy-Five," Shenandoah, XIX, (Spring, 1963), 8; C. Matthiessen, 401. Knight, p. 116.


of these parts into an artistic whole:

A Universal...is any idea in the mind which proposes a little universe, or organized working combination of parts, where there is a whole and single effect to be produced, and the heterogeneous parts must perform their several duties faithfully in order to bring it about... It becomes a Concrete Universal when it has been materialized and is actually working.6

This "whole and single effect to be produced" of which Ransom speaks can be defined as the proposition of the poem. The parts which create "the whole and single effect" can be analyzed in terms of Ransom's categories of structure and texture which he articulates throughout The New Criticism.7 The structure of a poem is composed of those elements which promote the poem's logical and discursive development. It is the part of the poem that may be accurately paraphrased. The texture of the poem is the quality that eludes paraphrase. It is not completely relevant to the poem's logical achievement. Its appeal is non-discursive. Under each of these categories may be assigned four important strategic devices:

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7 (Norfolk, Conn., 1941), passim.
For the sake of brevity, omitted here are, among other less important strategic devices, rhyme, subject, situation, and order of events. Although Ransom would not agree point by point with this listing, he probably would agree with the general approach: in one of his more direct moments in *The New Criticism* he says that "To define the structure-texture procedure of poets, is to define poetic strategy, the last and rarest gift that is given to poets." The effect of this "last and rarest gift" is logically and, more important, emotionally, what I choose to call a rhetorical victory over the reader: an acceptance by the reader of the rhetorical propositions of the poem. That is to say, the modulation of structure and texture is the rhetorical machinery of the poems which carries the ideas and attitudes which the poet wishes to express in an earned and persuasive fashion to the reader.

This paper will discuss these eight technical devices in turn in order to demonstrate their individual strategic effectiveness within Ransom's better known poems of acknowledged impact. This separation is arbitrary, but it creates a critical structure which may lead to insights which might not otherwise be made. In order to counteract this necessary, though arbitrary, fragmentation, the final section of this paper will be devoted to an intensive analysis of *Janet Waking*.

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in an attempt to demonstrate how the technical devices work together in the modulations of texture and structure toward a poetic Concrete Universal.
I

PERSONA

The structural elements of a poem are those employed for essentially, though not wholly, logical appeal: their functions are largely discursive; they tend to impose control on the poem's texture. In Ransom's poems, one of the most effective of these structural devices is the careful use of his personae. These personae vary so little from poem to poem that their special qualities and strategic contributions may be considered homogeneous without over-generalization. Ransom's speaker has been called variously "a responsible human being,"9 "an observer rather than a participant,"10 "a sympathetic but somewhat obtuse observer,"11 "a disinterested yet concerned observer."12 Of these definitions, Warren's and Koch's are most to the point: the speaker's concern and sense of human responsibility are the major ingredients in his ethos. In Ransom's most famous poem, Bell's for

11 Stewart, p. 30.
John Whiteside's Daughter, the speaker conveys the shock of sudden stillness of something that was always moving. In doing this he shows his concern with his tender opening line. Further, he demonstrates his human responsibility through his ability to penetrate sympathetically the girl's point-of-view in the middle three stanzas of the poem, as well as the adult point-of-view in the framing stanzas. This gives the reader both sides of the experience important to the poem (i.e., the dead girl's and the neighbors' at the funeral). This breadth of perspective combined with mature tenderness heightens the reader's trust in the speaker's assertions.

One-sided presentations often do not succeed. James Dickey's Springer Mountain is a good example: lacking a broad perspective to provide balance, the poem is finally a sentimental and somewhat embarrassing self-dramatization. The broad ethos of Ransom's speakers never permits anything like this to happen. The reader is rarely, if ever, tempted to say, "That's interesting, but..." because he is led to an easier identification with the speaker. This is a fait accompli on Ransom's part: considering Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter again, would we, in isolation, identify with a speaker who is merely vexed at a child's death?

13 Selected Poems, (New York, 1964). References to Ransom's poems will be from this text unless otherwise noted.

14 Poems 1957-1967, (Middletown, Conn., 1967), p. 130. (Even Dickey, soldier, sportsman, poet, is a bit embarrassed when he reads this poem, and is quick to point out that he "never really hunted deer like that.")
The detachment of Ransom's speakers from the situations they describe is important to the establishment of the logos: it permits the personae a broader use of the intellect than would be permissable were they directly involved in the poem's situations. In Dead Boy, for example, the logical statement about the dynastic importance of the boy's death could not be, and is not made by any of the country kin. Even the preacher and the foolish neighbors only utter cliches. Ransom's speaker, however, with his detachment and intelligence which allow perception of the larger importance of the boy's death, can say:

But this was the old tree's late branch wrenched away,
Grieving the sapless limbs, the shorn and shaken.

Being from the world of outer dark permits his irony which, as Knight points out, in turn allows the complexity by not forcing the speaker "to take sides."15 The reader receives the impression that the complexity of the situation has been matched by the complexity of the speaker's observations: a solid base upon which logical acceptance of the poem's propositions is built.

The irony which is the foundation for the speaker's complex vision is not a sustained or militant irony. As Warren elucidates concerning Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter, "such a savage irony...is, in a sense, a meaningless irony if left in its pure state, because it depends on a mechanical, accidental contrast in nature, void of moral

15 P. 19.
Instead of this raw and sustained irony, Ransom mixes his irony with genuine human concern and feeling. This "impurity" forms the foundation of the pathos of Ransom's speakers. In Blue Girls, for instance, the speaker is not simply content with the irony that human beauty is transient although the girls don't know it: he is decrying the irony. As Koch explains: "The line of relationship between the girls' untested beauty and the poet's superior experience of beauty which is dimmed is, again, a human one." A strict ironist, unless he is a satirist, which Ransom is not, when dealing with human universals like mortality, must appear a misanthrope. The thesis of such an ironist might be something like, "Men are fools for living." Ransom, and more important here, his personae, effectively counter such assertions through their wide sympathy. In Here Lies a Lady the speaker, with deep irony, depicts the foolishness of the dead lady's way of life. Yet, point by point, this irony is countered with a sympathetic rendering of the lady's point-of-view: was she not lucky? As the title poem of Chills and Fever, Here Lies a Lady subtly comments on Ransom's technique of mixing the ironic (fever) with the sympathetic (chills). This mixing makes both the ironic and the pathetic more poignant. In turn, the speaker's appeal to emotion is heightened.

16 "Pure," 238.

17 252.
In addition to fulfilling the central appeals of classical rhetoric, the special qualities of Ransom's personae direct, among the structural elements in the poems, point-of-view, diction, and metrics. This is obvious: if it were not so the poems would be full of sloppy, detracting, and ineffective inconsistencies. More important, Ransom's personae lead the structure as a whole in controlling the texture. The speaker's objectivity, sympathy, and irony aid much in the control of tone: they keep it from becoming either harsh or maudlin. Instance Blue Girls again: it is a delicate, twirling poem where the slightest imbalance of tone toward irony or pity would make the speaker seem, respectively, sadistic or doting, and cause the poem to be anything but the genteel "gather ye rosebuds" statement that it is.

The speaker's shadow over the imagery is similarly important. He cushions the irrelevance of the imagery by making it appropriate to his stance. In The Equilibrists the images of flesh (jacinth, myrrh, ivory, quaint orifices, white field ready for love, lilies, flowers, male and female tissue) could give the poem quite different directions, were it not for the somewhat chivalric stance of the speaker to which they are tempered.

In turn, the inferential speaker modifies the subjects of the poems by providing a contrast with them and by emphasizing their important aspect. In Blue Girls the girls themselves are richly suggestive, (especially of sexuality which is too strong for the poem) but the speaker with his imperatives (go, tie, think, practice) and
his practical wisdom contrasts with them and points out their naivete—one of their two qualities important to the poem. The other quality, beauty, is emphasized by the speaker's attitudes embodied by twirling and blue birds in addition to his statements, Practice your beauty and lovelier. Again, peripheral qualities suggested about the blue girls (e.g. is their main purpose in school to prepare them to marry blue boys?) are not denied—they are underplayed by the speaker's emphasis in other directions.

The relationship of Ransom's personae to tension in the poems is complex. The presence of the speakers helps create tension and simultaneously helps control it. This is most obvious in Piazza Piece where a dialogue takes place between Ransom's persona (who has undergone some symbolic alterations which will be discussed in the analysis of imagery) and one of the naifs so ubiquitous in Ransom's poems. The grim sophistication of the gentleman in a dustcoat highly contrasts with the naivete of the lady young. This creates an ironic dramatic tension: a low key Dionysus-Pentheus relationship which is low key because of the gentleman's ability to sympathize with the lady young's naive point-of-view. His understatement, trying, is a deep, but quiet

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18 In Selected Poems (1964) only nine poems are without at least an implied naif: Winter Remembered, Agitato Ma Non Troppo, Prometheus in Straits, Judith of Bethulia, Somewhere is Such a Kingdom, Old Man Pondered, Survey of Literature, What Ducks Require, and Painted Head.
irony, and a fine example of how tension can be engendered and re-
gulated by the same literary device.

The relationship between Ransom's personae and ambiguity in the
poems is also complex. The personae create ambiguity in two ways. First,
the nature of the personae "doth tease us out of thought" in that we
can ascertain some of their qualities, but, since they are from the world
of outer dark, not as many as we would like. In Here Lies a Lady, for
example, the speaker is obviously close to the situation, but it is
difficult to determine how close. Further, in that poem, we cannot
determine whether the speaker is an older or younger man. The second
manner by which ambiguity is created by the personae would probably
fall within the limits of Empson's fourth type of ambiguity: where
one detail has two or more meanings which do not agree very well.¹⁹
That is, if the speaker in Here Lies a Lady were a younger man the
irony would appear harsher than if the speaker were older and possessed
a broader point-of-view to buffer the irony. In this poem the speaker
seems older, but we never can be sure. The quality of seems is how
the structural device of the speaker controls the textural device of
ambiguity without destroying its delicate tissue of irrelevance. That
is, this sense of seeming supports the logical uniformity of the poem
without impairing the poem's heterogeneity of possibilities.

¹⁹ William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity, (Great Britain, 1947),
argues the possibility that the speaker in Blue Girls is a woman!)
As a strategic device, then, Ransom's generalized speaker contributes to the unity of the poems by aiding in the control of irrelevant texture and possesses the three primary appeals of classical rhetoric. The calm reasonableness of the speaker makes it easy for the reader to identify with him. This identification quietly encourages the reader to accept his conclusions. In fine, Ransom uses his personae with precision to great strategic effectiveness.
Another important structural device is Ransom's brilliant use of rapidly shifting point-of-view. A large part of the strategic impact of his device parallels that found in the discussions of breadth of vision as an ingredient in the logos, and the range of emotion as integral in the pathos of Ransom's personae in Section I. The point-of-view belongs to the speaker of the poem; only the final gestalt assertion belongs to the poet. Further, the rapidly shifting point-of-view, in addition to contributing to the speaker's ethos, elevates the general emotional force of the poem. *Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter* is a significant example. The poem is a catalogue of the kinds of emotions one feels at a funeral: a universal human ritual which formalizes one's feelings about death and provides a kind of ritualistic control over death. The first two stanzas are directed from the speaker's adult point-of-view—from the high window. The first stanza, with typical adult tenderness toward children, describes the little girl's childlike energy and grace and sets up the major irony in the poem with the astonishment we feel about her brown study. As Warren notes: "...a phrase which denies, as it were, the finality of the situation, underplays the pathos, and merely reminds one of those moments of childish pensiveness into
which grown-ups cannot penetrate." The second stanza tells us of
the girl's games and begins the shift toward sympathy with her point-
of-view. The description of the energetic wars she wages in her own
world "among the orchard trees and beyond" is an adult one, but more
familiar and childlike in tone than that in the first stanza. The
use of beyond is interesting: it is a metaphysical word, in the
philosophical sense, which hints that the girl's understanding of
her mortal position in the universe is somehow deeper than that of
adults, who can only view mortality through high windows. This reading
is consistent with the images of war (especially against her shadow
which becomes, metaphysically, more than just a fine irony) and under
the skies. If this is the case, then the shift from the adult to
the childlike point-of-view is anything but a condescension on the
part of the speaker.

*Harried unto the pond* makes the transition to the third and fourth
stanzas which are described completely from the childlike point-of-view.
The world which is described in these stanzas is not merely the charming,
dainty, idealized, and conventionalized world of a seemingly tireless
little girl. There is a very subdued sense of the ominous in it
which the child apparently realized (snow cloud, tricking, proud,
Alas, scuttle). The shift in point-of-view is a move toward understanding

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20 "Pure," 238.

21 This fine insight was made by Professor Stanley Radhuber of
Portland State College in a conversation about Ransom and Hart Crane.
the complexities of the child's reality which, finally, she has experienced more deeply than the extant adults. **Under the skies is the limitation of the vision of the adult—not the child.**

The final stanza begins with the bells, and the speaker's thoughts are snapped back to the reality of the situation. The point-of-view is abruptly shifted back to the adult. The speaker is sternly stopped and ready because he has succeeded, through the framework of the funeral, in ritualizing his emotions. This permits his understated grief and, as Warren points out, "*vexed becomes the ritualistic, the summarizing word.*"²² This completes a modulation in viewpoint from the adult, to the childlike, and back to the adult; or, more precisely, from the speaker's view to deep reminiscent sympathy with the deceased child's view, and back to the speaker's involvement in his present situation. The sudden juxtapositions of shock, nostalgia, and understated grief elevate the emotional impact of each of these feelings—they are, so to speak, honed against each other to create a greater individual poignance. I vividly recall sensing this after my first reading of the poem when my emotions had been jogged by the shifts in point-of-view, and the delicate ironies throughout the poem had been deftly crystallized by lying so primly propped.

A poem that fails singularly in this regard is Anne Sexton's *The Addict* where the point-of-view is too personal and too homogeneously

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²² "*Pure!" 240.
sustained. The reader is somewhat put-upon by this insistent literary exhibitionism. Sister Madeline DeFrees has a theory about the translation of personal experience into other terms in poetry in order to present the genuine emotion of the personal experience in a context that the reader will accept. Ransom seems to have done this. In preface to a reading at Portland State College in October, 1966, Ransom said that his poems are "rarely autobiographical." I suspect, however, that the feelings and attitudes in the poems are precisely "autobiographical;" only the literary forms in which they are presented are not; he has translated his experience into more acceptable terms.

As a device within the logical structure of the poems, point-of-view helps in the control of the textural elements. As implicit in the above discussion of Shells, point-of-view is highly instrumental in the control of tone. Indeed, the major ironies in the poems are achieved through "the manipulation of point of view." In any one of Ransom's mature poems, the slightest imbalance of tone could make its final flavor either romantically syrupy or "modernly" harsh ("What are all those fish that lie gasping on the strand?") instead of the firm

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but genteel stance that he is so fond of achieving. In *Here Lies a Lady*, for example, the tone is vigorously shifted within the first two lines:

Here lies a lady of beauty and high degree,  
Of chills and fever she died, of fever and chills...

The first line has measure and decorum fitting its epitaph content; it is elevated and dignified. The second line, with its "jaunty rhythm...playfully makes the illness sound like a jig." This initial rapid juggling of the tone indicates that probably neither tone will sound the closing diapason of the poem which, in fact, it does not: the "six little spaces of chill, and six of burning" contains something of both the mocking and the straight.

In a similar fashion, Ransom's use of point-of-view directs and modifies imagery. In *Dead Boy* the irrelevance of the imagery in isolation from the remaining elements in the poem is extravagant:

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25 John M. Bradbury, "Ransom as Poet," *Accent*, XI, (Winter, 1951), 52, sums up this quality: "In its broadest aspect this personal flavor has been described by various critics as: 'wrinkled laughter' (Morley), 'acid gaiety' (Van Doren), 'detached, mock-pedantic,' 'wittily complicated' (Jarrell), 'ambiguous and unhappy' (Winters), 'suave,' 'mixed,' or simply 'ironic.' All these epithets are justifiable with the exception of the 'unhappy,' which the poetic aloofness immediately disallows. (It is just this aloofness, by the way, which lifts Ransom's poetry above the sense of personal desperation which the poetry of his fellow-Fugitives, Tate, and Warren, are [sic] likely to exhibit.)"

26 Fred H. Stocking, "Ransom's 'Here Lies a Lady'", *The Explicator*, VIII, (October, 1949), 1. I am further indebted to Mr. Stocking for many insights into the poems that I gleaned in his class, as well as for much of my general literary and critical inspiration.
to cite just the images of the boy, little cousin; green bough from Virginia's aged tree; boy not beautiful, nor good, nor clever; black cloud full of storms; sword beneath his mother's heart; pig with a pasty face; little man quite dead; first fruits; late branch. In terms of the local particularity of the details, boughs, clouds, swords, pigs and fruit have nothing to do with the boy. To that degree they are irrelevant, but the structure emphasizes their especially appropriate qualities as it counterpoints their contradictions. Point-of-view plays its part in this control by indicating its shifts with a bluntness befitting the poems' title:

A sword beneath his mother's heart—yet never
Woman bewept her babe as this is weeping.

A pig with a pasty face, so I had said,
Squealing for cookies, kinned by poor pretense...

These rapid transitions, in this case from cliché sentimentality to narrative brutality, do not give the imagery enough time to steal off with the poem and, on the surface, the structural shifting point-of-view is more dramatic than the textural images. This judgment is a bit unfair to the images, of course, because they are involved in their own undoing since they support the diction and meter in indicating the shifts. However, once the structure has settled the imagery in its place by giving it the desired emphasis, then the imagery can happily return to its textural character of suggesting its inherent, irrelevant associations.

Further, the point-of-view directs the images by giving them shapes fitting the shifting tone. In other words, the pressure of
the point-of-view modifies the imagery. This is illustrated with clarity in The Equilibrists:

7  At length I saw these lovers fully were come
    Into their torture of equilibrium:
    Dreadfully had forsworn each other, and yet
    They were bound each to each, and they did not forget.

8  And rigid as two painful stars, and twirled
    About the clustered night their prison world,
    They burned with fierce love always to come near,
    But Honor beat them back and kept them clear.

9  Ah, the strict lovers, they are ruined now!

The central image in stanza eight is that of binary stars in an "equilibristic" relationship with each other, but in isolation from the rest of the universe. Ransom is after the associations of torturing, though necessary, balance (the kind of torture Orpheus felt leading Eurydice out of hell), and a quality of "untouchableness" concerning ourselves (we are warned about this in the Epitaph) as well as the lovers. The metaphor itself has myriad associations: scientific, astrological, romantic. The point-of-view helps the diction, meter, and speaker focus this irrelevance along the general lines of the tone. Stanza seven mirrors mildly sympathetic objectivity and distance of the poem's preceding stanzas. This stanza also begins a move toward greater sympathy with the lovers' predicament (torture, dreadfully), pointing to a shift in point-of-view in stanza eight in addition to stressing balance and distance. Though more distant, stanza eight is significantly more sympathetic with the lovers' point-of-view (rigid, painful, prison, burned) and increases this intensity of involvement
through the strong monosyllabic last line. This energy is carried into the speaker's direct statement in the first line of the following stanza. The high emotion accompanying the shift in tone, from the sympathetically objective to the sympathetically involved, pushes through the desired print of the image without denying, but underemphasizing, its corollary associations. (In fact, as I get to know this poem better, I sense that this image implicitly indicts both romanticism and scientism for the torture these lovers must endure. I hope this is an example of the richness of irrelevance, rather than an example of my own free-association.)

We see then that point-of-view in Ransom's poetry has a close relationship with textural tension. The shifting viewpoints do more to build tension than to direct it. Shifts in point-of-view create tension by creating friction between the intellectual and emotional structures which keeps suspended the final resolution or closing tone of the poem. For example, in Bells, the shifting tone has distinctly set up the adult and childlike points-of-view by the fourth stanza. In the first line of stanza five we find tireless heart deep within the childlike point-of-view. In terms of the poem's intellectual structure, the phrase is appropriate in that it characterizes the child's seemingly ceaseless activity (speed, took arms, harried). In the emotional structure, however, the phrase is contradictory because the child has died. This friction, then, creates an ironic tension—the variety of tension most typical of Ransom's poetry.
Point-of-view controls over this tension by not allowing it to be homogeneously sustained. Rather than maintaining one dominant tension in the poem, the shifting point-of-view creates and successively fragments smaller tensions. Again, in *Dells*, the details (the adults are astonished; the girl wages war; the geese dripped snow; they tricked, stopped, cried alas; and they scuttled) create tension as the intellectual and emotional structures of the poem rub around them. Further, these tensions are ironic tensions. The point is that they are not the same ironic tension, nor do they fuse into a solid irony. They may hover around a general central irony, but they remain heterogeneous nonetheless. If this were not the case, then the resultant sustained irony would be meaningless (as we previously noted in Warren's observation.27).

That Ransom would permit a meaningless irony to remain in one of his carefully created and selected poems is doubtful, but that he would create ambiguous ironies is certain. Point-of-view assists in both the development and regulation of these textural ambiguities. The nature of the point-of-view itself is often ambiguous. In *Here Lies a Lady*, the point-of-view can be taken two ways: (1) as pure irony; or (2) as mixed irony and sympathy. There has been much commentary on this poem that neatly illustrates this ambiguity. Bradbury takes the point-of-view in the first sense: "The question [was she not lucky?]"

27 "pure," 238.
is, of course, tipped with the same barb, but this time the easy geniality is the disguise...The whole flavor of this passage, and Ransom manages many like it, is that of a social game played by a perfectly mannered gentleman on a sophisticated level just above that of his audience. William Bleifuss makes a similar reading: "The ironical inquiry in the last stanza, impossible to answer either yes or no, serves to warn other sweet ladies that they would do well to open their eyes and wash out some of the romantic dust clinging to their sickly blooms." Stocking, however, makes a reading accordant with the second sense: "These occasional light touches in the speaker's manner or pose (as distinct from his basic feeling) do not satirize the lady, but they do enable the speaker to suggest that he knows there can be other attitudes than his own; he says, in effect: 'Despite my genuine grief and my deep respect for the lady's values, I understand that it might be possible to regard the lady as an inconsequential creature whose death was as cluttered with pointless activity as her life had been.'" Ellsworth Mason confirms this reading: "Having almost openly revealed his emotions in stanza 3, the speaker immediately covers them up in line one of stanza 4...The question in line 2 is completely ironic. The poem ends, as it began, with a contrast between the richness

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28 P. 54.
30 P. 1.
of the lady's life and the seeming triviality of her disease." All of these readings are made with good justification. The latter two seem most conclusive, but the former are certainly allowable. More important, none of these readings occasioned by ambiguous points-of-view ruins the poem. This is due largely to the limitations imposed on the ambiguity by the point-of-view: the limitations of permissible ambiguity which keep poems from becoming calligraphic Rorschachs.

In Here Lies a Lady, for instance, the point-of-view forbids sentimental or romantic readings as it simultaneously permits ambiguity.

The strategic effectiveness of point-of-view as a structural device, then, lies in its elevation of the emotional impact in a poem, and in its modification of textural elements. Most characteristic of Ransom's use of point-of-view is the rapid shifting he employs. In this regard, Ransom stands behind the poems like a theater technician rapidly casting different intensities and colors of stage-lights on the various actors in his brief but poignant dramas.

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III
DICTION

Although Ransom's use of rapidly shifting point-of-view is distinctive, his broad and precise use of diction is even more individual. In fact, it is probably Ransom's most distinguished characteristic as a poet. There is no lack of critical epithets for his diction. It has been variously described as "refined colloquialism," "dandyism of surface," "mock grand style," "protective rhetoric," "biblical," "old fashioned country expression," "mocking and monumental," "medieval," "Miltonic," "elegant surface," and "pluralism of treatment," to mention a few. That these epithets are all, each in

32 Koch, p. 228.
33 Schwartz, p. 440.
34 Ibid., p. 440.
36 Matthiessen, p. 400.
37 Ibid., p. 400.
38 Stauffer, p. 428.
39 Ibid., p. 428.
41 Stewart, p. 20.
its own way, appropriate, indicates both the striking use and wide range of Ransom's diction. A complete discussion of the range of this unique diction is well beyond the scope of his paper. However, the general importance of this wide range is twofold. First, it provides a universality of appeal within the continuum of English literature. Second, it provides evidence of and a basis for deep language appreciation. The strategic importance of these two qualities will be discussed below.

Ransom's striking use of diction is more germane to our purpose here. Strategically, beyond its influence on textural elements, Ransom's diction does five important things: (1) it creates surprise; (2) it yields logical and emotional precision; (3) it provides distance and irony; (4) it enhances universality; and (5) it affords and evidences language appreciation. The first quality, surprise, functions rhetorically by pulling literary stunts and calling attention to the diction. A literary stunt is not a frivolous achievement. It may be achieved in many different ways. For example, Hopkins' great line, "Thrush eggs look little low heavens," is phenomenal for its compression and its accuracy. It is a literary stunt. Ransom often executes these stunts with his diction:

"The little cousin is dead, by foul subtraction."
(Dead Boy)

"But strange apparatus was it for a Carmelite."
(Necrological)

"Sweet ladies long may ye bloom, and toughly I hope ye may thole."
(Here Lies a Lady)
"It goes not liquidly for us."
(Philomela)

"And a blade shook between his rotten teeth alack."
(Captain Carpenter)

"Were strange in the leathery phiz of the old campaigner—"
(Puncture)

"Rehearses his pink paradium, to yap."
(Dog)

"And best bodiness to colorify!"
(Painted Head)

The effectiveness of these stunts of diction lies in the appropriateness of the highly unusual words combined with the surprising heterogeneity of their appearance. Neimierov uses similar diction in "Runes," but in a sustained fashion with ponderous and boring effect. The result of Ransom's stunts, to the contrary, is spice and vigor in the poems; and, like the spontaneity of a magician's stunt, cajoles the reader into sympathy with the poem.

Second, Ransom's diction yields logical and emotional precision to the poems. Considering the following lines in Dead Boy,

The elder men have strode by the box of death
To the wide flag porch, and muttering low send round
The bruit of the day. 0 friendly waste of breath!

Matthiessen says, "And where the archaic unfamiliar 'bruit' is by its very familiarity made to release its full store, not only the 'rumors'
of the day, but the very breath and sound of the old men voicing them."\(^{45}\)

A similar effect is achieved in Ransom's use of capital in his "modern poem," Painted Head. Knight points out that Ransom is punning on the word—a habit in which Ransom rarely indulges—to the effect of enriching the intellectual theme of the poem.\(^{46}\) Further, the punning focuses the attitude of intellectual playfulness that pervades the poem.

Concerning Blue Girls, Ciardi calls attention to the root meaning of publish ("to make public"), establish ("to make stable"), and practice and perfection (with the joint root "to do") and says: "An awareness of this root relationship between the girls ("doing") and the old woman ("done") certainly adds a dimension of meaning to the poem."\(^{47}\) Specifically, the dimension added is logical and emotional precision. Logically, this precise use of diction develops the theme of carpe diem from a detached perspective. This detachment is essential to the poem's emotional structure: irony.

This is an illustration of the third function of Ransom's diction: the establishment of distance and irony. The pointed and scholarly nature of Ransom's diction can, as Warren points out, "make a bolder,

\(^{45}\) P. 400.

\(^{46}\) Pp. 25-26.

because more self-conscious, use of rhetorical resource, "The mocking and pedantic quality itself is illustrative of distance from the subject. Dead Boy provides a cogent example: words like subtraction and transaction are hardly typical of conventional elegaic expression. They are scarcely evocative of pathos. Rather, they create the distance which permits the ensuing shifting point-of-view. This, in turn, achieves the irony. Ransom's Philomela, to cite another prime example, is, of all his poems, most heavily laden with pedantic and archaic diction which is natural, of course, to the subject. Significantly, the subject of the poem is Ransom's most typically romantic: the woe of the nightingale. It is the distance between the classical diction and the romantic subject that is most instrumental in the achievement of the poem's final tone of complex, ironic and resolute modernity which transcends both classicism and romanticism. This transcendence is, in itself, ironic. As Brooks notes: "With Ransom, one of the obvious functions of the Latinity and hint of the archaic is to parody the grand manner and establish the ironic tone which is the consistent tone in Ransom's verse." 49

Fourth, Ransom's diction creates a sense of universality in the poems which amplifies the seriousness of their particularized

49 "Doric," p. 405.
situations. That is, the archaic diction suggests human experience, common throughout the history of man. In an early essay, Robert Penn Warren attempted to modernize Ransom by aligning him with Eliot's famous theme of the dissociation of sensibility.50 In a very recent essay, however, Warren retracts this thesis and concludes, "He [Ransom] was not writing about modern man, but about man."51 Specifically, the sudden appearance of an archaic word (Sweet ladies, long may ye bloom, and toughly I hope ye may thole,) firmly suggests the broad application of the particularized experience. Herein lies Ransom's "deliberately minor"52 degree of high seriousness.

This universality of appeal also contributes to the fifth major effect of Ransom's diction, the celebration of language, by indicating his gracious acknowledgement of the language's literary traditions. His frequent Latinisms (saeculum) pay homage to the classics; his medievalisms (leman) recall Chaucer and Langland; his phrasing (O friendly waste of breath!) often rings like Shakespeare; his frequent stiff directness (Rhyme her youth at fast as the granite) is reminiscent of Donne; his occasional ponderousness (with scourge they mortify their carnal selves) is Miltonic; his fanciful usages (transmogrifying)

50 "Irony," passim.


52 Matthiessen, p. 401.
are directly Johnsonian; his overstatements (The storm was withered against his empyrean) smack of the romantics; and his mannerisms (My ears are called capacious but they failed me) are nods to Hardy. With this use of universal diction, Ransom seems to have cheerfully placed himself linguistically within the literary continuum, rather than on its expanding edge. His fresh employment of this diction, however, qualifies as advancement of the literary continuum. Most important, Ransom simply has fun using the language. As Schwartz maintains, Ransom enjoys a milieu which permits him to use diction like felicitous and spat in the same poem.\(^5\) The freedom of modern poetry stems from the choice of this milieu and Ransom liquidly expresses his delight as he colorifies his poems with his rich idiom. The strategic effect of Ransom's celebration of language is obvious: literary pleasure, one of the final tests of a poem.

Ransom's diction is also instrumental in the control of texture.\(^6\) It achieves this control through the keen precision with which it is used. Bells provides the most famous case in point—especially in the control of tone. In his discussion of the poem, Heilman notes that

\(^5\) P. 444.

\(^6\) Although diction is usually considered a textural element, its primary function in Ransom's poetry is structural. Ransom's words certainly carry rich textural connotation, but Ransom's precise use of denotation and the logical pressures of context make even the connotative somewhat discursive. This is one price Ransom has paid for control in his poetry.
in the verbal structure of the poem, then, one emotion is expressed in terms of another, and the real strategy of evading sentimentality—which is the evoking of more emotion than the situation can produce—is the rather daring one of having a deep emotion represented by a rather transitory feeling; grief, by astonishment and vexation.\textsuperscript{53} Astonishes and vexed, in this case, are the key words. Their controlling effect lies in their precision.

Similarly, the diction helps shape the imagery through the pressure of linguistic context. The most striking use Ransom makes of this context is through his "sharp and even shocking associations of the colloquial and the pedantic."\textsuperscript{56} Dead Boy is illustrative of this point: Squealing for cookies modifies the metaphor pig with a pasty face and kinned reiterates the initial, loftier metaphor, green bough from Virginia's aged tree. The pressure of the diction modulates the images and prevents their separate and contradictory irrelevant tenors from upsetting the balance of the poem. Again, this control is achieved by the sharpness of the contrasting verbal associations.

The relationship of diction to the texture of tension in Ransom's poetry is usually contingent on this same sharp contrast. In this case, the importance of the contrast is between the intellectual and emotional levels in the poem. In Painted Head, for example, we suddenly find one of Ransom's rare parenthetical expressions, (homekeeping heads are happiest), within an intense environment of very stiff diction

\textsuperscript{55} Pp. 459-460.

(severance, apparition, Platonic, illusion, grandeur, instinct, absolute, decapitation, truant). The lightness and ease of the parenthetical diction is a foil for the surrounding pedantic diction. The resulting tension is between the logical core of the poem (literal Platonism is impossible and undesirable) and the playfully mocking attitude, brought to the surface with the foil, that surrounds it. Simultaneously, the discursive precision of the diction keeps this tension at a low level and under control.

The relationship between diction and ambiguity is similar. First, diction is a large ingredient in ambiguity in that it presents such a wide range of possible readings. This is obvious. Second, the diction limits self-generated ambiguity through its precision developed by the pressure of the context it creates. In Blue Girls, for example, seminary has two distinct possibilities: (1) a girl's school; (2) a school for training priests. The pressure of the context created by the surrounding diction immediately eliminates the denotation of the second possibility. The denotation of the first possibility submerges the connotation of the other possibility, but does not eliminate it. It is permitted a limited ambiguous resonance.

Ransom's diction, then, functions essentially as a device in his poem's structures. Its primary virtue as a structural device is its high precision. This precision, in league with the pressures of

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57 Note the effectiveness of Ransom's rare and sparing use of alliteration.
context created by the diction, aids the other elements of structure
in the control of texture. More poignant, his diction achieves surprise;
great intellectual and emotional accuracy; distance and irony; literary
and experiential universality; and, perhaps best of all, deep celebra-
tion of the language.
IV
METRICS

Ransom manipulates his meter with the same variation and intensity as his point-of-view. Of the critics who mention Ransom's metrics, Winters is the only one who finds fault with them: "The rough meters... are frequently very monotonous indeed."58 This sounds a bit strange coming from a critic so sophisticated in metrics that he can analyze their morality, but considering how Winters was smarting after Ransom worked him over in The New Criticism, we can understand Winters' remark. The opposite is the case: Ransom's irregular meters are invigorating. Winters' remarks would be more apropos of Walter Savage Landor's tum-te-tum. Matthiessen is more to the point when he notes that Ransom's "usual iambic has considerable variations from the pentameter norm. But his irregularities are seldom casual or haphazard; they are designed to bring out what is essentially a speaking rather than a singular voice."59 It may be added that this speaking voice is rich with inflection. When one listens carefully, one rarely hears monotony. The essential strategic effect of this speaking voice is naturalness of expression. Unlike a pounding iambic pushing the poem's

59 P. 395.
rhetoric before it, the more natural rhythms work subtly with the elevated rhetoric to assure that the poem's credibility, if achieved, will be a quiet one. Here Lies a Lady is a good example. In the first and second lines of the third and fourth stanzas we find the lady's reactions, respectively, to the fever and chills:

For either she burned, and her confident eyes would blaze
And her fingers fly in a manner to puzzle their heads—

Or this would pass and the light of her fire decline
Till she lay discouraged and cold, like a thick stalk white and blown...

The first lines of each stanza scan six and one-half feet. They fit with the regular lines in the poem. The second line of stanza two has seven feet, which also is within the poem's regularity. The second line of stanza three, however, has eight feet, and is the longest line of the poem. Further, the syllables in lines one and two of the second stanza are short syllables and primarily assonantal; whereas lines one, and with more intensity, two of the third stanza are composed of longer and more consonantal syllables. There are more fricatives in stanza two (for, either, she, her, fi, eyes, gaze, her, fi, fly, uzz, their), and more plosives in stanza three (pass, light, de, till, discouraged, cold, stalk, white, blown). In this fashion, the metrics pick up the very timbre of the fever and chills. Moreover, the metrical prolongation of the second line in stanza three supports the diction and imagery it carries in creating the pathos registered in Stocking's and Mason's readings of the poem. The metrics of the final lines of each of these stanzas also succinctly support the evidence that two
kinds of feelings, quite different from one another, are represented in this poem:

Of old scraps of laces, snipped into curious shreds—

* * *

The sixth of these states was her last; the cold settled down.

The preceding metrical analysis applies to these lines. Also, the first line is highly alliterative and jaunty. It has great speed. The second line has great metrical bluntness, and (especially the last four words which are almost a tongue twister) significantly slows the poem down. In this way, Ransom's irregular meters support the print of the poem. They also ward off monotony, achieve an approximation of the rhythms of natural speech—a much praised "modern" characteristic—and serve as an effective, but unobtrusive vehicle of the poem's rhetoric.

In addition to these specific qualities, Ransom's meters assume an important role in the general structural control of texture. Implicit in the preceding argument is the effect of metrics on the control of tone. Likewise, metrics provide focus for the imagery. In Bells, the central image of the middle three stanzas is war. The tenor of this metaphor (appropriate to the logical and emotional development of the poem) is that of intense and clamorous activity. This tenor is emphasized by, as Warren points out, "a busy yet wavering rhythm."60 Note that the resonance of other possible tenors is only de-emphasized, not eliminated. The mortal tenor of war, for example, is only moment-

60 "Pure," p. 238.
tarily suspended until the scattered ironies crystallize at the close of the poem. The structural control of imagery by metrics is balanced; it permits textural irrelevance, but not to the point of serious destruction.

The modulation of metrics with the textures of tension and ambiguity is similar. The metrics can create tension by contrasting with the seriousness of meaning they carry, also the line reduces (through tension) death to low seriousness: Of chills and fever she died, of fever and chills. The irregularities of the metrics, however, do not sustain this tension. Rather, the metrical irregularities submerge the tensions as fast as they create them, play the tensions off one another, and consequently, keep the poem's energy at a high level. Ambiguity, in turn, is achieved partially through this metrical manipulation of tensions. As the critical debate over Here Lies a Lady illustrates, this ambiguity may never be totally resolved.

As the final structural device to be discussed, Ransom's careful use of metrics is important to the generation and regulation of texture. As a strategic device his meters effectively carry rhetoric with naturalness and vitality.
V

TONE

The textural elements in a poem are those employed for essentially, though not wholly, emotional appeal: their functions are largely nondiscursive; they tend to detract from the poem's structure. Since these elements have been considered in the analysis of the strategic functions of structure, formal consideration of them must be brief. This brevity, however, does not reflect the value of texture. Indeed, the presence of the irrelevance of texture is, according to Ransom, precisely what makes a poem a poem. Texture is the magical quality that defies paraphrase and keeps the poem aloof from the critic—even after the most intensive explication. Texture is secret and powerful. In its irrelevance lies its deep value: its ability, through centuries and critics, to give men metaphors for living.

Ransom's tone is one of his richest textural elements. It is a tone which is distinctive in its simultaneous irony and sympathy. Brooks notes that "Ransom's triumphs...are triumphs in the handling of tone." Ransom's basic tone is ironic, but as Brooks goes on to say, "Ransom's irony never become a stereotype. It is a function of the entire poem and consequently varies from poem to poem... However

It is always present, if only as a sense of aesthetic distance."\(^{62}\) Wasserman moves even nearer the point when he says that Ransom's irony "accepts human limitations in order to arrive at truth."\(^{63}\) And Koch's comments are most appropriate in her analysis of *Dead Boy* when she discovers that "the tone hovers perilously between irony and sorrow, or irony and nostalgia."\(^{64}\) What these critics are driving at is that Ransom's famous irony is infused with deep sympathy. Their reticence to say this is probably a result of the once pervasive critical fad to disparage sentimentality and "romanticism" at every turn: it seems that once these were the most severe of critical perjoratives.\(^{65}\) Nonetheless, the distinctiveness of Ransom's bipartite tone is its ability to border on, but finally evade, either sentimentality or harshness.

I will be brief,
Assuredly I know my grief,
And I am shaken; but not as a leaf.

A good illustration of Ransom's narrow evasion of sentimentality and harshness is in *Miriam Tazewell*. The surface contrast between poor Miriam and the vast and indifferent universe (*But the regular stars went busily on their courses*) is essentially a sentimental one. Beneath this surface contrast something else is going on; in each


\(^{63}\) Pp. 154-155.

\(^{64}\) P. 239.

\(^{65}\) Ransom the critic is at least partially responsible for this.
stanza at least one word or phrase suggests this submerged theme: young thing; in good season; deflowered; some bridals; fragile babes were fallen. This submerged sexual explanation for Miriam's refusal to be maudlin (much like Audrey Hepburn's seemingly perpetual state of being on the brink of tears) is as harsh in its raw irony as the surface of the poem is sentimental. That neither dominates the closing tone of the poem is a fine instance of Ransom's skill in modifying the contrasting themes through their juxtaposition, within his detached ironic and conversationally sympathetic tone.

This duality provides a rich texture. The range of possible irrelevant resonance stretches from the melodramatic to the cynical. Herein lies the essential strategic effect of Ransom's tone: the non-discursive appeal of a wide range of emotional possibilities—an aspect of raw experience often perceived by the sensitive. Tone also makes a secondary discursive appeal: the balance achieved between the ironic and the sympathetic is a reasonable, though not necessarily a rational, one. The non-discursive resonance and the discursive balance constitute the richness of Ransom's tone. This richness makes the poems come to life, especially when read aloud. The fusion of irony and sympathy is piquant and demonstrative of deep human awareness.
VI
IMAGERY

Ransom's use of imagery is as diverse and pointed as is his use of other strategic devices. The following are some metaphors which, in their appearances in the poems, are highly fitting: ten frozen parsnips for lonely fingers; wrathy whips for lightning; prison richest of cities, marble fortress, white peace for virgin flesh; brown study for attitude in death; grizzled baron for death; ribbon rotting on the byre for autumn days; blue-capped functioner of doom, leering groom for mailman; lovely ritualist for fox; officious tower for head; and faithful stem for neck. Although, as Ransom frequently notes, the value of these metaphors, as with all metaphors is in their irrelevance, in Ransom's hands their main appeal seems to be in their acute appropriateness. That is to say, Ransom's steely control never permits the degree of irrelevant resonance that we find in, say, Lorca's travels on the deep roads of the guitar. Even Ransom's rare use of symbolism is precise. A fine example is in Piazza Piece. The poem itself is a little drama. The scene, complete with moonlight, roses and probably wrought iron, is a standard for melodrama. The characters are a strange old man and a beautiful lady young. He has his dustcoat on to take her for a drive, but she is waiting for her true-love. The first four lines of the old man's "pitch" follow the conventions of melodrama, and are quite adequate as literal expressions:
—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.

His next two lines, however, do not make good sense in terms of melodramatic formulae—they do not fit with the pitch:

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

This break from literal sense (he is not going to win his lady young talking like that) obliges the reader to look for the possibility of symbolism. Ransom supplies these hints, it seems to warn the reader not to look for symbols unless they are indicated: in this poem we are presented with a literal situation to be interpreted figuratively, but this is not to be the case in all of his poems. Piazza Piece becomes an allegory with the gentleman in a dustcoat representing death and the lady young representing naive mortality on the figurative level:

For I must have my lovely lady soon,
I am a gentleman in a dustcoat trying.

It is difficult to know what he means by soon, but it is not difficult to feel the crystallization of the symbol with the repetition of dustcoat and the new understated ironic significance of trying. In contrast, the naivete of the lady young is manifest:

—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.
Her waiting is ironic because symbolically she is really waiting for death, and her innocence is heightened by her attempt to flout Death in the fifth line of her speech. After this, her repetition of waiting highly intensifies the irony. Ransom's use of symbolism, then is clearly indicated and tightly controlled.

Ransom's use of the irrelevance of imagery is similarly controlled. The irrelevance of Ransom's imagery lies in its "local particularity" which contrasts with the logical "universals" of structure. However, Ransom's "local particularity" is, in itself, tightly ordered. We might say that Ransom's poems take us down paths and the images inform us of the irrelevant local particulars along the way. The paths the poems take, however, seem to traverse the domesticated wildness of gardens rather than the diverse wildness of open fields and natural forests. This prevents the imagery from severely detraction from the rhetorical thrust of the poem as it does, for example, in Edna St. Vincent Millay's very funny literary pratfall, *Euclid Alone Has Looked on Beauty Bare*. In the poem, the cardboard of irrelevance that swathes her final image of some Reubenesque female stomping through the woods in her massive sandals (*Beauty bare*) violently intrudes on the irrelevance of the earlier images which suggest the mild geometer's perceptions of infinite parallel lines and light atomitized. Ransom, obviously, would never permit any detraction as gross as this to appear.

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in his poems. Indeed, the specific victories achieved by Ransom's imagery within the overall strategies of the poems are largely indebted to his highly controlled tissues of irrelevance. That is, when the reader apprehends the pointed propriety of the images, he is somewhat victimized by the ingenuity of the tropes:

And rigid as two painful stars, and twirled
About the clustered night their prison world,
They burned with fierce love always to come near,
But honor beat them back and kept them clear.
Tension in Ransom's poetry is achieved essentially through the interplay of structural and textual elements. This has been discussed in the course of the above analysis of the components of structure. The main strategic impact of this tension is to keep the poems' energies at high levels. There are four other kinds of tension in Ransom's poems: (1) tension in mood; (2) tension in concern; (3) tension in balance; and (4) tension in theme. The first is considered by Rubin as he points out that Ransom is not so completely the gentle and urbane poet as he is frequently depicted; that beneath Ransom's gentility lies "the underlying mood of the poems: terror and savagery." 67 Rubin largely overstates his case, but his essential point is well taken. He later demonstrates how this mood builds tension when he says that

Ransom works with consummate skill upon his reader's sensibility, first stating the violent motif, then denying it as it were with his language, then stating it again, only to seem to take it all back, and so on. The result is a precarious balance, a hovering effect that intensifies the suspense. 68

Rubin's analysis of this tension in mood extends to other than the

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68 Ibid., p. 160.
violent motif: the interplay between the ironic and sympathetic moods is frequent, Knight also notices shifts in mood reflected in Ransom's diction, "from the pedantic to the commonplace, from the euphemistic to the starkly shocking, from the archaic to the colloquial." The modulations of these moods, coupled with the triviality of the rhyme, build poignant tensions. In Her Eyes the mood shifts from the nostalgic, to the jocular, to the sympathetic, to the ironic:

To a woman that I knew
Were eyes of an extravagant hue:
Viz., china blue.

Those I wear upon my head
Are sometimes green and sometimes red,
I said.

My mother's eyes are wet and blear,
My little sister's are not clear.
Poor silly dear.

* * *

A woman shooting blue flame
I apprehend will get some blame
On her good name

These modulations in mood generate much ironic tensions, considering the essentially small poem which contains them.

The second type of tension, that of concern, is similar. Jarrell notes that "Ransom seems in his poems, as most modern poets do not, sympathetic and charming, full of tenderness and affection, wanting

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69 P. 110.
This joint compassion and stern realism constitute a tension that the reader can feel is extended in the very act of composition. *Vaunting Oak* is a good example. The speaker would like to believe with the young woman, who had been instructed of much mortality, in the permanence of the oak. But the speaker, an unbeliever of bitter blood, knows better:

"The old gentleman," I grieved, "holds gallantly, but before our joy shall have lapsed, even, will be gone."

This tension between the wish and the reality of situation is similarly reflected in the middle stanzas of *Bells*, *Piazza Piece*, and *The Equilibrists*. It is quiet but sharp tension.

The third type of special tension in Ransom’s poetry, that of balance, is largely an aesthetic one. It is a tension which engages the reader’s curiosity: how can Ransom move from his romantic materials to a modern assertion? Stewart is precise as he notes that Ransom “liked to work on a narrow line where one false move would plunge him into the ludicrous and sentimental or worse still into archness.”

The aesthetic tension engendered by this balance resonates, of course, only to trained readers. The balance, however, also generates an emotional tension which is available to all readers: the conflicting feelings are held in suspension until the resolution of the poem.

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70 P. 99.

71 P. 25.
The last type of special tension is that of theme. Koch observes that Ransom's themes themselves possess tension as they originate from the "conflict between the classically trained mind and its inimical environment, the mythic past and the devalued present."\(^72\) The treatment of theme within the poems also creates tension. Koch further notes: "The superiority of 'Blue Girls' to hundreds of other graceful poems on the same subject lies precisely in the purity and elegance of the language working against the affectionate address."\(^73\) A similar tension-building treatment of theme is apparent in Miriam Tazewell, as discussed above. Another good example is Bells, where the sentimental situation receives stiff and understating treatment which engenders the primary emotional level.

Energy is the strategic result of tension. As it works against the control which the logical structure imposes, it creates an even greater energy. Suspension of intellectual resolutions, coupled with suspension of emotional resolution, comprises the irrelevant resonance of tension. This resonance is achieved through the friction of opposites which are brought to play against one another, rather than through any reconciliation of the frequently overlapping categories of subject and object. Oppositions in the poem are suspended rather than fused; this is the phenomenon that, linked with ambiguity, keeps the poem vital through multiple readings.

\(^72\) P. 229.

\(^73\) P. 251.
VIII

AMBIGUITY

Ambiguity in Ransom's poetry can occur as a product of the interplay of structure and texture as unresolved tension, or it can emanate from the particulars in the poems. In terms of Empson's classification of ambiguity, Ransom's ambiguities often fall within the first four types:

(1) Where one thing is likened to another, and by virtue of not one resemblance, but of more than one.
(2) Where one locution has two or more meanings, but they take the same logical diction.
(3) Where one locution simultaneously has two meanings, and only one has logical relevance.
(4) Where one locution has two or more meanings which do not agree very well.74

The image of the lovers as binary stars, where the lovers are balanced and burning, in The Equilibrists is a good example of the first type.
The second variety is well illustrated by For I must have my lovely lady soon in Piazza Piece where the literal and figurative meanings are different, but work together in the intellectual structure of the poem. The pun on capital in Painted Head falls under Empson's third type of ambiguity since the word means top in the logical structure and chief influence in the emotional texture. The fourth type of ambiguity is exemplified by brown study in Bells where childish pensiveness and attitude in death do not seem to agree very well.

74 New Criticism, pp. 119-120.
Of the remaining types of ambiguity in Empson's classification, Ransom is too careful to allow the fifth and sixth into his poems:

(5) Where the poet decides upon his meaning in the middle of a passage, so that the beginning and end of the passage will not be relevant to each other.

(6) Where the logical reader is obliged to paraphrase a locution into two conflicting statements, though the poet does not make them.  

The seventh type of ambiguity, "Where one locution has two or more meanings which are plainly in opposition," occurs in Ransom's poems if they are interpreted as strict ironic exercises. I do not read the poems this way, but, as we noted in the discussion of the polemics surrounding *Here Lies a Lady*, the strict ironic reading is possible.

Concerning the more general ambiguity produced by the interplay of structure and texture, Stauffer says: "The ambiguity of attitude is a part of the style and structure. It is not that Ransom is afraid of saying something...Rather, it is that Ransom knows, as all good poets do, that saying too much directly is not saying enough." In this connection we can see the justice of Ransom's deletion in *Selected Poems of lustrous* from *Tie the white fillets then about your lustrous hair* in *Blue Girls*. As it appeared originally, the word fit too patly with *tarnished* in the last stanza. The deletion of the word adds to the general variety of ambiguity.

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75 Ibid., p. 120.
76 Loc. Cit.
77 P. 433.
One of Ransom's more generally ambiguous poems is Vision by Sweetwater. The ambiguity resides in the disarmingly simple "visionary" imagery in the first two stanzas of the poem.

Go and ask Robin to bring the girls over
To Sweetwater, said my Aunt; and that was why
It was like a dream of ladies sweeping by
The willows, clouds, deep meadowgrass, and the river.

Robin's sisters and my Aunt's lily daughter
laughed and talked, and tinkled light as wrens
If there were a little colony all hens
To go walking by the steep turn of Sweetwater.

The distance and dreamlike qualities of these opening stanzas is suddenly invaded by a more serious and more particularized tone:

Let them alone, dear Aunt, just for one minute
Till I go fishing in the dark of my mind:
Where have I seen before, against the wind,
These bright virgins, robed and bare of bonnet,

Flowing with music of their strange quick tongue
And adventuring with delicate paces by the stream,—
Myself a child, old suddenly at the scream
From one of the white throats which it hid among?

The only explanation for the shift is that a vision is being described; a vision strangely occasioned by the Aunt's words to Robin. More ambiguous is the third line of stanza four. These ambiguities are partially explained by the beautifully veiled allusion to the metamorphosis of Syrinx, which was a contingent in Pan's invention of music. That is, the shift to sterner tone is paralleled in the shift from the music of their strange quick tongue to the scream. Further, the scream gives impetus and direction to music and, by extension, poetry. This makes the speaker old suddenly through his sudden aware-
ness of the universality of experience, but the impact of the original ambiguity still resonates—even through its partial clarification.

The ambiguities can carry a poem through the most severe explication. In October, 1966, I interviewed Mr. Ransom after a reading he gave at Portland State College, now Portland State University. I asked him about the possibility of expulsion from Eden imagery existing in the middle three stanzas of *Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter*. He said that he hadn't thought of it, but added, rather tiredly, that he supposed it was there. What is surprising is that the poem is "still there" in its original freshness and vitality. This is the value of irrelevance of the textural elements in their battle against the control of structure: that they prevent the poems from being objects that can be dissected and explained scientifically as Ransom frequently suggests in *The New Criticism*. 
Beautifully Janet slept
Till it was deeply morning. She woke then
And thought about her dainty-feathered hen,
To see how it had kept.

One kiss she gave her mother.
Only a small one gave she to her daddy
Who would have kissed each curl of his shining baby;
No kiss at all for her brother.

"Old Chucky, old Chucky!" she cried,
Running: across the world upon the grass
To Chucky's house, and listening. But alas,
Her Chucky had died.

It was a transmogrifying bee
Came droning down on Chucky's old bald head
And sat and put the poison. It scarcely bled,
But how exceedingly

And purply did the knot
Swell with the venom and communicate
Its rigor! Now the poor comb stood up straight
But Chucky did not.

So there was Janet
Kneeling on the wet grass, crying her brown hen
(Translated far beyond the daughters of men)
To rise and walk upon it.

And weeping fast as she had breath
Janet implored us, "Wake her from her sleep!"
And would not be instructed in how deep
Was the forgetful kingdom of death.
Janet Making provides an excellent example of Ransom's strategy to achieve rhetorical victory over the reader. In this poem, his speaker narrates an experience that a little girl has one morning—a very formative experience in "growing up." The tone of the poem is adult, parental, yet the speaker (with affectionate and sympathetic language on one hand, and mature and ironic language on the other) has the capacity to view the situation from two different viewpoints: Janet's and the parental. The first part of the poem is the kind of description of a little girl's actions that Alastair Reid might write. Its initial effect is to disarm the reader with its lightness and simplicity. Additionally, the narrative begins building tension with the word kept in the fourth line, which forecasts Janet's inability to make adult distinctions since hens, unlike fresh vegetables and raw meat, do not keep. A mild irony is here set up in that her hen has in fact perished. The poem's tension is between this ironic resonance and the light and easy tone which surrounds it. Beautifully is a wonderful characterization of a little girl's untroubled sleep. Deeply hints at Janet's position of understanding within her own little world. Dainty-feathered hen is not the sort of term that Janet would employ to describe her pet, but it shows, with beautifully and deeply, that the speaker is sympathetic with her point-of-view. The metrical arrangement of this stanza (the first and fourth lines trimeter and the middle lines pentameter) coupled with a loose conversational arrangement of the monosyllabic and polysyllabic, the
consonantal and assonantal, makes the stanza largely descriptive in tone and sets up a metrical regularity that, attached to the emotional regularity of this stanza, creates a foil against which later metrical irregularities and emotional modulations can be juxtaposed. Ransom, as we have seen, is expert in counterpointing rhythms to create strong emotional effect. The monosyllabic fourth line with the mildly surprising word kept packs a bantering punch and cleanly closes the stanza.

The second stanza is a nice description of the actions of mothers and brothers and especially of daddies and little girls. It is a continuation of the first stanza's childlike and sympathetic point-of-view. It has the initial effect of orienting the reader about Janet and increasing his affectionate feelings toward her. This further disarms the reader by bordering on sentimentality. Its simplicity and household quality stave off any apprehensions hinted by kept, and also pick up the mocking attitude of the "little safe world" that kept extends. This stanza provides another glimpse of Janet in her carefree, self-centered, childlike world. Her actions are irrational and confounding to adults, but the precision of her actions indicates that she has her own good reasons for doing them. Her control of the situation becomes ironic by contrast with her loss of control in the experience that follows. Each line varies at least half a foot from the corresponding lines in the first stanza. This slows the poem down slightly and mildly aids the tension building
by gently irregularizing the meters, which contrast with the regularity of the stanza's situation.

The third stanza begins the principal action of the poem. The childlike repetition of Old Chucky enforces the atmosphere of Janet's comfortable playfulness. Also, calling her hen Chucky works with kept to demonstrate the limits of her understanding by showing her inability to distinguish sex verbally. Further, by calling Chucky old she unconsciously articulates her inarticulate intuitive need to see how it had kept. That is to say, the hen is old because it is coexistent with Janet's awareness. The world upon the grass is Janet's own world, that adults find impossible to penetrate. We recall that her daddy, much to his dismay, received only one small kiss. But it is the world for Janet and she does, at least to the moment of her pet's death, understand it, however inarticulately. Janet's listening is a charming gesture which becomes too innocent and too light when juxtaposed with the disgusting details and the irrevocable fact of Chucky's death. This creates great tension and energy. Also, as she does not hear her pet, she likewise does not hear the bee or "see" death. It also enforces the idea of her inarticulate apprehension concerning the ephemeral nature of her pet. Alas also does two things. First, it is an expression of pity and an apprehension of evil on the part of the speaker which begins the shift of the emotional point-of-view. Second, in terms of the intellectual structure, it aids in the transition to the adult ironic
understatement in the following two stanzas. It is a pivot word, and vitally important here. *Her Chucky had died* reveals to the reader the central catastrophe in this formative experience of Janet's. This phrase's intellectual, emotional, and metrical bluntness deftly invades the preceding idealized pictures. Janet has been sleeping beautifully up till now when the death of her pet begins to shake her awake to reality. Her depth of immersion into the natural, spontaneous, and inarticulate quality of nature, however, like Hopkins' Margaret Early in "Spring and Fall," has not been diminished. This adds an additional and ironic dimension to the first sentence of the poem and creates a slight friction between the intellectual and structural lines in the work that contributes to the building in tension. The metrics of this stanza pick up the same irregularity exhibited in the second stanza, but the majority of the words are more assonantal. Up to *but alas*, the lines read more rapidly than in the preceding stanzas. The final sentence of this stanza, however, as mentioned before, slows us down and prepares us for the following shift in tone.

In the fourth and fifth stanzas, the speaker narrates Chucky's death from a strictly adult point-of-view and the sudden shift in tone is astonishing. *Chucky's old bald head* is diametrically opposed in attitude to *dainty-feathered hen*. The childlike repetition of Chucky now becomes an ironic and mocking repetition. Moreover, the succinctness in the portrayal of the act of stinging (*sat and put*) and the precise description of the ensuing physiological process,
coupled with that delicious pratfalling understatement, now the poor comb stood up straight/ But Chucky did not, makes the mock heroic hyperbole of these two stanzas pedantically humorous. The speaker must necessarily understate and be ironic about Chucky's death because he cannot approximate the depths of feeling and understanding that Janet possesses naturally and inarticulately. Putting change and mortality, as embodied in the death of Janet's pet, into the purple adult language of mock-heroism, which is the only way that adults can totally cope with death, picks up the nuances of kept and the gender confusion of Chucky and sets up the final crystallization of the articulate-inarticulate understanding problem with translated and instructed. These are key words; in Ransom's diction, rather typical.

The irregular metrics of these stanzas follow the precedent set by the second stanza, but have a different result, owing to the shift in tone. The irregularity of metrics creates a roughness which is discrepant with the regularity and precision of the narration. This agitation produces a tension which maintains the poem's energy and subtly hints that the adult mock heroic tone will not be the closing tone of the poem.

Then, suddenly, there was Janet/ Kneeling on the wet grass, snapping us back to the reality of the situation. Crying her brown hen, an archaism, works with the world upon the grass by increasing the universality of the poem. Additionally, with the subsequent parenthetical expression, it reminds the reader of the limits of
Janet's articulate understanding. It is also ambiguous in that we cannot tell whether she is crying for or crying to, and the parenthetical expression itself cannot be adequately translated. This stanza also hints that the limits of Janet's articulate understanding are expanding: the grass, which represented her idealized childlike world, is now wet with dew—a touch from real life—and her pet will not rise and walk upon it as she would naively expect in her self-centered way. Also, she sees her hen as brown—another detail from the real world. Her innocence and naivety are heightened by her attempts to get things back into her own world order, first personally (crying her brown hen) and then through "all knowing" adults: Janet implored us, wake her from her sleep! Nothing works: all she can do is weep. Referring to her hen twice as her shows that Janet is no longer confused as to gender: the limits of her articulate understanding are beginning to expand. An immediate doubletake occurs and the reader realizes that Janet is waking to reality and articulate awareness despite the loss of innocent bliss and natural, inarticulate understanding that this awakening brings. The awakening is far from complete and far from being accepted by Janet. She understands, in an inarticulate fashion, the death of her pet and the loss of her childish innocence and she refuses to believe in the adult articulation of acceptable death which is callous, insensitive, and largely as unreal as her idealized conception of life. That is to say, adults cannot feel the depths of the kingdom of death as Janet
can: they can only realize the fact of death with an ironic tone of dismissal. Their tone is also necessarily defensive. So, as Janet is beginning to wake to reality, she also learns about betrayal; those who control her world cannot wake her pet—and why can't they?

Ransom's fine strategy in Janet Waking, with all its economy and precision, achieves a well-earned rhetorical victory over the reader. This is not simply a trick, however, for beneath the mocking diction lies a profound awareness often greater than that of solemn, "serious" poets. The modulations of the narrator's tone and the order of events enforce the print of the poem by balancing the harsh with the maudlin, and capturing the experience from a variety of viewpoints. His careful employment of diction enforces the shifts of tone and at the same time generates little tensions which keep the poem's energy at a high level until the end. This energy in turn is controlled by the metrics. The short first lines of each stanza pack a verbal surprise and a metrical force which build up to the added punch of the short, final lines of each stanza. Her Chucky had died and But Chucky did not neatly tie off the internal emotional divisions of the poem and prepare us for ensuing shifts of tone. The long final line in the last stanza succinctly brings the poem to a close.

This is technical virtuosity certainly; but it is also fine poetry. Persona, point-of-view, metrics, diction, tone, imagery, tension and ambiguity are marvellously assembled to create a fine and well earned emotional and aesthetic experience. Janet Waking is, indeed, a poetic Concrete Universal.
Ransom's literary strategy is precise and effective. The rhetoric in the poems is a complex but quiet rhetoric. It is a rhetoric that engages and urges, rather than excites and demands. In this connection Jarrell importantly notes that Ransom's method

is not a method of forcing intensity...as most modern rhetoric is. Instead of listening through the hands, with closed eyes, as one is sucked deeper and deeper into the maelstrom, one listens with one's eyes open and one's head working about as well as it usually works.\(^78\)

Even after intensive explication, this quiet rhetoric survives the critical surgery and promotes its final proposition: pleasure.

Ransom intimated, in the course of my discussion with him at Portland State College, that the ultimate value of poetry resides in the rich and civilized pleasure it provides. Ransom's celebration of the language and his keen aesthetic precision at the least provide this kind of pleasure.

\(^78\) P. 88.
LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED

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