

JOHN CROWE RANSOM'S CHARACTERS:
PORTRAYALS OF THE
DISSOCIATED SENSIBILITY

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PREFACE

The purpose of this paper is to study the particular expression of the dissociated sensibility in a number of typical poems of John Crowe Ransom. These poems portray couples who either fail to establish or fail to maintain a love. Their failure stems from their inability to harmonize the two sides of their nature, intellect and feeling. Even since Descartes and the intellectual revolution of the seventeenth century, man has found it increasingly difficult to put feeling and intellect together into a unified self. For when abstract reason is erected into the very essence of man's nature, feeling, especially love, tends to contract. Since feeling attaches itself to particular concrete things or persons, it must be denied or neglected by reason which now works out its task in the realm of abstractions or generalizations where concrete particulars as such do not matter. Centuries of such thought poison the very atmosphere of human life and render it extremely hard if not impossible for the self to put itself back together again as a thinking, and feeling, unity. Like Humpty Dumpty, it too often remains a congeries of fragments. Ransom's poems put this fragmented modern self into dramatic focus by portraying couples who fail to measure up to human nature's demands for love. More conscious than they should be for their own

good, they fail to pull themselves together at crucial points in their life and perform the gestures needed to tie them in love to another person.

I would like to express gratitude to my adviser, Dr. Samuel H. Woods, Jr., who first suggested Ransom's poetry as a fruitful field of study and who has been most helpful in reading and suggesting improvements in the early drafts of this thesis.

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CHAPTER I

RANSOM AND THE DISSOCIATION OF SENSIBILITY

The characters in John Crowe Ransom's poems think and do such peculiar things that the reader may be puzzled to account for their motives. In "Winter Remembered" (p.3),¹ for instance, the speaker walks in a snowstorm to deaden the feeling of his beloved's absence; in "Good Ships" (p.16) a man and woman find tea and macaroons insurmountable obstacles to love; and the speaker in "Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom" (pp. 66-67) undermines for himself the beauty of birdsong by imputing to the birds an inner discord. The root of the characters' oddities lies in their divided being, or "dissociation of sensibility." This term is usually connected with T. S. Eliot, who uses it to refer to the divorce between feeling and thought that, he says, came over poets and poetry in the seventeenth century. There was, according to him, in the poets of the early part of this period "a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling, which is exactly what we find in Donne.... Tennyson and Browning are poets and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose.... In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we

have never recovered...."² Eliot attempts no explanation of the cause of this dissociation of feeling and thought, but says it "was aggravated by the influence of...Milton and Dryden."³

Ransom, widening the applicability of the idea of the dissociated sensibility beyond literature, sees the break between thought and feeling as pervading all spheres of life because of the increasing influence in the modern period of the abstractionism and power knowledge of science. Ransom's explicit remarks on this matter appear in prose which, while it postdates most of his poetry, accords with the poetic dramatizations of the divided sensibility. He says in The World's Body (1936) concerning the connection between knowledge and power: "We love to view the world under universal or scientific ideas to which we give the name truth; and this is because the ideas seem to make not for righteousness but for mastery."⁴ Feeling -- or to use Ransom's term, "sentiment" -- on the other hand always attaches itself to particular persons or things that in reality constitute the visible body of this world: "...we, for our curse or our pride," says Ransom, "have sentiments; they are directed towards persons and things; and a sentiment is the totality of love and knowledge which we have of an object that is private and unique."⁵ Ransom, unlike Eliot, sees thought and feeling as distinct sides to one's nature. He desires a balance or harmony between the two that would constitute "unified sensibility" or sensibility

proper, as opposed to the split in one's being that is the dissociated state. As he says in a 1941 article later incorporated into the chapter on Eliot in The New Criticism: "...the best we can do is to conduct a thought without denying all the innocent or irrelevant feelings in the process."⁶ By "innocent or irrelevant feelings" Ransom means a mood that does not respond to some particular thing or person solely for the sake of the usefulness to be got out of it but rather responds to it aesthetically, for the sake of delight, wonder, and love. His major emphasis, of course, lies in giving feeling its due, as when he says (in a passage reminiscent of the last stanza of the poem "Painted Head" [p. 92]): "Most well-bred persons deliberately set in to plant, water, and honor them [i.e., sentiments], and are rewarded by having their minds converted into gardens."⁷ When one denies, or neglects to cultivate, the feelings that should exist as the fully human response to particular things, one becomes dissociated. To judge from his explicit statements and from the types of characters he treats in his poems Ransom sees the dissociated state as the one prevailing among men. Commenting on the monsters that result from the neglect or denial of feeling, he says that "...most of the time we are not human, so far as it is a mark of the human dignity to respect and know the particularity by which we are so constantly environed."⁸ Such a sensibility would exist in its most monstrous form, one may suppose, in the man who,

were he to see a pink elephant sliding down a green, grassy slope followed by another pink elephant, would respond to this remarkable sight as being merely a "point mass moving down an inclined plane." This, indeed, would be the correct response to the event in terms of the most abstract of natural sciences, physics; but the aesthetic, and even comic, dimensions of it would be missed entirely.

Ransom's poetry is populated with characters who make responses to nature and to other persons that are as nonsensical as the hypothetical abstractionist's response to the colored elephant. For Ransom as poet concerns himself primarily with what happens to the person who denies the emotional side of his nature because he has allowed his abstract reason to acquire a tyrannizing mastery of his entire sensibility. That the portrayal of the dissociated person in the modern world is indeed Ransom's major theme was pointed out for the first time by Robert Penn Warren in 1935, and critics since then have commented on it. One needs to have at this point an accurate view of the work done by those critics who refer specifically to characters in the poems as suffering from the divided sensibility. This survey of the criticism follows chronological order for the most part, since the comment in this area has moved from Warren's general remarks to a few treatments of specific characters.

Warren says in his seminal 1935 article that Ransom means by "sensibility" the "harmonious adjustment, or rather

unified function, of thought and feeling"⁹ and observes of the characters that "To an astonishing degree, in far more than a majority of cases, the hero or heroine of the poem is a sufferer from that complaint of 'dissociation of sensibility.'"¹⁰ Warren points briefly to a number of poems that exhibit divided characters. Since the appearance of this article a number of critics have commented on Ransom's divided people -- none, however, in any systematic and comprehensive manner. Cleanth Brooks (1939) echoes Warren's discussion and comments briefly on the divided characters of Ralph in "Morning" (p. 65), the speakers in "Eclogue" (pp. 47-50), and the explorer in "Persistent Explorer" (pp. 63-64).¹¹ Randall Jarrell (1948) refers to "Ransom's war of the worlds (of Feeling and of Power)...." apropos of the split in the characters.¹² Vivienne Koch in a lengthy article (1950) speaks of the "split in sensibility" of Ransom's figures and looks briefly at the presence of this split in a fairly large number of them.¹³ Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (1965), says the characters show a "most appalling kind of inner disorder and rage" but goes into few particulars and does not link this disorder and rage to the idea of the divided sensibility.¹⁴ These comments are typical of the relatively short studies that attempt to survey the whole of Ransom's poetry.

A fairly extensive treatment of the characters appears in John L. Stewart's book, The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians (1965). Stewart provides some

provocative general commentary on Ransom's people, but he does not see his way far enough into the real problem. He is oversimple, for example, in asserting that mortality, especially the decay of a woman's beauty, is Ransom's "most frequent theme...."¹⁵ A kind of death certainly prevails in many poems, but it is usually a form or symbol of the spiritual death of divided being. Again, Stewart correctly sees the characters' emotionally constricted lives, but views the constriction as a failure in the poet's art of portrayal rather than as an intrinsic mode of expressing the characters' failures as full persons.¹⁶ He also errs in taking for a part of the "ideal world" of the poems what is really a defect in the characters' sensibility, for he says that "the men are shy and agreeably awkward; the women must assume the initiative in all relations with them."¹⁷ There is nothing particularly agreeable in such a reversal of the normal roles of man and woman; it points instead to the unnatural behavior of the characters. Robert Buffington in his recent book on Ransom's poems, The Equilibrist (1967), also thinks that "the major theme" in the poetry "is death.. .."¹⁸ Accordingly, he explicates a number of Ransom's poems from this point of view and does not take up the problem of the divided sensibility.

Few full-length studies of individual characters in the poems exist. In the past two decades some seven or eight critics have presented significant studies of individual

characters that testify to the mild but continued interest in Ransom's fragmented persons.¹⁹

Karl F. Knight's work, The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom (1964), contains the chief contribution to the study of specific characters. Knight identifies Ransom's major theme and describes the dissociated person as follows: "Ransom's major poetic theme deals with the fragmented personality, the individual who has lost the sense of unity in his life and who cannot find satisfactory expression or realization in any of the compartments into which his life has been artificially divided."²⁰ Knight's work provides invaluable aid in understanding how Ransom portrays the divided sensibility through the various devices of language. Knight, in his most illuminating and far-reaching contribution to the study of the characters, demonstrates that love is the crucial test of the quality of the characters' sensibility -- whether, that is, it is divided or unified. As he points out:

Ransom uses passion in a symbolic way. That is, he chooses to take a basic aspect of human nature, a kind of emotional common denominator; and he uses an incapacity in the expression of that one thing to symbolize an all-pervasive breakdown of the ability of the individual to achieve full and unified experience.²¹

He defines love in Ransom's poems as "the attitude which

results from the pleasurable contemplation of an individual object...."²² Hence failure in love indicates the person's deep-rooted inability to respond with appropriate feelings to the rich uniqueness of particular objects, be they human beings or parts of nature. And this inability stems ultimately from the modern intellect's drive to reduce the particular world of experience to a rigid system of abstract categories.

From the point of view of this study Knight has limitations. He studies the poetry not from the point of view of the characters but primarily from that of the poetic devices -- diction, metaphor, symbol -- that help express the major theme and the subthemes. His brief treatments of a wide variety of poems are primarily concerned with how they serve to develop and illustrate his points about Ransom's use of these poetic resources. Given this approach, it is understandable that he omits all discussion of a number of poems related to the theme of the dissociated person and treats but a few in detail with respect to the divided life of the characters.

From all this one can see that there is certainly room for a study of Ransom's characters in themselves, a study that explicates the nature of the divided sensibility in specific cases. For the characters are not all alike, but appear to group themselves naturally into a number of more or less definite categories. There seem to be four generic configurations of the general flaw of divided sensibility:

the isolated, extremely fragmented refugees from nature and other people who are hopeless cases of disunity; the isolated ones who yet sense something of their divided lives and who consequently seek a way to unity; the unmarried couples who fail to establish or maintain a love; and the marriage group, or those married lovers who fail to find, or in two cases do find,²³ a measure of unity through their life together. Seen in this light, Ransom's poems exhibit a kind of hierarchy of possibilities for reaching the unified self.

Of these four groups this paper studies the last two, the unmarried couples and the married lovers, because these people constitute the most typical and most important set of characters. Ransom tends to write more frequently about domestic crises than about anything else. And these figures are the most important because they are caught up in one way or another in the most important of human feelings, love. Their failure, in the end, to love another person shows the very quality of their sensibility. The poet himself has testified to the special place romantic love holds for him as the "most massive and satisfying" experience possible in a passage that slightly postdates the composition of most of these poems:

Romantic love is among the most delightful of our experiences; most of us would probably name it as the most massive and satisfying of all -- provided at least that we do not confine the term to love

between the sexes, but extend it to the love of nature, of works of art, and of God.²⁴

The poems of Ransom's maturity refer this romantic love generally to the feelings of persons for one another. Moreover, the figures in the two groups, even though they tend as a rule to fail in love, because of their relationship or near relationship with others are simply more human than are the lost and isolated refugees, who deviate from the larger group as from a norm of human life. And the failure of the lovers is an important failure, since they fail in the conflicts involved in the most important emotion, love. These chief characters exhibit, in a variety of specific modes, the imbalance between thought and feeling that constitutes the dissociated sensibility. The unmarried couples who just miss love are the subject of Chapters II and III: Chapter II discusses those who prove unable to achieve any companionship at all, and Chapter III treats those who go about together but who in the end cannot establish a solid love. Chapter IV studies the marriage group, and a fifth chapter summarizes and concludes.

FOOTNOTES

¹John Crowe Ransom, Selected Poems (New York, 1963). All quotations and references throughout this paper from Ransom's Selected Poems are taken from this revised and enlarged edition and their page numbers appear in parenthesis in the text.

²T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," Homage to John Dryden: Three Essays on Poetry of the Seventeenth Century (London, 1927), pp. 29-30.

³Ibid., p. 30.

⁴John Crowe Ransom, The World's Body (New York, 1938), p. 123.

⁵Ibid., p. 36.

⁶Ransom, "Eliot and the Metaphysicals," Accent, I (spring, 1941), 152.

⁷Ransom, The World's Body, pp. 227-228.

⁸Ibid., p. 211.

⁹Robert Penn Warren, "John Crowe Ransom: A Study in Irony," Virginia Quarterly Review, XI (January, 1935), 100.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 103.

¹¹Cleanth Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition (New York, 1965 [originally published Chapel Hill, 1939]), p. 88.

¹²Randall Jarrell, "John Ransom's Poetry," Sewanee Review, LVI (summer, 1948), 389.

¹³Vivienne Koch, "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom," Sewanee Review, LVII (spring, 1950), 229-230.

¹⁴Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "Four Southerners," American Poetry (Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies 7), ed. Irvin Ehrenpreis (New York, 1965), p. 16.

¹⁵John L. Stewart, The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians (Princeton, 1965), p. 224.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 252.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 244.

¹⁸Robert Buffington, The Equilibrist: A Study of John Crowe Ransom's Poems, 1916-1963 (Nashville, 1967), p. 2.

¹⁹Robert Flynn, "Ransom's 'Miriam Tazewell,'" Explicator, XII (May, 1954), Item 45.

G. R. Wasserman, "The Irony of John Crowe Ransom," University of Kansas City Review, XXIII (winter, 1956), 151-160.

Bernard Bergonzi, "A poem About the History of Love: 'The Equilibrists' by John Crowe Ransom," Critical Quarterly, IV (summer, 1962), 127-137.

Virginia L. Peck, "Ransom's 'Prelude to an Evening,'" Explicator, XX (January, 1962), Item 41.

William Bleifuss, "Ransom's 'Here Lies a Lady,'" Explicator, XI (May, 1953), Item 51.

Thornton H. Parsons, "Ransom and the Poetics of Monastic Ecstasy," Modern Language Quarterly, XXVI (1965), 571-585.

Katherine W. Snipes, "Ransom's 'Two in August,'" Explicator, XXVI (October, 1967), Item 15.

Charles Koorman, "Ransom's 'Painted Head,'" Explicator, X (December, 1951), Item 15.

²⁰Karl F. Knight, The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom: A Study of Diction, Metaphor, and Symbol (The Hague, 1964), p. 68.

²¹Ibid., pp. 86-87.

²²Ibid., p. 108.

²³Since Ransom himself and others have done a rather thorough job of explicating the two exceptions, the revised version of "Prelude to an Evening" (pp. 99-101) and the new poem "Master's in the Garden Again" (pp. 96-98), this paper omits all discussion of these two poems and concentrates upon the more typical failures. These two poems themselves do not reverse the whole downward tendency of Ransom's people. Even though the man in the former poem decides not to inflict any more of his disordered state upon his wife, and the man in the latter poem returns to his wife from his moldy garden, Ransom (as Dr. Samuel H. Woods has pointed out in class discussion) has retained in Selected Poems (1963) the older versions of these poems -- "Prelude to an Evening" and "Conrad in Twilight" respectively -- in which the revival of sensibility is not present. Ransom's own

comments on the new version of "Prelude to an Evening" appear in Selected Poems (1963), pp. 101-111, and on "Master's in the Garden Again" in The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic, ed. Anthony Ostroff (Boston, 1964), pp. 134-140.

²⁴Ransom, God Without Thunder (New York, 1930), p. 31, quoted in Inlight, p. 76.

CHAPTER II

THE REJECTION OF LOVE

The unmarried couples in the poems fail to establish or maintain a love because they fail to act forcefully and decisively in crucial encounters with each other. This failure so to act and choose love derives from their divided sensibility. They lack passion or the power to express it. Some also are too conscious of the problems that will inevitably arise if they love, and so they remain paralyzed. These characters appear in the poems "Good Ships" (p. 16), "Her Eyes" (pp. 52-53), "Parting at Dawn" (p. 18), "Parting, without a Sequel" (pp. 54-55), "Lady Lost" (p. 60), "Winter Remembered" (p. 3), "Old Man Pondered" (pp. 68-69), "The Equilibrists" (pp. 83-85),¹ "Vaunting Oak" (pp. 19-20), "Eclogue" (pp. 47-50), and "Spectral Lovers" (pp. 6-7). "Good Ships" is the natural starting point for discussion because the man and woman in this sonnet are at the lowest level of sensibility: they scarcely realize that their encounter at the tea party has possibilities for love.

Fleet ships encountering on the high seas
Who speak, and then unto the vast diverge,
These hailed each other, poised on the loud surge

Of one of Mrs. Grundy's Tuesday teas,
 Nor trimmed one sail to baffle the driving breeze.
 A macaroon absorbed all her emotion;
 His hue was ashy but an effect of ocean;
 They exchanged the nautical technicalities.

It was only a nothing or so, and thus they parted.
 Away they sailed, most certainly bound for port,
 So seaworthy one felt they could not sink;
 Still there was a tremor shook them, I should think,
 Beautiful timbers fit for storm and sport
 And unto miserly merchant hulks converted (p. 16).

The meeting over tea and macaroons does not result in their achieving any intimacy, because they respond to each other not as persons but as mere objects ("ships" in the metaphor) that pass one another in space. Ransom presents their failure to love in the terms of the conceit of two ships that encounter on "the loud surge/Of one of Mrs. Grundy's Tuesday teas" and sail past each other after exchanging "the nautical technicalities," i.e., the emotionally empty phrases or small talk that people use in everyday life. John L. Stewart in his brief comment on this poem rightly observes that the nautical conceit reinforces the emotional constriction of the couple's lives by rigorously excluding from the poem "all things that cannot be brought into the maritime analogy...."² But he seems to have missed the importance of this constricting

effect of the conceit for the portrayal of the characters' sensibility. He sees the technical success of the nautical conceit but thinks it is a flaw in the over-all poetic effect because it puts "a severe limitation on our image of them as people."³ He desires characters to be fully realized persons who can think and feel and act. But the import of the poem is that the pair do indeed have severe limitations "as people," and the nautical conceit brings this out.

Continuing with this conceit, the couple's failure to make anything of their encounter is suggested by the failure of the ships to remain "Fleet ships," "Beautiful timbers fit for storm and sport," and their conversion instead into "miserly merchant hulks." Knight makes clear the pejorative sense of this last shift in metaphor for the quality of their life: "...the couple in 'Good Ships' who neglect the opportunity of love and become 'miserly merchant hulks' are being spoken of on the basis of a common attitude toward failure in personal relationships and toward commerce: both things are degrading and even despicable."⁴ The couple are "miserly" in that they keep in their emotion instead of expressing it in love for each other. "Hulks" suggests a pair of old, no longer seaworthy ships or immobilized prison ships into which their glorious potentialities for love, symbolized by their description as "Beautiful timbers," have been metamorphosed. Like the lady transformed into a lady bird in "Lady Lost" (p. 60), their

metamorphosis symbolizes their denial of their fully human nature. And that they become "merchant" ships suggests their dissociation in still another way. They are not capable of aesthetic and personal responses but (like pure commercial travelers) only of economic, "useful" ones. It would not be convenient for these two busy people who never "trimmed one sail to baffle the driving breeze" to pause from their schedule of trivia to confront one another as persons.

The man and woman fail to live up to their possibilities as human beings fit for the good life of "storm and sport," i.e., struggle and joy in attaining and maintaining love through all the vicissitudes of life. The whole line, "Beautiful timbers fit for storm and sport," nicely suggests their very great potentiality for a life of love; but they fail to actualize it. Rather, they hide their gifts or direct their feelings to other things or let them create a storm within. The feeling the woman should direct toward the man she directs instead to -- a macaroon: "A macaroon absorbed all her emotion." By simply using the word "emotion," the speaker implies that feeling is important in this encounter, and that the woman does possess it; yet she cannot express this feeling to the man in any way and so the eating of a cookie absorbs it. This diversion is like their mere exchange of small talk in which, as Knight observes, their "potentialities are dribbled away."⁵ The man's failure to feel and express appropriate emotions at

this juncture reveals itself in the line "His hue was ashy but an effect of ocean." On the literal level of the conceit this line seems to excuse his ashy color as being only the result of seasickness: "...but an effect of ocean." But given the symbolic value of "ocean" as the sea of life, the line appears not as an excuse at all but as a judgment upon the man for lacking the power to feel or express love. Knight thinks that Ransom often uses a pale color to symbolize lack of passion and that here the man's ashy hue suggests "fire which has lost all its vital heat and force."⁶ Certainly this comment fits into the general scheme of the couple's metamorphosis from their state of being "Beautiful timbers." The man's "seasickness" conveys also his uneasiness in the presence of the woman. It is as if her presence makes him ill because it forces him to think of the behavior expected of him and which he will not or cannot perform. Like the speaker in the next poem, "Her Eyes" (pp. 52-53), he would rather withdraw from his encounter than do anything that would suggest his awareness of a difference in their sexes.

"Her Eyes" is spoken by one of the most fragmented of all Ransom's people. Like the cadaverous Mr. Jones of Conrad's Victory, he has a morbid distaste for the proximity of women. He will have nothing whatever to do with the "woman shooting such blue flame" from her eyes (p. 53). Since blue is one of the colors associated in Ransom with full and vital passion,⁷ the woman of the poem symbolizes

the full-natured woman who possesses such feeling. Like the "Blue Girls" who "practise" their beauty in all the bloom of their youth (p. 37), she wanders through the world in search of love. The speaker, however, is so far removed from any feeling of love or even awareness of the woman as something beautiful that he responds quite negatively to her flashing eyes. These eyes are to him only "of an extravagant hue" (p. 52) or "The ocular part" (p. 53). The heavy Latinate diction of these two phrases suggests that his nature is more intellectual than emotional; as has often been observed, Ransom commonly uses Latinate polysyllables to suggest over-intellectualized people, as for example in "Prometheus in Straits" (p. 33) where in the first stanza he rhymes several "-tion" forms to call attention to and satirize the speaker's unbalanced sensibility. The climax of "Her Eyes" is the eighth stanza where the speaker imputes falseness to the eyes, probably because, like Iago, he must find some motive for his uneasiness and rejection: "I'll have no business with those eyes, / They are not kind, they are not wise, / They are two great lies" (p. 53). He cannot trust the appearances of beauty and passion in the woman because the existence of such things would call in question his own attitude of withdrawal.

That the speaker comes from a family of blear-eyed people (p. 52), and his own complacent remark that he has eyes which are "sometimes green and sometimes red" (p. 52), help portray him as the divided man. Blear eyes suggest, as

the opposite symbolically of bright blue eyes, his lack of feeling. The alternating color of his eyes indicates his divided, indecisive state, his stop-go-stop way of life. The green may suggest, as in The Great Gatsby, and other works, the intermittent sense of hope and desire that beckons him on only to change to the feeling of danger and withdrawal indicated by the red color. Red, even as a symbol of passion as it often is in Ransom, would for that very reason suggest a dangerous relationship with another person.

All this is not to say that this silly man, just because the woman has bright blue eyes, should directly conceive it his task in life to see her as the necessary object of his loving attention. The poem does imply that he cannot even look upon this woman with a sense of admiration for her beauty but immediately reacts unreasonably against her. Ransom does not suggest that the speaker must in every case, when he meets a beautiful woman, fall in love with her on the spot or be branded as a divided self. He does suggest an openness to experience that will include the possibility of responding aesthetically to persons and the possibility that such responses may grow into love. When one destroys these possibilities by withdrawing or otherwise cutting himself off from others, as does the speaker in this poem, one becomes dissociated. Such an attitude runs counter to the emotional side of human nature, and so necessarily precipitates the person into disorder.

Another poem of parting, related to "Good Ships" through a metamorphosis and to "Her Eyes" through a flight from an encounter with another person, is "Lady Lost" (p. 60). The lost lady of the poem is clearly fleeing from some disaster in love. Her transformation from a lovely woman into a "timid lady bird" who seeks shelter with the speaker from "the clapping thunder/ And sight of the whole world blazing up like tinder" symbolizes both her delicacy as a woman and her departure from her true human nature. Like Bottom in A Midsummer Night's Dream she is a metaphor actualized. The physical storms that the bird-woman flees represent, of course, the storms of life and love which have proved too much for her. They have reduced her to such a state of inner conflict and lack of self-possession that she cannot meet the eyes of the speaker: "And when I caught her eye/ She looked aside...." This speaker, whom Vivienne Koch admires for his "full measure of gentlemanliness" in helping the lady,⁸ grasps that in order to restore the lady to her "full soft-haired white-breasted fashion/ And her right home and her right passion" someone, evidently the man who has "lost" or "injured" her, needs to "stroke her gently/ With loving words...." The color white in "white-breasted fashion" referring to the lady's proper state of being is presumably the vibrant whiteness (as opposed to a pallid hue) that Knight thinks "is connected with vitality and passion in a number of [Ransom's] poems."⁹ The lady needs

the love of someone else for her that will restore her to her own power to love.

On a very slightly higher level of sensibility are the characters spoken of in two other poems of parting, "Parting at Dawn" and "Parting, without a Sequel." These couples at least did not flee each other at first sight but were able to meet as human beings and initiate a love. However, the poems show their eventual failure. In "Parting at Dawn" (p. 18) the lovers fail because they have a misplaced virtue: they are brave and resolute, not in loving, but in parting forever. They "take flight" "with the morning star," not as passionate lovers such as Romeo and Juliet after a night of love, but as "Stoics...born on the cold glitter of light" who have spent the night in a "broken whispering" which is an "image of the coward heart" of the pair. They lack the courage of their feelings. The woman in "Parting, without a Sequel" (pp. 54-55) is divided within herself because, having sent a letter breaking off a love affair, she yet fluctuates between the heat of love and the cold of rejection: "But even as she gave it/ Saying to the Blue-capped functioner of doom,/ 'Into his hands,' she hoped the leering groom/ Might somewhere lose and leave it" (p. 54). She reveals her indecisiveness in the very words she uses to refer to the messenger boy in these lines. First she dignifies him with the phrase "blue-capped functioner of doom" to suit her sense of how important and final is her action of dismissing her lover. The color blue

here contributes its usual symbolic sense of vital feeling to her action, as if she is at one with herself in this decision. Then the messenger is pulled down in the next line to "leering groom" to show the lady's now hesitant feeling about sending the letter. She is not divided simply because she breaks off an affair (one is even told that the lover "so richly has deserved" the letter, though this too may merely suggest her passing mood of rejection), but because she is torn between desire and rejection; she cannot put her whole being behind the decision to once and for all renounce the man. As Knight observes, she "alternately wants and does not want her lover...."¹⁰ She is divided not because she chooses any one way, but because she does not really choose at all. Like "The Equilibrists" who remain indecisively in a "torture of equilibrium" (p. 84), she remains at the end of the poem "hot as fever/ And cold as any icicle" (p. 55). Her feelings for and against her lover run their alternating course with no act of will to bring order out of chaos.

The speaker in "Winter Remembered" (p. 3) is another person whose torture of separation from his beloved implies his dissociated life. Absent from his love for some unspecified reason (one feels he could make some effort to find her, but he never does), and unable to bear her absence and the anguish of his feeling for her, he tries a real purgation of that torturing feeling by exposing his body to "the murderous winter blast" so that he may be "past the smart

of feeling." He thus, in effect, dissociates himself in trying to reject all feeling of love. In trying to avoid the pain of "Absence, Absence, in the heart" that possesses him he would attempt to cut off any capacity at all for human feeling.

He feels that the warmth of his fire in the winter is not a substitute for his beloved, his "cause...proper heat and center":

Think not, when fire was bright upon my bricks,
 And past the tight boards hardly a wind could enter,
 I glowed like them, the simple burning sticks,
 Far from my cause, my proper heat and center.

He cannot glow with the inner warmth of remembered love as the "simple" sticks glow with their actual burning. Thornton H. Parsons, the only critic who has attempted a detailed explication of this poem, says concerning the speaker's inability to be warmed by the fire: "The images of physical warmth, the fire bright upon the bricks and the 'simple burning sticks,' are cold comfort to one deprived of his beloved, his 'proper heat and center.'"¹¹ This last phrase may well be an allusion to Romeo's speech about returning to his center, Juliet: "Can I go forward when my heart is here?/ Turn back, dull earth, and find thy center out" (Romeo and Juliet, II. i. 1-2).¹² This is an especially good thematic allusion in that Romeo has the power to act and go to his beloved, whereas the modern man of Ransom's

poem seems unable to act except to depart farther from his beloved by deadening his feeling for her.

Not only does he feel that the fire is no substitute for his absent love, but he departs from the hearth and goes out into a raging snowstorm because the fire reminds him as a symbol too strongly of his beloved:¹³

Better to walk forth in the frozen air
 And wash my wound in the snows; that would be healing;
 Because my heart would throbb less painful there,
 Being caked with cold, and past the smart of feeling.

By going into the storm in order to let it deaden his "wound" of love and to make his heart "caked with cold," he really deadens his "heart" in the broader sense of the term, i.e., his whole sensibility or being. In trying to avoid the pain occasioned by the beloved's absence, a pain normally incident to becoming entwined by love in the life of another, he destroys all really human feeling in himself. The last two lines of the fourth stanza show the speaker's success in reducing himself from a feeling being to a nearly insensate creature: "And though I think this heart's blood froze not fast/ It ran too small to spare one drop for dreaming." He will dream no longer of his beloved, and so the pain her memory causes will cease. Parsons says that in this attempt to dehumanize himself the man attains "...a sheer minimal existence without enough margin to permit any feeling that is specifically human."¹⁴ The man's closing

remarks that his fingers that had first joined him and his beloved were in the storm "ten poor idiot fingers not worth much,/ Ten frozen parsnips hanging in the weather" reinforce the idea of his having reduced his sensibility from the proper human level to that of a kind of idiot or vegetable. The fingers are also "idiot fingers" in that they failed to maintain the bond they had first established with the woman.

One may compare this self-mutilator of the soul with another figure, the old man in "Old Man Pondered" (pp. 68-69). What the man in "Winter Remembered" achieves temporarily -- the suspension of human feeling -- the old man achieved permanently as the result of a prolonged flight from both love and hate. He seems to be the end product of the movement toward dissociation. He is "pondered," i.e., in an obsolete sense of the word, he is "burdened" with the crushing weight of his thought. All he does is "strictly [watch] his own predicament" (p. 68). Completely shut up within himself, his eye "monstered in its fixed intent" (p. 68), he remains totally unaware of the speaker and his girl, who observe him. The meaning of "monstered" as a departure from the course of nature calls attention to the perversity of the old man's peculiar inwardness. Apparently too timid or too conscious of the difficulties and dangers to indulge in the "storm and sport" of life (cf. "Good Snips" [p. 16]),¹⁵ he has avoided "many a bright-barbed hate" (p. 68) from the world by shutting himself so effectively in his own consciousness that he has become "the lone

sitter-in" (p. 68). As a bonus to this process he has become the Cartesian man par excellence: separated from the real forms of nature and sufficient unto himself as a thinking essence. But in so avoiding hate he has also had to shut out the possibility of love "lest one light arrow/ Be sharpened with a most immortal sorrow" (p. 69). In other words, in barring the possibility of sorrow or hurt in life, he had also to bar that of love, since love might bring sorrow or involve it. He never took any chances in his monomaniacal scheme to anticipate all threats and tender certain everything that might happen to him. He planned for all eventualities by withdrawing, as so many of Ransom's people do, from the possibility of real experience -- and the result is a man who has inadvertently lopped off his feelings and so rendered himself truly a monster.

All the characters studied in this chapter, from the timid couple of "Good Ships" to the withdrawing old man of "Old Man Pondered," possess powers of intellect and feeling that could ripen into fully realized human lives. However, they invariably destroy their possible lives because they fail to perform the actions necessary to bring their lives to realization. They fail to face up to their responsibilities as human beings to think and feel and act forcefully in crucial encounters with others and with themselves.

FOOTNOTES

¹The amount of criticism devoted to "The Equilibrists" renders superfluous a detailed explication of its theme. In addition to the comments of Karl F. Knight scattered through his book, Thornton H. Parsons ("Ransom and the Poetics of Monastic Ecstasy," Modern Language Quarterly, XXVI [1965], 571-585), Bernard Bergonzi ("A Poem About the History of Love: 'The Equilibrists' by John Crowe Ransom," Critical Quarterly, IV [summer, 1962], 127-137), and G. R. Wasserman ("The Irony of John Crowe Ransom," University of Kansas City Review, XXIII [winter, 1956], 151-160) go into great detail in explicating the nature of the conflict between feeling and intellect in the poem. The final failure of the couple as lovers seems to be their failure to decide firmly either to love or to part forever; they resign themselves to their "torture of equilibrium." As Wasserman says: "...in resigning themselves to an inadequate reconciliation of both extremes [i.e., love or honor] of their predicament, they have in fact ceased to struggle to attain either of them" (p. 158).

²John L. Stewart, The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians (Princeton, 1965), p. 252.

³Ibid.

⁴Karl F. Knight, The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom: A Study of Diction, Metaphor, and Symbol (The Hague, 1964), p. 45.

⁵Ibid., p. 79.

⁶Ibid., p. 104.

⁷Ibid., p. 100. Other instances of blue as a symbol of vitality and passion are the bluebirds and the blue garments of the "Blue Girls" (p. 37), the blue veils of "Judith of Bethulia" (p. 35), and the "sweet blue eyes" of the old champion "Captain Carpenter" (p. 42).

⁸Vivienne Koch, "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom," Sewanee Review, LVIII (spring, 1950), 248.

⁹Knight, p. 103.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 99.

¹¹Thornton H. Parsons, "Ransom and the Poetics of Monastic Ecstasy," Modern Language Quarterly, XXVI (1965), 583.

¹²William Shakespeare, Shakespeare: The Complete Works, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York, 1948).

¹³Knight, p. 50.

¹⁴Parsons, p. 583.

¹⁵Knight, p. 80, says the old man is "one who avoided the stimulating challenges of life...."

CHAPTER III

WOMAN'S HOPE AND MAN'S DESPAIR

Several of Ransom's poems about unmarried couples portray lovers who, unlike the couples discussed in the preceding chapter, possess sufficient self-confidence that they can at least accompany each other. But these persons too fail in the end to establish a solid love. They fail primarily because the man, with his usually lower degree of sensibility, is incapable of truly loving the woman. The woman, with her greater capacity for love, would love him, but the man holds back in the crucial moment and so destroys their budding relationship. This implicit testimony the poems make to the woman's greater sensibility anticipates Ransom's explicit remarks in his prose that the basic differences between the sexes are differences in sensibility. He says in The World's Body (1938):

The minds of man and woman grow apart....man, at best, is an intellectualized woman. Or, man distinguishes himself from woman by intellect, but he should keep it feminized. He knows he should not abandon sensibility and tenderness, though perhaps he has generally done so.¹

Less pliant [than man], safer as a biological organism, [woman] remains fixed in her famous attitudes, and is indifferent to intellectuality. I mean, of course, comparatively indifferent; more so than a man.²

It will probably be agreed that women have much more aptitude for the cultivation of sentiments than men do....³

And more recently, in his comment in Selected Poems (1963) on the new version of "Prelude to an Evening," Ransom again speaks of woman as being "more natural, confirmed in her direction already, therefore more spontaneous in her responses; she is less reflective [than man]."⁴ Of course this "aptitude for the cultivation of sentiments," misdirected, can itself be a source of the divided sensibility, as it becomes in the spinsters Margaret (p. 90) and "Miriam Tazewell" (p. 4) who cultivate feelings for dead leaves and storm-pelted flowers as if these objects were persons. But the poems under discussion in this chapter portray this special quality of the woman's sensibility developed in the right direction. "Vaunting Oak" (pp. 19-20), "Eclogue" (pp. 47-50), and "Spectral Lovers" (pp. 6-7) are the three poems that show crises of love in the lives of sensitive, loving women and their divided men.

In "Vaunting Oak" the woman would desperately believe in lasting love, but the man, the "unbeliever of bitter blood" (p. 19) who is also the speaker, destroys her hope by

destroying her feeling of the permanence of the oak which she has chosen as the symbol of their love's endurance. Ransom uses the narrative point of view, or aesthetic distance, as a principal device to characterize the man as deficient in proper feeling for the woman. The reader does not learn that the speaker is the "me" of the poem, the "unbeliever," until, as Cleanth Brooks observes, "the poem is half over."⁵ Throughout the first half, the "unbeliever" in love speaks of himself and his affair with the girl beneath the great oak in the detached, third-person voice as if he is not describing an intimate and moving love scene but is merely an observer noting social phenomena: "How a certain heart, too young and mortally/ Linked with an unbeliever of bitter blood" (p. 19). When the reader receives the revelation in the seventh stanza that the speaker is also the "me" of this drama of passion, that he has been speaking all along of himself, "And what but she fetch me up to.../...the oak" (p. 20), the shock to the reader at the sudden collapse of the aesthetic distance he has assumed to exist is a measure of how far gone the speaker is in abstractionism. He is totally objective about the whole episode; it is but another fact, one feels, retained by his memory. Remote from any feeling of love such as animates the girl, he retails the events as if for clinical consumption. He shows no delicacy or sense of inticacy for what has taken place.

In the fourth and fifth stanzas the speaker describes the woman's hopes for love:

Now a certain heart, too young and mortally
 Linked with an unbeliever of bitter blood,
 Observed, as an eminent witness of life, the tree,

And exulted, wrapped in a phantasy of good:

"Be the great oak for its long winterings
 Our love's symbol, better than the summer's
 brood" (p. 19).

The woman, desperate to believe in the permanence of their love, chooses the tall, apparently stout oak as its symbol. But that this hopeful attitude is indeed, as the speaker says, a "phantasy of good" Knight points out: "'Phantasy' suggests the unreality of her attitude, and 'wrapped' concretely indicates that her attitude is used as a protective covering, a way of shielding herself from the truth."⁶ One may build on this idea and observe that her hopeful attitude is unreal because she is "Linked with an unbeliever" in love. She shields herself from the truth that not all her striving to establish a symbol for their love can bring the man to believe in it. And yet one must praise the woman more than criticize her, for she strives to achieve a lasting love. In erecting a symbol of her love she carries out in the only way she sees possible her desire to love and be loved by the "unbeliever" who desperately needs her help.

For he is already convinced that he is defeated as a lover and so refers to himself as an "unbeliever of bitter blood"; the "bitter blood" suggests a flaw that reaches to the very roots of his nature since "blood" connotes passion and this he lacks altogether. He seems too conscious of the mutability of all things to enter into love for a perishable creature. He refers to the woman as one "who had been instructed of much mortality" (p. 20) -- "instructed" evidently by himself -- but in reality he himself is the one overpowered by the sense of the inevitable mortality of man and the world. His preoccupation with oncoming night and extinction gives to the entire poem an oppressive atmosphere which stifles love. In the first stanza he sees the tall oak as "a tower unleaning" (p. 19), but immediately thinks of its death: "But how will he not break,/ If Heaven assault him with full wind and sleet" (p. 19). The oak's leaves are "the frail leaves of a season" (p. 19), and the flowers beneath the tree have "dusty tombs" (p. 20) awaiting them. This sense of mortality inhibits his ability to love here and now.

The speaker's inability to appreciate the beauty of nature as he follows the girl to the oak is another trait that shows his lack of attachment to particular creatures and hence his divided state. He says: "A flat where bird-song flew/ Had to be traversed; and a quick populace/ Of daisies and yellow kinds..." (p. 20). He reveals in his use of the word "had" that the journey through the fields where

the birds sang was something to be endured, not delighted in; and flowers to him are only "yellow kinds," not particular flowers each with its own specific beauty. His use of the adjective "quick" to refer to the flowers suggests, as Knight points out, a pun on the meanings "alive" and "short-lived."⁷ This usage again testifies to the man's obsession with the idea of universal decay and death. His unfeeling response to nature is similar to that of the abstracted speaker in "Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom" (p. 66) who tolerates the birds' songs only because they do not bother his thinking. Most importantly for the poem's theme of hopeless love, the man reveals his defective sensibility in his powerlessness to see the oak as a symbol, something that the woman does readily.

The painfully blunt way in which he acts to destroy for the woman the oak as the symbol of the solidity of their love shows another side of his emotional poverty. When she tells him to behold the tree as a symbol, "established, you see him there! forever" (p. 20), he acts immediately to disabuse her of her "error": "But, that her pitiful error be undone,/ I knocked on his house loudly, a sorrowing lover,/ And drew forth like a funeral a hollow tone" (p. 20). He finally acts, but, ironically, does so only to destroy the effect of the woman's hopeful act of creating a symbol. His cold, intellectual behavior reminds one of Richard Eberhart's lines, "In a hard intellectual light/ I will kill all delight."⁸ He certainly kills the woman's delight. He is

such a lover of truth that it takes precedence over all courtesy, and he destroys, with little or no compunction, the woman's hope for love. Brutally he enforces his point by knocking louder and louder on the ex-symbol: "I knocked more sternly, and his dolorous cry/ Boomed..." (p. 20). As Cleanth Brooks comments, "The poem achieves a proper climax and a powerful one as the boom from the hollow oak is made to swell into a great cry of lament which smothers every sound in the spring scene...."⁹ It even drowns out the girl's sobbing as she cries over her ruined love.

Another character who gives up love before his overpowering consciousness of the mutability of life is the man in the dialogue-poem, "Eclogue" (pp. 47-50). Two formerly inseparable childhood companions, John Black and Jane Sneed, now grown up, find they cannot achieve a mature adult love. They remain apart musing on what has come between them. Jane recalls how they were inseparable when children:

Ten years ago, pretty it was in a ring
 To run as boys and girls do in the grass--
 At that time leap and hollo and skip and sing
 Came easily to pass.

....

Those days I could not quit you if I would,
 Nor yet quit me could you (p. 47).

This attachment was possible because their childhood possessed a kind of unified sensibility in which, as John Black

says, "Our infant selves played happily with our others" (p. 47).¹⁰ No thought of death then constricted their natural feeling to reach out to each other. But now as adults this excessive consciousness of their own mortality renders them unable to love. As Jane puts it,

We were spendthrifts of joy when we were young,
 But we became usurious, and in fright
 Conceived that such a waste of days was wrong
 For marchers unto night (p. 48).

They stop living in this world and its possibilities for happiness and live only for an afterlife: "We are mortals," John Black declares, "teasing for immortal spoils, / Desperate women and men" (p. 48). Their sense of the transience of all things renders them unable to enter a love affair. But this sense of the transience of things is normally present in life and in much of literature and does not in every case compel a surrender of the possibility of being somewhat happy in the temporal order. Just because something will not last forever is no reason to dismiss it as of no account. The speaker in Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" sees with harsh distinctness the transience of physical love but nonetheless strives to persuade the lady to seize the day with him by loving while they still can. The knowledge that death impends for them should not of itself make Jane and John remain apart in fear and despair. On the contrary, it would seem that the

awareness of death would make them all the more eager to love since this awareness would render life more precious to them. But they think too precisely on things they should be aware of but not preoccupied by; they think of everything, they are too conscious of the mortality inherent in life and all its activities, and so, out of an exaggerated sense of futility, do nothing. Their intense perception of their natural end is one of those "diseased forms of clarity," a striving after absolute certainty about the future and rejection of openness to the immediately possible, that William F. Lynch asserts is one of the major causes of hopelessness and paralysis of the will.¹¹

John Black is the typical fragmented lover who has, in Randall Jarrell's words, "seen through everything except the process of seeing through everything."¹² He sees through every emotion of the more hopeful and sensitive Jane, and duly delivers the explanations of theogony and philosophy for their separated state. Jane is typically not interested in these abstract formulas, but only knows that "Something, John Black, came flapping out of hell/ And wrought between us, and the chasm is/ Digged, and it digged it well" (p. 49). Like the "ditch of darkness" in which the benighted lover walks in "Two in August" (p. 62), "digged" here suggests that something conscious or a kind of consciousness has intervened and prevented their love from maturing. Jane feels intensely the hellishness of their plight, while the man, if he feels at all, can only

express himself in morose abstractions. Jane Sneed, with the greater sensibility of a woman, if she cannot bring John Black to love her at least can imagine what it must be like to love:

Yet I can picture happiness--

Perhaps there wander lovers in some lands

Who when Night comes, when it is fathomless,

Consort their little hands;

....

So they keep unafraid the whole night through,

Till the sun of a sudden glowing through the bushes

They wake and laugh, their eyes again are blue...

(p. 49).

In Jane's imagined harmony of love, according to Isabel Gamble, "all of Ransom's plus-terms -- life, love, courage, blue eyes -- converge."¹³ But John Black's censoring intellect clamps down on this imaginative excursion as not possible for them because they are primarily thought and not feeling:

O innocent dove,

This is a dream. We lovers mournfully

Exchange our bleak despairs. We are one part love

And nine parts bitter thought. As well might be

Beneath ground as above (p. 50).

That John puts their (more accurately, his) imbalance

between thought and feeling in quantitative terms, "...one part love/ And nine parts bitter thought..," involves the very same imbalance and brands him as an abstractionist. He speaks of the sensibility as if it were some mechanical mixture of opposites. John Black, one concludes, is a hopeless case of the cold fragmented self -- Jane will never warm him to love her.

In "Spectral Lovers" (pp. 6-7) a couple fail in love because they fail in the crucial moment as they walk in the April mist to affirm and seal their love with the indispensable physical touch -- an embrace, a kiss, or even so little but significant a gesture as a handclasp. "Lovers they knew they were, but why unclasped, unkissed?/ Why should two lovers go frozen apart in fear?" (p. 6). The repetition of "lovers" and the stress on the word "knew" in these lines from the first stanza foreshadow the sad fact brought out later in the poem, namely, that they are not really lovers at all and that they are "frozen apart" because they are too self-conscious of their love. Their love remains in their heads and never gets out into their fingertips.

As in the two poems already discussed in this chapter, the woman is closer than the man to the unified self. She is ready to love the man and even to "surrender all," "If he but ask it" (p. 6). As Thornton H. Parsons remarks, she will wait "passive, true to the convention of feminine modesty,"¹⁴ and so allow the man the opportunity to perform

his proper, more aggressive part in love. Still one must admit that not just modesty but also a certain timidity toward love itself causes her to wait passively:

The heart was bold that clanged within her bosom,
 The moment perfect, the time stopped for them,
 Still her face turned from him (p. 6).

At the same time her feeling of love is "bold," she averts her face from the man as if still not ready to meet his advance. Her curious mixture of boldness and timidity also comes out in two lines earlier in this second stanza:

"Scarcely her fingers touched him, quick with care,/ Yet of evasions even she made a snare" (p. 6). Her evading action negates her boldness; she would initiate physical contact with the man but draws back out of timidity and modesty. In so doing she makes a "snare" for their love. "Snare" must be understood in at least two senses: it means that she draws back in order to provoke the man into an advance; but it also suggests that by failing to touch the man, she has lost the opportunity to establish their love. The man is so reticent himself that apparently the woman has to initiate their relation, but this, as Knight observes, serves to "reverse the usual roles of male and female."¹⁵ The woman's fluttering, indecisive actions probably contribute, Parsons suggests, "to the timidity of the man."¹⁶

Still, for all her indecisive boldness, her behavior accords in the main with the tradition of feminine passivity

as she waits for the man to ask her. But he never accepts this tacit yielding to his proper role because, as Knight sees, he rationalizes away this perfect moment for his acting.¹⁷ On the one hand he does feel passionately drawn to her: "Am I reeling with the sap of April like a drunkard/? Blessed is he that taketh this richest of cities" (p. 7). On the other hand he refuses to act on this feeling of love; he refuses to so much as touch her because in reality he does not want to. He tells himself that she is not to be conquered or that if she were conquered the conquest would somehow impair her person:

But it is so stainless the sack were a thousand pities.
This is that marble fortress not to be conquered,
Lest its white peace in the black flame turn to tinder
And an unutterable cinder (p. 7).

Parsons sees this language of the man's interior monologue as only a flaw in the poem, "an intrusion by the author.... The erotic love between the man and woman is not even imaginatively credible when the speech becomes so artificial."¹⁸ But instead of being a flaw, the language supports the theme of their love's unreality. It is indicative of the man's divided sensibility that he uses the traditional figurative language for winning a woman but cannot act upon its implications. In such language the woman is always a castle or fortress that must be "taken" by the man. The man's use of the language, in the light of his refusal to act in the way

the language points and "conquer" her, suggests strongly his excessive self-consciousness. He thinks in the terms of the actions necessary for success in love, yet he cannot perform these actions. The actions remain only possible actions in his imagination; they never reach the status of real actions. In fact by using such language he only covers up for his failure to act. His speech suggests that the woman is so tender that she would be somehow used up if he were to make use of her body, but such extreme effacement on his part seems hardly consonant with the idea of lovers. The body is normally a means of expressing love. Moreover, the woman's monologue reveals her boldness and the fact that he would encounter no resistance from her, since she is ready to yield all to him "If he but ask it." Her reticence shown in averting her face and in withdrawing her fingers may have something to do with causing his inability to act, but he never refers to this and seems unaware of it.

Probably the man's failure to perform the physical acts necessary to cement their tie and his rationalizing of this failure stem chiefly from his repugnance to the physical side of love. That he refers to passion as "the black flame" in the passage quoted above suggests his extreme uneasiness in a situation fraught with sexual necessities. He is unnatural in being so upset over a normal part of love, the touch of the two bodies. In "The Equilibrists" (pp. 83-85) the woman's body is "a white field ready for love" that urges the man to make use of itself; the "lilies" of her

body's beauty beseech "him to take,/ If he would pluck and wear them, bruise and break" (p. 83). But the "spectral lover," like the man in "The Equilibrists," shrinks from any bruising and breaking. There is other evidence for thinking that he shrinks from the physical as such. Knight points to the "effeminate"¹⁹ behavior of the man in the fourth stanza as he walks with the woman:

And gesturing largely to the moon of Easter,
 mincing his steps and swishing the jubilant grass,
 beheading some field-flowers that had come to pass,
 He had reduced his tributaries faster
 Had not considerations pinched his heart
 Unfitly for his art (p. 7).

The man would rather "behead" field-flowers than deflower his lady. His "gesturing largely to the moon" and "Mincing his steps and swishing the ... grass" suggest not so much what Parsons calls his "passionate exultation"²⁰ as a kind of dainty prancing about. He should employ his time and mood not in these random gestures which dissipate his feeling but in saying something to the lady or taking her by the hand. "...considerations pinched his heart/ Unfitly for his art" suggests that he is too self-conscious about doing any such thing. Parsons rightly points out that "pinched" effectively renders his squeamishness" but goes on to attribute this squeamishness not to his reticence before the physical side of love but to a code of honorable restraint:

"Both feel passion but do not act upon it because of a humane code of restraint."²¹ However, to see a moral restraint here is really beside the point, since the man is not being called on to possess the woman on the spot, but merely to indicate by some physical sign that he loves her. But the man declines to offer any touch at all, or even to say anything to her.

The speaker of the poem presents another instance of the divided sensibility. Suddenly in the last stanza the reader perceives that he is listening not to an omniscient narrator but to another character who has been observing the two "spectral lovers" in the mist:

They passed me once in April, in the mist.
 No other season is it when one walks and discovers
 Two tall and wandering, like spectral lovers,
 white in the season's moon-gold and amethyst,
 who touch their quick fingers fluttering like a bird
 whose songs shall never be heard (p. 7).

The abrupt reference to "me" in the first line causes a mild shock to the reader comparable to that caused by the collapse of the aesthetic distance in "Vaunting Oak" (p. 20). Vivienne Koch suggests that the speaker, through the use of the lovers' monologues, "is really regarding his own past."²² Cleanth Brooks provides a more significant and tenable account, that the "spectral lovers prove to be, now that the vantage point of the speaker is established for us, a con-

struction evoked with pity, with understanding, with irony, by the 'me' of the last stanza, out of himself and out of the two forms who have silently passed him in the mist."²³ The speaker, with a divided sensibility himself, projects his state of mind onto the pair of lovers who pass him in the mist. Why should he be out in the mist, alone, where he meets the wandering pair, unless he too is lost? That he is so apt at filling in the characters of the couple and producing speeches for them suggests strongly that, like the men in "Eclogue" and "Vaunting Oak," he is given to fathoming his nature but not to performing it. The poignant sadness of the last two lines indicates his painful awareness of his unhappy state of being.

FOOTNOTES

¹John Crowe Ransom, The World's Body (New York, 1938), p. 77.

²Ibid., p. 78.

³Ibid., p. 228.

⁴Ransom, Selected Poems (New York, 1963), p. 108.

⁵Cleanth Brooks, "The Doric Delicacy," Sewanee Review, LVI (summer, 1948), 408.

⁶Karl F. Knight, The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom (The Hague, 1964), p. 53.

⁷Ibid., p. 25.

⁸Richard Eberhart, "In a Hard Intellectual Light," Chief Modern Poets of England and America, fourth edition, ed. Gerald D. Sanders et al. (New York, 1962), p. II-403.

⁹Brooks, "The Doric Delicacy," p. 408.

¹⁰Brooks, in Modern Poetry and the Tradition (New York, 1965 [originally published Chapel Hill, 1939]), p. 89, writes of the connection between childhood and sensibility: "In the form most familiar to us, the division [of sensibility] reveals itself in the contrast between the broken and confused life of the mature man and the innocent and total world of childhood which he has grown out of. The characters of 'Eclogue' comment on the change..."

¹¹William F. Lynch, S. J., Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless (New York, 1965), p. 69.

¹²Randall Jarrell, "John Ransom's Poetry," Sewanee Review, LVI (summer, 1948), 389.

¹³Isabel Gamble, "Ceremonies of Bravery: John Crowe Ransom," The Hopkins Review, VI (spring-summer, 1953), 111.

¹⁴Thornton H. Parsons, "Ransom and the Poetics of Monastic Ecstasy," Modern Language Quarterly, XXVI (1965), 573.

- 15 Knight, pp. 78-79.
- 16 Parsons, p. 573.
- 17 Knight, p. 78.
- 18 Parsons, p. 574.
- 19 Knight, p. 78.
- 20 Parsons, p. 574.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Vivienne Koch, "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom," Sewanee Review, LVIII (spring, 1950), 241.
- 23 Brooks, "The Doric Delicacy," p. 412.

CHAPTER IV

THE MARRIAGE GROUP

Ransom's marriage group, like the two preceding groups, consists typically of failures in love. As Knight observes, "Although the social form of marriage conventionally suggests love, Ransom's married people tend to fail equally as much as his withdrawn and isolated figures."¹ While failure does prevail in the marriage poems, at the same time marriage itself seems to possess a special importance for Ransom as a context of hope, of possibility for achieving -- if only for a moment -- the unified sensibility. In his commentary on the revised version of "Prelude to an Evening" (pp. 99-101) Ransom speaks approvingly of "the great Familial Configuration" that has "been ordained in our creation...."² More significantly, as coming from the evidence of the poems themselves, it is only through participating in conjugal love that any of the characters approach a recognizable unity. The couple in "Two in August" (pp. 61-62) before they split apart one night have "grown almost one" (p. 61), and Jane and Ralph in "Morning" (p. 65) reach a moment of happiness on awaking one day before falling again into their separate and fragmented lives. However, failure in love remains the theme of these two bright

exceptions. In the other poems of this group, "Man without Sense of Direction" (pp. 79-80), "Conrad in Twilight" (p. 28), and "In Process of a Noble Alliance" (p. 21), the failure is unmitigated.

This last poem portrays a woman who lacks love and so looks upon her approaching marriage not as the normal fulfillment of life but as a hellish and fatal ordeal. The poem is not a joyous epithalamium but, as Isabel Gamble says, "a dirge for a marriage"³:

Reduce this lady unto marble quickly,
 Ray her beauty on a glassy plate,
 Rhyme her youth as fast as the granite,
 Take her where she trembles and do not wait,
 For now in funeral white they lead her
 And crown her queen of the House of No Love:
 A dirge then for her beauty, musicians!
 Not harping the springe that catches the dove (p. 21).

The lady's new house and new life with her husband will be "the House of No Love" because she will bring to it no vital lover of her own. The capitals emphasize love's absence from the union, as though this were the loveless marriage. Her crowning is ironic since she will not be "queen" of the household in the usual sense, but rather in the sense of a queen suffering in Hell. Marriage will be Hell for her, and her lack of affection will inevitably render it Hell for her family. The "funeral white" in which she is led to the

alter as if to her grave associates her, as Knight observes, with "the absence of love and with death...."⁴ and contrasts with the usual vibrant whiteness of the wedding dress. Robert Buffington identifies the "dove" in the last line with the unloving lady and says she "is a dove caught in a springe...."⁵ Marriage, in other words, appears to her as a trap that will lead to her decline and death. The construction beginning with the word "For" in the fifth line expresses the fact that since she will not love, her beauty will fade as she herself will fade away to death. This is the reason for the urgency of the first four lines with their repeated directions to the artists to preserve her beauty before it disappear in the loveless marriage. Vivienne Koch writes of these opening lines, "A rejecting lady is consigned by the poet to her proper element...."⁶ Certainly the marble, photographic plate (the "glassy plate" of the poem), and granite possess a glittering beauty like the lady and also, like her, are hard and without warmth. She is truly marmoreal in her lack of affections.⁷

This woman who would draw back from marriage finds her male counterpart in the lonely old man of "Conrad in Twilight" (p. 28) who retires from his wife and her domestic comforts. He sits on alone in his garden pondering morosely the course of the dying season and its dead leaves. He has sat so long that, like the friar in "Necrological" (p. 10) who sits motionless among the corpses of a battlefield, he

has almost become a part of the decaying landscape:

His lungs filling with such miasma,
 His feet dripping in leafage and muck:
 Conrad! you've forgotten asthma.

Vivienne Koch views the autumn scene as expressing Conrad's interior disposition: "...Conrad's particular malaise of age and purposelessness is tied in with the physical defects of the region...."⁸ The sudden shift from a description of Conrad in the first three stanzas to the autumn imagery in the last stanza emphasizes that Conrad is used-up inside:

Autumn days in our section
 Are the most used-up thing on earth
 (Or in the waters under the earth)
 Having no more color nor predilection
 Than cornstalks too wet for the fire,
 A ribbon rotting on the byre,
 A man's face as weathered as straw
 By the summer's flare and winter's flaw.

The absence of color in the images of cornstalks, ribbon, and the man's weathered face brings out Conrad's passionless state. Dr. Samuel H. Woods points out that the whole poem recalls, "in its emphasis on bogging down in moroseness,"⁹ the old man of "Old Man Pondered" (pp. 68-69) who withdraws from emotions altogether.

The direct address to Conrad in the lines quoted above from the second stanza, "Conrad! you've forgotten asthma," appears to be the anxious thought of his wife who waits in her house where she has spread out for her bemused husband all her domestic comforts. The narrator presents the warmth and comfort associated with the wife from whom Conrad absents himself:

Conrad's house has thick red walls,
The log on Conrad's hearth is blazing,
Slippers and pipe and tea are served,
Butter and toast are meant for pleasing!

The "red walls," along with the more obvious images, suggest the warm feeling of the wife who awaits Conrad's return in vain.¹⁰ Conrad the thinker rejects his wife's world of love and sits on alone sunk in his morose mood: "Still Conrad's back is not uncurved/ And here's an autumn on him, teasing." Conrad is not a man of strong desires. His lack of passion to do anything, to exclaim against the oncoming winter or to go back to his wife (both of which the Conrad in "Master's in the Garden Again" [pp. 96-98] does), is well brought out in lines four and five of the first stanza, in which his knees, emblem of vitality, appear "too rheumy and cold/ To warm the wraith of a Forest of Arden."¹¹

The wife in "Morning" (p. 65) succeeds a little better than Conrad's wife in leading her husband back to domestic harmony. Jane, the wife, brings Ralph momentarily to a

"blue world" of unity.¹² She awakes him "so gently on one morning" that he begins to respond aesthetically and lovingly to nature and to his wife. Before his busy head, "haunted" by the ghostly "true householder Learning" can start its mill-like operations for the day, Ralph "would propose to Jane then to go walking/ Through the green waves...." For the first time, apparently, this highly intellectualized man begins to give his innocent, delighted awareness to "wings and light and clover," the beauty of the particulate, dappled world. But Ralph's newborn sensibility finds it immensely difficult to maintain this awareness of things.¹³ Ralph is so dissociated that in order to reach even momentarily the state of aesthetic awareness he has to be brought to it from sleep, when his intellect is in abeyance. This intellect, the "true householder," soon recovers and prevents Ralph from getting from his desire to ask Jane to go walking (he only "would propose" it) to the realization of the desire:

Suddenly he remembered about himself,
 His manliness returned entire to Ralph;
 The dutiful mills of the brain
 Began to whir with their smooth-grinding wheels
 And the sly visitors wriggled off like eels.

The "sly visitors" are Ralph's inchoate aesthetic perceptions; they are "sly" because they have stolen over his sensibility on his waking; and their wriggling off -- the

very sound of this line supports the sense -- suggests their insubstantial nature from the intellect's point of view. Ralph's head emerges victorious over these invaders much as the "Painted Head" (pp. 91-92) emerges alone from the "canvas sky depending from nothing" (p. 91) and plays "truant from the body bush" (p. 91). His mind's "dutiful mills" -- suggesting the routine categorizing and churning out of "useful" ideas it is accustomed to -- reduce the new-found world, and the newly perceived wife, from their rich uniqueness to their class abstractions: "He rose and was himself again./ Simply another morning, and simply Jane."

Obviously Ransom does not suggest that every time a man wakes up he should have an ecstatic perception of nature and his wife and plunge forthwith out into the world for a delightful jaunt. Such lines as "His manliness returned entire to Ralph" mean more than simply a satire of Ralph's rejection of such action on this morning; economic life must go on (Ralph must go to work) for one to have any leisure for aesthetic life. But here one needs to find a mean. Ralph has no aesthetic side to his life at all. The poem implies that there is something terribly wrong with a man who never sees anything in nature that is his, whose sensibility is so distorted that he can no longer see nature as it exists on the level of particular forms which stir one's feelings but only as it fits his class categories of useful ideas and objects. That his wife awakes Ralph "so gently on one morning" suggests that this particular morn-

ing of the poem's action is Ralph's one and only chance for a Joycean epiphany. But even under these best possible conditions of human and natural aid, he is so divided that he remains unable to keep afloat for more than a fleeting moment in the real world.

The husband in "Man without Sense of Direction" (pp. 79-80) is the fragmented married lover par excellence. For he has everything necessary for a rich human existence -- he is "Of noblest mind and powerful leg" (p. 79) -- he has the prerequisites of body and intellect, yet he "cannot fathom nor perform his nature" (p. 79). Buffington says of his plight, "What he is 'without' is unteachable: the simple trick of day-to-day living...."¹⁴ He seems unable to integrate the good qualities he so obviously possesses into some kind of unity. His failure to do this shows itself in his failure to respond with appropriate feelings of love -- for nature, and for his loving wife. These two, nature and woman, come up again and again in Ransom as the tests of one's sensibility.

In the first two stanzas Ransom presents a contrast between the ideal hero of the past who could perform his nature and the decrepit modern man of the poem:

Tell this to ladies: how a hero man
 Assail a thick and scandalous giant
 Who casts true shadow in the sun,
 And die, but play no truant.

This is more horrible: that the darling egg
 Of the chosen people hatch a creature
 Of noblest mind and powerful leg
 Who cannot fathom nor perform his nature (p. 79).

The opening advice to the reader that here is something he should tell to women, "Tell this to ladies," suggests the connection between one's ability to love and the quality of one's sensibility. It suggests that the "hero man," the man who can think and feel and act, would recommend himself to women's love because he is not paralyzed but meets life bravely. He may be defeated in the conflicts of life, but at least he fights something real that he recognizes as such, "a thick and scandalous giant/ Who casts true shadow in the sun." In this struggle with something that is "thick" and casts a "true shadow" and hence is no illusion, the man can develop and assert the best in his own nature. He might even die, but he plays "no truant" from this task of acting according to his nature.

The modern man of the second stanza, however, lacks the sense of coherence or simplicity that informs the world of the hero and makes his action meaningful and even possible. "Scandalous giant" contains a faint irony aimed at the hero: he must have lived in some fabulous time when the values associated with modes of action were clear and simple. The modern man lacks this immediate sense of direction. Ransom deftly contrasts the unified man of the first stanza with

the divided man of the second by setting "hero man" against "darling egg" and "creature." The imagery of the "egg" and of its hatching a "creature" expresses in a number of ways the divided being of the modern man. First, since "egg" and "hatch" belong to the bird symbolism that Ransom makes such extensive use of, these terms suggest the man's really great potentiality for realizing his nature. This symbolism usually suggests, as it does later in this poem and in poems like "Blue Girls" (p. 37) and "What Ducks Require" (p. 89), fullness of life and passion. It is another reminder of the man's "noblest mind and powerful leg," but which he fails to use. The "egg" itself also suggests something with a promise, something about to unfold and develop into a fully realized organism. In the poem "What Ducks Require" (pp. 88-89), for example, the duckling that soars off into the sky to live in complete accord with its essence is "Cold-hatched" (p. 89). On the other hand, having suggested the man's promise, the imagery also has directly pejorative connotations that suggest the man's failure in sensibility. These connotations point to his nonhuman state of being: he is not a "hero man" but merely a "creature" that has hatched out of an egg, perhaps hatched only halfway out. The "egg" image functions also, as it does in "Painted Head" (p. 92), as a pejorative metaphor for the man's head and so by metonymy suggests at once the man's fragmented life and its cause -- the imbalance between head and heart.

Having now established the man's fragmented nature by demonstrating his distance from the ideal unified man, Ransom shows how the modern's double failure expresses his divided nature: his failure to take pleasure in nature and his failure to feel real love for his wife. The third and fourth stanzas show his failure with respect to nature by contrasting the animals' spontaneous delight with the "darling egg's" inability to enjoy anything. "The larks' tongues are never stilled/ Where the pale spread straw of sunlight lies," and the other birds and beasts "Are swollen with rapture and make uncouth/ Demonstration of joy..." (p. 79). But this tumultuous response of the animals to their life and surroundings is "uncouth" to the man; it is all a "babble/ Offending the ear of the fervorless youth" (p. 79). This last line hints at the cause of his inability to see anything more in nature than an offensive "babble": he lacks the passion necessary to be carried away by things; he cannot become stirred by anything particular in nature. He is farther removed from the unified self than is another character in Ransom who finds himself at odds with nature, the speaker in "Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom" (pp. 66-67). For at least the man in this latter poem tolerates -- at first -- the birds' songs since they do not bother him in his thinking. But the "man without sense of direction" takes offense from the start at the beasts' and birds' natural expressions of "joy." Since a large part of their joy evidently stems from sexual passion ("uncouth" suggests

this), this fact offends the man because he senses their success in love while he himself is a failure with his wife.

The fifth stanza amplifies the suggestion of the preceding one that he is fervorless and asks, apropos his sullen behavior in the face of nature: "Love -- is it the cause?" (p. 79). But the speaker decides it is not the cause since the man's love "was requited beyond his merit/ And won him bridal the loveliest" (p. 79) Not love, but failure to love, causes his unhappy mood and displeasure with nature and is his primary truancy from his right state of being. The possibilities of his marriage are the best conceivable, for he himself is well-endowed with a good mind and fine body and has a beautiful wife who loves him dearly. But he fails in his attempt to love her because he lacks inner warmth of his own:

Yet scarcely he issues from the warm chamber,
 Flushed with her passion, when cold as dead
 Once more he walks where waves past number
 Of sorrow buffet his curse-hung head (p. 80).

His wife's passion warms him briefly, but he comes from her and immediately goes "cold as dead" because he has no depth of feeling. His emotional failure troubles him, but he cannot discover just what it is that is the matter with him. He "...writhes like an antique man of bronze/ That is beaten by furies visible"; "He flails his arms, he moves his lips:/ 'Rage have I none, cause, time, nor country --'" (p. 80).

He strikes his arms about in frustration at not knowing his real antagonist, who is none other than his own divided, fervorless self. In contrast to the "hero man" of the first stanza who knows against whom he fights stands this modern, who is not even really angry at anything he can name or see. The simile Ransom uses for him, "like an antique man of bronze," specially well suggests his falling off from the knowledge and purposeful action of the hero. This simile points out the modern's decline, since bronze age man, as Knight observes, "are relatively degenerate" compared with the heroic figures of the primal age.¹⁵

The degenerate modern's failure in sensibility shows itself finally in the obtuse way in which he tries to overcome or cover up for his lack of feeling. He "rushes/ Back to the tender thing in his charge/ With clamoring tongue and taste of ashes/ And a small passion to feign large" (p. 80). But he fails in this attempt to achieve unity with himself: "But let his cold lips bear her omen,/ She shall not kiss that harried one/ To peace..."(p. 80). The man fails because he tries to reach unity through the marital union alone. As Knight points out with respect to the typical married lover in Ransom, "...the mere fact of physical union does not in itself correct the malady of dissociation...."¹⁶ He seems really too squeamish to perform even at the physical level because he has to feign a passion and experiences a "taste of ashes" which suggests his real aversion toward physical love. He fails ultimately

because he sees his wife not as an aesthetic object and as a person, but as an economic object, a mere sex object, a "thing" to be exploited. He cannot love his wife because he does not see her properly. In a prose passage that post-dates the poem but which helps to explain it Ransom points out that a "woman, contemplated...under restraint, becomes a person and an aesthetic object; therefore a richer object. In fact the woman becomes nothing less than an individual object...."¹⁷ It is this rich, unique person that the wife in the poem has not become for her husband because he rejects restraint and seeks to "prove" to himself and to her his masculine humanity by going straight to the ultimate end of his unenlightened desire, the physical possession.

This poem is of extreme importance, then, in Ransom's studies of domestic crises because it shows so clearly, yet artfully, the inadequacy of pursuing the body alone and thinking that the physical union will of itself provide the sense of a full and happy life.¹⁸ Such a course provides but one more obstacle to a person's reaching the unified sensibility. Raw physical appetite dissociates as effectively as does the exclusive pursuit of abstractions. What is needed is a balance, but this Ransom's married lovers cannot reach. Either they go to the extreme of withdrawing entirely, like the lady of "In Process of a Noble Alliance," or they go to the opposite extreme and seek, like the "Man without Sense of Direction," to reach unity through the bodily union alone.

FOOTNOTES

¹Karl F. Knight, The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom (The Hague, 1964), pp. 84-85.

²John Crowe Ransom, Selected Poems (New York, 1963), p. 110.

³Isabel Gamble, "Ceremonies of Bravery: John Crowe Ransom," The Hopkins Review, VI (spring-summer, 1953), 111.

⁴Knight, p. 103.

⁵Robert Buffington, The Equilibrist: A Study of John Crowe Ransom's Poems, 1916-1963 (Nashville, 1967), p. 71.

⁶Vivienne Koch, "The Achievement of John Crowe Ransom," Sewanee Review, LVIII (spring, 1950), 233.

⁷The other married woman in Ransom's poetry who turns away from her marital duties is the dying lady of "Here Lies a Lady" (p. 25). William Bleifuss, in "Ransom's 'Here Lies a Lady,'" Explicator, XI (May, 1953), Item 51, demonstrates that the poem "is not so much an elegy for a dead lady... as a satiric and ironic sketch of a pattern of life that needs amending." Bleifuss does not explicitly connect the lady's vagaries of mood with the idea of the divided sensibility, but it is clear from his rather exhaustive explication that the lady suffers from dissociation in that she alternately chooses life and rejects it, finally reaching the point at which, as Bleifuss says, she "reacts to nothing...."

⁸Koch, p. 234.

⁹Personal communication, may, 1968.

¹⁰In the poem "Captain Carpenter" (pp. 41-43), for example, "red red vitals of his heart" indicates the captain's vitality and passion.

¹¹Knight in a footnote, p. 28, observes of these lines that Ransom is using this allusion to the Forest of Arden in an ironic manner. Certainly the eagerness of the lovers in As You Like It contrasts with the cold, distant attitude Conrad displays towards returning to his wife.

¹²Ibid., p. 101.

¹³Joseph Wood Krutch, in The Desert Year (New York, 1951), p. 37, observes from his own experience: "It is not easy to live in that continuous awareness of things which alone is true living." If the maintenance of this awareness is difficult for Krutch, how much more difficult it must be for someone like Ralph who has apparently spent his life among abstractions.

¹⁴Buffington, p. 87.

¹⁵Knight, p. 106.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 85.

¹⁷Ransom, The world's Body (New York, 1938), pp. 33-34.

¹⁸A more explicit, and hence less artful, expression of a man's failure to achieve, through sexual union alone, successful love and unity appears in the poem "Triumph" from Ransom's early volume Chills and Fever (New York, 1924), p. 18, lines 10-12. In this poem the man fails to achieve any real unity with the woman and hence with himself because, while he has conquered the woman's body, he has failed to reach her soul:

It was her empty house that fell before my legions;
 Of where her soul inhabits I have conquered naught;
 It is so far from these my Roman regions!

CHAPTER V

SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSION

John Crowe Ransom's poems do not present an optimistic view of the life of man in the modern world. While suggesting man's capacities for harmonious thinking, feeling, and acting, they almost invariably show his failure to live up to them. It would seem that one must go outside the human realm altogether, for example to the ducks in "What Ducks Require" (pp. 88-89), to find creatures able at all times to live in harmony with themselves. The prevalence of the divided self among Ransom's characters reminds one of the prevalence of such portrayals in modern literature in general. The speaker in Poe's "Sonnet -- to Science," Hawthorne's Aylmer in "The Birthmark," and Faulkner's Addie Bundren in As I Lay Dying, to name just a few instances from American literature, suffer from the division between the intellect and the feelings. Ransom's characters cannot harmonize these sides of their nature because of the divisive effects of abstractionism which stem ultimately from the goals and methods of modern science. Abstractionism tends to reduce all the world of experience to class concepts for the sake of power over nature. After centuries of such a program, persons, unique substances formed not only

to act upon the world's body but also and primarily to find delight in contemplating it, grow up in a society that puts a premium on efficiency in turning the world to some economic use. This milieu destroys in large measure any budding desire to make the repose of wonder and aesthetic delight the basis of one's life.

The crucial test of the sensibility of Ransom's people, that which determines whether one is divided or unified, is love. Love demands that one form an emotional attachment to a particular person. No one can succeed in this if he sees individual, concrete persons as mere accidents under an abstraction which alone is "real." Most of Ransom's characters fail this test: they prove unable to either establish or maintain a love for another person.

Chapter II has examined those characters that cannot achieve any companionship at all. These figures range from the couple in "Good Ships" (p. 16) who withdraw from their encounter, to the lady in "Parting, without a Sequel" (pp. 54-55) who alternates between desire and rejection for her lover, to the speaker in "Winter Remembered" (p. 3) who dissociates himself because he cannot bear quietly the pain of his loved one's absence.

Chapter III has examined three poems, "Vaunting Oak" (pp. 19-20), "Eclogue" (pp. 47-50), and "Spectral Lovers" (pp. 6-7). While possessing enough sensibility to feel the attraction of one another, the couples in these poems fail to establish a solid love and sink into despair. They fail

primarily because they cannot overcome their consciousness of either the mutability of things or the physical necessities involved in love. They fail in a crucial encounter to rise to the occasion and give some physical sign of their love. The woman in each case is much more ready for love than the man because she possesses by nature a greater aptitude for emotional attachments.

Chapter IV has examined typical poems from the marriage group and found the married lovers to fail as much as the others. Ransom's married people either hold back from marriage itself or the duties of marriage, as do the lady of "In Process of a Noble Alliance" (p. 21) and Conrad of "Conrad in Twilight" (p. 28) respectively; or reach a moment of happiness like the couple in "Morning" (p. 65) and then fall back into the rut; or, finally, like the couple in "Man without Sense of Direction" (pp. 79-80) exist in a state of torture because the man cannot integrate all sides of his nature and so love his wife as a person.

While not altering profoundly the critical view of Ransom's major theme, the dissociated person in the modern world, this paper has traced its expression in a number of poems that have received little or no attention from this point of view. In pursuit of this study of the divided self, it has amplified Karl F. Knight's perception that love is the test of one's unity. Ransom writes predominantly about failure in love, and this failure indicates the failure of the persons involved to achieve a unified self.

Without a unity to their lives, they cannot love; and because they cannot love they cannot achieve unity. These men and women can find no repose but exist in a tortured equilibrium.

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Thesis: JOHN CROWE RANSOM'S CHARACTERS: PORTRAYALS OF THE
DISSOCIATED SENSIBILITY

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Rock Island, Illinois, November
17, 1938, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Edward Gorecki.

Education: Graduated from Central High School, Tulsa,
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Arts degree from St. John's College, Annapolis,
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1961 and 1962; attended University of Oklahoma in
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ments for the Master of Arts degree at Oklahoma
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Professional Experience: Teacher of mathematics in the
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