CHAPTER FOUR

(A)

Ransom’s Criticism of Poetry

We have seen that the New Critics came to formulate theories of poetry on the basis of their critical examination of individual poems. This strategy is quite obvious in all the critical formulations of Ransom also. In all his critical essays, Ransom cites numerous examples which amply substantiate the claims made by him while enunciating his theories of criticism. His conception about the place of poetry in human society is very high. For him, “Poetry is an advanced pattern of public behaviour” (Ransom, “New Poets” 4). His high ideal about poetry is reinforced when he says, “Poetry is not a narrow accomplishment, nor a private one” (5). Ransom also claims for the superiority of poetry as an art in the following words: “...there cannot be another art whose meaning offers so many dialectical possibilities as verse” (“Strange Music” 469). Ransom explores these ‘dialectical possibilities’ with an unparalleled critical acumen.

Ransom dwells at length on the sonnets of Shakespeare in The World’s Body. He also makes it clear that he intends to limit his attention to only some of the features of the Shakespearean sonnets with an iconoclastic attitude, leaving his dramatic poetry which is more popular, out of his purview. The reason he advances is that in drama, poetic drama included, the poetry is subordinated to the requirements of the drama. In his plays, Shakespeare provides the characters with speeches which are in keeping with the traits of the characters. But these speeches, though cast in the mould of poetry, can hardly stand as self-sufficient poems. Shakespeare, as a playwright, always catered to the taste of his audience. He did not deign to
write poetry as an intellectual exercise in the manner of John Donne and others. He, however, wrote a sonnet-sequence which helps the readers to form a fairly good impression of him as a poet, in spite of the fact that he was not technically trained in the art of sonnet-writing.

The feature that draws Ransom's attention first is that Shakespeare's sonnets suffer from structural defect. Shakespeare practised the English form of sonnet-writing. The English form requires that the poet write three co-ordinate quatrains, similar in argument, followed by a couplet, summing up his contention. Though Shakespeare follows the rhyme-scheme abab cdcd efef gg, the logical pattern, in some cases, does not quite correspond to the metrical pattern. Ransom cites a sonnet, Sonnet No. 56 from Spenser's sonnet-sequence, *Amoretti* to illustrate his point. Spenser further modifies the rhyme-scheme by linking the last rhyme of the previous quatrain to the last rhyme of the first line of the next quatrain. Though the sonnets of Spenser are linked in terms of rhyme and logic, each of the quatrains gives rise to an independent image, while the couplet stands separate. Ransom considers the English form unsuitable for elaborate thoughts, while the Italian form is an appropriate vehicle for any complicated substance. Ransom refers to Shakespeare's Sonnet No. 87, "Farewell! Thou art too dear for my possessing" where the same argument is stated in each of the three quatrains in legalistic terms with the use of words like 'charter,' 'bonds,' 'patent,' 'misprision,' 'judgement,' while the couplet returns to the basic theme of the lover's passionate attachment. However, Ransom is quick to add that such balancing of logic and metre is restricted to only a few of Shakespeare's sonnets. Sonnet No. 66, "Tired with all these for restful death I cry" and Sonnet No. 129, "Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame" are more in the form of fourteen-line poems than sonnet proper in the sense that they do not follow the logical scheme appropriate for an English sonnet where the same argument is repeated in the three quatrains, followed by summing-up in the couplet. Sonnet No. 63, "Against
my love shall be as I am now” — where the speaker anticipates the time when old age will overshadow the youth and so wishes to preserve his beauty in his poetry — follows the logical pattern of the Italian sonnet. Sometimes, as in Sonnet No. 64, “When I have seen by time’s fell hand defaced,” the argument of the couplet is introduced as early as in the third quatrain. The reason that Ransom finds working for such carelessness on the part of Shakespeare is that he might have found the quatrains as having too much space to fill out and the couplet too little space to contain his argument.

Ransom iterates the Aristotelian argument that the cognitive value of poetry depends upon the extent to which it offers an absolute knowledge of the object it treats. But very often the art of poetry is resorted to by poets in order to express their subjective feelings, the most notorious example being the Romantic poetry. Shakespeare’s poetry was also tainted by what Ransom calls “subjectivism, sentimentality, and self-indulgence” (279) — traits which later came to be identified with Romantic poetry. Ransom specifically refers to Shakespeare’s Sonnet No. 33, “Full many a glorious morning have I seen” which symbolically treats of the betrayal and deception practised upon the speaker by his false friend. The sonnet brings together a number of images represented by mellifluous words, but the link among the images, according to Ransom, is not clearly established. In his opinion, the appeal of Shakespeare’s many such sonnets comes from the association of the words he uses and their resultant melodic pattern. Ransom characterises this kind of poetry as “associationist poetry” (280). The only objectivity shown by these sonnets is that of the device of metre which does not come from within, but is imposed from outside. Shakespeare sometimes also resorts to the use of unnatural syntax and idiom. Such “violence of syntax and of idiom” (282), instead of imparting strength of feeling, adds to the obscurity. Ransom quotes a line, “The painful warrior famoused for fight” [the Arden edition has
'worth' for 'fight' (Duncan-Jones 161)] from Shakespeare’s Sonnet No. 25, and another, “The rich proud cost of outworn buried age” from Sonnet No. 64, where Shakespeare’s use of ‘famoused’ in the first instance and ‘rich proud’ in the second obscures the logical sense. And Ransom associates such sweet-sounding obscurity with the Romantic mode of writing poetry which he disparages in the very preface to The World’s Body as “heart’s-desire poetry” which is identified as “the act of a sick mind” (ix). According to Ransom, even if we ignore George Santayana’s judgement that Shakespeare’s art is like landscaping in the sense that it is pervasive, and not like architecture where each constituent object is distinctly visible (282), we must concede that Shakespeare was not a habitual perfectionist, a charge which seems to be an echo of Shakespeare’s estimation by Ben Jonson who wished that Shakespeare had revised his lines a thousand times in order to attain technical perfection. Of course, there are sonnets which are free from “absurdities, structural defects, and great violences,” but, in Ransom’s opinion, Shakespeare had only an “occasional mastery” of them (284).

Besides associationist poetry, Shakespeare also writes in what came to be known after Dr Johnson as the metaphysical style. Ransom recognises the metaphysical manner resorted to by Shakespeare around the time he wrote Hamlet, more in the sonnets than in the plays. Though Shakespeare has never been grouped with the Metaphysical poets, he tries to achieve in his sonnets the same effects as John Donne did in his poems. However, Ransom bestows the honour of pioneering the metaphysical style not to Donne, but to Sidney who in his Sonnet No. 94, “Grief, find the words, for thou hast made my brain” in Astrophel and Stella exploits the so-called metaphysical style. Ransom finds a good example of Shakespeare’s use of the metaphysical style in Sonnet No. 87, “Farewell! Thou art too dear for my possessing.” In this sonnet, Shakespeare develops his theme in three separate quatrains through an image fraught
with legal jargons. Ransom also refers to Shakespeare's Sonnet No. 55, "Not marble, nor the gilded monuments" which Ransom characterises as a "strong sonnet" (287) and finds it comparable with Donne's "Valediction: of the Booke." In this sonnet, Shakespeare's theme is the immortality bestowed on his beloved by his verse, but Shakespeare gives a metaphysical twist to this common classical theme by dwelling on the mutability of the ordinary marbles and monuments. John Donne develops almost a similar theme in the poem mentioned, though, according to Ransom, Donne could have excelled in the sonnet form as well. Unlike Donne and his followers, Shakespeare, however, is not consistent in his handling of the metaphysical style which demands that the poet develop his feelings within a figure of speech. Shakespeare often repudiates a figure, without developing it fully, in favour of another. In this connection, Ransom mentions that Metaphysical poetry was given a new lease of life by H. J. C. Grierson who located in it the combination of passion and intellect. By the way, Eliot's essay, "The Metaphysical Poets" concentrates on this aspect. However, in Ransom's opinion, such a definition of Metaphysical poetry does not speak the whole truth. What distinguishes the Metaphysical poets is their ability to objectify the feelings into external actions. But this is labouring the obvious, because in any perfect art, according to Eliot, the artist hits upon the right "objective correlative" - "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion: such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (qtd. in Borklund 174).

According to Ransom, Metaphysical poetry illustrates the use of the imaginative faculty as an intellectual exercise. It is the spirit of scientific positivism originating during the Renaissance that sowed the seeds of distrust in the versatile functioning of this faculty. Ransom digresses a little to discuss the particularity of the metaphysical image, how this particularity is
related to the contemporary Catholic religion, how the Protestant stance bred distrust against metaphysical composition, and how Dr Johnson’s evaluation of the Metaphysical poets mingled admiration for and disapproval of this important school of poets. Ransom quotes a Prologue composed by Johnson in 1747 to be recited by Garrick, a well-known actor of the time, on the occasion of the opening of Drury Lane Theatre.

When Learning’s triumph o’er her barbarous foes
First reared the stage, immortal Shakespeare rose;
Each change of many-coloured life he drew,
Exhausted worlds, and then imagined new;
Existence saw him spurn her bounded reign,
And panting Time toiled after him in vain.
His pow’rful strokes presiding Truth impressed,
And unresisted Passion stormed the breast. (Ransom, World’s Body 294)

Each of the lines in the Prologue shows Johnson’s ample use of imagination to create a distinct image in each line. This mode of composition casts the entire Prologue in the metaphysical mould. Very appositively, Ransom doubts the intellectual integrity of Dr Johnson in showing disapproval for the metaphysical mode.

Ransom cites some of Shakespeare’s sonnets where Shakespeare shows near-perfect workmanship in sustaining the metaphysical image. In most of the instances Shakespeare’s technical virtuosity is flawed by his attachment to what Ransom has already characterised as the associationist style. He does not develop an image to the full. Instead, he jumps from one image to another and creates a complex of images. He often resorts to word-play or punning which is a feature of the associationist poetry. Here Ransom seems to echo Johnson’s view that quibbles for
Shakespeare were "fatal Cleopatra." Shakespeare's Sonnet No. 30, "When to the sessions of sweet silent thought" is an instance in point, where words like 'sessions' and 'summon up' have a multiplicity of reference. We may pertinently recall here that such punning lends to the feature of ambiguity in poetry, as theorised by Empson, investing the poetic texture with an ironical dimension. However, this ironical dimension can also be seen as the merit of a poem. Sonnet No. 60, "Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore" develops the theme of the decay in the natural world to be countered only by the poet's verse in praise of his young friend; however, the poet introduces so many images that the reader loses track of the development of the images and feels confused. In Sonnet No. 73, "That time of year thou mayst in me behold," the poet, apparently not satisfied with the image of the boughs shaking against the cold to objectify the condition of the old rejected lover, has recourse to the image of the "bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang" (Duncan-Jones 257). Ransom takes exception, in line with his New Critical rejection of the affective fallacy, to Shakespeare's use of the word 'sweet' which, in his opinion, registers a subjective and sentimental impression. Ransom also finds the collation of the two images mentioned unconvincing. Sonnet No. 107, "Not mine own fears, nor the prophetic soul," though metaphysical in orientation, uses words like 'wide' and 'dreaming' that contradict the basic metaphysical image of "the prophetic soul" (Ransom, World's Body 298). The language of the very opening sentence of Sonnet No. 121, "'Tis better to be vile than vile esteemed" strikes at once as metaphysical, though the argument suffers from obscurity. Ransom finds Shakespeare's Sonnet No. 146, "Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth" "Platonic or spiritual" in character, being Shakespeare's only explicit religious poem. He also thinks that this sonnet might have been a natural conclusion for the sonnet-sequence, had not Shakespeare been dictated by the printer's commercial compulsions.
In the postscript part of *The World's Body* Ransom, however, revises some of his earlier opinions in the chapter, “Shakespeare at Sonnets.” Earlier he had said that Shakespeare was not consistent in developing his sonnets. The promise with which a sonnet opens is hardly carried to the last. But here Ransom quotes Sonnet No. 27, “Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed” and Sonnet No. 28, “How can I then return in happy plight” which reveal the close-knit structure as they progress towards the end. Ransom remarks that he should not have brought Donne into comparison with Shakespeare; for the strength of Donne’s lyrical verse rested on a few compositions, while Shakespeare had an opulent production. Ransom also discusses the charge of homosexuality brought against Shakespeare, about which his indirect conclusion is that, though intensely attached to his patron, the poet strongly abhorred such relationship — which is evident from Sonnet No. 121, “Tis better to be vile than vile esteemed.”

Ransom discusses Milton’s poem, “Lycidas” as illustrating ‘anonymity,’ an essential condition for creating aesthetic distance in *The World’s Body*. “Lycidas,” composed during Milton’s formative years, is ‘anonymous’ not in the sense that it did not have a title or full name of the poet on its first appearance, but the poet tried consciously to erase his personal identity. For this purpose, he took to the form of the pastoral elegy and took up the role of a Greek shepherd. But even taking to this dramatic method could not completely suppress the man. The poet and the man are equally expressive in the poem. Milton knew that while the person expresses his feelings in a poem, the feelings must be disciplined by the technical norms of a composition. Milton followed a particular metrical pattern in composing the poem, “Lycidas”; but he subtly varied the pattern in order to give expression to his natural self. However, this is quite natural because the poet decides to write a pastoral elegy on account of some personal equations with a dead man. It is often alleged that Shelley’s “Adonais” is more a poem on
Shelley than on Keats. The poem, however, conforms to the thematic features of the pastoral form. To add to that, Milton improves upon the existing features of such a poetic genre. He also inculcated the grand style of Virgil and managed to produce it in English. One may, again, note that Milton begins the poem as a monologue; yet the narrative method breaks in upon the monologue here and there. The reason is that Milton’s dominant personality occasionally catches in with the poet and often surpasses his poetic self. The readers are reminded that the reading of a poem requires, what Coleridge described as, “willing suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge 30). In brief, throughout “Lycidas,” Milton leaves the stamp of his insuperable personality, even while performing the role of a literary artist.

Ransom discusses the poetic features in Edna St. Vincent Millay’s poetry in the essay, “The Poet as Woman,” included in the volume, The World’s Body. The essay is occasioned by Ransom’s reading of Elizabeth Atkins’s critical biography of Millay (1892-1950), entitled Edna St. Vincent Millay and Her Times, published in 1936. Ransom says that the reading of the biography tempts one to study in contrast the poet’s poetry and the critic’s criticism. Millay cultivates in her poetry the literary virtues of clarity, firmness of outline, consistency of tone within the unit of poetry, and melodiousness, while she betrays the generic qualities of a woman, namely sensibility and tenderness. The early decades of the twentieth century are marked by intellectualisation, John Donne, the great intellectual poet, having been discovered. But that does not diminish the degree of Millay’s success. Instead, she indirectly approaches Donne. However, her intellectualism is “mild and dilute,” compared to Donne’s “exciting kind” (81). Donne’s directness of treatment is also conspicuously absent in Millay’s poetry. Also, in yielding to the necessities of metre, Millay fails to achieve poetic strictness and economy. She even sacrifices logic to the music of the verse. Atkins tries to establish how the use of sounds and silences adds
to the semantic effect in Millay's poetry. But Ransom says that it is often the other way round. The phonetic elements, Ransom argues, are "indefinitely negotiable" in the sense that they are "able to be dissociated quickly and cleanly from given meanings and re-associated with fresh ones" (94). According to Ransom, Millay is not intellectually disciplined in technique to fertilise the "pleasures of imagination" (101); but when the subject is within the scope of her feminine sensibility, she shows utmost finesse.

Ransom throws considerable light on Imagist poetry and Metaphysical poetry in "Poetry: A Note in Ontology," an important essay in The World's Body. The 'ontology' of poetry, for Ransom, is "the reality of its being" (111). Poetry is constituted either by things or by ideas. Things or images are the original state, whereas ideas are derived from images. An image is the assemblage of many properties. Ideas are in a state of flux, their conceptual identity determined by their contextual position.

Poetry of things or physical poetry may be illustrated by the examples of the Imagist poetry or Pure poetry. Imagists presented "things in their thinginess" (113) and discarded metre in favour of free verse. Unlike Imagist poetry, Pure poetry, developed by George Moore and his associates, imposes metre on logically arranged elementary images.

Poetry of ideas or Platonic poetry illustrates idea by using image. Hence the Platonists often define art as "the reference of the idea to the image" (126). But an image can hardly illustrate an idea; for, as Ransom cogently puts it, "ideas have extension and objects have intension, but extension is thin, while intension is thick" (126). Platonic poetry is positive "when the poet believes in the efficacy of the ideas" (122), but negative if the poet finds the ideas deficient in mitigating personal griefs, and wishes to replace the reigning ideas with a new set of ideas. This results in 'Romantic Irony.'
The use of the device of metaphor gave rise to an outstanding school of poetry, known as Metaphysical poetry. Originally, Dryden used the term, ‘metaphysics’ to criticise Donne for his use of miraculous elements in love-poetry, while he allowed its use in satiric verses to achieve an effect of witticism. Miraculism survives on conceits formed by psychological identification between apparently disparate elements, and is best justified when it arises out of the in-built situations.

In “The Tense of Poetry,” included in The World’s Body, Ransom takes up for discussion the treatment of the past in poetry. In Ransom’s formulation, the treatment of the past results in two kinds of poetry. There is longing for “the vague undated past” (234) in one, as in Tennyson’s “Tears, Idle Tears” or Wordsworth’s “Immortality Ode.” However, it is debatable whether “Tears, Idle Tears” really records his longing for the vague undated past. The poem occurs in The Princess and, therefore, it is contextualised. At the personal level, this song is suffused with Tennyson’s sense of loss on the death of Arthur Henry Hallam. The other kind, according to Ransom, retrieves some special experience of the past, Tennyson’s “Marina” and “Ulysses” being prominent examples. There are also hybrids like Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” which, though born of a specific experience, turns reflective.

Poetry was necessitated by the abundance of prose. The phases in the development of poetry clearly illustrate this. In the Golden Age or the period of the Garden of Eden, prose and poetry were one and the same. Then, in the historical epochs, business, morality, and science began using prose as the language of efficiency, and to counter it, poetry evolved. In the modern age, prose has appropriated nearly everything, leaving little for poetical treatment. Poetry has to struggle to survive, the solution lying probably in the duality of the experience, alternating between prose and poetry.
Ransom takes up the story of the Garden of Eden and explains the emergence of poetry. So long as Adam did not eat the fruit of knowledge, he was entitled to perform simple unskilled jobs with enjoyment. After he tasted the fruit, he was initiated into the domain of efficient and technical knowledge, but without enjoyment. As enjoyment divorced itself from the knowledge gained through prose, poetry had to make up for the loss.

Before expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Adam was not capable of a distinctive aesthetic experience, as he had no concepts which could lead to well-built percepts. In the absence of the technical efficiency of prose, poetry could not exist; for, the business of poetry is to integrate the hard technicality of prose into the total human experience. Idealists often try to reconstruct the state of innocence, thinking of the supreme happiness one experienced then, but they forget that happiness could not exist without sense-perception.

Poets who locate happiness in the future perform an act of heresy, for none of the great creations testify to their contention. The perfect creations of poetry dramatise the past. Prose, being the language of real life, cannot reveal how we should have transacted business. So we resort to poetry, the language of make-believe, and reconstruct the past in the light of the ideal. Even Othello who performs a gory business demonstrates how such an odious act can be carried out in accordance with aesthetic norms.

Poetry recovers from the store-house of memory the world of experience in its wholeness and integrity. Hence, as soon as the creation of make-believe is withdrawn, we return to the plane of actuality, but not without a sense of "mortification" (249). Poetry, with its idiom of illusion, intrudes upon the principle of efficiency which asserts itself in terms of prose.
Poetry is not drama proper, but it is dramatic in the sense that the poet does not speak in his actual person and in an actual situation, but assumes a role and speaks in an assumed situation. This is manifestly exemplified in the poetic genre of the dramatic monologue.

One of the techniques resorted to by the poet for concealing his identity is the adoption of metrical language. Metre not only imparts artificiality into the poetic discourse, but also liberates the poet from conforming to the triple virtues of prose, namely, unity, coherence, and emphasis. However, some poets display a non-conformist stance and, contrary to custom, use metre to embody the logical expression of prose. The poet also puts on the costume of the character he impersonates. The device of costume imparts an element of sincerity, that is, resemblance to actuality, to the creation of the imagination.

Ransom's *Poems and Essays*, as the title indicates, is a collection of his poems and essays. The essay part begins with an article, "Old Age of an Eagle." Ransom discusses here the meticulous craftsmanship of Thomas Hardy as a poet. Hardy attended carefully to what Ransom calls "the three dimensions of a poem" (79): the plot or argument, the metres, and the language. This can hardly be expected of an accomplished poet. Hardy’s choice of words was less than secure. He often selected commonplace or stereotyped words and archaic words; but that did not impede his forceful representation.

Hardy chose for his medium of expression the usual iambic or the iambic-anapaestic line. But within the iambic line he used variations of the ‘folk line,’ the origin of which can be traced back to the Anglo-Saxon period, and which survived the depredations of the Norman invasion and the negligence and snobbishness of the Renaissance scholars to persist in the eighteenth century ballads and thereafter. The folk line has two remarkable features. It is a line of eight beats with a break in the middle. The line can be divided into four beats or two beats, with
pauses in the middle; but it cannot be broken into further than two beats. So it is also called the
dipodic line. Secondly, the final beat in a four-beater or eight-beater line is often dropped; and it
is compensated by a full musical pause in the end. This musical quality is strangely absent in the
syllabic rhythm.

Hardy makes competent use of the folk rhythm in his early years as well as in his late
years when, after a prolonged interruption, he returned to poetry writing. As early as in 1867 he
wrote "Neutral Tones" where the stanza consists of three four-beater lines, followed by a three-
beater. Hardy uses a comma in the fourth line to ensure that the reader pauses in the position of
the missing beat.

"Friends Beyond," written much later, records the poet’s traumatic experience when his
deep-rooted religious faith suffered a jolt by the theories of the evolutionists. Here the stanza
consists of two eight-beater lines holding between them an unrhymed four-beater. The four-
beater line lends its rhyme to the eight-beaters in the next stanza, and a new four-beater line
arises to give its rhyme to the eight-beaters in the next stanza. The rhyme-scheme reminds one of
the 'terza rima' used by Dante in Divina Commedia.

"The Ruined Maid," dated 1866, which for its theme has a sociological issue, reveals
Hardy’s "fierce folkish humor" (84), which he retained even in his old age when he resumed
poetry writing.

In the 1920’s Hardy wrote “Haunting Fingers: a Phantasy in a museum of musical
instruments.” In this poem, he uses two different kinds of stanza — two stanzas spoken by the
musical instruments followed by a stanza in the narrative form — with equal ease. In still another
poem, “The Missed Train,” Hardy uses the quatrain form. All these reveal Hardy’s dexterity in
poetic craftsmanship in ample measure.
Ransom discusses Thomas Hardy’s achievement as a poet more fully in the introduction to Selected Poems of Thomas Hardy, published in 1960. The kind of poetry that was being written by the American poets towards the end of the second decade of the twentieth century injected a certain freshness into the genre of poetry. Hardy’s poetry was not of a kind with theirs. However, his poetry easily impresses one as “fresh” and “timeless” (ix). It was the working of “a metaphysical imagination, in the service of a theological passion” (ix). Hardy could not make full use of this imagination in his novels; so he came to write poetry which would give him sufficient scope to indulge in imaginative speculations. The poems of Hardy have qualities of drama, as also qualities of epic in the flavour of folk-tales they contain. However, they broadly come under the category of fables. The poems present divine beings in terms of the naturalist idiom that Hardy embraced so earnestly.

Ransom discusses some of Hardy’s poems in detail. The first poem he takes up is “Channel Firing,” described by a critic as ‘sabre-rattling.’ The phrase, ‘sabre-rattling’ which means “attempts to frighten somebody by threatening to attack or punish him” (Hornby 1113) was a common expression among the contemporary journalists. Ransom, however, confutes the description by saying that the date of composition of the poem (it was composed in April 1914) clearly indicates that it was based on Hardy’s real-life experience and not on any ambitious design for rhetorical verbosity. The poem is about the disturbance of the state of perfect rest being enjoyed by the clerical ghosts, which results in their scare of the Judgement Day. Their fear is allayed by the Christian God. The divine assurance, however, fails to overpower the evil forces that continue to work, though they do not make any further impact. In its peculiar resolution of a good-evil conflict, the poem gives effect to a lyrical moment.
The title of the poem Ransom discusses next is "The Subalterns." A careful look at the stanzas reveals Hardy's diligent workmanship. He makes the stanzas equal in status, though there are enough differences to individualise them. Ransom guesses that Hardy's training as an architect must have contributed considerably to this commendable design. The poem has a powerful rhythm which is couched very appropriately in metrical language. The title of the poem amply indicates the symbolic presentation of the theme. Like the low-ranking officials in an army, the meteorological agents — namely, the Sky and the North Wind, and the physiological agents — namely, Sickness and Death, are bound, in spite of themselves, to do as they are bidden. It is hinted at in the final stanza when the poet speaks of the passive execution of the divine laws. Hardy's idea of Nature as the protector of her creatures as also an instrument of evil takes shape here.

The poem, "And There Was a Great Calm" was written with the First World War Armistice Day in mind. The poem is written in iambic pentameter which gives it a stately look. In this poem we encounter speakers like the Spirit of Irony, the Sinister Spirit, and the Spirit of Pity — characters bodily lifted from Hardy's verse-drama, The Dynasts. The poem deals with the influence of the heavenly Spirits over the events of the earth. Ransom finds a reflection of Hardy's ironical voice among his contemporary poets in the voice of the Spirit of Irony.

Meanwhile, Ransom takes a quick look at Hardy's verse-play, The Dynasts. Its vast dimension is clearly indicated by its long title: The Dynasts: an Epic-Drama of the War with Napoleon, in Three Parts, Nineteen Acts, and One Hundred and Thirty Scenes; the time covered by the action being about ten years. Before Hardy, Shelley and Keats had attempted similar things. Following the examples of the Greek drama, they took up for treatment in their works the evolution of the Greek godhead. Hardy's distinction lies in his treatment of the Napoleonic wars,
a contemporary theme of historical importance. He thus turned his back on Aristotle's advice to
the Greek playwrights to take up themes related to the legendary heroes of ancient times, whose
fortunes gave the artists greater freedom of treatment. The Chorus, which was an integral part of
the Greek plays, is formed by the Spirits of Pity and the Spirits of Irony in Hardy's play. They
interapeutatively comment on the working of the Immanent Will. The Spirits of Irony also provide
the comic relief, and take away from the severity of the tragic blow. The play admirably presents
the unresolved clash between the world of "is" and the world of "ought to be" (xx) through the
working of the natural order which follows a natural law and the moral order which follows the
laws of justice and pity. Ransom's distinction harks back to Aristotle's preference of the
"probable impossibility" to an "improbable possibility" (Sen Gupta 41).

Hardy's poems often express his fabulous ideas. The theme of "Transformations" is how
human lives get transformed into and survive through different varieties of flora after death. In
"On the Tune Called the Old-Hundred-And-Fourth," written in memory of his first wife, Hardy
expresses his desire to sing together a tune both he and his wife loved after his death and reunion
with his dead wife, a task never accomplished in their conjugal life. "During Wind and Rain"
describes the destruction of domestic bliss by the foreboding of the impending ruin. In "Wives in
the Sere," two separate stanzas could be combined into one by virtue of their rhyme-scheme. The
odd-numbered lines end in masculine rhymes, while the even-numbered lines end in a feminine
rhyme, uniformly preceded by a verbal suffix.

Ransom's verdict on Hardy is that in most of the poems Hardy combines his naturalistic
inclination with his interest in fables and the folk ways of life. Many of his poems are occasioned
by some happenings in his personal life. Without the knowledge of these autobiographical
allusions, such poems would appear to be difficult for our understanding. Hardy's Satires of
Circumstance is a group of fifteen short poems, satiric in intent. Though economical in form, the poems do not lose clarity. The satires are mostly directed towards persons who do deserve sympathy, and are laughed at because of their foolishness and innocence that cost them not a little. Ransom's judgement on Hardy is that "Hardy is the third Victorian poet, after Tennyson and Browning" (Ransom, "Introduction" xxxi). Chronologically, Hardy lived well beyond the reign of Queen Victoria and into the Modern era. But the characteristics of the Victorian era are quite apparent in his poetry, though in a distinctive way. The Victorian age is characterised by the loss of faith in traditional religion following the advent of Darwinism and the Higher Criticism of the Scriptures. Hardy was brought up in an ecclesiastical environment. But, with the controversies surrounding religious faith setting in, he gave expression to his rebellious theology. While Tennyson and Browning are "orthodox in their piety" (xxxii), what marks Hardy out is his standing as a "disaffected religionist" (xxxiii). In Ransom's estimation, Hardy is a major Victorian poet with a "modern temper" (xxxiii).

In the summer of 1939, Ransom published a paper, "Yeats and His Symbols" in the Kenyon Review, volume 1. In this paper he dwells on Yeats's eclectic use of symbols. In Ransom's estimation, Yeats was both naturally gifted and technically well-trained as a poet, and deserves to be called "great" (309). Against the aggression of Naturalism, Yeats's poetry served the tradition of 'great' English poetry, working on metaphysical theme and sustaining the bond between poetry and religion. Edmund Wilson objected to Yeats's use of metaphysical symbols as there was no intellectual sanction behind them, while Blackmur found them "entirely suitable and defensible" (310).

It is true that Yeats did not find the Roman Catholicism, the most popular religious system, conducive to his ethical feelings. Moreover, the stock of its imagistic wealth had gone
stale because of continual exploration by earlier poets. Therefore, the religious eclectic that Yeats was, he improvised upon the existing wealth to obtain fresh perception into it. But that does not mean that Yeats was like the “irresponsible” (310) French Symbolists for whom the religious images could no longer evoke the special religious histories behind them, and had become, in effect, “bare terms of reference” (313).

Yeats made an attempt to revive the Ossianic or Irish mythology in his early poetry, but its symbols had become too obsolete to apply to the situations of life then current. Eventually he derived his symbols from the so-called occult schools, and in this respect he had proximity to T.S. Eliot. However, Eliot tagged the occult symbols to Christianity which Yeats renounced much earlier. Again, unlike Eliot’s, Yeats’s poetry does not require much editorial gloss. His sense of professional responsibility drives him to make his symbols as objective and easy as to be accessible to any reader without assistance. However, this does not hold good of his prose which, it seems from the complexity of his symbolic references, might have been written for his personal use. Anyway, his strong grounding in the official religious system helped him in the composition of his poetry so that it could have “an excellent understanding of how to use and how not to abuse his symbols” (320).

Ransom offers a critique of Eliot’s poems on the basis of his prosodic study of Eliot’s poems in the Postscript to The World’s Body. In Poems 1920, Eliot uses the long metre ballad stanza of eight-syllable lines divided into two exact halves, with the second and fourth lines rhyming, for seven lyrics. In “Sweeney Among the Nightingales” Eliot composes lines of “still moments” — which Ransom explains as “holy moments” (355) — after satiric lines. “The Hippopotamus” makes clear Eliot’s disgust with the modern church while he returns to the fold of religious faith. In “A Cooking Egg,” a solitary line is interposed between the last two stanzas,
resulting in prosodic irregularity. The seven successive lyrics in Poems 1920, though uniform in style, are quite individualistic. After writing them in the Old Style, Eliot opts for a New Style in “Gerontion,” corresponding to the broken music of the contemporary musicians.

The Waste Land, published in 1922, exhibits “magnificent orchestration” (358) in its five movements. There are too many passages, but the passages under each movement strictly belong there. The poem deals with the unregenerate condition of the human spirit. The Upanishadic solution offered by Eliot gets lost in the inextricable knot of too many literary allusions in different languages.

The exquisite music of Ash-Wednesday, published in 1930, is interspersed with still moments, especially moments when, solitary, we commune with God in darkness. Ransom here locates the history of the ‘still moment’ in the scriptural literature, and in the process, dwells on Bergson’s differentiation of time and duration. He says that time is measured in terms of practical and physical appointments, while duration is time lived or endured. Moreover, time can be measured only by space. We can measure the passing of a day only by the movement of the sun.

About Modern poets Ransom’s opinion is that unlike their predecessors, Modern poets do not enjoy wide popularity. Formerly, poets preached virtue in their poetry. In other words, morality and aestheticism were compounded in traditional poetry. The Modern poet has dissociated morality from poetry with the aim of achieving pure aesthetic effect. With this end in view, he adopts the pure and obscure style, ‘pure’ in the sense that he does not mix it with effects other than aesthetic. The poet writing in pure style does “not consider a subject which lends itself to moralisation,” his singular objective being the attainment of aesthetic effects; whereas the obscure specialises in a subject of “terrifying import,” but stops short of “moral or theoretical
conclusions” (Ransom, World’s Body 61). However, the ingredients of morality and aestheticism, if compounded well in poetry, may lead to delightful reading; on the other hand, if assembled mechanically, the poetic outcome will cause revulsion.

In “The Poetry of 1900-1950,” published in the Kenyon Review, volume 13, in 1951, Ransom offers an excellent survey of the contemporary Modern poetry. In the period of the half-century under discussion, Ransom notes the tremendous growth of poetry. There were poets who shot into fame by their admirable achievement which was, however, fitful in nature. Their survival was ensured by their inclusion in anthologies; and in respect of the multiplicity of anthologies, Ransom finds the period comparable to the period between 1550 and 1600. The contribution of the British poets has been ably multiplied and diversified by the corresponding contribution from their American brethren.

Ransom finds it difficult to characterise the poetry of the first half of the twentieth century. To characterise it in terms of the culture of the period proves futile; for the culture itself has not had a homogeneous development. Rather, it has witnessed “the clash of cultures.” The poet may represent in his poetry the not-so-popular culture; or, he may be simply following the spirit of the time; or, he may be even unwilling to identify himself with the formality that education and popular culture seek to impose upon him. In a word, poets of the period have chosen to assert their individuality by representing the contemporary divergence of culture in their poetry. So Ransom thinks it would be convenient “to comment not upon many poets but upon a few poetic effects which have been general but new, and peculiarly characteristic of the century” (446).

The first feature noted by Ransom is the ‘metrical feat’ performed by the Modern poets. This has been characterised by a kind of laxity which has resulted in the “collapse into free
verse" (446). What marks it out is the consciousness of the poets in attempting this feat, in spite
of their formal training in technical craftsmanship. The importance of the metres lies in
defamiliarising the natural order of language which, even when interspersed with rhetorical
elements, would still be treated as prose. Such disintegration of the natural order of language
startles the imagination into work, and in turn, helps the poet settle upon the most suitable word-
pattern for his poetry. Bypassing the metres by the Modern poets invariably involves an
enormous mastery of the poetic language that will serve the poet's need as and when the
occasion arises. With the withholding of the metrical feature, the dimension of musicality is also
lost. Ransom characterises this feature as 'metaphysical' in the sense that an order is imposed on
divergent material and formal perfection achieved by the working of the universal or cosmic
intelligence. The Modern poet's turning away from metres may have been prompted, Ransom
doubts, by his reluctance to make public his religious submission to this cosmic intelligence.
This, again, is brought about by the all-pervasive influence of science which defines the cultural
perspective of Modern poetry. Though the Modern poet appears to be diffident in the face of this
cultural scenario, he can hardly suppress his metrical propensity which shows spontaneously in
his poetry.

Next, Ransom notes the satiric intent of Modern poetry as the second characteristic. The
satire embedded in it is directed towards the common behaviours wherever and whenever these
are found. The impatience is not only with the erroneous aspects of life, but also with the surfeit
and disillusionment bred by the familiarity of the natural objects. In Ransom's conception, it is
the pressure of the factual aspects of life that has resulted in the divorce of the religious and the
poetic imagination — which finds expression in the satiric nature of Modern poetry. Sometimes
even poets like Robert Penn Warren writing in the twentieth century itself have to take to the means of the ‘negative capability’ to depict this disillusionment.

The third and final poetic effect that draws Ransom’s attention is “the extreme condensation of some of the poetry,” resulting in “syntactical displacement” (450) which is the root cause of difficulty in Modern poetry. ‘Condensation’ and ‘displacement’ are terms used by Sigmund Freud in connection with the interpretation of dreams. In Freud, ‘condensation’ describes “the compression and selection that takes place during the process of dreaming” (Wynne-Davies 427), while ‘displacement’ is associated with “the mechanisms whereby the conscious mind processes the unconscious in dreams” (Wynne-Davies 462). Ransom is well aware of the dream-like state induced by Modern poetry, more so when recited aloud, though its mode of composition does not parallel that of dreams. Wit is an integral part of this poetry, and wit saves it from a comic propensity. Nevertheless, the nature of high-seriousness of this poetry is manifest in its allusion to the crumbling of the old faiths. Such poetry defies interpretation by the application of the explication de texte, and is meant to be accorded an uncritical reception in its bodily fullness.

After enumerating the ‘poetic effects,’ Ransom proceeds to rank the practising poets, irrespective of their nationality. His list of Minor Poets, though not exclusive as yet, includes as many as ten poets. They are Robert Bridges, Walter de la Mare, John Masefield, Vachel Lindsay, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, E. E. Cummings, Hart Crane, and Allen Tate. Ransom names four poets — A. E. Housman, Wallace Stevens, Wystan Auden, and Dylan Thomas — who come in between his ranking of the Minor and Major poets. Thomas Hardy, William Butler Yeats, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, and T. S. Eliot fit into his criteria of Major Poets. What prompts Ransom to consider them Major is their consistent
performance as poets in the matter of giving poetic expression to subjects of vital human importance. In case of the poets who come in between the Major and the Minor, the quality is diminished by inconsistency in poetic output.

Among the Major Poets, Ransom gives special consideration to Thomas Hardy. Hardy started as a poet in his twenties, but left his poetic career to put on the mantle of a novelist. He again took up his poetic career after a gap of forty years, representing in his poetry the contrast between the scientifically conceived indifferent universe and the finer sensibilities of the human spirit. A rather common human theme finds cogent multifarious metrical expressions in the metrically well-formulated language of his poetry. In every page of his poetry he leaves the impression of a rewarding poetic experience, deserving the attention which is due to a Major Poet.

In “The Planetary Poet,” published in the Kenyon Review, volume 26, Ransom gathers and puts into order “some observations...concerning the poetry of Wallace Stevens” (233) whom he considers a major poet. Ransom draws attention to two sides of Stevens’s personality. For earning his livelihood, Stevens was dependent on his occupation in an insurance company in Hartford, and gradually became its vice-president; while he practised as a poet to sustain his emotional need. His first book of poems, Harmonium was published in 1923, and it was at once recognised as the work of a powerful new poet. His later books clearly charted the course of his development as a philosophical poet who, priest-like, was out in a search for his poetic credo. The way the major powers of the mind are combined results in three kinds of economic combination that determine our patterns of living. Ransom designates the first as the scientific-and-business economy. It is the economy of the highest importance, and includes the individual as well as the collective economic activities. The second one is the moral economy, and it is the
special province of the religious institutions. These economic activities are related to the theological rites and are inserted between the activities of the first order. The third kind concerns the works of grace which are created out of some spontaneous individual compulsion, and which lie beyond the economy of earning one's livelihood and the economy of moral commandments. Stevens strikes an admirable balance between the first and the third order of economic activity.

Stevens's first book of poems, *Harmonium* contains eighty-five poems. Written at the age of forty, the book shows Stevens's poetic maturity in his command of the use of word and phrase. The poems of this book are a mixed lot. There is hardly a poem by Stevens which does not present Nature in some form or the other. Even when Nature is absent physically, it is presented by means of figurative language. In “The Ordinary Women,” an early poem, Nature is viewed from the bay-window. Again, Stevens uses the word, ‘ordinary’ to refer to people living close to Nature. Sometimes a place invests the matrix of the poem, as is evident in the poems on Florida. The change of Nature in outward appearance also draws his attention. Though the season of winter marks the death of vegetation, Stevens is well aware that the coming of spring will usher in rejuvenation. The theme of the finality of death which spreads over many of his poems receives a climactic treatment in “The Emperor of Ice-Cream.” On her death, an ordinary woman is adorned in her best clothes by her women friends. The men, on the other hand, set to make the ice-cream which seems to be an appropriate symbol of the emperor who presides over the life and death of people. The symbol of the ice-cream indicates the brief but sweet nature of human life. Another death-poem by Stevens, “Sunday Morning” is notable for its formal perfection. Throughout his poetic career his attachment to the aesthetic faith was steadfast, though he always prioritised his business's self.
To conclude, Ransom's criticism of poetry is distinguished by its wide range. The number of poets included as well as the aspects of the craft of poetry-writing he focuses on is marked by diversity of treatment. But Ransom never loses sight of the fact that what distinguishes a literary genre is its specific form. So even when he goes deep into a piece of poem, he maintains almost a scientific objectivity in his critical approach. At the same time, he takes into account all considerations which, within the bounds of the 'literary,' contribute to a better understanding of the poem at hand. Ransom thus ensures a holistic approach to poetic criticism. Furthermore, Ransom's approach also shows his intellectual honesty as a critic; he does not hesitate to revise his opinion in view of his changed perception.
CHAPTER FOUR

(B)

Ransom’s Criticism of Drama

In *The World’s Body*, Ransom writes a criticism of T. S. Eliot’s play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, and shows Eliot’s deficiency as a playwright. In Ransom’s opinion, in *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot fails to sustain the tone of the play. It begins on a religious note, but declines as the play progresses. Eliot achieves brilliant effects by “juxtaposing incongruous notes” (167), a prominent modernist feature. But the deficiencies become evident when compared with Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*. The material at Eliot’s disposal provided him with ample scope to treat it with a fullness and profundity denied to Milton. But, practically, it turns out to be the other way round. Milton’s splendid craftsmanship informing the entire play holds the play tight. The lines spoken by the Chorus of wise old men in *Samson* strike the keynote of Samson’s tragedy. On the other hand, the Chorus of garrulous old women in *Murder* speaks digressively about matters which do not relate to Becket’s martyrdom. Moreover, the poetry in *Samson* has an unflagging interest, and is made suitable to every character and situation. In *Murder*, Eliot uses prose on two occasions: once, in Becket’s last sermon which could be easily delivered in poetry without doing harm to literary conventions; secondly, after the archbishop is murdered, the assassins justify their act in prose. The solemnity of the central theme of martyrdom is thereby made light. Some critics, however, feel that Eliot deliberately used prose in the last sermon of Becket and in the speech of the Knights to suggest the contemporary relevance of the theme of *Murder in the Cathedral*. The use of prose immediately brings us back to the contemporary reality and thereby links up the past and the present. This is particularly relevant to Eliot’s insistence on historical
sense on account of which he wrote the play. In other words, the raison d'etre of Eliot's writing this play is its contemporary relevance. The use of prose only reinforces it. Again, the poetry, "a striking assemblage of poetic ingredients" (172), does not correspond to the thematic dignity. The only justification for the play, in Ransom's opinion, may be that Eliot was well aware of the weaknesses of the modernist literary standards; hence he wrote a play which not only met the norms but also exposed their loopholes. Ransom, however, retracts his views on Murder in the Postscript to The World's Body. He confesses that when he reviewed Eliot's play, his judgement was vitiated by his late reading and admiration for Milton's Samson Agonistes. He expounds the well-knit pattern of the plot and the relation of the play to Eliot's conscious faith in the Roman Catholic religion.

In the paper, "On Shakespeare's Language," included in Poems and Essays, Ransom proposes to discuss "Shakespeare's way of compounding Latinical elements with his native English" (118). To elaborate his point, Ransom quotes and explains well-known passages from Shakespeare's plays. He quotes from Macbeth the following passage:

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red. (119)

And shows how the flow of the native English is stopped by 'multitudinous' and 'incarnadine' ('Neptune' had already been well-assimilated into English) — the two words whose Latinical identity is retained by Shakespeare.

Ransom summarily rejects Ben Jonson's allegation that Shakespeare had "small Latin and less Greek," and dwells on Shakespeare's fondness for Latin. During the Norman period the
Latin words which had been introduced into English via French were thoroughly assimilated, with Chaucer doing his best to do away with the distinction of Latin from English. Subsequently, during the Renaissance period, when new ideas developing from Classical ones were camouflaged in Classical words, the same process of assimilation was halted by Shakespeare. It is significant to note that in the middle of the century it was customary to flaunt one’s knowledge of Latin by interspersing one’s English speech with Latin words, while towards the end of the century it became a mark of one’s aristocracy to make no difference between native English and Latin elements. Shakespeare’s principle of using Latin, whatever it may suggest about his social position, leaves no doubt about his superiority in using the language. Ransom quotes from *Hamlet* where Hamlet, on the verge of death, says to Horatio:

> If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
> Absent thee from felicity awhile,
> And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
> To tell my story. (123)

The strength of this passage lies in the contrast in which the expressions ‘absent thee’ and ‘felicity’ are set against the rest of the passage. These Latin words, when translated into other languages and even into native English, though expressive, lose much of their charm. Hence it is not without reason that Arnold selected this passage as one of the ‘touchstones.’

Again, Ransom quotes the following passage from *King Lear* where Lear is reminded of the sufferings of the poor in a stormy night:

> O, I have ta’en
> Too little thought of this. Take physic, pomp;
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just. (124)

In this passage, Ransom draws our attention to Shakespeare’s use of ‘shaking the superflux’ to the poor. ‘Superflux’ is a Latin word, meaning ‘overflow.’ How can one ‘shake the superflux’? It is rather the incongruity in the collocation of these two words that engages our attention.

Ransom feels that this distinctive use of Latin is absent in most other writers. Spenser’s use of Latin elements does not make us conscious of its distinctness, and Marlowe did not sufficiently develop the opposed contexts between native English and Latin. Shakespeare’s “disposition” (126), on the other hand, served the language in three ways: (i) By halting the process of anglicising the Latin words, he kept the Classical language alive; (ii) His kind of Latinity imparted a special importance to the dictionary; and (iii) It served as a substitute for the actual strenuous study of Latin.

Ransom quotes passages from *Hamlet*, Sonnet No. 107, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Tempest*, and analyses them to show Shakespeare’s ambivalent use of Latin and native English. Ransom concentrates on those passages from *The Tempest* where Prospero with his magic wand is supposed to represent Shakespeare with his dramatic imagination. This clearly shows the chameleon poet’s power to lose his sense of self and merge his personality into the character he contemplates or creates. Ransom extends the scope of the application of Keats’s principle of ‘negative capability’ by substantiating the shuttling service Shakespeare performs between his native language and his fondness for a Classical tongue.
CHAPTER FOUR
(C)

Ransom's Criticism of Fiction

That the New Critics were primarily preoccupied with the criticism of poetry has been candidly confessed by Ransom in “The Understanding of Fiction,” published in the Kenyon Review 12 in 1950. His clear observation on the existing critical scene is: “The poems have monopolized the attention of the critics who seem too energetic for this restriction” (193). So the only option left for the criticism of fiction is “to bring to fiction a set of procedural biases [sic] gained elsewhere” (193), that is, in the criticism of poetry. Ransom, however, unstintingly praises Blackmur, Leavis, and Scherer for their contribution to the criticism of fiction.

In “The Understanding of Fiction,” Ransom puts forward many of his observations on the criticism of fiction. The writing of this paper was occasioned by the publication of a book, Image and Idea, a work comprising fourteen papers on modern fiction by Philip Rahv. In Ransom’s opinion, Rahv shows exemplary critical insight in the application of his knowledge of various kinds of criticism appropriate for modern fiction. He also shows rare discrimination in discussing a work of fiction under a critical category which is most relevant to it. Moreover, he discusses the work of a novelist under a symbolically significant title. For example, his essay on Hawthorne has the title, “The Dark Lady of Salem,” and the symbolism is ably carried through in his discussion of Hawthorne.

Rahv’s writing shows his depth of understanding of the modern writers, like Kafka, Proust, Joyce, and Mann. The intricacy of his criticism which corresponds to the ‘learned’ nature of the modern novels graphically depicts the alienation of the artists who suffer from insecurity.
Ransom feels that this feeling of insecurity issues from the disintegration of the erstwhile religious community, as a result of the supreme importance given to intellect which also paved the way for the industrial revolution. Quoting Blackmur, Ransom says that “the substitution of technical intellectual processes for the old intuitive or primitive skills” (192) has resulted in atheism which has led to an existential crisis in the modern writers. Ransom suggests two solutions: either to continue with the earlier civilisation, or to locate the areas where the primitive skills can be still deployed. Ransom’s argument here seems to be in line with his ‘agrarian’ identity.

Like other New Critics, Ransom suffers from engrossment with the criticism of poetry. So his obvious option is to transfer the yardsticks of judgement from the field of poetry to the field of fiction. Ransom himself may be in doubt about the efficacy of such a strategy; so he asks: “To what extent can the understanding of poetry be applied to the understanding of fiction?” As a critic of poetry, Ransom’s area of concentration has been “the linguistic detail of the lyric passage” (193). He intends to single out similar passages of lyrical intensity from works of fiction, and criticise them from the standpoint of technical virtuosity.

Ransom refers to Edmund Wilson’s opinion in *The Triple Thinkers* that the development of, what he calls, “a supple prose language” (Ransom, “Understanding” 196) in modern times has sounded the death-knell of the long poem, replacing it with the genre of the novel. Ransom’s observation is that in the long poem the poetic moments are concentrated in a few parts; the rest of the poem is suffused with unnecessary and unpoetic ingredients which fill out the structure. In this respect, Ransom only echoes what Coleridge said in *Biographia Literaria*: “... a poem of any length neither can be nor ought to be all poetry. Yet if a harmonious whole is to be produced, the remaining parts must be preserved in keeping with the poetry” (Coleridge 36). It also partly
subscribes to the view Eliot expressed in regard to poetic drama. He has, as a rule, confined himself to verse in all his plays except in one instance, namely, *Murder in the Cathedral*. According to Eliot, the use of prose in a basically verse play is justifiable only when the author's purpose requires the auditor to be jolted, “that is when the author wishes to produce this jolt: when, that is, he wishes to transport the audience violently from one plane of reality to another” (Eliot 73-74). The incorporation of plain prose passages does not do any disservice to the stylistic effects of a novel. Of course, when one reads a novel, he or she is concerned far more with the stylistic peculiarities which justify its existence as literature than with matters related to plot construction or ideological setting. Ransom defines ‘style’ as “the aggregate of those characteristic turns of speech by which the author frees himself of the restrictions of logical prose.” By ‘logical prose’ Ransom means the prose used by science which attaches importance only to utilitarian purposes. The characteristic turns of speech are the use of ‘tropes’ which Ransom explains as “licensed irregularities, departures from the logical norms of language” (Ransom, “Understanding” 198). These assert their existence by violating the rule of logic; and yet, it is these violations that make the reader aware of the concreteness of a literary discourse, in the process making the discourse interesting and lively.

Logical discourses seek to divest an object of its concrete individuality and reduce its status to the level of a type. However, it is imperative in case of fictions to uphold the individual identity of an object, and thereby represent the usual everyday existence. In this sense, the ‘naturalistic’ manner of writing fiction, as practised by Dreiser and Farrell, is devoid of style. The practitioners of this school were led by the belief of Emile Zola that there could only be types of persons, guided by the general laws of cause and effect, and the concept of a free personality was nothing less than an illusion. Ransom, in this context, mentions the case of
Tolstoy. Though Tolstoy captivates his readers by presenting his scenes and characters with a
certain fullness, his presentation seems to be devoid of style and appears artless. Ransom's
conclusion is: “Style converts the world of utility, whose objects are attended to as mere
commodities, into the world of objects built up in the fulness of their actual being” (201).

In his paper, “Contemporaneous Not Contemporary,” included in The World’s Body,
Ransom shows his keen insight in criticising two novels, namely, Alexei Tolstoi’s Darkness and
Dawn and Rebecca West’s The Thinking Read. According to Ransom, Alexei Tolstoi’s Darkness
and Dawn surpasses even the bests of the Russian fiction in breadth of subject-matter. The work
amply displays the virtue of artistic detachment, a virtue to emulate. Divergent points of view
have been allowed to emerge without any conflict among them. The matter is treated through a
simple narrative. Structurally, the novel is a masterpiece in the Russian manner. The materials
that go into the making of the narrative are words, actions, pictures, and feelings; these elements
are ordered into a certain shape. In the Russian novel, Nature is described as it presents itself,
whereas in West European novels the psychological complexities of the characters colour the
descriptions. The impress of the author’s personality informs the style of a Western fiction, but
the intricacies of the author’s thought-process do not complicate the Russian fiction.

In The Thinking Read, Rebecca West achieves perfection in a genre which demands
extreme carefulness on the part of a writer. She does not merely assemble the objective materials
at her disposal. She puts into service her faculty of imagination which organises the disparate
elements into a coherent whole (Coleridgean unity). Unlike Alexei Tolstoi’s Darkness and Dawn
which displays little of conscious cultivation of style, Rebecca West’s fiction is conspicuous by
its architectural splendour. The style of Rebecca West’s fiction is that of a writer trained in the
best of the contemporary literary minds.
Ransom's criticism of literary forms other than poetry, drama and fiction, though not large in volume, still deserves attention. In *Poems and Essays* Ransom includes a paper, "More Than Gesture." The event that propels Ransom to write this paper is the publication in 1952 of R.P. Blackmur's book, *Language as Gesture*. In the preface to *The New Criticism*, Ransom hails Blackmur as one of the 'New' Critics obviously on the basis of his earlier writings, possibly he had *The Double Agent* (1935) and *The Expense of Greatness* (1940) in mind. There he says that the distinctive critical insights of R. P. Blackmur, though he refuses to be placed with any school, conveniently place him among the New Critics. Ransom thinks that Blackmur's observations on Shelley, Swinburne, and Hardy as well as his comments on Emily Dickinson's poem on 'renunciation' amply speak for his departure from the older schools of criticism and his adoption of the methodology of the 'New' Critics.

Blackmur's book is a compilation of essays which are of acclaimed merit, whether individually or collectively. The collection throws considerable light on the contribution of individual poets to the development of Modern poetry. Blackmur's method is to locate the most outstanding quality of a poem, and then make a lucid exposition so that the poem becomes "actual in the reader's consciousness" (Ransom, *Poems and Essays* 102). For Blackmur, a poem is an embodiment of a powerful sensibility which requires intelligence to impose order on it. There is, again, the interaction between the prose rhythms of the language and the metres — which contributes considerably to the organisation of the poem.
Ransom finds that Blackmur does not value ideas for their own sake, but for their functional importance in the poem. For example, Yeats’s poetry is a record of Irish mythology, Irish politics, and his devotion to the occult; but these are not analysed separately; they are of consequence so far as they add to the understanding of his poetry. Similarly, it is not necessary that Eliot’s readers accept his religious ideas; these ideas, instead, help the readers re-construct the imaginative structure that produced his poetry.

Blackmur also highlights the role of the intelligence which imposes order on the “intolerable disorder of the times.” Cummings is placed in the “anti-culture group” for his “sentimental denial of the intelligence.” D. H. Lawrence’s life-view, included in his poetry, fails for lack of “rational imagination” (105) which, Blackmur says, is “the ordering imagination which controls sensibility” (105-6). The mystical element in Hopkins’s and Emily Dickinson’s poetry does not deliver the goods; it is the ‘rational imagination’ which makes the perception possible. However, Blackmur sounds self-contradictory when he claims for poetry a standard of faith higher than that for common life.

Ransom takes exception to Blackmur entitling his book ‘Language as Gesture’ which implies that poetry plays with the superficial. This goes contrary to Aristotle’s view of art as the imitation of life. To use Ransom’s words, “it is the fact which is the heart of the fiction” (107).

Ransom rounds off his essay on Blackmur with the conclusion that Blackmur was not content with the formal or aesthetic values of poetry. He felt compelled to talk about the ideas, the morals, the faiths encoded in a poem, as they are talked about by the critics of fiction. This shows the inbuilt contradiction in the New Criticism which found it difficult to reconcile the aesthetic and cognitive elements in a literary discourse.
Ransom’s “Empirics in Politics,” included in Poems and Essays, is a review-article of Russell Kirk’s The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana, published by Regnery. Himself a religious humanist, Kirk wants to re-discover the conservative doctrine of Burke. It is noticeable that almost all the political theorists who figure in Kirk’s book are either British or American. There are only two notable exceptions: Tocqueville, a French, who was conversant with both the British and the American polities, and Santayana, a Spanish, who even while residing in both the countries, kept away from their conservative polities.

The Conservatives, as presented by Kirk, do not make any concession for the modern economic liabilities. Burke had unfaltering faith in “the accrued wisdom of the ages” (136), and he also found theological support for the “inscrutable and divinely ordained historic process” (137). However, it is surprising that the Conservatives, far from abolishing the reforms introduced by the innovators, acquiesce in them. The Conservatives start by resisting the changes, but ultimately reconcile to them, because, as Kirk says, “change in society is natural, inevitable and beneficial” (138). Kirk does not specify the benefit. It may be that in its first appearance change is unwelcome, but when it settles down it is as good as the age-old principles.

Burke, a natural Irishman, had so much veneration for the conservative state of England that he adopted English citizenship. Burke regarded the English nation as a “great mysterious incorporation of the human race” (138). And the English statesman was to be guided by his “natural and proper prejudice” (140) for preservation and continuity of this state. On the other hand, Burke’s abhorrence for reasoning which guided the French philosophers during the French Revolution is amply revealed in his Reflections.

According to Ransom, Burke’s was an empirical faith, but of a distinctive sort. Burke sees eye to eye with John Locke, the father of English philosophical empiricism, when the latter
speaks about a tacit agreement between the ruler and the ruled in bringing about a social contract, but dissociates himself when the latter speaks about the role of reasoning in deviating from the contract. Ransom notes that the Greek root from which the term 'empiricism' is derived makes for the two faces of it. One is the process of fresh experiment, involving analysis and recombination of Nature; the other is the experience gained from obsession with a familiar object.

In Ransom's opinion, Burke was an empiric of the second kind.

In the article on T. S. Eliot in The New Criticism, Ransom takes up for review Eliot's essay on the plays of Ben Jonson. Ransom proposes to deal with "the extensiveness of Eliot's historical comparisons" and his "employment of critical terms that are psychological" (159). In his essay on Jonson, Eliot puts his stress on two points: first, poor reception of Jonson's plays among modern readers; and secondly, the popular belief that Jonson did not have the genius for writing a good tragedy.

Jonson's plays are not appreciated well by the modern readers. The reason for it, according to Eliot, is that Jonson's poetry is "poetry of the surface." Poets like Shakespeare and Dante engage the interest of the reader with a single phrase and from the very beginning, though in the end they may prove difficult. But Jonson's poetry needs deliberate study for the sake of understanding; and it is not evocative or suggestive in the single phrase. Poetry of Shakespeare and Dante is "poetry of design as well as of detail" (159). On the other hand, as Eliot says, "Jonson's emotional tone is not in the single verse, but in the design of the whole" (160).

Eliot next deals with the popular perception that Jonson did not possess the genius for writing a tragedy. Eliot, on the contrary, is surprised that a genius like Jonson should not have written a good tragedy. First of all, Eliot is of the opinion that that the distinction of plays into tragedy and comedy is not strictly applicable to the plays of the Elizabethans. Following the
conventions of tragico-historical drama, Jonson did attempt a play, *Catiline*, but in that play he was not conscious of the fact that his Latin erudition was not proper for the idiom of the play. Yet Eliot finds two passages in the play which betray his genius. One is the prologue spoken by Sylla's Ghost. The speech is the most appropriate for Sylla's Ghost, and the passage cannot be dismissed as mere "invective," or "rhetoric" (162), or "verbiage" (163). As Eliot says, "... there is a definite artistic emotion which demands expression at that length" (163). The heterogeneous detail of the speech densely fills the logical outline of the structure, and it makes the texture. Ransom does not quote the other passage, but says that Eliot discovers the similarity of the passage with passages of other English and French writers, and then locates the distinctive quality of the passage.

Eliot gives his views about the 'Humours' of a Jonson play. He refuses to regard these characters as 'types,' and says that a 'Humour' is "a simplified and somewhat distorted individual with a typical mania" (165). The characters of Shakespeare can have their existence even outside the play in which they act, but Jonson's characters are confined within the bounds of the play; they cannot assert their individual existence. Similarly, a line of Jonson's poetry cannot be labelled "great" (167), but extended passages amply deserve the attention due to a great passage.

Next, Eliot dwells on the unity of a play by Jonson. The unity of his play depends on a situation rather than a well-formed plot consisting of a series of actions. The unity also depends on the consistent maintenance of a particular manner of expression or "idiom" (169) of the play.

Eliot again goes to clarify the use of the phrase "poetry of the surface" (169). He quotes Gregory Smith and says that words and characters of Jonson's great contemporaries, namely, Shakespeare, Donne, Webster, Tournéur, and sometimes Middleton have a "third dimension"
which makes them individual. Moreover, Shakespeare’s characters are susceptible to “a greater range of emotion,” “emotion deeper and less apprehensible” (172). However, Jonson’s works are not “superficial” (170) like Beaumont and Fletcher’s. The works of Beaumont and Fletcher sound the depth of great poets, but are hollow in reality. But Jonson is fully conscious of the “superficies” he creates, and these “superficies” have “a logic of their own” (171). This proves that Jonson’s creations do not lack the ‘third dimension,’ but its existence is not so much evident as in Shakespeare.

In this context, Ransom comments on the importance of the ‘third dimension’ in the case of an art-work. Ransom’s observation is that in a scientific formulation the value of an object depends upon the interest built towards a single aspect or all the aspects of an object, which are relevant to the formulation. An artistic formulation, on the other hand, represents an object as solid and encourages us to perceive the object in its actual character.

In the same article on T. S. Eliot in *The New Criticism*, Ransom takes up for discussion Eliot’s essay, “The Metaphysical Poets,” published in 1921, which, in turn, was a review-article of H. J. C. Grierson’s anthology of ‘metaphysical’ poems. In his essay Eliot brings into prominence the poetry of the sixteenth and the early seventh century, and relegates the poetry of the Restoration and the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to a less important place. Eliot finds the conventional definition of Metaphysical poetry in terms of its conceits inadequate. Metaphysical poetry is marked by variety. There are the secular poetry, the courtly poetry, the religious verse; but there is no specific use of conceit which can mark it distinctly. In Donne and Cowley, Eliot notices the use of the device of elaboration which is used to carry a comparison to the furthest stage. Eliot also marks in Donne the use of “telescoping” which signifies “the passing from one metaphor into a second which depends on it” (177). Eliot recalls Dr Johnson’s
definition that in Metaphysical poetry “the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together” (177). In Eliot’s opinion, Johnson forgets that the heterogeneity is the distinctive quality of poetry, and it differentiates a poem from a prose-piece. For Eliot, ‘violence’ signifies “some outrageous forcing of the sense” (177). Eliot quotes a poem by Bishop King where the equalisation of the idea to the simile by ‘violence’ produces exquisite poetic effect. About the language of the Metaphysical poets, Eliot’s observation is that it is usually “simple and pure,” while the grammatical structure of Metaphysical poetry, Eliot observes, is “far from simple” (178).

Eliot remarks that the virtue of the Metaphysical poetry was allowed to lapse. The ‘virtue’ that he notes in Metaphysical poets was the amalgamation of thought and feeling into their sensibility. The Metaphysical poets had a sensibility which “could devour any kind of experience” (181). Eliot says: “Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose” (180). On the other hand, “A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility” (180). Eliot holds responsible two poets, Milton and Dryden, for the bifurcation of sensibility into thought and feeling, and this bifurcation eventually perpetuated. This resulted in the ushering in of the sentimental age. The ratiocinative and the descriptive elements were banished. The poets merely reflected, but did not feel their thought.

At this point, Eliot says that “the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary” (180-181). While an ordinary man falls in love and reads Spinoza, he cannot synthesise these two experiences. Nor is it possible for him to fuse together the two experiences: the noise of the typewriter and the smell of cooking. But in the mind of the true poet “these experiences are always forming new wholes” (181). To Eliot, the value of the Metaphysical
poets lies in the fact that they were “engaged in the task of trying to find the verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling” (182).

Eliot speaks of the unification of sensibility or the fusing together of thought and feeling; but he does not trace the technique which makes it possible. Ransom’s observation is that the moment we find that a poetic sensibility is a complex of feeling and thought, it cannot remain an integrated whole. The most a poet can do is to construct a poem on thought without sacrificing the feelings. This leads Ransom to cast his argument into the mould of his structure-texture dichotomy — the structure consisting of logical thought, with the feelings associated with the free details making the texture. But this is common to all poetry. Then what is special about Metaphysical poetry? Ransom formulates that the distinctive feature of Metaphysical poetry “consists apparently in the structural device of making the whole poem, or some whole passage of it, out of the single unit metaphor” (185). A metaphor which introduces “foreign” (188) elements into a discourse is usually a component of texture. Hence a Metaphysical poem which consists entirely of a conceit cannot have a structure. Ransom refers to Cleanth Brooks who speaks of “functional” (188) or structural metaphors which, according to Richards, are all vehicle, with no tenor. The tenor of a metaphor in Metaphysical poetry has to be something common and generalised, so that we can infer the tenor from the vehicle; this would make the structure. And the free details which are relevant to the vehicle but ‘foreign’ to the tenor would make the texture. Metaphysical poems are, Ransom says, “sharply-textured representations,” and in them “the texture dominates the structure and all but threatens its life” (190). It is Ransom’s opinion that the sharp individualisation of a general behaviour in a metaphysical conceit brings it close to the spirit of a satire.
Ransom also reviews Eliot’s essay on Dante in the article on Eliot in *The New Criticism*. Here the topic for discussion is poetry and belief in comparison with religion and belief. In his essay, Eliot says that one need not believe the philosophical and theological ideas of Dante for a proper appreciation of his poetry. But in case of religion, one cannot practise a religion without believing its precepts. In respect of religion, Eliot was a staunch Anglo-Catholic as he himself made it public in the Preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes* in 1928. He upholds the hoary tradition of his faith, but does not offer any philosophical or rational defence of it. Eliot fell foul with the naturalists who included scientists and positivists (together they are called humanitarians), and the Humanists of whom Irving Babbitt and Norman Foerster were the most prominent.

Unlike religion, Humanism does not have a continuous tradition. It originated from a critical attitude towards religion [Eliot calls it even “parasitical” (196)]. It has not become a habit with the people. It is, says Eliot, “a state of mind of a few persons in a few places at a few times” (196). It does not accept any dogma or the truth of ‘revelation’ which are essential parts of any established religion. It tries to establish itself as, in Foerster’s words, “an observed fact of experience,” and holds that “the value of supernatural intuition must be tested by the intellect” (198). Eliot almost ridicules this positivistic aspiration of the Humanists by indicating that tests to validate the supernatural intuitions were conducted by the Church “long before the word Humanism was coined” (198). Eliot’s contention is that rational assent or intellectual conviction for the supernatural intuitions of religion may come late but comes inevitably with continuous practice; and those practising the religion do not need philosophical vindication. Eliot’s defence of religion from the point of tradition has little value for these thinkers. Ransom, in this context, quotes Allen Tate’s remarks: “Historicism, psychologism, scientism, in general the confident application of the scientific vocabularies to the spiritual realm, has created a spiritual disorder
that may be briefly described in terms of a dilemma . . .” (201). Ransom’s opinion is that the new civilisation that the naturalists are trying to establish on a rational cannot encompass people as comprehensively as the traditional religion; and even if such a new civilisation is established, it “may turn out to be oddly like the old one” (201).

Ransom here comes to his moot point: the relation between poetry and belief. Ransom refers to Eliot’s essay, “Arnold and Pater,” published in 1930. With Matthew Arnold and also I.A. Richards, Eliot believes that poetry can be enjoyed irrespective of whether it is based on fact or fiction. However, in the case of religion, Arnold and Richards think that the emotional experience of religion need not have a factual base. But Eliot differs from the other two in that he strongly stresses the need for fact in case of religion. His opinion is that the stand of Arnold and Richards will lead one to experience religion either as morals or as an art. Ransom corroborates Eliot’s view and explains that religious rituals have close affinity with poetic myths; but beyond that the religious precepts are supposed to support the practical life of a person, that is, to lay a moral foundation.

Eliot holds that the revealed or divine truth of a religion cannot be subjected to the precise and close analysis of a scientific discipline. On the other hand, the hypotheses of science are also not free from a certain dogmatism. But while the hypotheses of science are ‘speculations,’ religion does not allow its revelations to be grouped under that category. The revelations of religion are sacrosanct. Citing Aristotle’s observation, Ransom says: “Aristotle regarded any branch of study as a kind of science if pursued hard and intelligently, but knew all about the absurdity of expecting a science to yield more precise knowledge than accorded with the nature of its content” (206). The scrutiny that religions have been subjected to makes Ransom apprehensive that religions may be debunked unless they give up their dogmatic arrogance.
Ransom regrets that Eliot does not uphold the sanctity of poetic affirmations with so much earnestness as he does the sanctity of religious revelations. Eliot, however, does not attach much importance to 'belief' for the appreciation of poetry. But Ransom's view is that Dante's poetry would be better appreciated if the reader believes in his philosophy. The reason that Shelley's poetry appears "foolish" (208) beside Dante's is that there is consistency in the enunciation of Dante's philosophy, while Shelley's philosophy is marked by methodical inconsistency.