CHAPTER FIVE

An Assessment of the Contribution of Ransom to the Development of Contemporary Literary Criticism

The contribution of Ransom to the development of contemporary literary criticism is so profound and pervasive that it will possibly not be an exaggeration to say that the New Criticism is the most important critical school that dominated the entire second half of the twentieth century. Ransom called attention to the need for objectivity in literary criticism. It may be pointed out that long before Ransom, Arnold in “The Study of Poetry” and Eliot in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” called attention to it. But the credit must go to Ransom to put these ideas into a coherent logical system and provide a dependable tool of criticism, a tool which is used by almost all the critics who were either contemporaries or successors to Ransom.

Though in the early period of his career, Ransom had protested, like Davidson and Tate, that he was an artist with little concern for social and economic problems, he soon found himself defending the civilisation of the Old South in the face of the growing influence of the progressive ideals of the New South. This was apparently prompted by their determination to withstand the misrepresentation of the Southern culture by the so-called progressive forces. Ransom’s involvement with the social and economic issues of the region helped him cultivate a critical sensibility. The prospect of a career as a literary critic depended, for Ransom, on his exploration of two related problems. Primarily, as he himself concedes in The World’s Body, “it is not a pre-scientific poetry but a post-scientific one to which we must give our consent” (viii). Secondly, the literary critic must maintain, as Louise Cowan has strongly advocated in The Fugitive Group: A Literary History, “a firm ontological position in the face of a dominant scientific knowledge”
These concerns led Ransom to explain in detail what he called "three moments" in an unpublished volume *The Third Moment*, the scheme of which he elaborated in a letter to Allen Tate. The first moment captures an experience in its whole and concrete form, and it is free from all kinds of intellectual interference. The second moment is that stage when the experience, in the process of being recorded, is abstracted and a concept is formed. The third moment is the stage of becoming aware of the deficiency in the recording of the first moment. The only way to recapture the fugitive first moment, for Ransom, is through a recourse to images, which, in actuality, effects a reconciliation of images and concepts. Dreams, religion, morals, and art are only some of the means that allow man to experience the fleeting glimpse of the first moment. The reconstruction of this moment through images in poetry lends to its special epistemological status which is very different from the kind of knowledge which science purveys.

*God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy*, published in 1930, was Ransom's first published prose work of any critical worth. In this work, Ransom's focus is on religious myth. He points to the inadequacies of scientific abstractions to explain the relationship that exists between the physical and metaphysical realms. It is the specific function of the religious myth to bring about this revelation. Such revelatory phenomena cannot be comprehended by the scientific faculty of man. The inscrutability of Nature finds expression in Ransom's representation of Nature as an unintelligible and contingent phenomenon, a view which is remarkably different from the scientific view of Nature as usable and intelligible and devoted to man's welfare. For Ransom, "... nature industrialised, transformed into cities and artificial habitations, manufactured into commodities, is no longer nature but a highly simplified picture of nature" (qtd. in Young 16). Critics like Walter Sutton finds reiteration of many of Eliot's views in Ransom's *God Without Thunder*, but in a more emphatic and bold manner.
Ransom published *The World's Body* in 1938 when he was deeply involved in the agrarian movement. A collection of fifteen of his literary essays, the book presents Ransom's ideas with a trickiness in the selection of some of his terms. The term, 'ontology' is one such word. Ransom uses this word not to refer to the particular branch of metaphysics, but to mean the reality of an object's being. Ransom stresses in this work the uniqueness of a work of art in its tendency to embody the whole substance of the object, and thus justifies its validity as a more reliable source of knowledge than a scientific discourse which destroys the integrity of the world's body by drawing abstractions. Not only that, in Ransom's conception, the artistic representation of an object is even better than the object itself. The object that exists on the plane of reality lends itself to use, while the artistic representation is free from any such utilitarian purpose and caters to a knowledge of itself for its own sake. Ransom's approach in *The World's Body* is marked by his treatment of a wide range of topics. What distinguishes his approach of textual study is his examination of the complex psychic process of poetic creation. "Criticism, Inc.," the final essay in the collection, is an exhortation on Ransom's part to shun attention on the extra-textual facts about the poem and a call for concentration on the work of art itself, a call soon to be answered by his New Critical brethren Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren who published a book, *Understanding Poetry* in the same year, a book which is supposed to have directed the course of studying literature for decades.

When Ransom became editor of the *Kenyon Review* in 1937, he devoted the pages of this quarterly to publishing articles by the so-called New Critics, bringing to light the critical opinions and views of Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, R. P. Blackmur, Kenneth Burke, and William Empson. By then, Ransom had become convinced that the critic's proper function was to focus on the distinctiveness of a poem, its mode of communicating in a
manner that cannot be adopted by any other medium. It was, however, only a small group of reigning critics who followed Ransom's dictum. The prominent among them were I. A. Richards, William Empson, T. S. Eliot, and Yvor Winters. Their achievements (and failures also) were encoded by Ransom in *The New Criticism*, a book of seminal importance published in 1941. On Delmore Schwartz's suggestion, Ransom included his own opinions on the role of a literary critic in the concluding chapter of the book, which he entitled "Wanted: An Ontological Critic." In *The New Criticism*, as in the previous books, Ransom elaborates his contention about the distinction of science and art, by referring to two components in a poetic discourse: structure and texture. Ransom's argument involving these two components has been neatly summarised by M. K. Ray in his essay, "Remembering Ransom," and it is worth quoting:

> A poem consists of a logical core, a paraphrasable content or a structure, and a tissue of local irrelevancies or texture. In other words, the structure is the prose or scientific meaning and the texture is made up of factors that are independent of the argument but are enjoyable or valuable. Thus there is always a tension between the structure and the texture. The structure tries to put forward, while the texture takes the reader 'away into passionate excursions.' The texture gives the 'qualitative density,' while the structure gives us some objective knowledge. The symbols, therefore, in Ransom's scheme of things are not just referential signs of prose discourse but constitute the *poesis* of a poem, and the metre is of central importance in regulating the relationship between structure and texture. (66)

It is through an interaction of structure and texture that the final meaning of a poem is reached. It is the responsibility of the critic to understand that meaning and eventually communicate it to the
reader; and this critical task can be performed only by reading the poem, not anything about the poem.

In the essays that followed the publication of *The New Criticism* Ransom seems to have modified his opinions to a considerable extent. In "The Concrete Universal: Observations on the Understanding of Poetry, I," Ransom figures out three organs of a poem: the head, the heart, and the feet — the head speaking in an intellectual language, the heart in an affective language, and the feet in a rhythmical language. The New Critics, in their obsession with the languages of the heart and the feet, have ignored the intellectual language of the poem. The comprehension of the wholeness of existence of the poem is the result of an understanding of the relationship existing among these languages. Ransom also stresses the value of the 'logical paraphrase,' which he discarded earlier, in order to understand the intellectual language of the poem. In an attempt to make sense of the dual nature of poetry, Ransom makes use of the philosophical concept of the 'concrete universal' which he explains in terms of Hegel: "A Universal in Hegel's favourite sense is any idea in the mind which proposes a little universe, or organised working combination of parts, where there is a whole and single effect to be produced, and the heterogeneous parts must perform their several duties faithfully in order to bring it about," while the Concrete "is the objective element in which the Universal in all its parts is to be materialised" (*Poems and Essays* 163). Ransom still makes a distinction between the practical universal used by science and the moral universal used by art. The scientist so uses up the Concrete that there is "no unused remainder" to attain to a state where there is "Not one necessary part missing; not one unnecessary part showing; nor a part showing which is excessive or deficient in its action." On the other hand, the moral Universal of the poem "is borne out perfectly in the sensuous detail
which puts it into action” (164); neither is the Concrete “used up so completely that there is no remainder” (165). It turns out to be a restatement of the structure-texture formula in the sense that the final meaning of a poem, again, depends upon an understanding of the relationship between the “Universal or logical plan” and “the sensuous detail which puts it into action” (164).

Ransom was not only a critic; he was a practising poet as well, very much in the tradition of the poet-critic. It would be interesting to investigate how far Ransom’s poetic practice conformed to his critical principles. As Graham Hough observes, “One way of approaching Ransom’s poetry would be through his criticism” (Young 186). Besides being a critic, he has also earned a place as an eminent poet in spite of the fact that he imposed restrictions upon his practice as a poet. The poems that he wrote in the span of the period between 1915 and 1927 number around 160; but Ransom himself revised those poems a number of times in the years that followed, leading to drastic changes in their appearance. Trying to ascertain their character, critics find Ransom’s verses inevitably coloured by a certain Southern orientation. Besides, the presence of dichotomies is unmistakable in them: mortality and the vigour of youth; agrarianism and industrialism; idealism and reality; the tension between mind and body, as well as between reason and sensibility. However, what marks his poetry out is his proficiency as a poet to create an aesthetic distance which helps the reader in understanding his work from an objective standpoint that, in turn, leads to appreciating his poetry from a clear perspective. Supposed to have been greatly influenced by Robert Frost, his first collection of verse, Poems about God explores religious and spiritual matters. Discontented with too much emphasis on what he later formulated as ‘structure’ and not enough on ‘texture,’ Ransom desisted from reprinting the poems collected in this anthology. His next few collections, including Chills and Fever and Two
*Gentlemen in Bonds,* showcase his best-known and most-admired poems. In “The Equilibrists,” Ransom underscores the tension between reason and passion, as two lovers repress their desire in order to adhere to societal mores. In the epitaph to the poem, Ransom memorializes their love, which will be consummated in death. As Ray contends, “The equilibrists are beautiful in their eternally unfulfilled love. But the supreme equilibrist is Ransom himself. With remarkable skill, he maintains a balance through equilibrium stress in his treatment of the two main forces that run through the poem: honour and passion” (“Remembering” 68). The concept of death and decay is a recurring thematic concern in Ransom’s verse. His famous poem, “Bells for John Whiteside’s Daughter” explores the death of a young, energetic girl through the eyes of her neighbour. The piece expresses the neighbour’s anger at such a senseless and tragic death. In “Janet Waking,” a young girl is forced to face mortality when she finds that her pet hen has died during the night. The fleeting nature of feminine beauty is the subject of “Blue Girls,” a poem that focuses on a group of Southern schoolgirls who revel in their attractiveness and youth. In “Old Mansions,” Ransom asserts that ideals of the South should be preserved in spite of the changing circumstances and the passage of time.

There is a raging debate among commentators as to where Ransom’s reputation rests—on his poetry or on his critical work. It is a well-acknowledged fact that as a poet Ransom had confined himself to only a limited output. To take into account Allen Tate’s observation, Ransom always considered himself “deliberately minor; he very early set limits to the scope of his performance.” But within this “deliberately minor mode” he wrote a small number of “great poems.” And Tate is quick to remind us, “In a deliberately minor mode, Donne, Marvell, Landor, and Yeats wrote their great poems” (qtd. in Young 4). It is also to be noted that within its limited
scope Ransom's poetry reflects modern sensibility, combining almost paradoxically the opposing qualities of delicacy and strength, as well as elegance and earthiness. In brief, his poetry illustrates a fine balance and perfect correspondence of the structure and the texture. On his own testimony, the structure dominated over the texture in the poems of the collection, *Poems about God*. So the structure-texture correspondence was a conscious criterion on his part. Critics also favour Ransom as a master stylist, and praise his poems as well-crafted, finely textured pieces that explore the ambiguities, paradoxes, and ironies that make up modern life. Recent critical studies have examined Ransom's tendency to revise his work, the role of metre in his poetry, the influence of his religious faith on his verse, and the representation of Southern women in his poems. The influence of Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot has also been a frequent topic of critical discussion. Although some reviewers find Ransom's poetry to be cold and distant and view him as a minor American poet, many consider him a distinctive and profoundly influential writer whose verse will not only endure but deserves greater critical attention. It is no wonder Allen Tate considered him, "... since the death of Stevens and Frost, the dean of American poetry" (qtd. in Young 4).

In fine, Ransom obviously uses concepts borrowed from other fields of knowledge to investigate into the nature and use of poetry. However, his originality lies in convincingly demonstrating why reading of poetry should be considered a rewarding experience. In his diligent and tenacious exploration of the differentiation of science and art, he succeeds in ensuring a higher epistemological status for a work of art than for a scientific treatise. As Ray says in "Remembering Ransom," "The chief contribution of Ransom lies in his repeated emphasis on the value of poetry as knowledge. It is only through poetry that man can recover
‘the body and solid substance of the world.’ His essays and poems make it abundantly clear that without poetry man can never know himself, and even his knowledge of the world would remain incomplete and fragmentary” (69). To my mind, the importance of Ransom as a literary critic is more historical than critical. It must be admitted that as the official founder of the New Criticism, he made us aware of the problems in literary criticism, and to be aware of the problem is the first step towards its solution.