Rereading the New Criticism
Hickman, Miranda B., McIntyre, John D.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Hickman, Miranda B. and John D. McIntyre.
Rereading the New Criticism.
The Ohio State University Press, 2012.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/24254.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/24254

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=859138
Androgyny and Social Upheaval

The Gendered Pretext for John Crowe Ransom's
New Critical Approach

AARON SHAHEEN

JOHN CROWE RANSOM's essay "Criticism, Inc.," included in his volume The World's Body (1938), reads in many respects as a manifesto for the New Criticism that he was in the process of developing: "[I]t is from the professors of literature, in this country the professors of English for the most part, that I should hope eventually for the erection of intelligent standards of criticism. It is their business" (328–29). These professors, he suggests, will be armed both with a poet's knowledge of technique and style and a philosopher's understanding of abstractions and themes. By the end of the essay, Ransom outlines several tendencies that such critics should avoid, including paraphrasing the text in lieu of analysis as well as providing "personal registrations," which describe the "effect of the art-work upon the critic as reader." But perhaps most importantly, critics should refrain from literary analysis that stresses historical context or political moralizing at the expense of close examination of the text itself (342–45).

As a number of critics, including Michael Kreyling and Paul Bové, have noted, this last directive at first glance appears odd coming from Ransom. After all, in the years before his development of the New Criticism, in works such as God without Thunder and the Agrarian symposium I'll Take My Stand, both published in 1930, Ransom concentrated his literary energies on cultural/historical criticism and theology—all pursued directly or indirectly in defense of Southern traditionalism. Bové and Kreyling argue that
the New Critical method allowed critics to bypass the messiness of history, especially when that history was deeply immersed in issues of race and slavery. Moreover, such “political quietism” gave these critics a chance to resist the forward lurch of time and the recognition of modernity, just as the essays comprising *I'll Take My Stand* did by setting forth an economic and cultural program based on precapitalist agrarianism (Bové, 115). Striking a somewhat different chord, Mark Jancovich insists that the New Critical approach never intended to divorce itself from history and culture, though he concedes that the New Criticism was the logical intellectual extension of agrarianism, not Southern nationalism: “[I]t was not Ransom, [Allen] Tate, and [Robert Penn] Warren who abandoned their Agrarian ideals. They merely felt that their position had become overidentified with the South as a region and their shift to the New Criticism was a way of refocusing attention on their criticisms of modern society” (27).

Despite their differences, these assessments of the historical and cultural context in Ransom’s New Critical method largely overlook issues of gender, though gender is perhaps the one cultural/political issue that retained its visibility throughout the Agrarian and New Critical phases of Ransom’s career.³ During the Agrarian phase, Ransom’s concern about gender upheaval in general and androgyny in particular was part and parcel of his brooding about the modernizing South. The blurring of gender roles that seemed to characterize the end of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provided Ransom with a point of departure for discussing a wider range of threats, including Southern acquiescence to industrial capitalism, the emergence of a Soviet-style welfare state, the evisceration of traditional Southern social customs, and even the breakdown of a notion of a racially cohesive organic Southern community.

Thus in one sense androgyny was a symptom of a modern world that had lost its historical and cultural moorings. At the same time, however, androgyny for Ransom also served as a prescriptive measure to anchor humans to the landscape, to God, and to each other. In this latter prescriptive form, androgyny functioned for Ransom as it did for fellow modernist T. S. Eliot, whose *The Waste Land* uses the hermaphroditic Tiresias to embody poetic unity and historic continuity. Likewise, Ransom sought a synthesis of his “masculine” intellect and “feminine” sentiment as the means to create a myth of an organic Southern community, ironically based on clear social distinctions between men and women.

Though Ransom abandoned the South and Southern nationalism by the late 1930s, many of his gender formulations simply found amplification through aesthetics. In sorting out the differences between the two competing
versions of androgyny, he was able to codify and articulate the type of gendered dualisms that would constitute the backbone of his later New Critical methodology. Perhaps without his realizing it, Ransom’s deployment of gendered paradigms beyond the sexed body into the realm of aesthetics betrays a larger point about gender itself. As theorists Judith Butler and Thomas Laqueur have suggested, gender does not depend on the sexed body for meaning; rather the sexed body has been made to fit preconceived notions of gender. Controlling the world of men and women during a time of tremendous social upheaval first meant controlling the discourses by which masculinity and femininity were defined.

Angered by the ridicule the South suffered in the wake of the 1925 Scopes “Monkey” Trial in Dayton, Tennessee, Ransom (then an English professor at Vanderbilt University in nearby Nashville) turned his intellectual energies from poetry to religious and cultural criticism (Jancovich, 22). Better known today for his contributions to *I’ll Take My Stand*, Ransom also wrote a full-length study of Christianity, *God without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy*. In it he questions how modern western society—which he calls the Occident—interprets Christianity. In its quest for material acquisition and scientific knowledge, the Occident has chosen to put its faith in a God without thunder—that is, a benevolent God who loves His children so much that He opens up the secrets of the universe for them to exploit for their own scientific and commercial gains: “[T]he new religion,” cautions Ransom, “presents god as a Great Man with all the uncertainties left out: a Great Man whose ways are scientific and knowable and whose intention is amiable and constant” (20). Ransom consequently believes that the West is bent on self-destruction, and he exhorts his readers to understand God as the “Orientals” (i.e., the premodern Church or the Jews of the Old Testament) once did, as a jealous God of contingency, one who could be “capable of evil as well as good” (301). Furthermore, he explains, “When God was pictured in the likeness of a fabulously Great Man, of marvelous technique and uncertain favor, it was fairly difficult for one to be at ease in Zion; for his fiat was unaccountable and unpredictable; and man worshiping him was necessarily humble, and for the time being neglectful of the ordinary routine of practical life as a very vain thing” (20). Though Ransom was never a devout believer himself, he felt that only by living in fear of God as “the Orientals” once did could the West reverse the course of industrial capitalism’s tendency to fragment traditional communities, lay waste to arts and social customs, and bring humans into interminable warfare with their natural environment.

At the center of this book stands a Godhead who has been largely understood in the Occident as implicitly male, but who in Ransom’s opinion should
be seen as androgynous. Remarkably, the gendered construction of Ransom’s irascible Oriental god has gone unnoticed over the years, even though it has everything to do with the book’s basic thrust. The God of Thunder that Ransom would like to reinstate in western culture is not the Trinitarian deity commonly worshiped in traditional Christianity; Ransom believes that Christ is merely a demigod, and thus the two remaining components of the Trinity are the true and supreme components of the Godhead. Ransom calls these coequal figures the Mother and the Father:

God is the Father, the masculine, cosmic, and rational Creator. But the material is the Mother, who is feminine, anarchical, and irrational. (We would add, with Plato’s permission: The Father is the personification of Quantity, and the Mother is the personification of Quality.) It is upon such a Mother that God [the Father] must beget his children, the objective creatures which we now know on earth as nature. They partake of the being of both parents; and so far as biology can generalize them, in equal degrees. (God without Thunder, 300)

The Mother is for Ransom what has otherwise been known as the Holy Ghost. “It is a significant fact,” he says, “that the Holy Ghost for the Old Testament authors, and for Christ himself speaking in his native Aramaic, was of the feminine gender. But this was the right gender for defending the demonic and irrational aspect of his being” (304). These musings make for a heady proclamation. In short, Ransom asserts that nature (of which humans are a part) is the metaphysical or cosmological product of a masculine and feminine Godhead. Ironically the Godhead’s phallic thunderbolts come from the feminine, irrational side of its being. This configuration may very well be what Ransom had in mind when he claimed later in The World’s Body that the male poet is an “intellectualized woman”: he partakes of both the Father’s spirituality and the Mother’s mutable, sensual materiality (77).

The Southern soil, which is at the ideological, spiritual, and imaginative core of I’ll Take My Stand, likewise partakes of the Father and Mother. On one level the soil exists as a certain quantity of atoms that can be represented by the rational—that is, masculine—abstraction of a molecular compound. Yet simultaneously the soil elicits a certain amount of sentiment from its cultivator. Through daily toils on the farm the agrarian establishes a personal relationship with the soil, something that cannot be represented merely by a chemical equation. The poem “Antique Harvesters,” published in Ransom’s 1927 book of poetry Two Gentlemen in Bonds, invokes the landscape’s feminine aspect. In the first stanza the poet asks: “What shall this land
produce?” The answer, which comes at the end of the poem, is an image of a “Proud Lady” who “hath not stooped” (50–51). As the poem suggests, physical matter such as the soil possesses its own personality that people can experience in infinite varieties. The Proud Lady, though old, is the primordial landscape, and the (presumably male) Antique Harvesters, made in the Godhead’s androgynous image, are in touch with their feminine sides enough to experience the soil in more than just scientific or “masculine” ways. This distinction would prove instrumental in the development of the New Criticism in the 1940s.

As a mythical object of homage, the Proud Lady becomes what Anne Goodwyn Jones has called the symbolic Confederate woman who dutifully wears Dixie’s diadem. “Rather than a person,” Jones remarks, “the Confederate woman is a personification, effective only as she works in others’ imaginations. Efforts to join person and personification, to make self into symbol, must fail because the idea of Southern womanhood specifically denies the self” (4). Ransom sees androgyny as a form of male prerogative. Male poets, alongside their agrarian brethren, mystically in touch with both their masculine rationality and feminine sensibility, cultivate a female art object. As a result the Proud Lady is displaced from politics and the marketplace, standing still eternally, never disrupting the patriarchal order. In fact she becomes the very symbol of that order. In this sense, then, the Proud Lady’s advanced age is not a sign of temporal decay, but an embodiment of the sweep of (white) Southern myth and tradition.

Ransom’s religious vision reflects a larger modernist interest in androgyny. For example, William Faulkner, H. D., James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf all entertained the notion that the imagination was made up of masculine and feminine faculties that, when combined, could produce remarkable artistic achievements (Rado, 7). No doubt this affirmative version of androgyny was what T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* sought in its depiction of Tiresias. “[T]throbbing between two lives / Old man with wrinkled female breasts,” the aged prophet is, as Eliot’s “Notes” to the poem explain, “the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. . . . [S]o all the women [in the poem] are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias” (38, 50).

Yet in “Reconstructed but Unregenerate,” his contribution to *I’ll Take My Stand*, Ransom addresses a dystopian version of androgyny heralded by a capitalist economy that has the power to uproot familiar gender and social structures. Though the essay rarely mentions religion, the principles of *God without Thunder* obviously serve as the essay’s philosophical basis. Placed at the opening of the symposium, the essay is in many ways the most general. While Ransom claims not to miss the Old South per se, he at least misses
the leisurely approach (white) Southerners supposedly took to life—one that allowed them to experience the aesthetic pleasures of the quotidian. Since the Civil War, industrial capitalism had encroached upon the South’s traditions and ripped them apart.

Yet beneath Ransom’s worry about capitalism was a deeper brooding about socialism. The Agrarians believed, for example, that it was through the crisis in capitalist overproduction that the economy would slump and labor would organize to the point of applying government directives to the modes of production. Thus the Agrarians ironically believed in the Marxist dialectical narrative of history but certainly did not condone its ends. As the United States was sinking deeper and deeper into the Great Depression while the Soviet Union was reporting a surge in its economy under the first Five Year Plan, the Agrarians no doubt felt they had legitimate reason for concern. It is little wonder that Allen Tate originally proposed calling the Agrarian manifesto *Tracts against Communism* (Murphy, 63). The manifesto’s “Statement of Principles,” which Ransom had a direct hand in drafting, touches on these threats, arguing that a band of “super-engineers” will “adapt production to consumption and regulate prices and guarantee business against fluctuation: they are Sovietists. . . . [T]he true Sovietists or Communists—if the term may be used here in the European sense—are the Industrialists themselves” (*I’ll Take My Stand*, xxiii).

As “Reconstructed but Unregenerate” makes clear in later passages, the modern age of industrial capitalism distorts the “orthodox” view of androgyny *God without Thunder* so earnestly delineates. Here Ransom speaks of masculine and feminine forms of ambition that operate symbiotically, yet destructively, in the modern world. The masculine form of ambition manifests itself in a war against nature, and its bottom line is production. Ransom worries that men have used their intellectual grasp of chemistry, physics, and engineering to promote a pioneering spirit of progress that sees no end to this conquest. This war is sustained in large measure by an insatiable consumption:

> If it is Adam’s curse to will perpetually to work his mastery upon nature, it is Eve’s curse to prompt Adam every morning to keep up with the best people in the neighborhood in taking the measure of his success. There can never be stability and establishment in a community whose every lady member is sworn to see that her mate is not eclipsed in the competition for material advantages. (“Reconstructed,” 9–10)

Ransom also presents here a variation on what current-day critic Christophe Den Tandt refers to as “corporate androgyny.” For Den Tandt this concept
describes male protagonists in early-twentieth-century American fiction “whose willingness to develop a supreme sense of masculinity paradoxically involves the appropriation of feminine features. . . . [They] derive their heightened power from an ability to bracket off their sense of individuation and to merge with entities modeled as feminine bodies—the urban market, the corporation” (640). Clearly there are some differences between Den Tandt’s and Ransom’s concepts, yet both recognize that women—either as consumers or more abstractly as symbols of corporate entities—held a stake in the American marketplace that businessmen could not afford to overlook. As a further indication of androgyny’s centrality to the modern American economy, Ransom states that Adam may become a consumer alongside Eve. Any strict dichotomy between masculine production and feminine consumption, he observes, “may not be without the usual exceptions” (“Reconstructed,” 9).

Furthermore, the blurring of the masculine and feminine impulses emerges through the irrational fears of cultural emasculation men feel in response to the demands of their wives. In fact as God without Thunder explains, the impulse to consume so preoccupies men that readers might forget that consumption had historically been understood and depicted as an innately feminine activity—as Eve’s activity. In this sense corporate androgyny leads not to “a supreme sense of masculinity,” as Den Tandt would have it, but to a debilitating self-consciousness. Thus the male consumer becomes subject time and again to the irrational sense of lack that contemporaneous Freudian theory ascribed to women.

The feminine sense of ambition goes well beyond turning men into castrated individuals who fulfill their lack through consumption. As “Reconstructed but Unregenerate” further explains:

The feminine form is likewise hallowed among us under the name of Service. The term has many meanings, but we come finally to the one which is critical for the moderns; service means the function of Eve, it means the seducing of laggard men into fresh struggles with nature. It has special application to the apparently stagnant sections of mankind, it busies itself with the heathen Chinee, with the Roman Catholic Mexican, with the “lower” classes in our own society. Its motive is missionary. Its watchwords are such as Protestantism, Individualism, Democracy, and the point of its appeal is a discontent, generally labeled “divine.” (10–11)

In essence Ransom suggests that the feminine bourgeois devotion to “Service”—a common term in the contemporaneous discourse of the New Woman—evolves slowly but surely into the modern welfare state. At first
glance one might suspect that Ransom would be relieved if “laggard” men could find work; a strong employment rate, after all, might keep workers from organizing and rebelling. Yet Ransom is also mindful that the industrial economy will always have a surplus labor force that women will thus enjoin the state to employ. “Along with the gospel of progress goes the gospel of Service,” he explains. “They work beautifully as a team” (“Reconstructed,” 8). As Ransom later explained in response to Stringfellow Barr’s indictment of *I’ll Take My Stand*, “The old Southern instinct which identifies [socialism and communism] is perfectly right in the long run. . . . Big business, which [Barr] accepts, and which every day becomes bigger business, will call for regulation, which every day will become more regulation. And the grand finale of regulation, the millennium itself of regulated industrialism, is Russian communism” (Davidson, 49).

In fact, in positioning the “feminine form” of ambition as a key instigator in a specific historical sequence beginning with the Protestant Reformation and ending with the establishment of secular democracies, Ransom shows the extent to which modern women have ventured beyond the mythological parameters of his ultrafeminine Proud Lady. The reforms established in the Progressive era and 1920s were largely fueled and populated by women activists, such as settlement house founders Jane Addams and Lillian Wald, Women’s Christian Temperance League president Frances Willard, feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and National Consumers League general secretary Florence Kelley. Not surprisingly, many of these women not only promoted a broader base of gender and social progressivism (if not outright socialism), but had come under fire for being mannish and aggressive.7

By looking at the deeper gendered implications of Ransom’s writings of the 1930s, one might find that the status, power, and legitimacy of the post-war New Woman was still very much at issue. With one foot in the bourgeois world of mass consumption and another in the world of social reform, the New Woman was anathema to conservative Agrarianism. Just as American men lived out the “pioneer doctrine” in their never-ending battles with nature, so did women in their striving to ameliorate the inevitable effects of those battles (“Reconstructed,” 11).

Thus it would seem that Ransom had been hailed by cultural currents that regarded social amelioration in general as an oddly gendered ideological construct. As social historian Daniel J. Walkowitz notes, the 1920s proved a key decade for women who sought to make social work a viable career option. Women social workers effected changes in society through the adaptation of scientific methods for treating clients. And “because objectivity and rationality were conventionally associated with male professional
culture . . . , the scientific model created its own tensions for female social
workers.” The woman social worker not only had to play the Good Mother;
she “had to adopt attributes of passionlessness and objectivity generally asso-
ciated with men, traits that easily allowed others to stereotype her as desexed
and androgynous” (1051–56). By the time *I’ll Take My Stand* was published
at the start of the new decade, social work had changed so much as a result
of the “male” scientific principles it accepted that it had adopted its own
manual for scientific research. The 1930 census, moreover, reported employ-
ment of 31,241 social workers with seventy-six different job titles; eighty per-
cent of the profession was female. By 1932 social work had moved into the
university curricula of twenty-five different graduate degree-granting schools
(Brown, 142–43).

The androgynously constructed Service impulse also threatened Ransom
because it could abstract the South well beyond the mystical organic com-
munity he so devoutly envisioned. Using Benedict Anderson’s famous term,
Michael Kreyling understands the Agrarians’ South as an “imagined com-
munity” (3–6). Yet the insidiousness of the welfare state makes that cohesive
community nearly impossible to imagine because feminine Service uses the
masculine sense of intellect and rationality to carry out its program of uplift
and reform. Under such positivist guises as sociology, history, anthropology,
demography, and social work, the encroaching welfare state would demys-
tify the South’s cultural “unity,” which had relied mainly on myths of white
supremacy and religious conservatism to keep the bond strong.

Scholars of Southern literature have noted the ideological rift between the
conservative Vanderbilt Agrarians led by Ransom and the liberal academic-
s at the University of North Carolina led by sociology professor Howard
Odum. This rift developed in large part because Odum and his Chapel Hill
colleagues attempted to ameliorate the poverty and racism of the South by
first assessing them through the use of different empirical and abstract meth-
ods. Thus industrialism and the various “-ologies” would not only create the
pretext for a proletarian state in Ransom’s view, but would also use mascu-
LINE modes of science to connect seamlessly the North and the South cultur-
ally, economically, and racially. Through scientific and economic abstraction,
the nascent welfare state would create an androgynous and miscegenated
social body by incorporating the worst of modern masculine and feminine
ambitions.

The perceived racial implications of feminine Service wedded to mascu-
LINE rationality were far-reaching for Ransom. At the heart of the Agrarian
movement was a cultural nationalism that was very much in keeping with
the romantic primordialism of Johann Gottfried von Herder and Giuseppi
Mazzini (Reed, 52–53). The Agrarian emphasis on primordialism might explain, for example, Donald Davidson’s reluctance to include Robert Penn Warren’s essay “The Briar Patch” in *I’ll Take My Stand* because it spoke of blacks’ participation in the Southern agrarian tradition. Ransom himself is guilty of the same discomfort when it comes to the place of African Americans in the South. His essay awkwardly glosses over the issue of slavery, absurdly suggesting that the peculiar institution was “monstrous enough in theory, but, more often than not, humane in practice” (“Reconstructed,” 14). Ransom concerns himself primarily with the “vegetative aspect” of a person, which he asserts is the impulse to settle permanently on a piece of land, but which also implies in quasi-Herderian fashion that white Southerners spring up from their native Southern soil. Of course he fudges the lines of descent in his assumption, and perhaps Warren’s “Briar Patch” met such resistance among his colleagues because it reminded them that white Southerners were no more indigenous to the land than the first slaves who arrived in Virginia from west Africa in 1619 (“Briar,” 246).

The inherent contradictions between Ransom’s religious and dystopian visions of androgyny are, I argue, an integral part of his eventual turn away from Agrarianism. On the one hand, androgyny was the dreadful result of modernity, for as the American industrial economy slumped further, it necessitated a governmental intervention that put masculine rationality in the service of feminine uplift. Yet on the other hand, androgyny in its orthodox, spiritual manifestation provided the antidote for a nation-state’s ills, not only involving a belief in a Godhead half-male and half-female, but also enjoining individuals to see themselves as a part of the Godhead’s world; like the natural world itself, humans are both material and spiritual, intellectual and sentimental. In both forms of androgyny, masculine intellect and feminine sentiment are present, but Ransom could never articulate just how these two constitutive elements veered off in such dangerously different directions. In other words, where was the line between artistic creation on the one side and social amelioration on the other if both required the use of masculine rationality and feminine sentiment?

When Ransom turned away from Southern nationalism and religious criticism by the late 1930s, the larger theoretical implications of this disjuncture haunted him. By the end of the 1930s, he was no longer even a Southerner. Unable in 1937 to agree on a sufficient salary and contract with the English department at Vanderbilt, Ransom uprooted to Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, and took on a dual role as professor and founding editor of the *Kenyon Review*. By this point in his career, Ransom had moved so far from his previous promotion of religious orthodoxy that he often found himself in the
middle of the religious idealist and the secular “realist” camps between which William James tried to negotiate in his famous essays on pragmatism (Quinlan, 68–87).

With this change came Ransom’s deeper ambivalence about the cultural legitimacy and economic viability of the agrarian South. The shift appears in his 1936 essay entitled “What Does the South Want?,” which was included in *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence*, a companion piece to *I’ll Take My Stand*. This essay already marks some acquiescence to the welfare state as it had developed during the first four years of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. Ransom recognizes the incredible devastation the Great Depression has wreaked upon the South, and he admits to the need for a number of improvements that only a technologically advanced and centrally cohesive federal government can provide. Almost as though laughing about his militancy during the earlier Agrarian years, he remarks: “The Agrarians have been rather belabored both in the South and out of it by persons who have understood them as denying bathtubs to the Southern rural population. But I believe they are fully prepared to concede the bathtubs” (248). In fact he accepts the need for fairer income distribution, backup employment, hospitals, paved roads, parks, and dependable plumbing, all of which are “urged nowadays by the welfare workers.” One might be shocked to see just how much Ransom acclimated himself to the idea of the welfare state. Once deriding social scientists for breaking up the organic community, he now admonishes them much more humbly: “But I should be a little wary of the professional welfare workers, and not let them drill the population too hard in playhabits and social functions. I should give the labor community its rights and let it make the most of them” (251). In other words, he exhorts the social workers to shape up the Southern laborers, but still to be gentle and let them save face by keeping some of their regional-based leisure habits.

Ransom’s essay “Poets without Laurels,” also included in *The World’s Body*, serves as a farewell to his overtly political phase of the early and mid-1930s. In it he argues that modern poets, needing to adapt to the alienation of modern life, have chosen to write poetry about subjects that are largely divorced from the political arena. The modern poem “has no moral, political, religious, or sociological values. It is not about ‘res publica,’ the public thing. The subject matter is trifling” (59). Among these trifles are those Wallace Stevens made famous, such as a blackbird, a Key West seascape, or a jar atop a hill in Ransom’s home state of Tennessee (Malvasi, 79). Not surprisingly, the critical theory that would spring from his *The New Criticism* (1941) and related writings was one that would champion such poetry, removed as it was from politics, history, and authorial intention.
But androgyny did not disappear from Ransom’s later writings. By the late 1930s he had found a way to rechannel it back toward the aesthetic program suggested in God without Thunder. For example, in his essay “The Woman as Poet,” a review of Edna St. Vincent Millay’s poetry that is included in The World’s Body, he remarks:

A woman lives for love, if we will but project that term to cover all her tender fixations upon natural objects of sense, some of them more innocent and far less reciprocal than men. Her devotion to them is more than gallant, it is fierce and importunate, and cannot but be exemplary to the hardened male observer. He understands it, from his “recollections of early childhood,” or at least of youth, but has lapsed from it; or rather, in the best case, he has pursued another line of development. The minds of man and woman grow apart, and how shall we express their differentiation? In this way, I think: man, at best, is an intellectualized woman. Or, man distinguishes himself from woman by intellect, but he should keep it feminized. He knows he should not abandon sensibility and tenderness, though perhaps he has generally done so. (77)

This distinction gets at the very heart of certain gender dynamics that reside just under the surface of Ransom’s earlier writings. Good poets, Ransom suggests, are those who find the right balance of sentiment and intellect. In this case Ransom shows no anxiety about women social workers whose masculine rationality threatens to override their femininity. Rather, he frets about those such as Millay, who allow their feminine poetic sentiment to override their masculine sense of discipline and precision. Likewise, he expresses concern for the overly rational man, who gets no love from poetry and invests all his energies in the corporate or scientific world: “[N]ow that he is so far removed from the world of the simple senses, he does not like to impeach his own integrity and leave his business in order to recover it. . . . He would much prefer if it is possible to find poetry in his study, or even in his office, and not have to sit under the syringa bush” (77–78).

In 1941, the same year The New Criticism was published, Ransom published “Criticism as Pure Speculation” in The Intent of the Critic, a volume of essays edited by D. A. Stauffer. Here Ransom dichotomizes poetry into structure and texture. Likening these two components to a fully furnished home, he explains that the structure consists of the “beams and boards”—that part of a poem that can be transcribed or paraphrased seamlessly into prose. The structure of the poem therefore consists of its abstract theme or argument. The texture of the poem, however, is “the paint, the paper, the tapestry”—
those formal elements such as imagery, rhyme scheme, meter, enjambment, or caesurae that provide the poem with its feel, its particularities. As Ransom explains, “The intent of the good critic becomes therefore to examine and define the poem with respect to its structure and its texture. If he has nothing to say about its texture he has nothing to say about it specifically as a poem, but is treating it only insofar as it is prose” (111). This dichotomy sounds suspiciously close to masculine spirituality and feminine materiality, the two components of Ransom’s orthodox Godhead articulated in *God without Thunder*. As the thematic core of the poem, the structure is the masculine thematic abstraction—perhaps love, happiness, dejection, anger, or jealousy—that is given its character by feminine texture.

In *The New Criticism* Ransom again explains the difference between the structure and texture of a poem, adding to his explanation the remark that understanding the tension between structure and texture gives way to a sense of resolution and order:

> The composition of a poem is an operation in which the argument fights to displace the meter, and the meter fights to displace the argument. It would seem that the sacrifices made on both sides would be legible forever in the terms of peace, which are the dispositions found in the finished poem, where the critic may analyze them if he thinks it furthers the understanding of poetry. (295)\(^\text{11}\)

Should my suspicions about the genders of the structure and the texture prove tenable, I suspect as well that Ransom attempts to do in poetry what he could not do in the world of time and space: find a creative means of controlling the rivalry between masculinity and femininity. The productive tension of the androgynous poem supplants the androgynous Godhead as Ransom’s new object of reverence. True, Ransom labels poetry fraught with tension between texture and structure as “impure,” but he concedes that “[t]he World of Appearance (or opinion) seemed to Plato inferior to the World of Pure Being (or reason), but he acknowledged that the former was the world which our perceptions took hold of, and indeed was the world of nature” (328). The “pure” poetry made up of structure alone is too close to masculine rationality. Unchecked by feminine texture, the structure has the character—and perhaps the potential destructiveness—of a scientific theorem.

Though New Criticism resisted didacticism at all costs, Ransom subtly, albeit undeniably, makes a case for applying his method beyond the classroom or the study. In his essay “Forms and Citizens,” also found in *The World’s Body*, he makes a general plea for the preservation of social custom.
and ritual, though he concedes that the informality of the modern world seems to have the upper hand in the matter. In his defense of custom he creates the hypothetical example of the man who wishes to possess a woman sexually. In this example structure and texture take the respective forms of the man’s intention and the various rituals he performs to woo her. Ransom suggests that, given the lack of pretense in the modern era, the man might be able to simply approach the woman straightaway and engage her in (presumably consensual) sexual play. “If our hero, however, does not propose for himself the character of the savage . . . he must approach her with ceremony, and pay her a fastidious courtship. . . . The form actually denies him the privilege of going the straight line between two points, even though this line has an axiomatic logic in its favor and is the shortest possible line” (*World’s Body*, 33). In other words, the “structure” of the situation is tempered by the logically unnecessary but nonetheless satisfying “texture” of the courtship ritual.

The hypothetical woman’s sexuality is made more enjoyable for the man willing to travel a circuitous route to take her: “But the woman, contemplated in this manner under restraint, becomes a person and an aesthetic object; therefore a richer object” (33). The sexism in this statement is made all the more curious by the contention that the woman somehow becomes more of a person by achieving the status of aesthetic object—a poem in the flesh. But it is also worth remarking that in treating the man’s plight as an androgynous trajectory made up of masculine argument and feminine ritual, Ransom’s narrative arrives at gender stability: men court; women are courted—and then enjoyed for their sexual richness. His concentration on fixity mirrors a statement he made eight years earlier in *I’ll Take My Stand*: “The arts of the [South] . . . were the eighteenth-century social arts of dress, conversation, manners, the table, the hunt, politics, oratory, the pulpit. These were the arts of living and not arts of escape; they were also community arts, in which every class of society could participate after its kind” (“Reconstructed,” 12, emphasis added). Poetry is like any other formality in that it provides boundaries, hierarchies, and stasis.

As an example of a culture that has already “rationaliz[ed] and economiz[ed] its citizens down to their baser instincts, Ransom cites Soviet Russia, where “there is less sex-consciousness . . . than anywhere in the Western world” (*World’s Body*, 37). Though by 1938 Ransom had come to embrace much of the New Deal’s welfare programs, he nonetheless preserved some of his earlier Agrarian reticence about the destructive form of androgyny. In heralding the “New Soviet Woman,” Russian feminists such as Lenin’s wife Nadezhda Krupskaya and Alexandra Kollontai seriously questioned
what, if anything, constituted difference between men and women. Kollontai was one of the most vocal of Soviet feminists, even publishing opinions in the *Baltimore Sun* in the early decades of the twentieth century. She was particularly outspoken in her advocacy of a Soviet culture that would abolish the notions of gender distinction promoted by the bourgeois patriarchal family. “In the place of the individual and egotistical family,” she argued, “there will arise a great universal family of workers, in which all the workers, men and women, will be above all workers, comrades” (Stites, 351).

Ransom seems to suggest the same thing, though reluctantly. “I suppose,” he continues, “that the loyal Russians approach the perfect state of animals, with sex reduced to its pure biological business” (37). In other words, while he may believe that the differences between genders are the result of convention, they are nonetheless necessary for sustaining an enjoyment of life. Here he readily acknowledges the relative inconsequence of sex distinctions between males and females in comparison to their gender distinctions, which are governed by culture and habit. In the absence of divinely or culturally enforced gender codes, men and women must choose to be different just as in an earlier moment Ransom was willing to submit to an irrational god in whom he did not personally believe. Here Ransom concedes a larger point made by Judith Butler that gender is performed “in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” to perpetuate the illusion of immutability (140). In preferring “efficient animality,” which recognizes sex but not gender differences, humans are bound for a life of “perfect misery” (38). While Jancovich believes that “[i]t would be wrong to suggest that Ransom is egalitarian in his sexual politics,” he states nonetheless that Ransom’s ideas evolve “from a profound discomfort with the distinctions between masculinity and femininity” (39). I argue the opposite, however: androgyny as Ransom defines it—insofar is it is made up of masculine and feminine components—is essentially a conservative formulation, for it implies that there is a clear distinction between the two, even if the distinction is grounded in culture and not biology. Ransom’s aesthetic comfort, then, comes from his ability to articulate those differences if for no other reason than to keep them in a proper balance. Through keeping the distinctions clear he is able to conclude that the hyperfeminine Millay is just as flawed as the hypermasculine New Soviet Woman.

For John Crowe Ransom the process by which poets create poetry is essentially no different than the Southern yeoman who finds in the landscape a substance imbued with both abstract and material qualities. In both cases the blending of masculine and feminine attributes provides not only a better understanding of the world’s complexity but also a sense of order and
control. As the South joined the rest of the nation in experiencing the breakdown of nineteenth-century gender barriers and the rapid increase in industrialization, Ransom came to realize that yearning for a Southern yeomanry was fruitless; but via his New Critical method he was able to articulate the boundaries of masculinity and femininity in ways that helped him make order of a dynamic and sometimes hostile world.

Notes

1. A substantially different version of this essay appears as part of the chapter entitled “Reactionary and Radical Androgyny: Two Southerners Assess the Depression-Era Body Politic,” in Aaron Shaheen, Androgynous Democracy: Modern American Literature and the Dual-Sexed Body Politic (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2010).

2. See Bové and Kreyling.

3. Jancovich does acknowledge the intersection between gender and criticism in Ransom’s writing, but he only devotes two paragraphs of his book to this intersection. See chapter 4, “John Crowe Ransom: The Social Relations of Social Activity.”

4. See Butler and Thomas Laqueur.

5. See Watkins, Hiers, and Weak. Unlike T. S. Eliot, who found personal refuge from the fragmentation of modernity in Anglo-Catholicism, Ransom remained fairly agnostic throughout his adult life. Talking with Robert Penn Warren in 1931, he made a curious remark about God without Thunder: “I found it very odd that I who am not a religious man, should write such a book; but I had to write it for the truth that was in it” (Talking with Robert Penn Warren, 382). The apparent “truth” for this son and grandson of Methodist preachers was the cultural efficacy, though not the verifiable reality, of the wrathful Christian God.

6. In Ransom’s orthodoxy, Christ plays a different role. Now relegated to the inferior position of “demi-god,” he does not command nearly the authority that he does in the Trinitarian tradition. For Ransom, Christ was “The Demigod who knew he was a Demigod and refused to set up as a God” (World’s Body, 305; italics in original). In other words, Christ, being male and partially divine, was an emanation of the Godhead’s rational masculine principle, what Ransom calls the “Logos.”

7. For analysis of Kelley’s and Addams’s purported androgyny, see the chapter entitled “The New Woman as Androgyne” in Smith-Rosenberg.

8. Equally at issue in Ransom’s writings was the so-called “social gospel,” a doctrine of Christian-sanctioned progressivism that caught up many reform-minded men and women in its evangelical sweep. Middle- and upper-class Christians worked through established church organizations and also created new outlets for reform, such as the Young Women’s and Young Men’s Christian Associations. This latter institution Ransom lumps in with “welfare establishments, fraternal organizations, and Rotary” as “philanthropic societies with a minimum of doctrine about God” (God without Thunder, 5).

9. See also Anderson.

10. See, for example, Chapter 3 in Hobson.
11. In later years Ransom would back away from these claims, arguing that such unity was really another term for the domination of the abstract over the particular. (See Ransom, “Art Worries the Naturalists,” 282–99).

Bibliography


———. “Reconstructed but Unregenerate.” In *Twelve Southerners, I’ll Take My Stand*, 1–27.


