CHAPTER FOUR

The Fugitive and the Exile

Theodor W. Adorno, John Crowe Ransom, and
The Kenyon Review

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I N 1945, Theodor W. Adorno published two short essays in the spring and
autumn issues of John Crowe Ransom’s Kenyon Review. Ransom in-
directly responded to the first in the same issue, and he directly reacted against
Adorno’s ideas in the second. This marks an improbable moment in modern
literary history, at which the practical genius of the academic institutionaliza-
tion of American letters in the New Criticism and the anti-discursive poly-
math of the Frankfurt School crossed intellectual paths. Their essays testify
to the subtle affinities between the literary and cultural criticism exemplified
by the New Critics in the middle decades of the twentieth century and the
ideology critique that came to dominate the center of academic literary-criti-
cal activity at the end of the century. An account of the meeting on the page
between the founding editor of The Fugitive and The Kenyon Review and
the exiled savant of Frankfurt offers more than the novelty of intersection
between academic fashions past and present. Crucially, Ransom’s encounter
with Adorno’s anti-teleological, western Marxism provoked him to abandon
publicly most of the agrarian, religious, and aesthetic theories he had devel-
oped in the 1930s.

Gerald Graff, John Guillory, and most recently, Stephen Schryer have
made compelling arguments that the career of Ransom, as the exemplary
New Critic, does not merely mark the decline of an ambitious but consciously
“traditional” mode of cultural criticism into a hermetically sealed institu-

83
tional form of literary pedagogy. As Schryer rightly emphasizes, the shift in Ransom’s career from that of an Agrarian agitator in *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930) and a defender of southern Christian fundamentalists in *God without Thunder* (1930) to an advocate of a professional, philosophically consistent and “purely” literary criticism in *The World’s Body* (1937) and *The New Criticism* (1941) was not one from politics to culture, nor from social forms to poetic ones. Rather Ransom’s and his colleagues’ loyalties moved from the region to the academy as “the critic’s primary object of identification” (Schryer, 670). In *God without Thunder*, Ransom had argued that poetry and religion (itself a collective concretization of poetry) were the necessary check on science and the totalitarian impulses of practical human action. *I’ll Take My Stand* contended that traditional southern culture was the form of society that best expressed the proper balance among poetry, religion, science, and praxis; that form should be adapted to current conditions and restored to its place of honor. Ransom’s later two books were primarily—though by no means exclusively—concerned with defining the proper nature of poetry and the proper practice of literary criticism. Schryer highlights the continuity between these projects, while observing that Ransom’s turn to the latter would eventually result in his abandonment of his earlier, anti-modern and anti-industrial regional politics. He would come to accept the division of labor because, as his essay “Criticism, Inc.” notes, only through a process of professionalization could criticism achieve its proper levels of academic sophistication and credibility (Schryer, 673). In fact, Ransom’s gradual abandonment of his earlier politics in concession to a modernity that granted him institutional and aesthetic autonomy would have more causes than just an emergent academic loyalty. The most startling and direct of those causes would be the provocation of Adorno’s two essays. And yet no full account of this brief, important episode in the history of the New Criticism has been given until now.

Adorno’s essays reflect his experience as a German intellectual in exile, living in a United States he finds culturally barbarous, while a more lethal barbarism devastated his native land. The first, titled “A Social Critique of Radio Music,” offered challenging and pessimistic insights on the dynamics of American mass culture. Here Adorno observed that the democratization of orchestral or “classical” music was in fact merely its mass commodification and fragmented distribution, and so fundamentally changed art itself into “entertainment.” Such reflections stemmed from his work on the Princeton Radio Project, an engagement lasting several years in which Adorno studied and measured, by various empirical means, the effects of music and radio on the American public (O’Connor, 8).
The second essay, “Theses upon Art and Religion Today,” was briefer and more elliptical. Indeed, aside from its unwavering and specific focus, the “Theses” offers an early example of the organization of ideas into a spatial constellation rather than a specifically linear-temporal mode of composition: a style of which the dialectics of Adorno’s posthumous Aesthetic Theory remains the best example. Unlike the “Social Critique,” this later essay follows the typical Adorno style of avoiding the presentation of empirical evidence. And yet, the “Theses” may be even more historically embedded, more concerned with the environment of its production than its predecessor, for in it Adorno challenges the interdependence, even the association, of religion and art as either intrinsic or even possible in contemporary western society. Almost certainly, Adorno was responding to the conditions of Anglo-American modernism, which, as Perry Anderson has noted (84), was considerably more conservative in its ideological and formal practices than was its Continental counterpart. A significant factor in that conservatism was the persistence of a nebulous point of intersection between art and religion (a variously defined phenomenon), even a conflation of the two, that had been ever more anxiously theorized since the days of Cardinal Newman and Matthew Arnold. Adorno’s expressed contempt for American mass culture in particular may have been not only part of a larger pessimism about mass culture per se but also part of a general distaste for the way in which modernism and the avant-garde were developing in the American grain. In any case, both essays mark a significant, indeed formidable, intervention into American critical discourse.

The appearance of both essays in The Kenyon Review seems oddly appropriate, given Ransom’s use of that journal to ponder the interaction between the social and the aesthetic spheres. In the first instance, Ransom’s essay—perhaps coincidentally—directly follows Adorno’s; “Art Worries the Naturalists” in no obvious way functions as a commentary on Adorno’s “Social Critique.” The “Theses,” however, are more explicitly linked to Ransom; they are gathered as the second contribution to a tripartite “Speculation” in which Ransom, exercising editor’s privilege, has the last word. His “Art and the Human Economy” is in substantial part a direct response to Adorno’s essay. It again marks a moment of transition, not in this instance one of critical methodology but rather of political conversion. Adorno’s essay and that of a more regular contributor, W. P. Southard, prompted Ransom to “renounce” (Young, 449) his wary advocacy of Agrarianism, the very architectonic of political, social, religious, and aesthetic concerns that had initially made his important criticism possible. He also thereby gave up, or at least radically attenuated, his career-long struggle to establish art as an ultimately
triumphant form of knowledge that could challenge the mere naturalism of science, even from its marginalized position in the secular industrialized world. As Mark Jancovich has noted (112–13), this essay marks the practical end of Ransom’s writing career. What has gone unexamined until now is the way in which the two essays in tandem suggest the provinciality of Anglophone modernism and, within it, of the ascendant American variety typified by the Agrarians and New Critics. While both Adorno and Ransom always appeal to a form of objectivity in their critical work, these essays reveal a deep rift between their different forms. Adorno’s criticism is predicated on an attentive phenomenology of “the whole objective structure of society” (Aesthetic Theory, 212), whereas Ransom’s is based on an act of what Adorno would dismiss as “hypostatization.” Whatever the similarities between them, and there are many, Ransom’s concept of objectivity, and the epistemological security it affords, is always theo-ontological, appealing as it does alternately to a transcendent absolute outside of time and to a narrative of history that describes an ideal, normative social condition—what he would call a proper “human economy.”

“A Social Critique of Radio Music” and “Art Worries the Naturalists”

Adorno’s “Social Critique” provides a spectacular example of the close interpretation of a particular phenomenon facilitating the presentation of a larger sociological vision. The essay commences as a counterdialectic to that posed by “administrative” and “market” analyses of the broadcasting of music and the demographic it reaches. Rather than asking “how can good music be conveyed to the largest possible audience,” Adorno poses a range of epistemological and phenomenological questions that interrogate how music is listened to, and also, how it is transformed by wireless transmission and the very methods of presentation that the radio stations and disc-jockeys structure.

As a means to such inquiry he offers four axioms: a) that society has been fully, or almost fully, commodified; b) society operates on a trend toward standardization; c) the ideological tendency of an increasingly complex society is to maintain a status quo; and d) there is an antagonism wherein the forces of production are fettered by the relations of production (210–11). Within the complex of these axioms, Adorno is able to distill certain features of radio music as it functions within its American social context. Music becomes a product to be consumed. The new or avant-garde is rejected as orchestral music in favor of “classical” music, meaning that which was
composed before the advent of radio and so carries with it a Benjaminian aura of high culture that the masses cannot penetrate, comprehend, or judge even as it becomes the significant quality that drives consumption. This “classical” music serves as an anodyne, or to be vulgar, an “opiate” for the masses—convincing them that economic modernization, which works materially to their disadvantage, is desirable because it is masked by cultural democratization: “Toscanini compensates for low market prices for farm products,” Adorno notes (212); “compensatory” functions of art, like “cathartic” ones, are not effects of art at all, but of ideologies external to, and obscuring of, it. And finally, apropos of this last point, Adorno details the way in which music on the radio ceases to function as art at all, reduced by a plethora of ideological delusions to subjective “infantile” emotivisms (213). American listeners in “The Middle West,” he notes with scorn, are incapable of mustering the slightest incidental judgment about orchestral music; they can only write to the radio stations to confess an appreciation that, in fact, merely reproduces the intentions of the station’s administration in its banal “public service” announcements. Adorno cites as evidence the piles of “fan letters” written to a particular station: “It widens my musical horizon and gives me an ever deeper feeling for the profound qualities of our great music. I can no longer bear the trashy jazz which we usually have to listen to” (214). The supposed democratization of high-culture music has not accomplished (and probably cannot accomplish) what its advocates claim: the medium of distribution and the intellectual paradigms the listeners have available to them ensure that this mass audience has an experience that may have any number of qualities, but is almost certainly nothing like the experience of the competent musician nor of the attentive and elite audience that traditionally filled concert halls. Adorno observes that they listen for isolated strands of melody in a symphony rather than grasping its total orchestration. They listen to quotations as if these were complete “songs,” and they listen for a flute solo in the same way they might listen to a sax solo in a Charlie Parker tune. Their interpretive ear is not inadequate by degree but rather deaf to the necessary kind of listening. And so they experience symphonies as entertainment, as a commodity, rather than as a measured and, in some sense, dialectical encounter: “Entertainment may have its uses, but a recognition of radio music as such would shatter the listener’s artificially fostered belief that they are dealing with the world’s greatest music” (217). Adorno insists that it is the disparity and contradiction between American radio listeners’ conception of what they are experiencing and the actual form of their perceptions that make orchestral musical “classical” for them. Their listening practice remains untransformed even as their sense of that practice reconceptualizes it by means of a
vocabulary of class and moral elevation. Adorno diagnoses listeners as experiencing a combination of vague feelings and programmed responses; they lack the knowledge necessary to experience music in any active sense: “Music is not a realm of subjective tastes and relative values, except to those who do not want to undergo the discipline of the subject matter. As soon as one enters the field of musical technology and structure, the arbitrariness of evaluation vanishes, and we are faced with decisions about right and wrong and true and false” (216). Such sententious remarks in Adorno’s work elide the difference between empirically objective and objective ethical and aesthetic categories of knowledge, while his historicism refuses the “objective” as a metaphysical category.

It is instructive to note how Adorno’s concern with “right and wrong” listening and interpretation touches on the work of the predecessor to the American New Critics, I. A. Richards—specifically to his psychological theory of literary interpretation set forth in Principles of Literary Criticism (1924) and Practical Criticism (1929). In these works Richards reads the proper interpretation of a text, and the refusal of “stock” responses, as signs of a healthy intellect. Ransom criticizes Richards’s “psychologism” in The New Criticism on ontological grounds (11–12), suggesting that it lacks objectivity. When one reduces aesthetic experience to psychological or biological phenomena, Ransom emphasizes, one loses the reality of the object causing the experience in the first place and settles for vague notions of feeling. He protests Richards’s “psychologism” with specific reference to music:

There are not two schools of musical appreciation, one instructing our feelings and attitudes, the other, perhaps staffed by intellectual snobs, instructing our intellects. There is one school, and its method is the study of musical composition, as in ‘harmony’ or ‘counterpoint,’ by analysis of the objective sound-structures in their own terms, and it does not need to say a word about emotions. (20)

By refusing categories of the subjective and psychological as adequate to understanding music or art in general, Ransom insists, one comes to the ontologically objective reality of the work itself as a thing. Adorno, meanwhile likewise insists on objectivity, but his version of it is historical and dialectical rather than ontological; he refuses “essentialism” without accepting subjectivism. This improbable effort to argue according to categories of the “real” without admitting the language of realist metaphysics proceeds by Adorno’s, first, analyzing the specificity of a medium—music—and its context, and second, his insistence that such specific analysis serves as an exemplum for larger
social phenomena. Once Adorno’s investigation has homed in on a particular subject, it magnifies out, by suggestion and implication as much as by clear statement, to a general critique of modern society. This magnification proceeds by way of homology: the cause of poor music apprehension (not to say enjoyment) in the American Midwest is also the cause of “deafening” processes of reification in modern life as a whole. Adorno’s method does not allow him to specify the ultimate cause, but only the forms of action it undertakes, as outlined in his four axioms.

Ransom’s counterpart essay in the same issue of the Review, “Art Worries the Naturalists,” pursues a similar movement from specificity to more general social commentary based on implicit homology. However, its success in so doing remains far more ambiguous. It begins as something of a review of the minutiae found in various recent books on aesthetics by pragmatic and naturalist philosophers, who offer what Ransom viewed as an urbane and carefully limited attempt to understand aesthetic experience by means of the categories established by the natural sciences. By the time Ransom wrote this particular essay, of course, he had been reading the works of the American Pragmatic philosophers for many years. This helps to explain why the ontological criticism he defined in The World’s Body and, more explicitly, in his chapter “Wanted: An Ontological Critic” in The New Criticism (republished in Beating the Bushes), does not simply hypostatize an opposition between science and poetry, but inadvertently takes natural science as the standard, and more importantly the form, of all knowledge even as it struggles to establish a place for criticism and poetry beyond the compass of that science. When Ransom attempted to understand poetry or religion (or anything threatened by the utilitarian and empirical movements of modern science and philosophy), his efforts went into making that supposedly ineffable phenomenon of poetry comprehensible and acceptable to a presumed hostile scientific audience. At the beginning of “Art Worries the Naturalists,” he confesses that the “apologist of the arts cannot do otherwise than refer the question of their strange kind of activity to the current philosophies; therefore, in these days, to naturalism” (Beating the Bushes, 93). Hence the need to establish poetry ontologically was not one exclusively grounded in his prior acceptance of metaphysical realism; for that matter, Ransom’s prose but little suggests that he had rejected his early education in the idealism of F. H. Bradley for realism. Rather, the persistent ontological focus of Ransom’s criticism seems to have been formed primarily in reaction to an American variety of nominalism and positivism that denied the reality of ideas, save those which perfectly corresponded to material facts. He wanted to establish the objective attributes of poetry’s being to prove to his hostile audience that in fact poetry possessed
some kind of existence that merited attention independent of the slush and subjectivity of vague feelings somehow adhering to nonsense.⁷

Adorno had no compunction about asserting the objectively assessable qualities of music. Although the equally assessable attributes of verse—rhyme, meter, metaphor—were available to Ransom, they only tentatively satisfied him as evidence that poetry had some objective existence, that it had a structural integrity as poetry, as more than the sum of its parts. However, he sometimes felt compelled to rebel against the very empirical ontology he advocated by leaping into the irrational. Often, he pandered to the specters of his insecurity—naturalist philosophers such as John Dewey—by attempting to harness their discourse to prove what he nonetheless asserts is unverifiable within its bounds. In “Art Worries,” however, this strategy is inverted. Here, he will not convict science of limitations whose lines of demarcation poetry exceeds and “worries.” Rather, he optimistically suggests that Dewey’s naturalism is richer than that of his younger colleagues and might mature beyond the reductive vision characteristic of that school of philosophy. Unlike that of his colleagues, Dewey’s writing exhibits “a tangle of bold philosophical speculations which are religious as well as aesthetic, and do not yield any firm or demonstrable results” (97). If his naturalism only continues to evolve it will move beyond the material and the empirical to the “supernatural” and the speculative. Ransom does not observe that it would then cease to be naturalism.

Ransom does confess, however, that this optimism replaces a former hostility—and this shift in thinking marks the distinctive importance of the essay and suggests the role Adorno’s cultural criticism played in his intellectual development. Years of effort suddenly begin to unravel. In a subtle apology for his early God without Thunder, where his suspicion of science reached its most indignant pitch, Ransom notes the need for “supernaturalists” to bone up on their “naturalist” philosophy before speaking. “If it seems impertinent in me to say this,” Ransom interrupts himself, “let me remark that I have myself come down a long and rather absurd hill. Like my preceptors I used to regard naturalism as a specially malignant heresy, if not an abomination unto the Lord” (Beating the Bushes, 94). After nearly fifteen years of combating, while making concessions to, the reductive nature of modern science and philosophical naturalism, Ransom’s only intellectual option left was a strategic surrender to the naturalists, in hopes that by admitting their terms of debate he might coax some margin of the field of “knowledge” to be left for poetry to till.

Ransom’s essay makes no mention of Adorno’s “Social Critique of Radio Music” appearing in the same issue, yet Ransom’s retraction of his early
defense of southern Christian fundamentalism seems to be provoked by Adorno’s pessimistic vision of the American Midwest as a landscape desolate of proper aesthetic understanding. As Aesthetic Theory’s occasional dives into American slang would later hint, Adorno’s characterization of rationalized, administered society finds its unhappy apotheosis in the America he came to know as an exile. When Adorno explains in “Social Critique” that music has “ceased to be a human force and is consumed like other consumers’ goods,” he observes,

This produces “commodity listening,” a listening whose ideal is to dispense as far as possible with any effort on the part of the recipient—even if such an effort on the part of the recipient is the necessary condition of grasping the sense of the music. It is the ideal of Aunt Jemima’s ready-mix for pancakes extended to the field of music. (211)

The move into particularity—a particular brand, a particular product—is not incidental. The “society of commodities” that Adorno generally discusses with conscientious abstraction is revealed as the home of instant pancake mix, Benny Goodman, of “giving the people what they want” (216), and a “mass-culture” incapable of hearing Bach (213) or articulating its experience of music except in prefabricated, stock terms (215). In short, Adorno’s “Social Critique” of mass-culture is specifically one of American culture, of flatlands rural and primitive in appearance but commodified in fact.

Ransom’s apologia of a mature philosophical naturalism likely responds to this attack on his country. Adorno’s essay impugns two ideas precious to Ransom. His suspicion of popular “taste” undermines Ransom’s democratic populism, a belief which had led Ransom to write God without Thunder, an “unorthodox” defense of Southern Christian fundamentalism, and to organize the symposium, I’ll Take My Stand, in defense of Southern culture against Northern industrialism. Second, Adorno insists that all efforts to disseminate serious music, or great art in general, are futile, because the mode of dissemination transforms the attributes of the work (217) and the categories of perception under which it is received. This last assault would have struck Ransom as particularly threatening, because he was already in the process of abandoning his religious and cultural populism in favor of a democratic theory of the professionalization of literary criticism and education. Ransom had already prepared, in nuce, a response to such strikes against his two cardinal ideas. In The New Criticism, just before demolishing I. A. Richards’s “psychologism,” he defends the naturalist, positivist, and skeptical methodology behind it. He finds Richards’s methods to “suit a sort
of pioneering, start-at-the-bottom Americanism, and are an excellent strategy for us, as I idealize our national temper and prospects of knowledge” (6). Whatever his anxieties over the method, he admits it is appropriate to the American “empirical” character. So too, in “Art Worries,” he abandons the anti-rationalist defense of fundamentalism in his earlier writing to laud the suitable, even patriotic, character of philosophical naturalism: “If there is anywhere a philosophy indigenous to our local climate, it is naturalism; whereupon, even if America were not my country, I think I should not care to convict this philosophy of inherent viciousness, but at most of an immaturity” (94). As many intellectual historians at home and abroad had already claimed, naturalism was the “American Philosophy.” Ransom’s theory of poetry had largely been geared toward proposing art as beyond the grasp of science and as resisting the rationalism of “northern industrialism.” This shift towards the naturalism he had previously reviled reconfigures Ransom’s aesthetic and critical theory so that it appears concerned with finding a suitable “indigenous” philosophy for the American psyche—one that is national rather than regional in character. Surely this change is rooted in Ransom’s departure from the South for Kenyon College in the late 1930s, and in a felt imperative of patriotism imposed during the Second World War, which ended the same year Ransom wrote the essay. No less likely, Adorno’s double alienation—exile from Germany in consequence of the war, and repulsion by the American cultural landscape in which he was forced to abide—prompted the scathing attacks of “Social Critique.” These provoked Ransom, in response, to take up an intransigently American apologetic for even those aspects of American culture he had once found most threatening. If immature naturalism seemed reductive to him, it nonetheless seemed a philosophy that gave Americans what they “wanted.”

Ransom’s new sympathy for naturalism required intellectual compromise on both sides. Particularly, Ransom’s mature naturalism had to avoid the positivist reduction of knowledge to science, and the definitive naturalist reduction of reality to matter. Again, Dewey’s philosophy makes “a tangle of bold philosophical speculations which are religious as well as aesthetic” (97). Ransom succeeds (if that is the right term) in luring the naturalists into his own native territory. The writers to whom he replies seem to have formulated in the language of biology, indeed with a literal use of the concepts of biology, an argument for the organic unity, or “fusing,” of works of art (103). Ransom out empiricizes the empiricists by arguing that the artwork is not a unity of any kind. Against this naïve claim of organicism, Ransom argues that artworks are the product of “funding,” a word he finds expressive of the central axiom of his poetic theory that a poem consists of a logical structure over-
loaded with “irrelevant textures” of meaning and meter. He urges that the naturalists are saying what he has always said. His exemplum and metaphor is that of a Christmas tree:

. . . I will risk some absurdity, to suggest that it might be wholesome for us to see [the work of art] as something like a Christmas tree. For, on Christmas morning when the switch is turned on, and the Christmas tree bursts upon our prepared vision in its beauty, we have the almost instantaneous sense of an intelligible object, and we feel such assured satisfaction and completion as may amount to the ‘ecstasy’ or the ‘seizure’ which qualitists, from Dewey on, desiderate for their arts. But I think the experience is not too spectacular when examined. There is the strong and steady tree, beneath the lights and ornaments and gifts which are so thickly strung upon it. . . . And at once we sense enough of the frequency and the quality of the accessories to know that the total object is of great magnitude and dimension of its density . . . here is the moral. It is only the sturdy frame of a small cedar which holds everything together to make an object that is technically and sufficiently one, and, looking for the ‘unifying principle,’ we say comfortably that this framework will do. (111)

Ransom consistently argued for the organic unity of artworks, but that unity referred to a specific logical structure held in tension with a potentially vast series of local textures. Much like Adorno’s theory of artworks as constellations, this argument for the “funding” of disparate elements into a complete thing suggests that the ineffable qualities of art reside not in its “organic” analogy to biology or in its otherness from science, nor does it lie in some romance of the supernatural, but in the almost supernumerary number of elements operating simultaneously. Science cannot suffice because there is no such thing as “Science”: there is biology, physics, psychology, etc., but no one discourse that can embody and articulate the totality of experience. That, for Ransom, is the point: art worries the naturalists because it reminds them that our experience of the world is neither univocal nor mono-vocal. We may try to understand the world by means of discrete disciplines, but we do not encounter it within them; they must arise only retrospectively. Ransom therefore recuperates the theory of art he had always maintained, but in a context hospitable to the naturalism he had previously refused. In the process, he abandons his earlier, deliberate “fundamentalist” anti-rationalism, and implicitly his Southern regionalism, for an American national imperative intended to resist the indictment of American culture found in Adorno’s dialectical social critique.
“Theses upon Art and Religion Today” and
“Art and the Human Economy”

The second exchange between Adorno and Ransom in The Kenyon Review was a far more direct confrontation. In the spring 1945 issue, Ransom may have abandoned his defense of Christian fundamentalism, but he maintained a fierce attachment to a necessary link between poetry and religion. The “Theses” testify to Adorno’s frustration with just such modernist theories of poetry as a hieratic art form, and target Rilke’s poetry in particular because it lingered on deteriorated “religious symbols” (678). Adorno generally excluded the Marxist doctrines of historical necessity from his work, finding its teleological thrust toward totality barbaric, but he evidently preserved a hint of that barbarism in believing that religion was vestigial and that art must abandon its ornaments to reflect accurately the historical truth of the present. Surely his experience in America had taught him that the residual nature of Rilke’s religion was not merely “retrograde,” but rather exemplary of a typical promise of modernist literature to manifest reality through a symbolism that was at least a “secular” analogy of the Catholic sacraments and at most their consubstantial manifestation. Adorno could scarcely approve what he saw as a project that was retrograde, patronizing, facetious, and of course, hypostatizing.

The theses themselves run as follows:

I) The unity between art and religion was the contingent product of specific historical conditions that cannot be recovered simply because western society has awakened to a crisis “involving individuality and the collectivistic tendencies in our society” (677).

II) The unity of art and religion was never tranquil and is not aboriginal; only romanticism posits a late and unusual break between them; art is a protest of the humane against any and all institutions; the protest would not end by establishing a “right” or religious society any more than that society would be established by the simple reunification of art and religion.

III) Modern artists who add religious content to their work are not doing the same thing as artists of earlier periods, but are merely adding futile ornamentation: “It glorifies religion because it would be so nice if one could believe again” (678).

IV) The borrowing of religious forms, such as “the mystery play” is “equally futile,” (679) and fails to effect a union between form and content or subject and object.
The loss of a hegemonic or universal religion or philosophy does not mean that their forces “should have passed on to art” (679). Art cannot become the new religion. This kind of reasoning would reconcile religion (or, for that matter, the various religions), philosophy, and art into one eviscerated category—leaving them as mere “cultural goods,” a desiccated residue that could no longer be taken seriously by anyone (680).

Nonetheless there was a primeval connection between art and religion, and as a result, art “bears the imprint of its magical origin: a halo that emanates from the artwork’s dual claim to uniqueness and the representation of something universal. But to insist upon this magical quality in the artwork itself actually diminishes it: “Today it is only the hit composer and the best seller writer who prate about the irrationality and inspiration of their products” (681).

Artworks function as a Leibnizean monad, representing the universal within their own walls but “without windows” (681). The attempt of the artist to mediate between the specificity of his word and the universal or absolute it represents in nuce cannot work. Rather, the most successful artists, like Marcel Proust, will invest in the concretion of experience; only by precise representation will they create a work that, constructed out of the ephemeral details of the world, becomes immortal by touching upon the absolute (682).

The American literary landscape in the high- and late-modernist periods could not but have provoked these observations. Although Adorno only specifically targets Rilke for his opprobrium, T. S. Eliot associated himself with Rilke on numerous occasions, and Eliot was the godfather of the American late modernism that The Kenyon Review promoted in its pages. Adorno’s theses would have been of immediate interest to Ransom who, following Eliot, made the connection between art and religion a central question of his critical work. Whereas Eliot and Ransom aggressively sought to hypostatize the intimacy of these two entities, Adorno no less aggressively sought to historicize it and dismiss it as obsolete. Theses I and II could apply equally well to the critical works of Ransom and Eliot, along with the then-flourishing masses of neo-Thomists and Catholic converts swelling the ranks of philosophers, aestheticians, and artists up to the late 1950s. Thesis IV almost surely was targeted at Eliot’s Murder in the Cathedral, although that was only one of myriad attempts to revive the place of mystery in modernist drama. Ransom, for his part, had argued that Murder was incompletely poetic because it was insufficently religious (The World’s Body, 166–72); a position he later
retracted along with his early pretenses of defending Christian orthodoxy (*The World’s Body*, 366, 377). Thesis V, harking back to the disciples of Arnold and Santayana, must surely have registered with Ransom as countering the arguments in *God without Thunder*, which he had repented for reasons quite other than Adorno presents here.

In total, the implication of these theses is to exclude the bulk of Anglophone literary modernism from Adorno’s canon of truly modern artworks. More than two decades later, these theses would find more subtle expression in Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, so it is telling that the modernism defined in that book would take James Joyce and Samuel Beckett as the very prototypes of literary modernism, rejecting by silence the other major figures who composed the modernist canon at mid-century. It is doubtful that Ransom fully grasped the significance of the theses, but he clearly sensed they put under erasure the literary modernism his work as a poet and critic had fostered. Detecting the western Marxist note in Adorno’s writing, Ransom observes in his essay responding to the theses, “Mr. Adorno is evidently for collectivism in politics, but not with all the potential ferocity of a partisan, i.e., fanatically. His social ideal has no room for religion yet provides a special asylum for art” (129). Students of Adorno will doubtless recognize the trace of his ideas in this statement, though Ransom has bowdlerized them. Adorno, like the poststructuralist philosophers who followed him, did not critique the “ontology” of art from the position of an empirical rationalist, but from a phenomenological position that was as skeptical of the ideology of rationality as it was of romanticism, as unconvinced by the attempt to boil down the individual subject to a number of material phenomena or nervous impulses as it was of conservative humanist attempts to preserve its unity. Ransom, whose philosophical positions were formed in response to German and English idealism as well as American pragmatism, was unlikely to have warmed to the nuances of a writer featuring negative dialectics.

While Adorno had launched an assault on the inherent relationship between religion and art, in “Art and the Human Economy,” Ransom took some such relationship for granted. But he questioned that this relationship could resolve itself into a “unity of culture” within history, because, in his view, art always acts in a dialectical opposition to “culture” rather than as the adhesive bond within it. From *I’ll Take My Stand* onward, Ransom had assumed just the opposite; religion and art reminded humanity of its insufficiency, its incapacity to conquer nature absolutely and its responsibility to walk uprightly and fear the Lord. Adorno’s second thesis denies the foundational assumption of nearly all of Ransom’s writings (including the poetry). Yet, in his response to Adorno, Ransom scarcely registers these attacks. In a
stunning reversal of his past position, Ransom instead takes issue with the idea that art can hold even so significant a social role as that of opposition or agitator. Ransom’s and Adorno’s writings had generally concurred in regarding art as a “check on action.” In this scheme, art was at minimum a retarding force, like that of ritual and ceremony, to prevent a merely pragmatic humanity from running into the abyss. Once more embarrassed to find his old Agrarian and New Critical positions overlapping with Adorno’s, as they had seemed to in Adorno’s “Social Critique,” Ransom swiftly abandons his long-maintained position in favor of a patriotic imperative.

For Ransom in 1945, art has ceased to operate as a response to the ideology of everyday life. It becomes for him a mere commemoration of action, not stopping human activities but magnifying them through an ideal image. To be more precise, art for Ransom has become mere consolation, like that found in “Sunday institutions.” If one must modernize six days a week, one may at least have one day’s poetic rest: “The arts are the expiations, but they are beautiful. Together they comprise the detail of human history” (133). The updated prototype Ransom chooses to define this function is that of the public statue of a general. Art venerates and improves as an image of reality; but both these actions are passive and neither continue nor repel action. Or rather, only within the artwork is action checked. The artwork cannot engage society in any kind of active dialectic: “Those who are supposed to commemorate action are commemorating reaction; they are pledged to the Enlightenment, but, even in Its name, they clutter It with natural piety” (135). Rather than an oppositional force to society, art in this view is the compensatory beauty that society requires to continue with the Enlightenment program of modernization, professionalization, and the division of labor. In this new theory, Ransom suggests that Agrarians of 1930 and the Wordsworthian romantics of every generation do not protest against this project, but offer in their poems a patch of pastoral to which one can retreat figuratively while one’s literal existence moves forward with the stream of progress.

We have fallen . . . and henceforth a condition we might properly call ‘decadence’ is our portion; guilt and repentance, guilt followed by such salvation as can be achieved. In the forms which this salvation takes, we do go back to our original innocence, but vicariously, symbolically, not really. We cannot actually go back. (132)

These comments come as a bemusing anti-climax in Ransom’s career. The America of applied science and economic efficiency that Adorno would critique thoroughly in his Aesthetic Theory had somehow fought the once
“unreconstructed” Ransom to an intellectual stalemate. He had always based his theories on a transcendental absolute and an ideal historical past, all of which were to serve as guideposts for human action; he now left himself with only the images of those things, not the belief in them. Indeed, though his comments appear as a rejection of Adorno’s theses, they actually enact the third one with distressing exactitude. Ransom’s concept of the religious function of art had been reduced to commemoration, what Ransom himself would call “nostalgia” (134), and what Adorno mocks with the observation that such art “glorifies religion because it would be so nice if one could believe again” (678).

Ransom had abandoned his anti-rationalist theory of religion and art in his previous exchange with Adorno. We see that he severely reduces the connection of art and religion, which had once been a poetic force against modernity, to that of a civil religion “central” to modern life only to the extent that a public statue might be located in the center of a Midwestern town square. These symptoms of Ransom’s final acceptance of the division of labor in modern administered society signify his abandonment of the Agrarian cultural theory he had done so much to propagate in the 1930s. He did not leave this abandonment to mere suggestion. Ransom wrote “Art and the Human Economy” with the state of Germany clearly in mind: perhaps Adorno’s identity as a German exile partly stimulated his reflections, as surely as his critique of religion and art provoked them. In any case, the recently concluded war directly imposed itself on Ransom’s political ideas. Near the end of the essay, he confesses,

I find an irony at my expense in remarking that the judgment just now delivered by the Declaration of Potsdam against the German people is that they shall return to an agrarian economy. Once I should have thought there could be no greater happiness for a people, but now I have no difficulty in seeing it for what it is meant to be: a heavy punishment. (134)

Caught between antipathy for Adorno’s western Marxism and sympathy for Adorno’s homeland, Ransom recognizes the religious and political synthesis he had forged in his theory of art could not hold. The work of art must be isolated at once from politics and religion to the extent that a statue—whether representing a general or a god—is so isolated. The dialectic by which art stood in a meaningful, but by no means easy, relation to society now struck Ransom as necessitating political and religious positions to which he could no longer assent. As a tenured professor at Kenyon College, and as editor of a literary review, Ransom found it necessary to abandon those positions and
to content himself with poetry alone, with the “commemoration” of a “natural piety” left to worry the margins of the otherwise unstoppable American juggernaut of industrial modernity. Adorno’s career reached an impasse no less troubling. As the axioms of his “Social Critique” indicate, however, he had early reconciled himself to the totalitarian direction of modern consumer society. Having abandoned all hope of art’s dialectic with society having a direct social function, he was perhaps better prepared to take up an intransigent position, accepting the absence of power that the political and religious pretensions of art seemed to promise. Adorno therefore could wait without hope, preferring to know the truth and see it bowdlerized by ideology, than to seek after a reconciliation with the status quo akin to that Ransom effected in declaring his patriotic admiration for the naturalism of John Dewey and his new aesthetics as one no more troubling than a “stone Bismarck” (135) welcomed in the town square.

Notes

1. See Graff, Guillory, and Schryer.
3. Ransom summarizes the psychologistic strain in Richards’s theory as reductive much as utilitarian philosophy is reductive:

   The health of the mind depends on its ability to organize its impulses into attitudes, and then to coordinate their operation so that there may be maximum activity and minimum friction among the units, as in the atomic society imagined by Jeremy Bentham. Poetry is needed as a complement to science because it is prepared to give to the emotions, and through them to the attitudes, their daily work-out; science intends to suppress them in order to map the objective world without distraction. (The New Criticism, 22)

4. After the fashion of another American New Critic, Yvor Winters, Adorno decries theories of art based on pleasure or enjoyment as forms of subjectivist hedonism: Art works are

   not a higher order of amusement. The relation to art was not that of its physical devouring; on the contrary, the beholder disappeared into the material; this is even more so in modern works that shoot toward the viewer as on occasion a locomotive does in a film. Ask a musician if the music is a pleasure, the reply is likely to be—as in the American joke of the grimacing cellist under Toscanini—“I just hate music.” (Aesthetic Theory, 13)

5. Francesca Aran Murphy’s Christ the Form of Beauty: A Study in Theology and Literature (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1995) situates Ransom’s criticism in a tradition
of conceptual realism and theological aesthetics extending from Jacques Maritain to Allen Tate, and continuing on to include William Lynch and Hans Urs von Balthasar. This may in fact be the most fruitful context in which to read Ransom, capturing as it does the realist implications of his poetic theory, despite, as Murphy concedes, the fact that “Ransom’s conception of imagination is a partially Kantian one” (73). As it happens, the modernist aesthetics grounded in the conceptual realism of Thomas Aquinas, such as those of Maritain, Tate, and von Balthasar, also splice Kantian idealist aesthetics to their metaphysics; what distinguishes Ransom is the absence of a conscious effort to conceal this debt.

6. Introducing Richards’s literary criticism, he notes that its bias is deeply nominalist, and by that I mean that it is very alert to the possibility that a word which seems to refer to the objective world, or to have an objective ‘referent,’ really refers to a psychological context and has no objective referent; this bias has governed Richards’ conception of poetry, for one thing, almost from that day to this. And with that bias goes—and the combination is a very common one nowadays though almost paradoxical—a positivist bias, through which the thinker is led to take the referential capacity of science as perfect, in spite of his nominalist skepticism; and by comparison to judge all other kinds of discourse as falling short. Nominalism and positivism are strange-looking yokefellows for undertaking knowledge, but it must be said that they may work very well together. (The New Criticism, 5–6)

7. Ransom would note in The New Criticism that poetry in its ontological reality bore certain resemblance to science, but differed from technology, because its being was not immediately subject to uses beyond itself:

art will seem specially affiliated with science, and further away from technology, in not having any necessary concern with pragmatics or usefulness. But in another sense it is closer to technology and further from science. We recall our old impression, or perhaps recall our knowledge of the Greek Philosophers, to the effect that art, like technology, is concerned with making something, as well as knowing something; while pure science seems concerned only with knowing something. And what poetry makes—and the word means a making—is the poem, which at least in respect to its meter is a discourse with a peculiarly novel and manufactured form, and obviously a rather special unit of discourse. (283–84)

8. Denis Devlin captures the widespread and troubled meeting of Catholic sacramentality and hieratic symbolism in late modernist poetry in his review, “Twenty-Four Poets,” in Sewanee Review 53 (1945): 457–66. Naturally, the early Robert Lowell and late W. H. Auden provide the scales in which this phenomenon was hung—to Adorno’s ironic smile no doubt.
Bibliography


