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# POETRY

## JOHN CROWE RANSOM

*Selected and Introduced by Anthony Hecht*

Any conventional list of the great modernist poets would begin with Eliot and Pound, Rilke, Valéry, and Rimbaud. These were not the only important poets of their era, possibly not even the greatest. One thinks of such others as Stevens, Frost, Montale, and Yeats. But the ones designated as *modernist* are credited with changing our whole mode of feeling, the voice and vocation of poetry itself. It is therefore surprising to recall that in 1926 two by no means negligible poets and commentators placed John Crowe Ransom (1888–1974) firmly in the ranks of the modernists. Robert Graves and Laura Riding, in their still-valuable *Modernist Poetry*, say of Ransom's work that it is of a kind which, "because it is too good, has been brushed aside as a literary novelty." Graves and Riding are no mere crackpots; their book was the inspiration, according to I. A. Richards, of that touchstone of modern criticism, William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930).

The poetry-reading public of today is not inclined to bracket Ransom with the modernists, despite some eloquent defenses of his work by the likes of Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell, and Geoffrey Hill; and Ransom's work has engendered no such devoted examination as has attended the poetry of Frost, Stevens, Eliot, Pound, or Williams. Indeed, Ransom's poems are still read with a shocking carelessness even by those who purport to admire them. Take, for example, this observation from the headnote to Ransom's poems in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, edited by Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair: "His poem 'Philomela' describes how, 'pernoctating' once with Oxford students in Bagley Wood, he heard a nightingale's song and was unimpressed." (So greatly do I revere the critical acumen of the late Mr. Ellmann that I have laid the blame for this comment, whether fairly or not, at the door of his colleague.) This has about it, in my view, the same flavor of blissful incomprehension reported by Matthew Arnold in his essay "Science and Literature": "I once mentioned in a school-report, how a young man in one of our English training colleges having to paraphrase the passage in *Macbeth* beginning, 'Can'st thou not minister to a mind diseased?' turned this line into 'Can you not wait upon the lunatic?'"

Ransom was a Rhodes Scholar, and by "pernoctating" (passing the night) he means only, and with becoming modesty, that his Oxford sojourn was briefer than that of others. The poem, as a thoughtful perusal ought to make clear, is not about the experience of hearing a nightingale in Oxford but about the radical break of American culture from its classical parentage, of which the nightingale myth, represented by Philomela and de-

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rived from Ovid, is a lovely but antique and conventionalized representative. Ransom is asserting that the old European tricks won't serve us anymore; in this he is adopting a stance we recognize in the work of Williams and Pound—and indeed of Eliot himself, who wrote of “the change of Philomel” as a “withered stump of time.” When Ransom writes of Philomela's “fairy numbers” he means to recall Keats, and to imply that we can no longer get away with those Romantic stage props or that Keatsean mellifluousness. When he writes of her “fabulous provinces” he means that, for better or worse, the world we now live in has pretty well banished the “fabulous.” Stevens was destined to take up the same theme.

Ransom is sometimes called an ironist, and compared to Hardy. The characterization is fractionally useful: Ransom admired Hardy, and edited his *Selected Poems*. Both, moreover, employed pronounced archaisms and antiquated diction. Hardy did so out of love for modes of rural English speech that were disappearing in the course of his very long life. But Ransom does so for quite other reasons. His poems very often present painful anachronisms that endure beyond the hope of resolution: codes of outdated morality applied almost laughably to a modern or heedless world; lovers torn by an equation of desire and ethics so perfectly balanced that they are like the proverbial donkey simultaneously attracted by two bales of hay, identical in their diametrically opposed distance from him and attraction to him, so that unable to choose, he dies of starvation midway between them. The effect is both ludicrous and pathetic, and it is this special emotional cocktail of contradictory ingredients, powerful and paradoxical, that forbids a simple response to many of Ransom's poems, that continues to puzzle and to charm, and that firmly distinguishes him from Hardy.

A poem such as “Captain Carpenter” is predicated on the notion that the ideals of courtesy, chivalry, and gentlemanliness can never survive against the barbarity they are pledged to oppose, since survival would entail abandoning those very ideals and adopting the brutal ways of the enemy. And into this world of irreconcilable paradoxes are always born the innocent, children and lovers, to whom the paradoxes are more bewildering than even to us, the poet's worldly and knowing readers. Ransom is telling us that, for all our worldliness and his, we were once as ill-equipped to cope with the world's welter of contradictions as the innocent; that in fact our worldliness is largely a matter of self-delusion; and when the heart of the matter is truly seen, we are as nonplussed as the veriest child. “Nonplussed” is a condition (if not a word) that Ransom is particularly gifted at eliciting in his readers, as well as describing in his poems. “Brown study” is a phrase he made powerful use of. What distinguishes his poems is a mixture of elegance and bluntness, a deep respect for innocence and the codes forged to protect it, along with a refusal to give way to any romantic or archaic delusions. It is always and disconcertingly, dramatically, dialectically, a bifocal poetry.

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## Philomela

Procne, Philomela, and Itylus,  
Your names are liquid, your improbable tale  
Is recited in the classic numbers of the nightingale.  
Ah, but our numbers are not felicitous,  
It goes not liquidly for us.

Perched on a Roman ilex, and duly apostrophized,  
The nightingale descanted unto Ovid;  
She has even appeared to the Teutons, the swilled  
and gravid;  
At Fontainebleau it may be the bird was gallicized;  
Never was she baptized.

To England came Philomela with her pain,  
Fleeing the hawk her husband; querulous ghost,  
She wanders when he sits heavy on his roost,  
Utters herself in the original again,  
The untranslatable refrain.

Not to these shores she came! this other Thrace,  
Environ barbarous to the royal Attic:  
How could her delicate dirge run democratic,  
Delivered in a cloudless boundless public place  
To an inordinate race?

I pernctated with the Oxford students once,  
And in the quadrangles, in the cloisters, on the Cher,  
Precociously knocked at antique doors ajar,  
Fatuously touched the hems of the hierophants,  
Sick of my dissonance.

I went out to Bagley Wood, I climbed the hill;  
Even the moon had slanted off in a twinkling,  
I heard the sepulchral owl and a few bells tinkling,  
There was no more villainous day to unfulfil,  
The diuturnity was still.

Up from the darkest wood where Philomela sat,  
Her fairy numbers issued. What then ailed me?  
My ears are called capacious but they failed me,  
Her classics registered a little flat!  
I rose, and venomously spat.

Philomela, Philomela, lover of song,  
I am in despair if we may make us worthy,  
A bantering breed sophisticated and swarthy;  
Unto more beautiful, persistently more young,  
Thy fabulous provinces belong.

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## Piazza Piece

—I am a gentleman in a dustcoat trying  
To make you hear. Your ears are soft and small  
And listen to an old man not at all,  
They want the young men's whispering and sighing.  
But see the roses on your trellis dying  
And hear the spectral singing of the moon;  
For I must have my lovely lady soon,  
I am a gentleman in a dustcoat trying.

—I am a lady young in beauty waiting  
Until my truelove comes, and then we kiss.  
But what grey man among the vines is this  
Whose words are dry and faint as in a dream?  
Back from my trellis, Sir, before I scream!  
I am a lady young in beauty waiting.

## Vision by Sweetwater

Go and ask Robin to bring the girls over  
To Sweetwater, said my Aunt; and that was why  
It was like a dream of ladies sweeping by  
The willows, clouds, deep meadowgrass,  
and the river.

Robin's sisters and my Aunt's lily daughter  
Laughed and talked, and tinkled light as wrens  
If there were a little colony all hens  
To go walking by the steep turn of Sweetwater.

Let them alone, dear Aunt, just for one minute  
Till I go fishing in the dark of my mind:  
Where have I seen before, against the wind,  
These bright virgins, robed and bare of bonnet,

Flowing with music of their strange quick tongue  
And adventuring with delicate paces by the stream,—  
Myself a child, old suddenly at the scream  
From one of the white throats which it hid among?

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## Janet Waking

Beautifully Janet slept  
Till it was deeply morning. She woke then  
And thought about her dainty-feathered hen,  
To see how it had kept.

One kiss she gave her mother.  
Only a small one gave she to her daddy  
Who would have kissed each curl of his shining baby;  
No kiss at all for her brother.

"Old Chucky, old Chucky!" she cried,  
Running across the world upon the grass  
To Chucky's house, and listening. But alas,  
Her Chucky had died.

It was a transmogrifying bee  
Came droning down on Chucky's old bald head  
And sat and put the poison. It scarcely bled,  
But how exceedingly

And purple did the knot  
Swell with the venom and communicate  
Its rigor! Now the poor comb stood up straight  
But Chucky did not.

So there was Janet  
Kneeling on the wet grass, crying her brown hen  
(Translated far beyond the daughters of men)  
To rise and walk upon it.

And weeping fast as she had breath  
Janet implored us, "Wake her from her sleep!"  
And would not be instructed in how deep  
Was the forgetful kingdom of death.

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## Captain Carpenter

Captain Carpenter rose up in his prime  
Put on his pistols and went riding out  
But had got wellnigh nowhere at that time  
Till he fell in with ladies in a rout.

It was a pretty lady and all her train  
That played with him so sweetly but before  
An hour she'd taken a sword with all her main  
And twined him of his nose for evermore.

Captain Carpenter mounted up one day  
And rode straightway into a stranger rogue  
That looked unchristian but be that as may  
The Captain did not wait upon prologue.

But drew upon him out of his great heart  
The other swung against him with a club  
And cracked his two legs at the shinny part  
And let him roll and stick like any tub.

Captain Carpenter rode many a time  
From male and female he took sundry harms  
He met the wife of Satan crying "I'm  
The she-wolf bids you shall bear no more arms."

Their strokes and counters whistled in the wind  
I wish he had delivered half his blows  
But where she should have made off like a hind  
The bitch bit off his arms at the elbows.

And Captain Carpenter parted with his ears  
To a black devil that used him in this wise  
O Jesus ere his threescore and ten years  
Another had plucked out his sweet blue eyes.

Captain Carpenter got up on his roan  
And sallied from the gate in hell's despite  
I heard him asking in the grimmest tone  
If any enemy yet there was to fight?

"To any adversary it is fame  
If he risk to be wounded by my tongue  
Or burnt in two beneath my red heart's flame  
Such are the perils he is cast among.

"But if he can he has a pretty choice  
From an anatomy with little to lose  
Whether he cut my tongue and take my voice  
Or whether it be my round red heart he choose."

It was the neatest knave that ever was seen  
Stepping in perfume from his lady's bower  
Who at this word put in his merry mien  
And fell on Captain Carpenter like a tower.

I would not knock old fellows in the dust  
But there lay Captain Carpenter on his back  
His weapons were the old heart in his bust  
And a blade shook between rotten teeth alack.

The rogue in scarlet and grey soon knew his mind  
He wished to get his trophy and depart  
With gentle apology and touch refined  
He pierced him and produced the Captain's heart.

God's mercy rest on Captain Carpenter now  
I thought him Sirs an honest gentleman  
Citizen husband soldier and scholar enow  
Let jangling kites eat of him if they can.

But God's deep curses follow after those  
That shore him of his goodly nose and ears  
His legs and strong arms at the two elbows  
And eyes that had not watered seventy years.

The curse of hell upon the sleek upstart  
That got the Captain finally on his back  
And took the red red vitals of his heart  
And made the kites to whet their beaks clack clack.

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