Form and Restraint in *John Crowe Ransom's Vision of Community*

*Not less than men, not wholly.*
- Ransom, "Antique Harvesters"

**To my way of thinking, the most profound prose statement of John Crowe Ransom's vision of community is found in his essay "Forms and Citizens," published in *The World's Body* in 1938.** It is generally asserted, with varying degrees of reprehension, that in the years following the publication of *I'll Take My Stand,* Ransom increasingly turned his attention to purely "aesthetic" concerns; the essay "Forms and Citizens" is usually viewed as belonging to Ransom's aesthetic canon. Yet surely the roots of Ransom's aesthetic view of community are found in his essay "Reconstructed But Unregenerate" (and in the introductory "Statement of Principles," also his composition) in *I'll Take My Stand.* It seems appropriate, then, to ask in what Ransom's aesthetic vision of community consists. What are its foundations, its implications, and its end?

**I**

In "Reconstructed But Unregenerate," Ransom characterizes American society as caught in the "eternal flux" dictated by a progressivist doctrine. (3-8)² This "gospel of Progress," he implies, is the pioneering attitude gone wrong, or, perhaps we should say, simply still going, beyond achievement or even cognizance of its original purpose. Ransom uses English society as the model for his exegesis of the pioneering origins of culture. The pioneering stage of an incipient culture, he says, exists for attainment of a specific end; that end is to secure a stable and "transmissible" means of making a living,
to acquire that "honorable peace with nature" which will free future
generations from immersion solely in the practical realm:

The pioneering life is not the normal life, whatever some
Americans may suppose.... European opinion does not make
too much of the intense practical enterprises, but is at pains to
define rather narrowly the practical effort which is prerequisite
to the reflective and aesthetic life.... It is the European inten-
tion to live materially along the inherited line of least resis-
tance, in order to put the surplus of energy into the free life of
the mind. (4-5)

In cultures such as that of England, then, the descendants of the
pioneers enjoy the fruit born of the labors of their "progressivist"
forefathers: the leisure to give themselves to the life of the mind-
the freedom, we might say, to rest in being, and in the contemplation
of being, rather than the continuous struggle to conquer, control,
and direct being. Closely associated with the cessation of an animat-
ing pioneering spirit is the capacity for attachment, for love of home,
of this plot of ground, this house, this community, this particular
time and place. Such attachment, Ransom observes, is not possible
when its object continually changes under the influence of a pro-
gressivist spirit which "thrusts its victims at once into an infinite
series" and pioneers "on principle, or from force of habit, and
without any recollection of what pioneering was for." (8)

Ransom is describing a view of life which does not see economic
pursuits as the all-embracing end of human existence and society.
"The good life depends on leisure," he says, "but leisure depends on
an establishment, and the establishment depends on a prevailing
magnanimity which scorns personal advancement at the expense of
the free activity of the mind." (10) Or, to put it another way, Ransom
is describing an orientation toward human life which, although it
begins with pioneering into the future, does so to enable a resting in
the present, in contemplation of the concrete realities which one
encounters here and now. Economic actions can (and should)
become an art for the people who engage in them; in a traditional
culture, that which was originally a means of living becomes an art
of living." "It is my thesis," Ransom says, that in the ante-bellum 
South "all were committed to a form of leisure, and that their labor 
itself was leisurely." (14) Work, as well as play, was enveloped "with 
a leisure which permitted the activity of intelligence." (12)

The word "leisure" resonates throughout Ransom's essay and 
his introductory "Statement of Principles" in I'll Take My Stand. 
And wherever we discover Ransom writing about leisure, we find 
him discussing love and contemplation and their inextricable inter-
twining with leisure. In reading Ransom, one cannot help being 
reminded of Josef Pieper's essay, "Leisure: The Basis of Culture," in 
which Pieper, surrounded by the unremitting and furious recon-
struction in Europe following the Second World War, argues the 
necessity of leisure and explores its relation to culture. Like Ransom, 
Pieper notes the doctrine of work for work's sake, the commitment 
to progress above all, and he goes on to observe the restlessness and 
inability to contemplate to which such an attitude leads. In a 
stunning reversal of ordinary perception, Pieper sees this ceaseless 
activity which characterizes modern society as motivated not by the 
energy born of love but by precisely its opposite: sloth, understood 
by medieval theologians as the absence of love. 

For love cannot 
exist and cannot motivate action when there is no resting in the 
concrete realities of the present time and place, when persons 
attempt to circumvent an encounter with the present by focusing 
only on the future. One cannot love a non-existent abstraction; love 
requires a concrete existent object.

Likewise, the endless search for entertainment, according to 
Pieper, indicates the inability of modern man to enjoy leisure, for 
genuine leisure is not characterized by a frantic search for diversion 
and multiple stimuli but by the capacity for receptive, responsive, 
loving contemplation of what is. Leisure is not possible without 
contemplation, contemplation is not possible without love, and love 
is not possible without relationship to the concrete realities of a 
particular time and place. For Pieper, as for Ransom, true leisure 
requires that objects be loved for themselves, not for the future use 
which can be made of them.'

According to Ransom, it is science which exemplifies the utili-
tarian approach to the objects of the world-"the world's body." He sees science as an exclusively pragmatic attitude, arising from a utilitarian, not a contemplative attitude toward nature. Science is the foundation of industrialism, which Ransom views as the most recent and insidious form of pioneering-"a program under which men, using the latest scientific paraphernalia, sacrifice comfort, leisure, and the enjoyment of life to win Pyrrhic victories from nature at points of no strategic importance." (15) In his essay, "Classical and Romantic," Ransom describes the non-utilitarian response toward nature in his discussion of "classical" and "romantic" literary works, which, he says, differ in their relation to the pragmatic attitude. When we call a work "romantic," he writes, we imply that it embodies that "rare and simple attitude which we call the love of nature" or the "love of anything for itself," not for the use which can be made of it. The "romantic," then, refers to an aesthetic, not a scientific, orientation toward the world and nature, an attitude in which one contemplates "those infinites of particularity," the "landscapes, the people, the flora, the merest things" in an attitude freed from utilitarian motive.

The perception of, and relationship to, nature is thus different for a progressivist, industrialized society and a traditional society. The pioneers who enable the birth of a culture negotiate their means of living, the satisfaction of their material necessities, with nature. Once these material necessities have been secured, the relationship with nature is one of "mutual respect and amity." (7) The progressivist view, on the other hand, sees nature as an enemy continuously to be battled, conquered, and even brutalized. Nature for the progressivist, the ceaseless pioneer, is an abstraction, but nature for Ransom is this particular plot of ground which is being tilled and with which the tiller is in a relationship of love. A "farmer who is not a mere laborer"-that is, one whose work itself is permeated with a sense of leisure-

identifies himself with a spot of ground, and this ground carries a good deal of meaning; it defines itself for him as nature. He would till it not too hurriedly and not too mechanically to
observe in it the contingency and the infinitude of nature; and so his life acquires its philosophical and even its cosmic consciousness. A man can contemplate and explore, respect and love, an object as substantial as a farm or a native province.

(19–20)

He cannot, as Ransom goes on to say, contemplate or love those abstractions into which industrialism would translate his farm.

It is, for Ransom, precisely attachment to the particular which gives access to the infinite; a contemplative love directed toward a concrete object reaches through it to the transcendent. This is the Agrarian way, and it is also the aesthetic, the poetic way. All poets give witness to the analogical nature of their intuition and creation; among a plethora of texts, Coleridge's description of the primary imagination as "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I am"9 stands out, as does his famous definition of symbol:

...a symbol...is characterized by a translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the special, or of the universal in the general; above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the representative 10

Or one might cite from a fellow Agrarian, Allen Tate, who writes in his essay, "The Symbolic Imagination":

To bring together various meanings at a single moment of action is to exercise what I shall speak of here as the symbolic imagination.... The symbolic imagination conducts an action through analogy, of the human to the divine, of the natural to the supernatural, of the low to the high, of time to eternity.... Shall we call this the Poetic Way? It is at any rate the way of the poet, who has got to do his work with the body of this world, whatever that body may look like to him, in his time and
place—the whirling atoms, the body of a beautiful woman, or a deformed body, or the body of Christ, or even the body of this death. If the poet is able to put into this moving body, or to find in it, a coherent chain of analogies, he will inform an intuitive act with symbolism; his will be in one degree or another the symbolic imagination."

The poetic or aesthetic path is thus the way of incarnation—the spirit made flesh, the infinite made finite—and the incarnate way is the human way, the fully human way for men who want to be "Not less than men, not wholly." Literary critics also recognize in this way the comic pattern; it is the choice of Ishmael rather than that of Ahab, the choice of "earthly felicities" rather than the endless tragic quest for an abstract answer to the meaning of life, its injustices, and its sufferings. The older Ishmael of Melville's *Moby Dick*, the narrator who has been educated by his observation of Ahab, says he has perceived,

by many prolonged, repeated experiences,...that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country....

It is not so for Ahab, for whom "even the highest earthly felicities ever have a certain unsignifying pettiness lurking in them." The comic accepts and celebrates the incarnate nature and finitude of human existence and does not attempt to circumvent all the concrete, temporal, definite realities of life to reach the infinite and transcendent. The comic protagonist accepts his presence in a particular time and place; he goes through the world rather than around it. His imagination is analogical; like Ransom's farmer, he would till his spot of ground not too hurriedly and not too mechanically to observe in it the contingency and the infinitude of nature; and so his life acquires its philosophical and even its cosmic consciousness."

In *The Southern Critics*, Louise Cowan has noted that Ransom,
in particular among the Fugitive-Agrarians, manifests a comic vision. Cowan writes that the insights of Ransom, Donald Davidson, and Allen Tate were all embodied in the symbol of the land, which "is for them that body of the world which brings into concentration the entire meaning of life." However, she continues, the three Fugitive-Agrarians viewed their "central symbol" of the land (and its loss) "from different angles," Davidson's view being "lyric and heroic," concerned with regaining and possessing the homeland, and Tate's view tragic, focusing on a loss which in its universal resonance is ultimately the loss of the unfallen Edenic or "garden" state of man. Cowan writes that, on the other hand, Ransom's perspective "is essentially comic":

Rueful, wry, ironic, he "endures," and, even more, accepts. The land which he loves has been so long in disorder that the right hierarchy can hardly be hoped for; it must be celebrated by the remnant in little "pockets of culture." ... Good manners, courtesy, rituals are all important because man is cut off from the garden and must make his way in a world of desperate difficulties. But there is sentiment and devotion, and the world's body is inexhaustibly interesting.

II
Ransom's vision-aesthetic, poetic, incarnate, comic-is essentially a religious vision, requiring, as it does, that receptivity of spirit which is necessary for the loving contemplation of reality. Without such an openness to being, man's encounter with the infinite through the body of his own particular, finite world cannot occur. Cowan sees Ransom as united with the other Fugitive-Agrarians in his insistence on the necessity of "submission to the reality outside the mind" when she writes in the conclusion of The Fugitive Group:

[The Fugitive-Agrarians] had found that their true task was not the creation of an ideal world but the discovery of a real one, independent of their own thinking; they had learned that a genuine culture, whatever its moral flaws, is an analogue of something nobler toward which the human spirit aspires but which it can grasp only through submission to the actual.
Cowan records and analyzes a portion of Ransom's correspondence with Tate which points to both the religious and universal elements of Ransom's thought. Tate had written a review of Ransom's *Two Gentlemen in Bonds*, in which he asserted that two attitudes are "basic to Ransom's poetry": "'rationalism' and `noble oblige.'" Tate wrote that by "rationalism" he meant not rationalism in a narrow philosophic sense but "a tradition lying at the very core of the old Southern order," which was part of an older "'humane tradition.'" One infers from Tate's phrasing that he had in mind something more like natural law-ratio or reason imprinted in the heart. In his response to Tate's review, Ransom said he thought Tate's identification of the two attitudes as "cues" to his poetry was quite valid, further commenting, "'I rather like, too, the more synthetic concept of the Old South under which you put them.'" However, he added, "'...I don't write consciously as a Southerner or a non-Southerner.'" Shortly thereafter, in another letter to Tate, Ransom expanded, as Cowan says, "on the subject of his poetry's not being essentially Southern":

> You dome the honor to let me be a mouthpiece for a very noble historic culture. But this is the accidental and perhaps the questionable feature of your interpretation, and certainly the less important feature. What is important in your witness was that my stuff presents the dualistic philosophy of an assertive element versus an element of withdrawal and Respect.... If you are right, I am happy-I've put unconsciously into my creative work the philosophy which independently I have argued out discursively.

"What Ransom was saying here," Cowan writes, is that the inner content of his poetry derives not from any period of history but from the very core of human existence, which, as he made clear a few years later in his *God Without Thunder*, is shaken by the two antithetical attitudes: the scientific and philosophic desire to possess and control and the religious and aesthetic urge to contemplate and love.
That with which Ransom and the other Agrarians concerned themselves in *I'll Take My Stand* was indeed both religious and universal. The issue the Agrarians raised was not only a question of the demise of Southern culture; it was an exploration of the nature of man and human community and of the future of each. As Cowan writes in *The Southern Critics*:

When one rereads the Agrarian symposium in the light of subsequent events it is clear that the object of attack was secularism with its redefinition of man, rather than mere technology. What was being defended, likewise, rather than agrarianism *per se* was the traditional image of man as repository of the pieties that gave rise to the Western communal virtues, still available, to some degree at least, in the South.

As Ransom was to write later in "Forms and Citizens," the question was really whether man was to be a predator upon reality or a contemplator of it.

**III**

In "Forms and Citizens," Ransom expands on his anti-utilitarian theme in his contemplation of the aesthetic forms handed down by tradition, the distinguishing characteristic of which is precisely "the remarkable fact that they do not serve the principle of utility." (29) Unlike economic forms, they are not "recipes of maximum efficiency, short routes to `success'"; they are, in fact, not "a help but if anything a hindrance to direct action," because they are "a technique of restraint, not of efficiency." (30-31) Aesthetic forms do not butter our bread, and they delay the eating of it. They stand between the individual and his natural object and impose a check upon his action.... To the concept of direct action the old society-the directed and hierarchical one-opposed the concept of aesthetic experience, as a true opposite, and checked the one in order to induce the other. (31)

The fact that aesthetic forms, when they are manifested as manners and religion, are so commonly regarded as "empty" forms
and ceremonies" in modern society indicates that cognizance of their value and purpose has been lost. Their purpose was to foster that restraint, that order of the heart, which all great literary epics reveal as necessary to the building of community; their value lay in disciplining men and women not to regard all persons and things as objects to be appropriated instantly for their own use and gratification. The value of aesthetic forms as techniques of restraint ultimately lay in their ability to transform *eros* into *caritas*, desire for possession into selfless love. Ransom had implied in "Reconstructed But Unregenerate" that the only way to engage any object properly is to love it. In "Forms and Citizens" he delineates this love as the delicate equilibrium of a contemplative charity rather than the devouring appropriation of an unbridled *eros*. The aesthetic forms of rite and ritual ultimately taught this highest of communal values, or perhaps one should say, they taught the value necessary for living in the highest form of community.

Ransom uses courtship and mourning rituals to elaborate upon aesthetic forms as techniques of restraint. A code of manners dictates that a man desiring a woman will not "seize her as quickly as possible" but will

approach her with ceremony, and pay her a fastidious courtship. We conclude not that the desire is abandoned, but that it will take a circuitous road and become a romance.... [The] woman, contemplated in this manner under restraint, becomes a person and an aesthetic object; therefore a richer object. (33)

The "natural man," Ransom writes, "is a predatory creature to whom every object is an object of prey and the real or individual object cannot occur." Without restraint to curb the predatory instincts of the natural man, contemplation cannot occur, and without contemplation, the woman cannot become a "real or individual object." Only the "social man," submitting to the code of manners or "restraint of convention,"

comes to respect the object and to see it unfold at last its
individuality; which, if we must define it, is its capacity to furnish us with an infinite variety of innocent experience; that is, it is a source, from which so many charming experiences have already flowed, and a promise, a possibility of future experiences beyond all prediction. (34)

Eros is, not abandoned, but transformed into the contemplative charity which allows the object of desire to be and to unfold its being rather than being used and consumed with no regard to its individual ontological dignity and significance.

The religious rites and rituals which encompass death, Ransom says, similarly provide the mourner a means of contemplative detachment from that which otherwise might overcome him with its weight of sorrow. This communal action surrounds his individual grief and breaks "his preoccupation with the deadness of the body...by his participation in the pageantry" and elaborates "his bleak situation...with such rich detail that it becomes massive, substantial, and sufficient." (35)

Using these examples of courtship and mourning rituals in "Forms and Citizens," Ransom thus expands upon the fallacy of regarding all human experience under an economic or pragmatic aegis. The question is, he says, whether "efficient animality" or sufficient rationalization, "taking precedence at every point over the imperative of manners, of religion, and of the arts, will not lead to perfect misery." (38) Knowledge of the use to which an object can be put is not knowledge of the object at all; it is knowledge which ends in the consumption of the object; it neither locates man in the fullness of present reality nor transcends it. "The object of a proper society," Ransom says, is not to enhance the progress of utility but "to instruct its members how to transform instinctive experience into aesthetic experience" and aesthetic knowledge. (42) For Ransom, the proper approach to life, as well as to the creation and contemplation of art, is the aesthetic approach, the way of contemplation

when I am impelled neither to lay hands on the object immediately, nor to ticket it for tomorrow's outrage, but am in
such a marvellous state of innocence that I would know it for its own sake, and conceive it as having its own existence; this is the knowledge, or it ought to be, which Schopenhauer praised as "knowledge without desire." The features which the object discloses then are not those which have their meaning for a science, for a set of practical values. They are those which render the body of the object, and constitute a knowledge so radical that the scientist as a scientist can scarcely understand it, and puzzles to see it rendered, richly and wastefully, in the poem, or the painting. The knowledge attained there, and recorded, is a new kind of knowledge, the world in which it is set is a new world. (45)

IV

Is the value of Ransom's aesthetic vision of community apparent? Surely the idea of unleashed predatory instinct is repugnant; we cannot imagine a community of predators because we see that it is not a community at all. To exist regarding all other persons and things as objects to be used rather than contemplated and loved is to be less than human. To acknowledge desire and to transform it into charity is a difficult task, but it is the human task; to do so is to achieve and maintain the delicate balance which Ransom depicts in his poem, "The Equilibrists," a meditation on the decision against appropriation by a pair of human lovers.

In "The Equilibrists," a spectator-we discover who he is at the end of the poem-meditates on the predicament of a man and woman drawn together by desire but forbidden to be united by honor. The man remembers her, remembers her riches-"her long white arms and milky skin, her jacinth, and myrrh, and ivory"-as he travels alone in a greyness of crowd. (85) He remembers her passion-"the heat that flamed upon the kiss"-but he remembers also the "cold words" of "Honor, Honor" which, like "grey doves," "came down spiral from [her] head" and "unsaid" the speech of her eyes as well as her body, on which "The lilies grew, beseeching him to take, / If he would pluck and wear them, bruise and break":

"The Equilibrists," a meditation on the decision against appropriation by a pair of human lovers.
Importunate her doves. Too pure, too wise,
Clambering on his shoulder, saying, Arise,
Leave me now, and never let us meet,
Eternal distance now command thy feet.
Predicament indeed, which thus discovers
Honor among thieves, Honor between lovers.
0 such a little word is Honor, they feel!
But the grey word is between them cold as steel. (85)

The spectator witnesses to the couple's slow achievement of "their torture of equilibrium," which, though they "Dreadfully had forsworn each other," bound them "rigid as two painful stars," not forgetting and burning "with fierce love always to come near," while "honor beat them back and kept them clear." (85-86) Seeing their predicament, the spectator's first response is anger at the "ruination" of these "strict lovers"; what fulfillment of desire have they spurned? But reflection upon "those gibbeted and brave" brings him to a different insight as he contemplates the end of the lovers' path, that "kinder saeculum" which "begins with Death," in which the lovers can "ascend to Heaven and bodiless dwell" rather than take their "bodies honorless to Hell," where the "Great lovers lie,"

... the stubborn ones
Infatuate of the flesh upon the bones;
Stuprate, they rend each other when they kiss,
The pieces kiss again, no end to this. (86)

And then, as he watches the lovers "spinning, orbited nice," the spectator sees that their choice of honor has generated a splendor beyond that of their passion: "Their flames were not more radiant than their ice." (86) It is this insight which enables and qualifies the spectator to become their gravedigger and eulogist, as he fashions their tomb and composes the epitaph which "memorize[s] their doom":

Equilibrists lie here; stranger, tread light;
Close, but untouching in each other's sight;
Mouldered the lips and ashy the tall skull.
Let them lie perilous and beautiful. (86)

Thus, in his tale of two lovers and their spectator Ransom embodies his vision of the communal action of desire and restraint in microcosmic form. It is perhaps not too great a leap to see the spectator as a cultural critic, giving voice to his awareness of the fragility and beauty of community which transcends predation and is transformed into charity and knowledge. Such a transformation is, then, the telos of Ransom's aesthetic vision of community: contemplation, love, and knowledge without appropriation, destruction, and use—the only appropriate relationship among free, autonomous human persons who enter existence at a particular time and place and journey into eternity.

Judith Stewart Shank
College of Saint Thomas More

NOTES


5. See also Pieper's essay, "The Philosophical Act," included in Leisure: The Basis of Culture.

6. Ransom's use of the word "science" to designate the utilitarian attitude toward the world has been criticized or glossed by his
commentators. See, e.g., Louise Cowan's gloss on Ransom's terminology in *The Southern Critics* (Irving: University of Dallas Press, 1972): "...a tendency of society to destroy itself through what Ransom chooses to call 'science'-actually a death drive that has the appearance of a life force." (24) If by "science" one means one of the fundamental modes of knowledge of reality—in other words, a discipline—then "technology" or "scientism" seem words more suited to Ransom's meaning. The testimony of scientists—physicists in particular—bears witness to the contemplative nature of their discipline, in the practice of which an aspect of reality is grasped in a moment of insight and then given rational, communicable form. Like any true discipline, the foundation of genuine science lies in the mind's immediate contact with reality through its power of receptive contemplation; *qua* discipline, science is not concerned with utility but with insight. The uses in which the insights of scientists are employed after their discovery are another matter. On insight as the foundation of science and the role of receptive contemplation in scientific intuition, see Donald Cowan's essays, "Scientific Discovery and Gratitude" and "The Three Moments of Learning," in *Unbinding Prometheus: Education for the Coming Age* (Dallas: Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1988); but see also, in the same work, the essays, "The Technological Imagination" and "The New Technology and the Polis," in which Cowan proposes that we need to alter somewhat our view of technology.


8. Ibid., 127. "Classical" art, according to Ransom, also comments upon science, since it reflects the degree to which science attains its ends.


26. *cf.* Malvasi: "To know an object aesthetically was to know it in all its characteristic particularity as an individual thing. To know an object scientifically was to know it in its abstract universality as a categorical idea, which, for Ransom, meant not to know it at all." From Mark G. Malvasi, *The Unregenerate South: The Agrarian Thought of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 25.