

JOHN CROWE RANSOM "CRITICISM AS PURE SPECULATION" (1941)

Ransom, John Crowe. "Criticism as Pure Speculation." Critical Theory Since Plato. Ed. Hazard Adams. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971. 874-883.

Ransom coined the term 'new criticism' (the title of his first book was The New Criticism). He is opposed to audience-oriented, author-oriented, and mimetic approaches to criticism, that is, to what he describes as *affective* and *psychologistic* theories of poetry such as those offered by I. A. Richards. Ransom does not deny that poems inspire emotions but advises that precisely because "feelings are grossly inarticulate if we try to abstract them" (454), we must "attend to the poetic object and let the feelings take care of themselves" (454). Ransom opposes, too, what he calls *moralistic* views of poetry (the most ancient view which goes all the way back to Plato, Horace, Sidney, etc.) which is one practised, according to Ransom, by "men with moral axes to grind" (455). There are two such camps of critics who both practice, albeit from very different perspectives, moralistic criticism: the Neo-Humanists and the Marxists. Both are guilty of seeking, in Ransom's view, to "isolate and discuss the 'ideology' or theme or paraphrase of the poem and not the poem itself" (456). That is, both camps are largely interested in what a poem is about (content), how that content got to be there in the poem (hence, an interest in the author's life and views) and/or its effect upon its audience, but not in its form or structure. The Marxists, in particular, have a tendency to reduce a poem to its socio-economic determinants by studying the impact of its socio-historical context upon it.

In defence of the *objective* approach which he is suggesting, Ransom argues that an 'Art for Art's sake' approach "asserts an autonomy for art" (457) that allows art "to be itself" (457) and not be reducible to something other than art (moral advice, economics, feelings, etc.). The 'objective' critic is involved, ideally speaking, in what is essentially a tautological exercise, that is, (s)he seeks to trace what the poem is about (content) and how it is put together (form) (the two are inseparable), rather than to merely paraphrase it. To this end, Ransom advocates a "structural understanding of poetry" (455), what he describes a little later as "intrinsic" (463) as opposed to 'extrinsic' criticism. In other words, a poem is to be studied in and of itself and not in relation to everything outside it.

For purposes of analysis, Ransom suggests, a poem may be divided into two parts:

- a "central logic or situation or 'paraphrasable core'" (455) / an "ostensible substance" (459) / "logical structure" (462). By 'logical core,' Ransom means what we normally call the 'meaning' of the poem, that is, what the poem is basically about. Such a paraphrasable 'core' to the poem might include, for example, "an ethical situation, a passion, a train of thought, a flower or landscape, a thing" [459]).
- a "context of lively local details" (455) / "poetic increment" (459) / "local texture" (462). Ransom characterises 'local texture' as "excursions into particularity" (460) which give a "sense of the real density and contingency of the world" (460). Ransom is referring here to the poem's stylistic features, i.e. the diction (the choice of imagery, etc.), metre, and rhyme which are not merely so much polyfilla or padding designed to fill out a poem (ornate, superficial decorations, as it were). Rather, they cannot be ignored precisely because local texture (e.g. a particular choice of metaphor) significantly inflects, even though almost always subtly, the meaning of the poem (what he calls the 'logical core').

Form is, therefore, not merely a vehicle for content: form and content are, rather, inseparable from each other, two sides of the same coin. He argues that the "house" (462) is a useful "trope under which to construe the poem" (462): a poem is a

logical structure having a *local texture*. These terms . . . are architectural. The

walls of my room are obviously structural; the beams and boards have a function; so does the plaster, which is the visible aspect of the final wall. The plaster might have remained naked, aspiring to no character, and purely functional. But actually it has been painted, receiving colour; or it has been papered, receiving colour and design, though these have no structural value; and perhaps it has been hung with tapestry, or with paintings, for 'decoration.' The paint, the paper, the tapestry are texture. It is logically unrelated to structure. (462)

Ransom sums up his position as follows: the "intent of the good critic becomes therefore to examine and define the poem with respect to its [logical] structure and its [local] texture" (462). Ransom's point is simply that for too long critics have focussed upon the logical substance or paraphrasable core of the poem to the exclusion of the local detail.

Ransom's argument, in short, is that poetry is an organic unity of theme (logical core) and form (local texture). For Ransom, a poem consists simultaneously of a universally recognisable idea, theme, situation or object, on the one hand, and, on the other, the "local development of detail" (461). These two constituents are inextricably linked by a relationship which he terms "accretion" (461) as a result of which neither ought to be ignored in favour of the other.