

Elegance and Poetic Economy in John Crowe Ransom and F. T. Prince*

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In this essay I take up the notion of poetic elegance as a specific instance of the general idea of poetic economy. The kind of elegance I have in mind mediates between elliptical and redundant uses of language by combining urbanity of tone with a style that is not afraid of cultivating mannerisms. The result in the two cases I cite as illustrations—John Crowe Ransom (1888-1974) and F. T. Prince (1912-2003)—is a type of personalized elegance that manages to appear elliptical while remaining committed to a principle of stylistic redundancy.¹

In mathematics, science, and engineering, elegance refers to the directness and simplicity of the solution to a complex problem.² In linguistics, elegance refers to the capacity to explain the largest set of linguistic phenomena with the fewest rules.³ In architecture, elegance signifies a balance between grace, economy, and strength. In poetic writing, elegance is mediated as achieved style, though hardly anything so obvious to the understanding could be more difficult to realize in practice. In classical rhetoric, *elegantia* constitutes one of the three qualities of style (along with *compositio* and *dignitas*) from at least as far back as the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (c. 90 BCE).⁴ A surplus of affect, and a style degenerates into eccentricity; too little individuation, and a style sinks into anonymity. A balance between the extremes of the stylized and the prosaic is hard to find, and even harder to sustain. When that balance is accomplished with flair and panache, we have elegance; when it combines ellipses of thought and feeling with redundancy of words and images, we have poets like Ransom

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and Prince: authors whose appeal might remain confined to a minority among readers of poetry, but who deserve the kind of appreciation and attention devoted ordinarily to more well-established reputations.

Ransom is known less as a poet than through his association with American New Criticism, the *Fugitive* group of writers from the American South, the Agrarian Movement, also of the South, and his editing of *The Kenyon Review*.⁵ Prince, who was born in South Africa, but lived most of his adult life in England, is better known for his scholarly work on Milton and Shakespeare.⁶ Each has suffered the fate described by John Ashbery as being “somewhat known and a little read, if only so that he may be all the more quickly dismissed without the slightest twinge of conscience” (“F. T. Prince” 33).⁷

I aim to show how the idea of poetic economy finds a variety of elegant materializations in their best poems through a commensuration of lexical and syntactic means with semantic ends. The two poetic styles are by no means similar. Nor does syntax or diction play a similar function in their poems. In one respect Ransom is more consistent than Prince: he cultivates a style that depends heavily on seemingly archaic words and motifs; and his syntax helps reinforce the desire to establish a distinctive poetic persona through style. In Prince, each poem creates its own, unique stylistic microcosm. That makes it difficult to infer a singular stylist behind an almost bewildering variety of tones, prosodic forms, and variations in syntax and diction. He voices a host of implied speakers, whereas Ransom voices versions of himself, each indicative of how he would like to present a singular persona to his readers. The point of bringing them together is to indicate the wide scope for stylistic choices in the management of word-choice and word-order, punctuation, pauses and silences, the rhetorical energies of poetic form and meter, and the ability to use tropes and figures to turn language to unexpected but fascinating and insightful ends.

In Prince, elegance of poetic writing is an effect to be realized in acts of reading that are attentive to how stylizations can inflect meaning. In Ransom, it is a rather more self-conscious characterization of a

poetic persona that stands in for the poet, giving scope to explore the interface between stylizations and what I have described as types of commensuration. The interface is manifest either as a form of lexical and syntactic redundancy or as forms of ellipsis. If redundancy is a mode of profusion, ellipsis is its converse: a mode of withholding. While both are common in ordinary speech, ellipsis functions more like short-hand (a way of saying things economically, taking what is omitted for granted, or implying that it can be inferred from the context); whereas, redundancy is often a matter of inefficient and superfluous communication. Redundancy evokes pejorative connotations in ordinary language-use, whereas ellipsis does so only when taken to the point where it seriously compromises the communicative intent. Neither functions quite the same way in poetry.

Redundancy in poetry raises the question of efficacy, since it is part of an intention. One might want to be deliberately redundant in ordinary language-use as well, but such cases are rare. In the context of poetry, what might be the ends that justify a profusion of means? Ellipses raise a related but different question: what does withholding accomplish that might not be managed by words?

Redundancy and ellipsis are linked: each, in its way, signifies a type of situation in which the idea of "more than might be expected" or "less than what might be expected" does not work as in ordinary speech. In the kind of poetic elegance I wish to identify, the "more" and the "less" (each in its unique way) produce new insights and nuances. Likewise, in writing that I here describe as elegant, the effect of the "more" is transmuted into the "just right." In ellipsis, too, when used elegantly, the "less" can be "just right." That this should be possible violates conventional expectations of adequacy in expression and communication: the supposition that what is apt in relation to the norm of communicative situations is just the right words for what is to be said, neither less, nor more (rather like Swift's definition of good style as "Proper Words in proper Places," 65).⁸ In that sense, elegant forms of redundancy and ellipsis work as paradoxes: they turn ordinary ideas of commensuration upside down.

Numerous twentieth century writers and critics have agreed with Ezra Pound that “good poetry should be at least as well written as good prose” (345). Nevertheless, the notion that good poetic style, like good prose, or like good conversation between people of civility and sense, could share in the quality of elegance, does not have currency in contemporary literary practice. When A. E. Housman’s *The Name and Nature of Poetry* (1933) extols the virtues of eighteenth-century prose in comparison to the “cumbrous and decorated and self-admiring prose of a Milton or a Jeremy Taylor” (18), it does so through the metaphor of “athletic prose.” Housman’s idea of athleticism, and its implied notion of masculinity, might well consign the idea of elegance to the realms of the feminine, alongside narcissism, ennui, indolence, preciousness, and decadence.

All the more reason therefore to revive the idea of elegance as one among several virtues desirable in poetry, on the evidence of two fine poets different from each other in the way they fashioned styles. The paradox subsidized by their deployment of style is no different from that referred to by Prince when he writes of Milton’s *Comus* that it is a poem at once “tumultuous but ordered” (Milton 150). He might have been speaking of his own early poem from the 1930s, “An Epistle to a Patron,” first published in *The Criterion* (January 1936) with the title “Letter to a Patron,” which begins:

My lord, hearing lately of your opulence in promises and your house
 Busy with parasites,⁹ of your hands full of favours, your statutes Ad-
 mirable as music, and no fear of your arms not prospering, I have Con-
 sidered how to serve you and breed from my talents
 These few secrets which I shall make plain
 To your intelligent glory.
 (*Collected Poems* 13)

Geoffrey Hill points out that, when it first appeared, the poem was accompanied by a note that was removed from subsequent editions: “the rather Poundian ‘Note’ placed after the text in the *Criterion* version. What Davie treats as inadvertently loose writing reads: ‘Letter from Leonardo da Vinci to Ludovico il Moro, c.1483. / Leon Battista Alberti, *De Re Aedificatoria*. / Alberti and Sigismundo Malatesta of

Rimini. / Luciano Luarana and Federigo de Montefeltro of Urbino. / Michelozzo and Cosimo de Medici'" (Hill 28). The kind of Renaissance patronage Prince evidently had in mind combined enormous power that could be at once both generous and capricious. The omission of the original epigraph from subsequent editions suggests that he preferred in later years to bury the historical allusion rather than wear it openly on his sleeve. The decision came at a cost: modern readers are not likely to pick up on the wealth of historical detail implicit in the original epigraph.¹⁰

Donald Davie cites the opening pages of "An Epistle" admiringly in *Articulate Energy* (1955), only to remark: "And so this splendid poem goes on. There is no reason why it should ever stop" (93). For him, the "sounded rhythm of that poem is very loose indeed" (32). The alternate view, which I would propose, is that Prince dramatizes a persona who appears verbose, but only as a semblance of looseness which is studied and elegant in its dramatic mimesis of sensibility. What Davie treats as inadvertently loose writing could be read instead as purposely so.

In a 2002 commemorative essay on Prince, one of his publishers, Anthony Rudolf, reported that Prince reacted to Davie's reading with the claim that the poem does have "a beginning, middle and end" (Rudolf 26). I am inclined to agree. I regard the poem's effect of redundancy as possessing an order in its apparent disorder: a supplicant both needy and cheeky whose begging letter underlines the logic, amidst all its verbal extravagance, that the greatness of a patron (his "intelligent glory") resides in the discernment he might apply to supporting dependent artists. The seemingly headlong rush of encomium, flattery, arrogance, and wheedling that takes up the ninety sprawling lines of the poem is held in place by an implied or tacit emphasis: the power to bestow patronage is enhanced by the merit of the supplication. The overarching ellipsis concealed in the poem's semblance of pell-mell dishevelment has its beginning, middle, and end: I can serve thus and thus ... but only if you save me from the abject poverty that can become the lot of the unsponsored artist ...

and then you shall be rendered service that will be apt to your merits. The overall logic of the plea is rather like the syllogism of Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," which hinges on the grammar of: if we had time ... but since we don't ... therefore let us....

One could say of the lavish yet subtly dissonant aspects of "An Epistle" what Prince wrote of the young Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, that the poem represents "the conflict between desire and its object, between mortal flesh and immortal, yet helpless, passion" (*Shakespeare* 9), or what he says of *The Rape of Lucrece*, that here the author works with a handicap, "if we can call exuberant genius a handicap" (*Shakespeare* 13). Consider the casual sweep of the very beginning:

My lord, hearing lately of your opulence in promises and your house
Busy with parasites [...]

To tell a potential patron that his house is full of parasites is a high-risk enterprise: if it works as a form of forthright cheekiness, the patron might well think twice before rejecting this supplicant; but if it were to backfire, that would be the end of all hopes of winning commissions through mixing honesty with hyperbole.

Curiously enough, other observations by Prince about Shakespeare's poem are almost equally applicable to "An Epistle." For example, that it is "a brilliant, uneasy, luxuriant work, and its greatest beauties can hardly compensate for its obvious faults. Some of these faults lie in exaggerated and superfluous detail" (*Shakespeare* 15). The redundancy Prince discovers in Shakespeare's poem is analogous to the linguistic surplus with which he endows his artist-suppliant:

[...] I know
What wood to cut by what moon in what weather
Of your sea-winds, your hill-wind: therefore tyrant, let me learn
Your high-ways, ways of sandstone, roads of the oakleaf, and your sea-
ways.

(*Collected Poems* 14)

Consider the use of the word "tyrant" in the specific context of what is otherwise respectful and flattering to the point of obsequiousness. The

etymology might well be relevant (as suggested by Robert Crosman when the paper was presented at a *Connotations* Symposium).¹¹ One has to invoke more than irony to account for its role in the poem. Why should the artist-suppliant tell his potential patron the exact opposite of what any person in his situation might want to say? Rather than think that the poet characterizes his artist-suppliant as extravagantly rash or prone to error, I propose that we think of such instances as a form of condensed ellipsis which inverts the kind of claim made in a reference book on stylistics, which says that “[e]llipsis is possible in normal discourse because of the latter’s redundancy or surplus and predictability of meaning” (Wales 139). Prince’s speaker uses “tyrant” elliptically. He elides the explanation for why he does so, but the context suggests what that could be. Since it remains at the level of implication, it remains ambiguous between several interpretive possibilities. In choosing one of these possibilities,¹² I would like us to keep in mind a general caveat offered by Prince in the context of interpretation: “The interpretation of works of art can never be a matter of rational or scientific demonstration, however much knowledge or method we may need on our way; to arrive at some understanding we need rather to draw upon the whole of our being, and have a feeling for reality which cannot be taken for granted” (*Shakespeare* 22).

Prince invites readers to wonder if his artist-suppliant risks appearing foolish and self-destructive for a reason. The aim could be to make a complex point using syntactic redundancy to smuggle in a pungent ellipsis. The artist submits his flattery to the intended patron in a way that might seem like an insult but invites reading as a paradox. Its resolution, condensed to the point of elision, needs an elaborate explanation which, it is implied, the patron will be intelligent enough to understand without the need to have it spelt out in actual words: that “tyrant” might even be apt in a context where the power and caprice of patronage is involved. The poem, as Geoffrey Hill observes, is meant to be read as circling “around an unshifting fulcrum which is the power of patronage, which in turn is worldly power” (28-29). Drawing attention to uncanny parallels between Prince’s discussion of

Milton verse style, and the influence on it of Italian poets like Tasso and della Casa, Hill provides a very perceptive insight into the style of Prince's first volume: "mannered statements" that "are simultaneously instances of cloaked, equivocal speech and of naked revelation" (Hill 29).¹³

Even in the act of receiving the proffered flattery, the patron is being urged to recognize that patronage is a tyrannically compelling system: it has power to enforce from supplicants the kind of flattery that the artist here offers with tongue-in-cheek hyperbole. He does so trusting that his patron will accept the compliments while recognizing the inequity of a system that requires and elicits such encomia. It is as though the ellipsis surrounding the word "tyrant" were claiming silently: "the patronage system of which you and I are a part, which forces me to play the role of supplicant, also forces you to play the role of the one who exacts praise, and though we are both victims of a tyranny, we play our parts adeptly, so we may as well admit between ourselves that my naming you as tyrant merely transfers the agency of the system to its principal beneficiary, you in your role of patron." This reading of the use of "tyrant" in the poem is meant to support the kind of general claim made by a linguist such as Robert J. Stainton that even single "words (as opposed to sentences) can be used to state complete thoughts" (4).¹⁴

The single word "tyrant," as used by Prince's speaker, in his context, might bring some of us to the realm of what we recognize after Paul Grice as "implicature," which entails a situation in which we have reason to believe that "what a *speaker* means differs from what the *sentence* used by the speaker means" (Davis). Whether in fictional speech acts or real, our interpretations of implicature are, as Kent Bach reminds us, "presumptions made in the course of the strategic inference involved in communication" (155). "Tyrant," we infer, is intended by Prince to be read as deliberately, and not as an error, on the part of his speaker. In context, its seeming inappropriateness invites conjecture, even if we take on board that it might be an arch allusion to the Greek etymology lurking behind the more straightforwardly

pejorative Latin source for the word. Grice associates his “Cooperative Principle” with being informative, truthful, perspicuous, and otherwise appropriate: “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (“Logic and Conversation” 45). This is where the literary use of language parts company with the non-literary uses that Grice has in mind. Our fictive speaker may well be truthful, and he is certainly informative, but he is hardly either appropriate (*aptum*) or quite beautiful (*pulchrum*), as the rhetorical tradition from Cicero to St Augustine formulated the terms of reference for their ideal of rhetorical efficacy.¹⁵

This is where I would like to introduce a specifically nuanced idea of elegance into the analysis: a form of daring economy, where a decisive and risky signification is handled with deftness; an effect so glancing that it might almost pass attention, but grows in import once noticed for what it is, a piece of calculated effrontery. Ordinarily, to say *other than* (and the exact opposite of) what might be apt or tactful can be a form of insensitive rudeness, irony, or sarcasm; but here it is none of those affects. Nor does it read more plausibly as a Freudian slip; an inadvertent blurting out of what is felt but ordinarily repressed. It is more like an invitation asking to be read for a sense that is ordinarily concealed, but here willingly declared. The dramatic point of the difference between what is said and what is implicated is that the speaker hopes to persuade patronage—not *despite*, but—*because* of this piece of effrontery. To have created that dramatic plausibility is elegant. The redundancy in Prince’s poem is syntactic. It grows through apposition. Phrase piled upon phrase, each a partial duplicate and subtle variant of the next. The parallelism multiplies instantiations of what the artist can do for his patron; but it conceals an ellipsis that runs against the weave of the redundancy: underlining the mutual dependency between patrons and artists would be unremembered by posterity if not for the humble artists they patronize (in both senses).

In Ransom, redundancy is a matter of diction and deliberate archaisms, and ellipsis a matter of admonitory implications kept latent or subliminal. Here, for example, is the beginning of “Blue Girls”:

Twirling your blue skirts, travelling the sward
Under the towers of your seminary,
Go listen to your teachers old and contrary
Without believing a word.
(*Selected Poems* 11)

New wine in old bottles, new teeth to old saws: the mix of *carpe diem* and *memento mori* themes is given a playful twist through the mischief played by the poet with diction and rhyme. The archaic “sward,” its less than full rhyme with “word” (even if uttered with a Southern intonation, as in Ransom’s audio recording of the poem), the jaunty suggestion that skirts could be twirled, the subversive idea that old teachers are merely contrary and can be listened to but safely ignored, all combine to create an effect that mixes light urbanity of tone with a style that seems to relish its own mannered qualities. The danger is self-evident: the manner can slip into the arch or the coy, relish can become off-putting when it begins to feel like self-regard. The gain is just as obvious: a style that is unmistakable, a poetic voice and identity that is distinctive and Southern in its elaborate courtesies, its old-world archaisms, and its deliberate contrariness. There is no great surprise in being told by Ransom that he prefers “rich obscure poetry” to “thin pure poetry” (*The World’s Body* 61).

The poem also emblemizes something far more elliptically regional and culturally specific. In 1930, Ransom contributed the lead essay to a compilation in which a dozen representatives of the American South provided a set of cultural and ideological self-representations. There, a chip-on-his-shoulder Ransom describes his stance as that of a “reconstructed but unregenerate” Southerner, who hopes that he will not be so entirely taken for granted (presumably by readers of the North, in this continued civil war of the mind) that people will fail to notice that his style of reproach “might bear a barb

and inflict a sting" ("Reconstructed" 1). The sting in this case concerns the gently caustic observation that Northerners "sometime send their daughters to the Southern seminaries," but not their sons, because, while they want their sons to be "sternly educated in the principles of progress at progressive institutions of learning," there is little expected of young women beyond "virtue and the domestic duties," for which the South serves its purpose, given that the North attributes "a sort of glamour to the Southern life" ("Reconstructed" 2).

From this perspective, Ransom's poem is elliptical. The "blue girls" need expect to learn nothing from the seminaries of the South, and the old teachers there, if we go by the prejudice of their own fathers. But the poet would have them know, *sotto voce*, that the poet is being ironical rather than cynical. The persona Ransom so studiously cultivates, "a gentleman in a dustcoat" (*Selected Poems* 9), a type of the courteous old-world Southerner "who persists his regard for a certain terrain, a certain history, and a certain inherited way of living" ("Reconstructed" 1), sticks with unregenerate pride and a "fierce devotion" ("Reconstructed" 2) to a cause which others are too readily wont to believe has long since become a lost cause: the values of the Southern way of life. In this poetry, we have elegance combined with grieving and a self-consciousness that is only superficially self-effacing, because its urbane manner conceals a hurt pride that can sting: this ellipsis affects the entire poem with a sense of its own belatedness of posture.

Consider the third stanza:

Practise your beauty, blue girls, before it fail;
And I will cry with my loud lips and publish
Beauty which all our powers shall never establish,
It is so frail.
(*Selected Poems* 11)

The accumulated effect of the clauses is to reinforce a moral almost to the point of redundancy: "cry," "loud lips," and "publish" reinforce virtually the same sense, only for the next two lines to undercut that declaration of poetic function with the Platonic idea that what is frail

cannot last, cannot be true, and cannot be established at all, regardless of how loud the poet sing its praise. One way of reading the lines, as suggested by an anonymous reviewer of this essay, is to treat the poem “as a witty variation on standard Renaissance love-poetry topics,” in the spirit of an ardent neo-Platonic lover such as Pietro Bembo. This reading does not find the accumulation of clauses redundant. It takes them to be “a careful step-by-step conduct of the argumentative process.” The alternative approach adopted here interprets the poem as bitter rather than simply witty, allusive not only with reference to Renaissance love poetry, but antithetical to its doctrine that poetry can keep from perishing that which is subject to mutability. Ransom’s “establish” proclaims the girls’ beauty, but his point in making such a declaration is to stress that he is unable to affirm the Keatsian ideal of an equation between truth and beauty. Whether the blue girls might realize it or not, they are being told more than merely to make hay with their beauty while the sun shines upon them; they are also being told, elliptically, that what they are blessed with—their blue eyes—is hardly real to someone such as the poet who has already established a contrary truth, that even greater brightness falls from the air. This is an elegance that is at once mannered and well-mannered, and it can scratch. The thematic and stylistic redundancy is laden with ellipses of latent signification.

There are other ways of mixing mannerisms with urbanity. Here is Prince’s short poem “The Token”:

More beautiful than any gift you gave
 You were, a child so beautiful as to seem
 To promise ruin what no child can have,
 Or woman give. And so a Roman gem
 I choose to be your token: here a laurel
 Springs to its young height, hangs a broken limb;
 And here a group of women wanly quarrel
 At a sale of cupids. A hawk looks at them.
 (*Collected Poems* 25)

The syntax is anything but simple, although the overall rhythm is smooth, and the pauses and ellipses of thought induced by the carefully unwinding syntax remain thoughtful and enigmatic. An eight-line poem comprising two tightly-packed sentences followed by a terse final sentence gives us a degree of syntactic inscrutability that manages to withhold a large part of the poem's import, as if the alternative of revealing the intent more clearly would constitute some kind of inelegance. Decorum in ellipsis; tact in circumspection; pointed, but veiled in emblematic obliqueness. The poetic voice adopts a deliberately riddling manner. It elides and omits several kinds of connective. It chooses not to be clear about why a child who is more beautiful than any gift she gives has to "promise ruin" (and does that mean or imply, "promise *to* ruin?"). Is it feared that she might ruin herself or others? Ruin the giving or the having? And what might it be that "no child can have, / Or woman give"? And the difference between having and giving? The poem withholds far more than it proffers.

That is what makes the semantics elliptical, though the syntax and imagery practice a kind of redundancy: we are told a lot, it might seem, and yet we have found out very little. The manner of telling and showing has raised more questions than the telling and showing can answer. What is the emblematic significance of the token referred to by the title? In choosing the gem as token, is the poet giving her a gift or naming it as an apt metonymy? And what makes the token apt: its beauty or its capacity to provoke strong reactions? The *mise-en-scène* with which the poem ends retains a mysterious quality, which provokes both reflection and frustration. In a manner quite different from Ransom's—less playful, less overtly stylized—the poem manages to remain somber and quizzical.

For our final example of the tense collaboration between ellipsis and redundancy, I would like us to consider one of Ransom's finest poems, "Prelude to an Evening." It was first published in 1934. When he revised it in 1963 (as became his disastrous habit in later years), he added a gloss on the domestic situation dramatized by the poem

which is useful (even after we remind ourselves not to confuse a retrospective account of intention with the poem):

Here is a man returning in the evening from his worldly occupations to his own household. He has had plenty of encounters with the world's evils, and his imagination is immoderate and wayward [...] he is a man pursued by Furies. [...] The poem is the man's soliloquy as he approaches his house. He is addressing the mother of his children, who awaits him, as if rehearsing the speech he will make in her presence in order to persuade her to share his fearful preoccupations and give him her entire allegiance. He seems to think that he will win her over; there is no intimation that it may turn out quite differently. But suppose he succeeds: will not that be a dreary fate for the woman? And what of the children? Those are not his questions. But they came to be mine. (*Selected Poems* 151)

Now let us consider the poem:

Prelude to an Evening

Do not enforce the tired wolf
 Dragging his infected wound homeward
 To sit tonight with the warm children
 Naming the pretty kings of France.

The images of the invaded mind
 Being as the monsters in the dreams
 Of your most brief enchanted headful,
 Suppose a miracle of confusion:

That dreamed and undreamt become each other
 And mix the night and day of your mind;
 And it does not matter your twice crying
 From mouth unbeautied against the pillow

To avert the gun of the same old soldier;
 For cry, cock-crow, or the iron bell
 Can crack the sleep-sense of outrage,
 Annihilate phantoms who were nothing.

But now, by our perverse supposal,
 There is a drift of fog on your mornings;
 You in your peignoir, dainty at your orange cup,

Feel poisoning round the sunny room

Invisible evil, deprived and bold.
 All day the clock will metronome
 Your gallant fear; the needles clicking,
 The heels detonating the stair's cavern

Freshening the water in the blue bowls
 For the buck berries, with not all your love,
 You shall be listening for the low wind,
 The warning sibilance of pines.

You like a waning moon, and I accusing
 Our too banded Eumenides,
 While you pronounce Noes wanderingly
 And smooth the heads of the hungry children.
 (*Selected Poems* 147-48)

I will be concise in locating what I interpret as the moment of decisive ellipsis: decisive for the dramatization and for its interpretation. The dominant element of the poem—using the word “dominant” to imply a central concern or preoccupation that determines all other detail—is the speaker’s frame of mind. If we grant the premise of the poem’s self-reflexivity, a crucial ellipsis occurs when he appears to shift the grammatical address which begins with a reference to himself in the third person, suddenly, by the third line of the second stanza, to the second person. The ellipsis hovers over the ambiguity it creates: does the “you” entail the man talking to himself? Or has the wife he proposes to address already become a part—even the primary referent—of the “you”? The phrase “your most brief enchanted headful” blurs the reference. The image of a man returning home with his head full of disturbing thoughts and feelings seems to mutate into the image of a man thinking about his wife as the one whose head is full of disturbed and disturbing thoughts and feelings.

In the third stanza, the image of a “mouth unbeautied” crying against the pillow makes it plausible to suppose that it is the wife who has by now become the primary or sole referent of “the invaded mind” and the “enchanted headful.” But how (or where, or when) did

the transference from the speaking voice to the wife take place? I would identify that moment or place as the decisive ellipsis of the poem: a speech act on the part of the speaking voice performed silently, without words, but enabling an inner state to have been projected onto the poor wife. Note that by stanza five, the “he” and the “you” have now resolved their focus into “our perverse supposal” (emphasis mine). That is the second decisive ellipsis in the poem. Everything after that is a series of unclenching redundancies until the final stanza, by which time, the “we” has split again into “you” and “I,” and the “you” is now definitely the wife. The degree to which the man is, and is not, a true friend to the mother of his children is the exact nuance of meaning the poem strives to capture, its achieved undecidability. To have left this undecidability (between the ways in which he is true to her and the ways in which he is not) within a zone of ambiguity could be said to be the peculiar and perverse nature of Ransom’s elegance.

Given the slippery nature of the slope on which such poems sustain their balancing acts, it is as well to recognize that the habit of being mannered can slip easily into self-indulgence and eccentricity. And while being mannered is in some ways distinct from being a mannerist, the two are not unrelated. Both provoke negative responses, one in the general sphere of affects and affectation, the other in the narrower sphere of European art history, where the Mannerist style in painting (or architecture, or music) is treated either as a transition or as a descent and divagation from the accomplishments of the Renaissance arts, and the equipoise, harmony, and balance of Renaissance classicism. John Ashbery, alluding to Parmigianino’s Mannerist self-portrait in a convex mirror, concedes that this type of art projects “[a] perverse light whose / Imperative of subtlety dooms in advance its / Conceit to light up: unimportant but meant” (*Self-Portrait* 70).

What does Mannerism evoke?¹⁶ Delicacy, sophistication, a certain degree of melancholia; also, ornamentation, complexity, an allusiveness that has something of belatedness to it. All these can be found in Ransom and Prince. Any style that can be called mannered—whether

in writing, painting, music, or architecture—requires its admirers to adopt a defensive or expostulatory stance, obliged to defend their endorsement of the mannered as a predilection which makes concessionary allowances for elements of the extravagant, the eccentric, and the self-indulgent. However, their best poems enable one, I think, to present mannered poetic styles in a more favorable light, not forgetting the connection between being mannered and being mannerist. Their best verse (which happens to be their earliest) is characterized by incredibly inventive verbal ingenuity, whose self-reflexive poise is managed without sacrificing the elliptical element that lends it a curiously impersonal charm that manages to imply both reserve and candor. The surplus of affect provided by such styles never obscures the degree to which such writing withholds rather more of sense and significance than the seeming profusion of words might imply.

We can approach the notion of poetic elegance from the perspective of a poet's choice of diction; then move on to consider the distinctive aspects of syntax and rhythm, and how these elements interact with the choice of verse form. Donald Davie's account of *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (1952) underscores the closeness between the notions of purity and chastity in the selection principle at work in poetic language. He derives from Oliver Goldsmith an antithetical relation between chastity and frigidity, in such a way that Goldsmith's "frigidity" corresponds nearly with what we might associate today with eccentricity, exuberance, or extravagance, which are all effects of style that Goldsmith regarded as "unchaste." In endorsing Goldsmith, Davie takes chastity to represent a principle of restraint and economy in the use of metaphor, working differently in different genres, implicitly based on judgment and taste, requiring closeness to the language of prose and "careful conversation" (*Purity of Diction* 20), and based on tacit correspondences between writers and their readers about what keeps a language close to its centre, "conversational not colloquial, poetic not poetical" (27).

Frigidity, in contrast, represents for Goldsmith "a deviation from propriety owing to the erroneous judgment of the writer, who, en-

deavoring to captivate the admiration with novelty, very often shocks the understanding with extravagance" (18). Davie makes the application of the antithesis explicit: the Romantic poets were mostly unchaste (although he finds cause later in the book to admire Shelley's "urbanity"), and whatever his many merits, no one could claim for Shakespeare that his poetry had the effect of "a valuable urbanity, a civilized moderation and elegance" (27). Likewise, the "prolific and unequal output" (28) of modern poets such as Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens, and Allen Tate is treated as "impure," in contrast the best poetry of Yeats and Eliot, while "minor modern poets on both sides of the Atlantic," such as Graves, Moore and Ransom, are described as having "employed successfully for their limited ends a personal diction deliberately impure, eccentric and mannered" (29).

What we have seen of the early poems of Ransom and Prince confirms Davie's point: that each chose to adopt a style that could be regarded as "unchaste." But where one might part company with Davie is in deciding if the "impure" necessarily sacrifices elegance. My short answer to that question foregrounds the interplay between semantic ellipsis and syntactic redundancy. Their combination fascinates, because it serves fresh, cognitive ends. It entitles such poets to claim that they thus give access to "the kind of knowledge by which we must know what we have arranged that we shall not know otherwise" (Ransom, *The World's Body* x).

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NOTES

¹The paper owes a debt of gratitude to my colleague Dr Susan Ang who has saved me from many errors, and to several participants in the *Connotations* Symposium where a shorter version was first presented on August 1, 2011. Their comments and questions have helped enrich details. I owe an even more sustained debt to the anonymous reviewer consulted by *Connotations*, who helped eliminate several errors and offered a tonic scepticism about my use of the notion of syntactic redundancy. I hope it has been put to constructive use here.

²In *The Elegant Universe*, for example, Brian Greene evokes the idea of elegance as equally applicable to “an order and a coherence in the workings of nature” (167), and to the theories developed by modern physicists, which have “an elegance and beauty of structure on par with the world we experience” (165).

³The view of language developed in *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* by Noam Chomsky, for example, treats the grammar of a language as a set of rules capable of generating all the possible grammatical sentences in that language.

⁴Cf. Kennedy 125. Bizzell and Herzberg note about the notion of *elegantia* in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (IV.12): “The Theophrastan scheme is here modified. The four qualities in Theophrastus’ system were Purity, Clarity, Appropriateness, and Ornamentation, this last embracing Correct Choice of Words, Artistic Composition, and the figures. Thus for our author, *elegantia* comprises two primary qualities of Theophrastus’ scheme; Appropriateness is here missing; the ornamentation residing in the choice of words is left unconsidered [...]; Artistic Composition is a primary quality, and is not treated as a branch of Ornamentation; finally, Ornamentation, represented by *dignitas*, is limited to the Figures” (252n62). The Latin treatise *Ad Herennium* exercised an enormous influence throughout Europe. For example, in 1444, Lorenzo Valla’s *Elegantiae linguae latinae* continues to use the notion of *elegantiae* as in the Latin treatise, in order to contrast the elegance attributed to Cicero and Quintilian with the Latin of the medieval Church.

⁵Ransom’s critical works include *God without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy* (1930), an essay in *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930), *The World’s Body* (1938), *The New Criticism* (1941), *Beating the Bushes: Selected Essays 1941-1970* (1972), and *Selected Essays* (1984).

⁶Prince’s academic writings include *The Italian Element in Milton’s Verse* (1951), an Arden edition of Shakespeare’s *Poems* (1960), a British Council pamphlet on the *Poems* (1963), and annotated editions of Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* (1957), *Paradise Lost*, Books I and II (1962), and “*Comus*” and *Other Poems* (1968).

⁷Ransom’s poetic career was brief and spread over four volumes published in less than a decade: *Poems about God* (1919), *Grace after Meat* (1924), *Chills and Fevers* (1924), and *Two Gentlemen in Bonds* (1927). After the age of forty, Ransom revised some of his poems, but wrote little that was new. His role as influential critic and literary editor came into its own when his career as poet was virtually at an end. In contrast, Prince wrote throughout his life, but not regularly. The early work was admired by many writers, including T. S. Eliot, who helped publish his first

volume, *Poems* (1938). The poem "Soldiers Bathing" became famous, but many tended to think of Prince as a one-poem-anthology-poet. In 1979 Donald Davie wrote in *The New York Times Book Review*: "Setting aside Eliot's 'Four Quartets,' F. T. Prince's 'Soldiers Bathing' is perhaps the finest poem in English to come out of World War II; and this is widely acknowledged. Why has he never since done anything so good?" (quoted from Pace). Although his other poems have not lacked admirers among poets (including John Ashbery and Geoffrey Hill), Prince is far less known as a poet than Ransom.

⁸I am grateful to Frank Kearful for drawing my attention to Swift's remark from "A letter to a young gentleman, lately enter'd into holy orders."

⁹Maik Goth points out that the "parasites" of the second line could be an allusion to a letter from Augustus to Maecenas, which refers to "parasitica mensa": "Before this I was able to write my letters to my friends with my own hand; now overwhelmed with work and in poor health, I desire to take our friend Horace from you. He will come then from that parasitic table of yours to my imperial board, and help me write my letters" (Suetonius 461-63).

¹⁰Cf. "Political blunders aside, Ludovico was enthusiastic about learning and the arts. He penned the lives of illustrious men and was the patron of Leonardo da Vinci who, while in his service, painted the *Last Supper* (1497-1498) for the Dominicans living in the Monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie, favored by Ludovico. He also painted the portrait of Ludovico's mistress, Cecilia Galleriani, called the *Portrait of a Woman with an Ermine* (c. 1485; Cracow, Czartoryski Museum)" (Zirpolo 403). In her 1899 biography of Beatrice D'Este, Julia Cartwright pointed out: "the more impartial judgment of modern historians, together with the light thrown upon the subject by recently discovered documents, has done much to modify our opinion of Ludovico's character. The worst charges formerly brought against him, above all, the alleged poisoning of his nephew, the reigning Duke of Milan, have been dismissed as groundless and wholly alien to his nature and character. On the other hand, his great merits and rare talents as ruler and administrator have been fully recognized, while it is admitted [...] that his generous and enlightened encouragement of art and letters entitles him to a place among the most illustrious patrons of the Renaissance. To his keen intellect and discerning eye, to his fine taste and quick sympathy with all forms of beauty, we owe the production of some of the noblest works of art that human hands have ever fashioned. To his personal encouragement and magnificent liberality we owe the grandest monuments of Lombard architecture, and the finest development of Milanese painting, the façade of the Certosa and the cupola of Sta. Maria delle Grazie, the frescoes and altar-pieces of the Brera and the Ambrosiana. Above all, it was at the Milanese court, under the stimulating influence of the Moro, that Leonardo da Vinci's finest work was done" (11-12).

¹¹Cf. *OED*: "tyrant, *n.*: [a. OF. tyrant (12th c.), tiran (13th c.), F. tyran (14th c.) = Prov. tiran, Cat. tira, Sp. tirano, Pg. tyranno, It. tiranno, a. L. tyrannus, Gr. τύραννος. [...] 1.1 One who seizes upon the sovereign power in a state without legal right; an absolute ruler; a usurper." The more neutral sense of the Greek

word may be the reason for the obsolete meaning "†2. A ruler, governor, prince. *Obs.*"

¹²In tracing the models for Milton's "magnificent style," Prince draws attention to several devices used by the poets of the Italian Renaissance, especially Torquato Tasso (1544-95), who learnt from the sonnets of Giovanni Della Casa (1503-56), and Pietro Bembo (1470-1547): (1) an elaborate syntax built from relative clauses spread over several stanzas, creating an effect of "reflection and deliberate utterance, yet a certain abruptness" in which "the flow of the sentences overrides the division of the stanza" (*Italian Element* 17), producing the effect of "asprezza, 'roughness' or 'difficulty'" (*Italian Element* 27), (2) "the placing of strong pauses within the lines" (27); and (3) "the deliberate accumulation of elisions" (27).

¹³Cf. Stainton: "a semantically elliptical sentence encodes a proposition, but it does so without adopting the form of a sentence" (81). Stainton distinguishes between three kinds of semantically elliptical sentences: syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic, of which the first type is referred to here and is defined as an expression with a certain kind of structure/form.

¹⁴"Hellenistic aestheticians distinguished between the 'appropriate' (*aptum*, *decorum*) and the 'beautiful' (*pulchrum*) in the narrower sense, but Augustine was perhaps the first (in his early work) to contrast them clearly" (Tatarkiewicz, Harrell, Barrett and Petsch 2: 51).

¹⁵Cf. Roman Jakobson, "The Dominant": "the *dominant* [...] was one of the most crucial, elaborated, and productive concepts in Russian Formalist theory. The dominant may be defined as the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure" (751).

¹⁶"Mannerists purposely denied the strict classicism and emphasis on the pleasing aesthetics of the High Renaissance and instead embraced an anticlassical mode of representation that entailed the use of illogical elements, jarring colors and lighting, contorted figures, and ambiguous iconographic programs" (Zirpolo 260).

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