The New Poetry of the American South

M. Carmel Meyer
Loyola University Chicago

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THE NEW POETRY OF THE AMERICAN SOUTH:
A Study of Its Art, Its Tradition, and
Its Critical Ideas

by

Sister M. Carmel Meyer, C.S.A.

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The past two decades have witnessed a new movement among Southern leaders intended to arouse the South to a realization of its inherited way of life and to induce it to make conscious effort to keep the South from becoming industrialized. To promote the movement many learned articles were written chiefly by the professors in universities on the problem of agrarianism. These men were conscious of their position, not only as American citizens, but as citizens of a section of America that possessed a cultural birthright. They saw certain social and economic forces creeping in not good for the life of the South, and they united their forces to repel them. Fortunately, these leaders were not only historians and economists, but poets, and in a few instances, critics as well.

This paper is an attempt to show how the past of the South affected the present in its social and economic problems, and to explain the nature of the poetic renascence that is taking place, its connection with literary traditions, and its drawing on a common cultural inheritance.

The scholars responsible for this revival classified themselves as "Fugitives" because they wished to flee from "the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South." Apart from their agrarian stand, their poetry has a distinction that places it with the best that is being done in American poetry today. The South is well-launched upon a productive period. Because it is almost a nation within a nation, "southern" qualities will characterize its literature.
CHAPTER ONE

THE AGRARIAN MOVEMENT IN SOUTHERN CULTURE

and Its Relation to Southern Cultural Tradition

Contemporary tendencies in the South cannot be adequately portrayed without a knowledge of the past of the South for it is the past of that section that holds the key to the story of the present. The history of the South with its economic, political and social implications throws its shadow on the literary accomplishments of the present time. Its literature is bound up with its history.

The conservative Southerner interpreted the victory of the North merely as the triumph of brute force. After all, many true and noble causes had gone down in defeat before 1865. To him secession was still lawful, scripture might still be quoted to support slavery. And was not a free negro a disintegrated negro? To him the old order of things still loomed large on the horizon. Public school education was frowned upon and if one might be so rash as to compare the achievements of the North and the South in the literary field, the conservative was loud in proclaiming that any Southern university was superior to Yale or Harvard or Princeton. As a matter of fact, the best of the southern colleges were doubtless as good as the best in the North.¹ What the Southern conservative failed to do was to distinguish between good oratory and good literature. Good oratory might arouse people but

it did not always arouse them to do that which was best to do. And the men who resorted to this type of oratory inflamed the populace with the old worn-out phrase—"The good old past. We must get back to it." They appealed to what was dead and gone and in the meantime, as is always the case, the present with its vast possibilities lay rotting. Hence it was to a second group of Southerners in whom the hope of the South lay. That group met the challenge of the defeated South to build deeper into soil that would be free, to make labor a blessing instead of a curse, to educate in a system of public education all of its children to the greatest extent of their possibilities.

The South, more than any other section of the United States, has been blessed with men who have been alive to Southern thought, to Southern evils, to Southern virtues. They have been the watchdogs jealously guarding what was worth-while guarding in the South and denouncing that which tended to sap the strength of these states. Senator Benjamin H. Hill was such a one. In 1866 before Tammany Hall he summarized the ideals of these men who understood the South and who were far-sighted enough to see what had to be done to save it culturally and economically for the union. In that address Hill said: "There was a South of slavery and secession; that South is dead. There is a South of Union and freedom; that South, thank God! is living, breathing, growing every hour."

Twenty years later, in 1867, Henry Grady as editor of the Atlanta Constitution used his position and influence to make his fellowmen conscious that industrial wealth of the South must receive due recognition if any per-

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manent civilization could be built. He called to the attention of the people that the South had vast resources and that it needed only intelligent men to make the most of these resources. 3

The Anti-evolution Bill featuring Darrow at the Dayton trial was highly significant in its tumult because it indicated the Southern struggle for freedom of thought. This struggle was fought both in the churches and in the colleges, in the former by men like Reverend Ashby Jones, a noted preacher of Atlanta, by Dr. R. T. Vann, leader of the Baptist Church in North Carolina who said the Bible cannot be taken too literally. President W. L. Poteat of Wake Forest College championed the theory of evolution in spite of the fact that he was also a leading force in the Baptist church. To deny development was to fly in the face of plain fact he maintained. President Poteat had been a teacher of biology too long to deny development from a lower to a higher order. 4

Southern thought was not static. Walter Hines Page and Thomas Nelson Page, distinguished Southerners of their age fought for education and for leadership. Both recognized that the loss of leadership was due to two facts -- untrained men and a lack of freedom of thought and expression. In June, 1907, the World's Work of which Walter Hines Page was editor carried a special Southern number. In that he said:

There is nothing in our contemporaneous life more interesting or more important than this rise of the people in these states, eager to the task of their own development and of the development of this richest region of the Union. This work has now been begun

3 Ibid., p. 7.
with such vigor that it will go on indefinitely; for natural forces have come into play and the land of "problems" has become a land of progress. 5

Industry and education were bound to solve Southern problems.

One other early outstanding incident must be mentioned to show the Southern struggle for intellectual freedom. This incident indicated more clearly than possibly any other thing the tremendous effort educational leaders made to attain freedom of the press and freedom of speech. In October, 1903, Dr. John Spencer Bassett, Professor of history in Trinity College made the following statement in an article he had written in the South Atlantic Quarterly entitled "Stirring Up the Fires of Race Antipathy." Speaking of Booker T. Washington he said, "Now Washington is a great and good man, a Christian statesman, and, take him all in all, the greatest man, save General Lee, born in the South in a hundred years; but he is not a typical negro."

The comparison with other Southern leaders aroused a storm of protest. Bassett became the victim of bitter invectives and so much opposition to him was aroused that he said he would resign his position at Trinity. Then it was that his own college supported him. Other members of the faculty threatened to leave if Professor Bassett resign. More powerful than this threat was the spirit of the student body. They loved Bassett and firmly stood by him. In the vote of the Board after a seven-hours' session, Professor Bassett's resignation was not accepted. 6

The South faced three major problems which became more complicated as

5 Ibid., p. 40.
6 Ibid., pp. 147-157.
its history progressed. First there was the race problem which seemed to threaten Southern white life and which became a greater menace through Northern interference. Secondly, with Lee's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse, the South felt itself relegated to an inferior national position and was forced to take the defensive against Northern capitalistic system which overshadowed it with its dominating influence. Thirdly, Southern life and sustenance took an appalling downward trend due to the decline in agriculture after the Civil War. Since the third of these problems was the balance wheel of the economic life of the South and since the health of any section may be determined by its economic status, it will not be out of order to consider that phase first.

The dominating crop in the South was cotton. To own many acres of land and sufficient negro aid to work this land was the goal of Southerners, and the returns from each year's crop were usually invested in more land and more labor. With the spread of cotton growing, there was bound to be a decline in price and this, together with Northern capital control and Northern control of cotton marketing, the economic depression of the late thirties was bound to leave its mark on Southern life. The price of cotton fell in the early forties to extremely low levels. Men like William Gregg of South Carolina and other industrial pioneers saw hope in the building of factories but lack of capital and bad management drove those who might have achieved some results back to planting—a thing they understood.

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8 Ibid., pp. 2 ff.
By 1850 agriculture seemed to have received a new lease on life for the Walker Tariff of 1846 lowered the cost of manufactured articles. But through this renewed prosperity, a feeling of uneasiness was evident. Southerners still rebelled at their colonial status in paying tribute to Northern capital and industry in the marketing of their crops. This alone was sufficient fuel for irritable dissension between North and South. But then came the Northern attack on slavery and with it fanatical accusations of that institution until the Southerner was convinced that not only was his economic existence insecure but that the very existence of a white civilization hung in the balance. The Southerner read the handwriting on the wall. He was definitely on the defensive. The only avenue that offered escape was that of secession. With secession came the four long years of war and a broken South.

In the end they were conquered, their slaves freed and their social system overturned, their lands laid waste and left worthless, their mills, factories and railroads destroyed or weakened beyond repair, their banks and accumulated credits wiped out, their families impoverished, the flower of their youth dead or crippled.\(^9\)

The Reconstruction Period with its exploitation of the remnants of Southern life by carpetbaggers and other scalawags burned to a white heat the tempers of this defeated people. Through it all, though, the South held its head high proclaiming with Robert Toombs that it "had nothing to regret but the dead and the failure."

True Southern reconstruction could come only from the South and it was expected that agriculture would be the force that would again place the South on an independent plane. But the lack of material for successful farming, \(^9\)Ibid., p. 11-12.
the inefficient labor of the Negro cropper, the heartlessness of merchants who demanded exorbitant prices for services, the Southern farmer found himself in the same position that the conquered nations found themselves after the treaty of Versailles. It was at this point that the efforts of James B. Duke and R. J. Reynolds to interest the South in its natural resources proved successful. Small coal and iron mines sprang up and by 1907 Birmingham rivalled Pittsburgh in its prosperity.\(^\text{10}\) The force that really gave impetus to the new Southern economic life was the rebuilding of railroads throughout the various sections. They became the distributing agents for the new business enterprises.

The average Northerner who has received his knowledge of Southern life from northern history books, supplemented now and then by novels ranging all the way from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to *The Fathers* may have a rather inaccurate view of the South. Ask him the simple question—"What is the South?" and he will answer: "Oh, the South? The South is that group of states lying below the Mason and Dixon line. Don't you know we saved the union for them in the Civil War, let them have their mules at Appomattox; and now we're just one big, happy family?" In his mind he has a picture of Southern plantations, negroes singing in the moonlight, lovely sedate ladies in floating gowns, dashing young Southerners noted for their expert horsemanship. But let him ask a Southerner his opinion of the North and he will be rather non-plussed by the answer: "Northerners? All them damn Yankees north of the Mason and Dixon line?"

\(^{10}\)Ibid., p. 18.
It will be a new experience for the Northerner to realize that the South has a way of thinking not quite in harmony with the Northern way, and that though we term ourselves Americans with a broad democratic sweep, yet there is in the South a feeling of having been cheated in a struggle some seventy-seven years ago. Then, too, with the industrial system of the North machining its way into Southern territory, endeavoring to superimpose its material way of life upon a people who have received a wound that up to date has not quite healed, it is but natural that ill-feeling should exist at the present time. "Thank God," wrote a Northern soldier, a draftee in World War II who had drilled two years on the grounds of Camp Stewart, Georgia, "that we have been transferred to Boston. Here we are again treated as human beings. In spite of the fact that we tried to tell Southern people that the Civil War was over, they persisted in placing us on a par with their negroes."

Is it not rather unusual that ill-feeling and hate should be directed towards a section [the North] of these United States and that the majority of that section are unaware that they are the object of this hate? If we desire to preserve that unity our forefathers strove for in the 70's, it might be well to become cognizant of the fact that all is not well between us and our Southern brethren.

"What does the South want?" is a question John Crowe Ransom asks in one of his articles. In brief it may be answered that the South desires the preservation of a culture peculiar to itself. A group of writers who classify themselves as "Agrarians" have championed this traditional way of life in
scholarly articles which have appeared and still appear in prominent magazines. These writers look to an agrarian way of life for their beloved South for to them it is the way that promises the development of the full man.

One of the best definitions of Agrarianism may be found in the introduction of the book I'll Take My Stand:

An agrarian society is hardly one that has no use at all for industries, for professional vocations, for scholars and artists, and for life of cities. Technically, perhaps, an agrarian society is one in which agriculture is the leading vocation, whether for wealth, for pleasure, or for prestige—a form of labor that is pursued with intelligence and leisure, and that becomes the model to which the other forms approach as well as they may. But an agrarian regime will be secured readily enough where the superfluous industries are not allowed to rise against it. The theory of agrarianism is that the culture of the soil is the best and most sensitive of vocations, and that therefore it should have the economic preference and enlist the maximum number of workers. 11

The fundamental reason for desiring that agriculture be the leading industry is not that the Southerners desire to be farmers just in order to farm. To get at the real reason it is necessary to cross the ocean, flip back the centuries of time when early English pioneers sought a foothold in English soil. To these "half-mythical pioneers" of England a way of livelihood seemed very simple. They explored the soil, took what it could give them, developed the trades, put roofs over their heads, and then took to the long road of intellectual development as the crown of their existence.

Those who came after them, looked at what their forefathers had accomplished and discovered that it was good. They realized that too much anxiety for material prosperity, too much locomotion, too much activity of the muscles

would result in a stulted life of the mind. It is only when a man has leisure that he has the ability to give the mind a chance. Leisure depends on a stability of life, an establishment that will put one out of competitive achievement, doing away with the thought prevalent today—"I must do all I can to get ahead of So-and-So."

"Get ahead!" That term succinctly summarizes the gospel of Progress trickling down from the North. Those who believed in the goodness of mother nature and hence in the blessings that followed in her train, such as the arts, religions, philosophies, in short, life lived with a normal heart-beat, took what nature had to give them and then lived on peaceful terms with her. To work her to death was to automatically kill oneself. Hence she was to be respected. But those who desired a full purse rather than a full life adopted another course—that of conquering nature. Nature was to be robbed of its treasures by machinery; but this machinery had to be ever substituted with newer and better machinery. Those who professed themselves disciples of the gospel of Progress were pioneers as were those who took to the land, but with a difference. The latter had an objective, for they knew what they wanted—life lived to the full. But the Progressivites had no well-defined goal. They went for the sake of the going. Each old machine had to be substituted by a new machine until beings became intemperately addicted to work and to gross material prosperity.  

they have had a difficult time getting it back again.

It would not be too difficult a task to make a list of faults attributable to the South. One thing, however, cannot be charged against it. It has never been intemperately addicted to work nor to gross material prosperity. The Southerner took to his leisure as seriously as he took to his work. His work stabilized his position and so he had time to look to the arts—"the arts of living and not the arts of escape, such as the social arts of dress, conversation, manners, the table, the hunt, politics, oratory, the pulpit."13 Certainly whatever else the Southerner was, he was not an escapist. He looked life in the eye and found it good. And why not? Was not his farm an almost economic unit? And although it might have been alleged that other centers had the same possibilities, such as parts of the New England communities, yet the South had many more such communities and exercised a greater influence on the surrounding territories as well as on the frontier sections which were still experimenting with their economic possibilities.

With the defeat of the South, industrialism overtook the North and produced a distinctly American civilization. The South, humbled and embittered, did not become industrialized. She retired into herself, nursed her poverty and clung to her ancestral fences. It was not long after the carpetbag era, however, that industrialism took its bow in the South. Many of the Southerners who had tasted of poverty and who saw what it had done to mind and body, succumbed to the "New South Party" as the only avenue to a fair degree of prosperity. Now the thought was to take the many small farms that had once

13 Ibid., p. 12.
been a plantation and convert them again into larger units to be worked, not by labor, but by machinery. This new group in the South ardently furthered the scheme which would lift them out of disrepute. So they put their shoulders to the wheels. But the Old South group looked askance at what was taking place. Its idea of an agrarian was something different.

He identifies himself with a spot of ground, and this ground carries a good deal of meaning; it defines itself for him as nature. He will 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. But he cannot contemplate nor explore, respect nor love, a mere turnover, such as an assemblage of "natural resources", a pile of money, a volume of produce, a market or a credit system. It is into precisely these intangibles that industrialism would translate the farmer's farm. It means the dehumanization of his life. 14

Whatever arguments, however strong the industrialists may present to support their gospel of Progress, in the final analysis they must admit that the traditional South embodies a theory that makes for culture in a nation.

Remove this last bulwark of anti-industrialism from these United States and in a few more decades we shall have a nation filled with highly concentrated machinery run by skilled robots who have lost all sense of sight and feeling and whose end is--well, one wonders.

Today, the South remains a battlefield of two surviving philosophies of life. The exponents of industrialism, here as elsewhere, range from ultra-conservative individualists to communists; the advocates of agrarianism from those who favor localized industrialism to men who disbelieve completely in industrialism. Only through the efforts of agrarianism does the South retain a flavor of individuality, an intangible but real unity which yet differentiates

14 Ibid., pp. 19-20.
it from other sections of the country.15

It is recognized, of course, that sections within the South differ from each other, so that in the main generalizations are liable to be false. On the whole the people of the South are temperamentally allied to the land with its virtues and pleasures. These virtues and pleasures embody the spiritual and cultural issue of the Agrarian movement. The literary men of the South who have championed this movement have been both bitterly and moderately attacked. Before considering these attacks it may be well to present a picture embodying agrarian life at its best. George Marion O'Donnell in a "Portrait of a Southern Planter" has described the Huntington Plantation situated in the delta country of Mississippi. This plantation had a thousand acres of which six hundred were in a state of cultivation; the remaining four hundred served as pasture land and timber. The early Huntington's lived on this plantation but later on they moved to the small town where social life in the form of bridge parties and gossip tournaments held sway. Appointed managers ran the plantation. In 1919, however, the wife of the only surviving Huntington decided that this social life was to be questioned and so she and her husband moved back to the plantation, remodelled the log house, installed an electric-light plant, and sank an Artesian well.

Time did not have to be budgeted now by the Huntington's for things were done leisurely. At five o'clock the Negro cook came to the house and built a fire in the wood range. Soon after George Huntington sounded the bell which awakened the eighteen Negro families working the plantation. While

15 Edd Winfield Parks, _Southern Poets_, American Book, 1936, pref. p. XLVI.
breakfast was in operation, he supervised the Negroes feeding the animals and hitching the mules. Then he returned to a tasty breakfast made by his wife. The cantaloupe was grown on the place, the eggs were from their own chicken house, the preserves were of their own canning. The flour for the biscuit, the sugar for the coffee, and the coffee itself constituted the only store-bought articles on the table. After the family breakfast, George left to supervise the work of the Negroes while his wife worked among the flowers, got the mail from the nearby town and planned the dinner. At 11:30 the big bell rang which recalled the Negroes and Mr. Huntington to a dinner of vegetables from the garden, meat, killed and preserved on the place, cornbread from meal ground from their own grist mill which was attached to the electric-light plant, and iced tea. For dessert there would be pie, boiled custard, or home-made ice cream. There was a noon period of two hours, half of which was used for a short nap before returning to the fields. Mrs. Huntington then read or sewed until her husband returned when they played a game of croquet under the pecan trees. In the evening the family recounted the happenings of the day, talked politics or natural phenomena. In cold weather they played cards, or read aloud before the log fire. Since Mrs. Huntington had studied music, the family was treated to Schubert, or Chopin, or Beethoven. At nine-thirty the family retired.

Cotton was the main product, but George Huntington believed in a diversity of food crops since he had an aversion for "tin cans." Both the Hunt-tons and the Negroes used available fruit and vegetables for canning, since
each family had a strip of ground which yielded ample produce. The Negroes were provided with seed by the planter.

George Huntington's code of honor was a real thing and neither his renter nor his share-cropper was exploited by him. The renter furnished his own mules, plows, and seed and the planter furnished the house. In return the planter, at the close of the year, received one-third of the corn and one-fourth of the cotton. The share-cropper received mules, plows, seed, land and house and only furnished the labor. In exchange the planter received half of all the crops. In short, on the Huntington plantation, all had food and clothes and warmth. To them the Negroes were actually free men. They were enthusiastic because life was on the "up-and-up" and their profits were actually their profits.

The above is an actual picture of a plantation sometime between 1919 and 1925. The writer of the article says that he was a part of that life. He also says that what constituted one of the menaces to this way of life was not that the people of the section had ceased to be a part of this life, but that the best intellects of the group, the men and women who had the fine stamina for such a life were being lured away to become Gertrude Stein's in writing--or what-have-you in the field of the other arts.

The Huntington way of life came to a close between 1925 and 1932. Two forces gained control: the dominance in government of industrialism, and the gospel of Progress. The government wanted paved roads and the Huntington plantation was chosen as the best line between two points. Added to this,
the government refused to permit the establishment of a favorable trade balance by debtor nations. This affected George Huntington for his cotton acreage had to be increased to pay expenses, his diversified crops became fewer, the price of cotton decreased to such a considerable extent that his help was forced to the towns for a livelihood. New roads, new canals, new public projects increased his taxes. Instead of the calm evenings where thinking had an opportunity to thrive, radios blared and cars honked along the road that cut his plantation. The manufactured articles he purchased had a high tax and subsistence became a problem. The high protective tariff ignored the Southern interests. 16

This is a picture of a way of life. Industrialists may sneer at it; sophisticated may strut by with a superior air. All in all, perhaps George Huntington had come closer to a full life during the years 1919-1925 than his industrial opponents came to it in a life time.

The Agrarian Movement was fortunate in the type of men who fought for it. Among the group was John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, at present one of America's foremost critics in the literary field, and Donald Davidson. They formed the core of the Nashville school which originated in 1921. They called themselves "Fugitives" but they soon proved themselves to be tough-minded political scientists and historians. The term "Fugitive" in this case seems a misnomer for the members of the group fought openly and boldly for the American Dream, the agrarian way of life. They were, however, 16

"Fugitives" from industrialization and mechanization. Their opponents dubbed them "escapists," "romanticists," "obscurantists."17 In language that commands respect, Allen Tate says with a calm, determined tone that even his enemies must respect:

The basis of culture is a dignified local life, resting upon the common people, who take all the props from under a genuine culture, as soon as they are deprived of independence; hence, the complete industrialization of the South, even if the perfect bungalow and sink of the industrial apologists were possible would destroy the last stronghold of culture in the United States. . . There is a plain program for the South. . . Either by legislation or by revolution in those regions where the land supports most of the people, the power must pass to those people.18

The significant words in the above quotation upon which Tate's entire argument rests are the words "where the land supports most of the people the power must pass to those people," or, in other words, the traditional inherent background of Southern life. To destroy this would be to perform an abortion.

Before concluding this major problem which has so deeply concerned the contemporary poets of the South, one must consider the more radical stands. Peter A. Carmichael refutes the writers of I'll Take My Stand with a great deal of violence. The bitterness which seeps through his article makes the reader wonder whether he may not have a personal grievance, an old score to even. He calls their book an anemic volume in which the writers pretend to take a stand. Rather sweeping is his denunciation when he says that "the

book is one of indirection, of intellectual insipidity, of innocents abroad."

Tate and his group, he says, evidently adhere to one of three doctrines:

1. A doctrine of hostility toward the city holding that it is corrupt and unfit for human habitation

2. A doctrine that things about the city, though by no means all, are good, and that the prudent and happy life is divided between the city and country

3. A doctrine that the land, and only the land, is the home of man, and that he should remain on it at all costs

Carmichael says that the agrarian movement is no country movement at all. It is a movement centered in cities, especially in the city of Nashville, and since Tate and his group are bona fide agrarians and not "literary zealots exploiting a theme" it must be concluded that they belong to Group 1 above.

Everybody realizes that country life with its open-air freedom is something to be desired. In fact, many people work in cities so that they can recreate in the country on Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays and so are more dyed-in-the-wool Agrarians for they practice what others in the city preach—the "ones who write innocuous pieces about green pastures."

In Group 2 may be classified, says Carmichael, the people who divide their time between the country and the city in a fifty-fifty measure on the principle that for some purposes city life is preferable and for others, country life. Might these not be called the city-country dwellers? Of course, one can readily see the writer's implication. Can someone inform him where the Southerners are to get the money for this type of fine living? His subtle implication is that perhaps the Twelve Southerners of I'll Take My
Stand really do not have a program as indicated by Group 1 or Group 2. Then only Group 3 remains. Carmichael's own words carry the sting that he wished to convey:

The Agrarians fatuously propose that the way to attain that goal is to go back to the hoe and sickle, to train the spirit to be content with contemplating the clod, and even to embrace peasantry. This means a simple, forthright, unconfused belief that the thing for us to do is to take for our ideal the man with the hoe and pitchfork, with dirt under his fingernails and manure in his shoes. The Agrarians have the ideas of irritated city men, evidently composed for the literary market. They misapprehend the old Southern plantation which was conducted in the style of an efficient business of today and which had its seat in an imposing mansion. Further, these writers have not a true dirt-related conception of the farm any more than of the plantation. They are blind to the squalor, the pitiful complacency, the helplessness, the crude elementality, and we may surmise that they are strangers to matted hair, to the man-born smell of ox and mule, to a fare of sow belly and molasses, to sloth, to recidivism to the great temptation of the farm, to inertia of every sort and to a great many other facts of life at dirt level. The visions they have are book-begotten, visions of campesstral repose, of flowers, of summer idylls, of far-off Arcadia visions, we may prudently remind ourselves, which have always been illusions, howeverso delightful, of city living.

The writer invites the Agrarians to ride through the South and to notice the habitations and the harrowed tenants thereof, the surrounding dilapidation, the gaunt, unfed quadrupeds, the excrementitious accumulations of decay, all sicklied over with consumptive gloom. This is not rare or remarkable, it is nearly the rule. This is the country long since abandoned to the hapless sharecroppers, by those who see realities. The sharecroppers are true dirt agrarians. They like the land, not knowing anything else, and they cling to it. The land is in them and is expressed through them. They are original total agrarians.19

Other opponents of the Agrarian Movement, while admiring the Nashville writers and their idealistic aims, give somewhat the same picture of Southern

people, women overburdened with the bearing and rearing of children, of Nature operating with its elemental vagaries, of wells filled with typhus germs. As a solution they offer diversification of industry, finance, and agriculture. Diversification of industry seems highly commendable to one who may have spent the major portion of his life playing tag on a factory street. On the other hand, can an Agrarian program flourish as such? Certainly the government has endeavored to "aid the farmer" but up to date he is still the seventh or eighth wheel on the national wagon.

The cultural value of Agrarianism thus far has had the main consideration. Practical-minded individuals who are not averse to being convinced as to the relative importance of a healthy-landed people will ask immediately what the Agrarians offer to produce this renewal of life in the South. Because of the diversity of the physical structure of the South conflicting interests must be given consideration:

1. The purely commercial interest, such as the enormous plantations on which cotton is grown as a business enterprise.

2. The farm-owning families that grow cotton as a cash crop, using the money that is derived from it for the purchase of supplies that cannot be produced on a farm.

3. Tenants and laborers doing the day labor on the farms owned by the interests of the first class, and a large number of tenants scattered throughout the South on smaller plantations and farms.

Because no distinction has been made between the above three groups, the result has been that the commercial interest has dominated; the other two

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groups have weakened so considerably that decay has found a firm foothold. Southern politicians, however, can do something to make the family-size farm an operating force. The farm-relief that has been given as a result of the Federal Administration has, so far, not benefited the small farm-owning family. Three things could be done to materialize the Agrarian Dream:

Concerning the farm-owning families

1. Establish the family-size farm in the best cotton-growing areas on a sound basis and then provide for allotments limited to 750,000 to 1,000,000 families giving each permission to grow ten to twenty bales of cotton. These families would have to grow other crops that would maintain themselves so as to have a pure cotton income.

Concerning the tenants

2. The tenants, farming families who also were once occupied with cotton growing (approximately 500,000 to 750,000) could remain on isolated, self-sustaining farms growing special crops. The great majority would have to grow food and feed crops and receive Federal assistance until they could be re-established in farm villages.

Concerning farm villages

3. The establishment of the farm village as a Federal project each of which would include one hundred to three hundred houses of the best modern design with proper conveniences and whose central life would contain a library and other facilities of clean, hearty entertainment. Each farmer would specialize in a few crops and take advantage of scientific farming. The commercial end of such a life would be so regulated that no financial interest could dominate the group. Such a plan would do away with the sap-draining isolation so prevalent in the South today.

Concerning the Negro

4. The Negroes would have their own villages and farms operating on the same basis as for the white in No. 3.
The above program operating in the South might be made possible through the medium of concerned politicians. A few wise legislative measures in Congress and the government would give reality to the Agrarian Dream.21

At this point it may be logically asked what bearing the Agrarian Movement has to the poetry now produced in the South. Wordsworth has the answer in a bit of the finest criticism he wrote: "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: and though this be true, poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than unusual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply." Wordsworth boasted that his poetry was distinguished by at least one mark of difference— it had a worthy purpose.22

When a poet is urged by the divine spark within him to express what lies nearest his heart he must give thought to both subject matter and theme. Present-day writers complain that artists in the past found it easier to write for they had not the chaos, the confusions and the complexities of a society such as is ours today. Hawthorne had his theme in the firmly-founded New England of his day. Melville also had his in Moby Dick, for the ship was merely New England afloat. The Elizabethans had Elizabeth and the national honor to enthrall them. But the present day writer may complain that he has not so powerful and coherent a culture. Everywhere the pillars of civilization are in a state of collapse. He feels that the writers of the past had half their thinking done for them before they ever began to write; he feels

that he is left stranded for a theme. 23

Unless the artist has a theme he may be without a purposeful direction of his powers. The result may be that he may project himself in symbol after symbol which merely exhibits the frustration he suffers. But because the artist is a citizen as well as a human being, he will never feel himself free from the obligation of inspecting the aims of society. From these speculations he has the ability to perform as an artist and the thing produced may be a genuine creation. On the other hand, the artist may perform as an abstraction simply because he is an artist. His end is self-expression, and so a theme to him is merely something that will give meaning to his impulse. 24

The Agrarians belong to the former group. In order to understand why the Agrarians belong to the former group, it may be wise to exhibit the attitude industrialism takes towards the arts.

The industrialists have a theory concerning the arts which, from a cursory point of view, seems tenable. Industrialism, they say, brings wealth, wealth brings leisure, and leisure will give men time to devote to the arts. Unfortunately, however, the artist does not appreciate the leisure the industrialists tender him. Art makes its own rules, which are not the rules of commerce. The artist is a stubborn individual and anyone who wishes to play his game must play it according to his rules. He realizes more than the casual observer that an industrialized society has changed the conditions of life that have given art a meaning. He knows, as history bears witness,

24 Ibid., p. 267.
that the art of the past has been produced in societies "which were for the most part stable, religious, agrarian; where the goodness of life was measured by a scale of values having little to do with the material values of industrialism; where men were never too far removed from nature to forget that the chief subject of art, in the final sense, is nature." 25

Leisure, however, is not an equivalent of art, as the present-day life of humanity verifies. Men, today, work at such terrific speed that when they are confronted with a span of leisure, the let-down is so great that their nervous system is not equal to the strain. They go to their play as they go to their work—in a state of lather. Modern industrialized society bears this out, and the arts will not easily survive such a condition. Men cannot work and play at cross-purposes. Such leisure is no leisure. Spiritual damage is bound to result. Either man will go to art in a spirit of boredom, characterized by passivity, or in a spirit of fashionable enterprise. To secure what they term culture, they will drive themselves to the art galleries, or whip themselves into reading poetry. 26

The second argument of the industrialists is that, with man's control of nature, literary masterpieces, chosen by the best critics, can be sent from city to city; symphonies can be broadcast; public libraries endowed. What more can be asked of industrialism? What more can a stupid agrarian desire? How can a creative spirit fail to meet such a challenge?

26 Ibid., p. 34.
That industrialism has met the challenge of distribution is certain. But that it has distributed good art is another matter. Many a modern classic has failed to win recognition because Gone With the Wind means more in dollars and cents to publishers and advertisers than the literary genius a classic may carry. Furthermore, with all the easy distribution of modern life, the man on the way to work will be more likely to whistle "One Dozen Roses" than a measure from Schubert's "Unfinished Symphony;" and the shop-girl will be more interested in the comic strip than in a selection from Shakespeare. Commercialized industrialism caters to the lowest common denominator. The Sunday papers and the movies bear that out.

Concerning libraries and art galleries, they, too, the agrarians maintain, have a baneful effect. Men no longer take pride in a personal library, a library where books are the personal friends of the family. And the pictures in an art gallery certainly cannot penetrate intimate connection with life. A notable painting on the wall of one's own home carries a much deeper message to the souls dwelling there than a visit to an art gallery once every twenty-five years.

It is necessary to note that the agrarian does not deny the real excellence of art in our time. What he wishes to do is to discover their general status in relation to the profound changes which industrialism has brought into human society. The excellence of art today is maintained, somewhat desperately, to be sure, in a back-against-the-wall heroism. The artist sees confusion of purpose in the political, the social, and the economic life of
man, and he finds that the current of ideas which once nurtured the creative power is in a state of civil war. Social conditions, to a large extent, at least, direct the temper and form of art. Now the artist is no longer "with society." He is "against" or "away from" society and the disturbed relation becomes his essential theme.

At the present time the Southern poets, possibly more than any other poets in the United States, realize that harmony between the artist and society must be regained; that this dissociation must be broken down; that society must be put in order. The Southern poet is measuring up to this task in two ways—by playing heroically his part as a person and as a citizen first and then by operating as a poet. As a person and as a citizen, the Fugitive poet is endeavoring to restore and preserve a social economy that is in danger of being replaced altogether by an industrial economy hostile to his interests. He takes his stand with an agrarian program. His hope, as a poet, lies in an agrarian restoration—

since only in an agrarian society does there remain much hope of a balanced life, where the arts are not luxuries to be purchased but belong as a matter of course in the routine of his living.27

And so each of the Southern poets takes his stand, first as a person and a citizen, then as a poet. Each has written at least one article advocating agrarianism because it offers the possibility of an integrated life, a life that will permit him as an artist to function to his fullest capacity.

As an artist, the agrarian produces a unique poetry. If one could adequately state the message that lies hidden in much of his poetry it would

27 Ibid., p. 51.
be a message calling men to arms to save the real values of society. It says, in spirit at least, that art has always shaped, in a beautiful and significant way, whatever there was to be shaped in life, whether secular, religious, private and public; that modern civilization has gone awry, that man must be saved by recapturing an harmonious relation between the artist and environment, for where the artist is at variance with his environment, solidity of life is threatened. As a poet, each of the agrarians adopts his own method in this enterprise of his poetry. What is significant is that each arrives at the same conclusion.
CHAPTER TWO
THE CRITICAL BASIS, FOUNDATIONS, OF THE NEW SOUTHERN LITERATURE

It is true of nations as it is of individuals that to extract from them the maximum amount of efficiency in scholarship, in holiness, in business, in militarism, or, to extract what may be called the sum-total of excellence in any field of human endeavor, there must be a certain amount of opposition rousing latent talent. "Not peace, but a sword." If the curtain of civilization ever falls on mankind, the cause will be that that certain section called the "minority group" has failed to make men alive to the democratic, the intellectual, the spiritual values of an age.

In the field of literature the same principle holds. Until a strong minority group is produced, not much will be accomplished that will credit the nation with excellent literary output. It is here that the critics form the minority group. When a people can boast of "real literary critics" it will soon produce a culture unique in its history. In the hand of the scholarly critic, the pen becomes a sword which cuts its way to true cultural value.

The United States has not been so fortunate as other countries in the number of its voices crying in the wilderness. Germany had its Heine who constantly reminded his people that they had still a long climb before they would reach the top of the ladder of learning. France had its Renan who railed at French mediocrity. But whom did the United States have? True,
there was Emerson, Lowell, Whitman who might have accomplished more if their
criticism had been strong enough to really arouse dormant talent. Even after
the Civil War there was no noticeable change in the method of criticism. The
few who had critical ability took a fast boat to Europe.¹

Some explanation can be offered for this indifference. America was on
the move. Between the establishment of the first permanent English settle-
ment in America in 1608 and the admission of New Mexico and Arizona into the
Union in 1912, the nation had travelled on foot a distance of approximately
three thousand miles. With the building of a nation, America needed con-
fidence in itself. Its very existence depended upon its material gains; and
before it had the opportunity to lay firm hold on cultural values, when it
might have done so because many areas were nicely settled and had comfortable
living, the terrific drive that had characterized the nation in its frontier
movement failed to subside; instead it swung its tremendous energy over to
the new Gospel of Progress.²

This social life has grown and changed so rapidly, so many
racial strains have merged themselves in it, so many territories
have opened before it, this life has indeed existed in such flux
that the idea of molding it has scarcely entered our calculations.
It was this that prevented for so long the development of criti-
cism in America.³

When America had achieved a more than fair degree of economic independence
and security, it became more subdued in its denunciation of foreign critics
and less bitter to its own satirists. The fact that "it allowed its 'giddy

¹Van Wyck Brooks, "The Critical Movement in America," in Literary Opinion in
²Ibid., p. 46.
³Ibid., p. 47.
minds' to turn from foreign quarrels and defensives to a healthy doubt about native life and its productions in manners and art" marked the beginning of a critical spirit. Although this critical spirit was more marked in other fields relating to human endeavor, it played a part in the field of literature.4

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century the dearth of critics became apparent. It also became apparent that the country needed men and women who were willing to make criticism their life work if it was to have a true bearing on American culture. The atmosphere became alive with a certain skeptical spirit and artists were needed to lay hold and produce a criterion of value.

The hour had arrived for setting up an American school of criticism that would face the ticklish duty of reconciling intelligent artists with their native birthright, and yet of developing in both them and the public sounder principles of appreciation and judgment.5

Through the medium of those many American magazines which were founded solely for the furtherance of poetry and criticism, culture received its opportunity. It is through them that one can trace the literary manners and ideas of the last several decades. They indicate the literary pulse of an age, they are the instruments which carry the vital literary productions and which stir up talent and vitalize it. It was the critical magazine that laid the foundation for a school of criticism in America.6

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5Ibid., p. XIX.
The South was not behind in this movement. In fact, it had good reason to further a project of this kind for, being naturally a proud section, they resented being labelled by the North as the little child in the family with the glandular disturbances and inferior complexes. Both before and after the war, they showed spirit in the founding of hundreds of forgotten magazines. They wanted a Journal which would make them feel that they had intellectual ability, that their way of life was good, and that the South was not the "Sahara of the Bozart" as Mencken had labelled it.

It was not long before the North became cognizant of Southern scholarship in their own magazines. Mencken remarked that for the first two years of the existence of the American Mercury (1924-) the South supplied twenty-three contributors and fifty-five contributions, while New England had supplied only twenty-four contributors and forty-one contributions. This "good showing of the South" was to the editor the best evidence of growing critical intelligence. Scribner's also passed its comments concerning the progress of Southern writers. It claimed that the South was experiencing a revival for in one of their issues there were nine contributions from Southern writers; furthermore, their Table of Contents from other issues gave proof that the South was producing writers of worth.

Southern magazines portray the struggle of the South to bridge the gap between the Southern writer and his audience. But like the story of many magazines, they had great difficulty in maintaining an existence and many and

8 Ibid., p. 197.
The study of the history of each of these magazines and their place in the development of Southern culture would form an interesting occupation. But because the Fugitive Magazine was representative of what was best in aim and publication, it shall be given more space here.

The Fugitive was given birth at Nashville, Tennessee, by a group of instructors and alumni of Vanderbilt University. The name is an interesting one for, as the writers themselves claimed, they fled "from nothing faster than the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South." The "Fugitives" illustrate the advantage of working in group. It was in the home of Sidney Hirsch and James Frank, the latter a Nashville business man, that John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, Stanley Johnson, W. C. Curry, and others met to exchange poems for criticism. Each brought carbon copies of his work and far into the night they discussed each other's work in an informal manner. Here was real criticism from men who had high literary standards. In 1922 a great deal of material had been collected and so they decided to start a modest poetry magazine, the first issue of which appeared in April. Soon others of note contributed among whom were William Frierson, William Elliott, Merrill Moore, Ridley Wills, and Robert Penn Warren. Leading American poets and critics gave verbal and written support. Louis Untermeyer selected a number of Fugitive poems for his "Anthology of American Verse" and Robert Graves voiced his appreciation of their excellent efforts. It is interesting to note that the financial end was aided by the Nashville Retailers' Association.

criticism in New York. James Branch Cabell formulated his own private theories and wrote estimates of books with great clarity. Archibald Henderson wrote of Shaw and the drama. Frances Newman produced a small but significant body of criticism. Most distinguished of all Southern critics is Allen Tate, who wrote in The New Republic, The Criterion, and in The Hound and Horn. Few Southerners read these, however. H. L. Mencken, although scarcely recognized as a Southerner, thundered away at America.

He wrote a history of American manners, howled into perdition the genteel superstitions of culture and dignity, and provided a basis for evaluating the realistic principle in fiction for what it was worth. His own criticism will probably be remembered chiefly for the humor that accompanied its purgative effects.

Tate and Mencken, although at opposite poles, lessened that distance by a common interest in Southern affairs. Tate, particularly, influenced by his own critical doctrine, his literary practice, his loyalty, the force of logic, battled for Southern tradition on home ground.

II

The high-aiming cultural Southern magazines, like the Fugitive, carried what was best in poetry and criticism. But it was modern poetry that it carried and as such it presented a problem to those accustomed to taking a poem at its face value. The poetry of Tate, Pound, Eliot, or Crane cannot be read as one would read Hamlet's soliloquy or Lord Byron's apostrophe to the ocean.

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16 Ibid., p. 196.
18 Donald Davidson, op. cit., p. 196.
Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean roll,
Ten thousand fleets sail over thee in vain...

is obvious in its meaning. It presents no problem. But what meaning does
one get to the puzzling allusions of such lines as--

Open it and see whether coiled on the bed
Or cringing by the wall a savage beast
Maybe with golden hair, with deep eyes
Like a bearded spider on a sunlit floor...

Here the reader of poetry is presented with a task of deciphering some associa-
tion of ideas clear only to the writer himself. This should not prove too
great a discouragement, however, since the poets themselves do not always
understand each other. Take the interesting example Corinne J. Gladding
gives in a letter to a certain editor. She writes:

You may be amused to know that I once asked Mr. Tate whether
or not he understood T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" on first read-
ing. He replied, "Oh, no, but I was so impressed that I wrestled
with the poem fourteen hours trying to comprehend its meaning."
The fact that Mr. Tate, himself a brilliant poet had to "wrestle"
comforted me, a mere English teacher. 19

There have been many individuals interested in the literary field who
have felt utter helplessness in the face of much of the modern poetry now
written. Most of it is shrouded in a gloomy fog with no sun to lift it. The
poet through symbols which are known to him alone produces a piece of art
which may mirror back to him a variety of his experiences but which, to the
reader, may give back nothing more than a few fine images lost in a number of
lines; furthermore, these images may mean mostly anything. One of the an-
swers to the situation is that poetry, like all the fine arts, belongs only

and the puzzling allusions of these poets. To top it off, let him come in contact with the writings of Max Eastman and his denunciation of the poetry of the unintelligibles, and ten to one, unless he makes a further sincere study of modern poetry, he will be inclined to reject it in no uncertain terms.

Why does modern poetry present so difficult a problem? First, the concentrated and condensed metaphor of the "metaphysicals" is one reason. Metaphysical poetry, and the poetry of the Southern writers is largely metaphysical, is complex, since its inherent quality is to reconcile widely divergent associations. The metaphysical poetry of the past always suggested some central idea which was openly stated in the poem. This is not always true of modern metaphysical verse for here the central idea may not be stated logically in the poem at all. Then, too, the trouble may be due to the extreme compression of syntax or the elliptical nature of the poet's use of language. Furthermore, it may be that the reader's ignorance extends to the whole symbolism on which a poem is based.22 This intense compression and mental subtlety of modern poetry, its complex associations, its material drawn from associations private and particular to the personality of the poet—all these make a severe demand on the intellectual ability of the reader. To say the least, like the critic, the lover of poetry must have a workable knowledge of history in order to understand the times which have produced such poetry; of philosophy, in order to understand the ideas about the

22Elizabeth Drew, Directions in Modern Poetry, New York: W. W. Norton, 1940, p. 80.
writing and in its reading all the intellectual power one has.\textsuperscript{24}

Modern poetry is difficult today because people have lost the art of reading—and this in an age when the presses have all but stripped nature of its trees to supply the printed word. Progressive education with its impressionistic doctrine has produced so many illiterates that we have almost become a nation without letters. Progressive education has taught that one need only be passive when reading poetry and that then something will be done to one. Perhaps this idea goes back even farther than the Romantic movement when for the first time in Western art the idea was promulgated that poetry was chiefly or even wholly an emotional experience.\textsuperscript{25} Now what is meant by an emotional experience? How does it differ from an intellectual experience? Are both the emotional experience and the intellectual experience responsible for the poetic experience or is there still something else?

If by an emotional experience we mean one in which we find ourselves moved, then we mean nothing; we are only translating a Latin word into English: a tautology. If by an intellectual experience we mean that we are using our minds on the relations of words, the relation of words and rhythm, the relation of the abstract words to the images, all the relations together—and if, moreover, we succeed in reducing all these things to the complete determination of logic, so that there is nothing left over, then this intellectual experience is a tautology similar to that of the emotional experience: we are simply using our intellects, as before we were emotionally being moved. But, if on the other hand, as in the great seventeenth-century poets, you find that the most exhaustive logic, applied to the texture of image and metaphor, fails to turn up any inconsistency, and at the same time fails to get all the meaning of the poem into a logical statement, you are participating in a poetic experience. And both intellect and emotion become meaningless in discussing it.\textsuperscript{26}


\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., p. 271.

\textsuperscript{26}Ibid., p. 271.
To illustrate the quotation, take the six line poem of William Browne "Epitaph on the Countess Dowager of Pembroke" which is neither metaphysical in nature nor romantically modern:

Underneath this sable Herse  
Lyes the subject of all verse:  
Sydney's sister, Pembroke's Mother;  
Death, ere thou hast slaine another  
Faire and learned and good as she,  
Time shall throw a dart at thee.

It is necessary to analyze this poem in order to understand it. In its analyzation one must know the difference between Time and Death which are dramatically personified and in conflict. Now Death, in one of the major modes of poetry, is conceived as the work of Time; consequently here the reader must subject himself to a dissociation of ideas, and see Time turning against himself, so that the destruction of Death is actually the destruction of Time. These distinctions being made, no inconsistency appears, and nothing that has been said in the poem contradicts itself. The certain particulars that the poet has offered are irreducible: the Sydney and Pembroke families (who will occasion this reversal of the order of nature), and then there is the dart, a dramatic and particular image that does not contradict, yet which is so elusive that a logical paraphrase becomes impossible.²⁷ Or, in other words, the reader has applied his intellect logically at all angles of the poem, he has not been able to trace any inconsistency either in image or metaphor, and yet he finds it impossible to capture the complete meaning of the poem and couch it into a neat paraphrase. This is a "poetic experience" and probably gives the reason why the poetry of the moderns is unpopu-

²⁷Ibid., p. 272.
lar. What the present generation needs to do is to recover the art of reading. It should also steer clear of that softening, passive condition. Too long have readers of poetry sat passive. They have accepted only that poetry which read itself into them. That is the easy way. But--

...look upon language as a field of study, not as an impressionistic debauch. If we wish to understand anything there is only the hard way; if we wish to understand Donne or Eliot, perhaps we had better begin, young, to read the classical languages, and a little later the technical logicians. There is possibly no other way.28

And, finally, let the complainant of modern poetry beware. If he boasts that he cannot understand Pound, Crane, Eliot, Tate, or Ransom, he probably does not understand Donne, Marvell, Sidney, or Spenser; furthermore, there may be a goodly portion of William Shakespeare that he does not speak too much about.

Poetry in all ages has devoted itself to the exploration of language. It keeps words from becoming deadweights by divesting them of their common meaning and using them in new, startling ways. That is one reason why the history of English literature falls into periods because the pendulum of language tends to swing with a complete curve. Poetry has always been on the move. The eternal spirit in man is a restless spirit and will never be content to "stay put." The universe is scarcely large enough to contain it.

Modern poetry has clothed itself in new vestments of various hues. The gold, the white, the green, the purple, the black, reflect the joys and sorrows of man. But it is the black that largely forms the background to the poet's soul, for it is the black engendered by the Great War and its aftermath—disillusionment, dismay, fear, the sense of disintegration both per-

28 Ibid., p. 270.
sonal and social. One can feel a poignant personal drama taking place portraying some outer and inner disorder. 29 And so if the poetry of today is more complex, more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, it is so because it is the means of using force in dislocating language so that the battleground which modern poets have inherited may be portrayed.

The first major poet responsible for the new technique was Eliot, and what is said of him holds true in a large measure of the Nashville group, for he influenced them. It was not long before others sought to do what Eliot had done, though a rather large number failed to grasp the situation.

But most of those so strongly influenced by Eliot—end by Eliot's influences—captured nothing except his (and Jules Laforgue's) idiom. His abrupt allusiveness, his style at once coarse and subtle, his emotional acuteness, could be imitated but not captured; his unacknowledged disciples merely parodied the trick of disassociation, the erudition without Eliot's wisdom, the gesture without (if I may misquote) emotion. The results were inevitable: sterile intellectualism at one extreme, infantile barbarism at the other. 30

Of the poets who reached Eliot's plane of poetry were Archibald MacLeish, Conrad Aiken, Horace Gregory and, of particular interest here, the entire Nashville group. Those influenced by Eliot in England were Stephen Spender, W. H. Auden and C. Day Lewis. With their highly-sensitized nerves, these men produced a literature in an era which gave no security, no peace; and their works show the doubts and the discontinuity of the times. 31

Although Eliot's poetry flouted the expectations of the people, he did

29 Elizabeth Drew, Directions in Modern Poetry, New York: W. W. Norton, 1940, pp. 91-92.
31 Ibid., p. 22.
not do it in a sensational way. Eliot was too much the master to do this. Besides being a technician, he was an intellectual revolutionist, and being intellectually honest, he was forced to turn away from the "whole liberal-democratic-romantic" swing of culture, away from their symbols, attitudes and techniques. Eliot recognized that writing was in a worn-out condition. Too long had it been characterized by "conventional diction, stock themes and attitudes, exhausted symbols." He confronted an exhausted civilization in the throes of disintegration. His poetry was the attempt to bridge "the gulf between an ordered past and a chaotic present with his own person."

It may be well to ask at this point whether Eliot and those who imitated him conceived the modern way of writing from forces outside themselves or from something completely new emanating from their own abilities and personalities. No, it was not completely new. France was acquainted with the complete break in idiom and Eliot brought it from France. There Laforgue, Valéry, and Rimbaud were the masters.

Many of the ideas behind this new type of poetry were not new. Rimbaud, Verlaine and Mallarme had all insisted that the only reality in life was the inner reality, that the world in which the poet lived transcended the world of common experience; they taught years earlier that the appeal of poetry should never be to the logic of the intelligence, but to the logic of the imagination—that its method should not be one of direct statement or description, but one of oblique image and suggestion. Eliot, however, was mainly influenced by Laforgue, whose flavor is different from that of the early Symbolists. Eliot's early poems have the same underlying theme as Laforgue's—the damage to human values caused by the invasion of an industrial civilization.

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33 Ibid., p. 117.
34 Louis Untermeyer, op. cit., p. 21.
Since the poetry of the Southern writers uses the technique of the Symbolist school, it will be necessary, first, to define the term "symbol" and then to give a brief survey of its leaders and their theories so that the symbolism of the modern poets may be adequately understood.

III

If there were no symbolism there would be no language, no literature. Words themselves are symbols, a combination of letters that stand for something else. Carlyle made the statement that man, consciously or unconsciously, lives, works and has his being through symbols, and that those ages that recognized and prized symbolical worth are accounted the noblest. It was this idea that impregnated the minds of those men who started the movement called Symbolism which so profoundly influenced the course of French literature.\(^{36}\)

In order to achieve the desired effect, the writer was to intimate things rather than to state them definitely and plainly. Ordinary language, not big or supple enough to handle sensations and feelings which take on a different shade of color and tone with almost every moment of consciousness, had to give way to a special language that would make use of symbols. These symbols were really metaphors detached from their subjects and one had to guess what the images were being applied to. Symbolism, as it was considered in the nineteenth century, was to communicate unique personal feelings through a medley of metaphors which captured the complicated association of ideas.\(^{37}\)

In order to study the Symbolist Movement, one need go back no farther


than the writings of Baudelaire and Mallarmé of the nineteenth century. These men had found in the American Poe ideas that they advocated. Poe had already formulated their doctrine. His disembodied poetry, the absolute music of his uncanny tales, his criticism, his demand for pure aestheticism made him a model for the French symbolists. He had a definite effect on the French masters.38

Like to the home of Sidney Hirsch and James Frank to which the "Fugitives" resorted in the 20's, so the home of Mallarmé became a meeting place for such men as Huysmans, Laforgue, Vielé-Griffin, Paul Claudel, Paul Valéry, Henri de Régnier, Rémy de Gourmont, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons, George Moore and W. B. Yeats. Mallarmé, like many of the "Fugitives," taught English for a living. He wrote and published little, but that which he did publish came in for a great deal of criticism from the people of his day. It was labelled as "so much nonsense," and yet because of its seriousness, it was given a great deal of consideration.39

Mallarmé advocated that a word be shaken free of its everyday meaning. "To name an object is to suppress three-quarters of the joy of the poem, which is made of the happiness of guessing, little by little--to suggest, that is to reveal the dream."40 Mallarmé contended that if a poem were shut up in too precise a form, the soul of the poem, which should deal with the interior movements of the inner life of dream, would not attain its purpose.

38 Alfred Kreymborg, Our Singing Strength, New York: Coward-McCann, 1929, p. 335.
40 Ibid., p. 20.
Besides Mallarmé, three other major symbolists must be given consideration here--Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Jules Laforgue.

Baudelaire used as his subject matter the lowest type of humanity that Paris could vomit on its streets--prostitutes, assassins, drunkards, tramps. It was no wonder that the poetry of the Symbolists fell into disrepute because so much of it reeked of decay--and "nice people" don't like that type of poetry. Baudelaire claimed that from such subject matter he could extract good, that he could find beauty where no one had ever found it before. Furthermore, he subjected himself to sensations that could be aroused only by abnormal means, such as the use of opium and hashish. And strange to say, with the exception of one experiment in conversational verse, almost every line of Baudelaire is characterized by sheer poetry.

Baudelaire held with Edgar Allan Poe that the short poem was a psychological necessity, that music was important in verse, and that sadness was an intrinsic element in beauty. To the idea of Poe that supernatural qualities were fundamental, Baudelaire added irony and macabre humor.

The two disciples of Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine, held with their master that the dream was the only thing. It was Rimbaud who influenced Verlaine's poetry and who also played havoc with Verlaine's life. Verlaine was a married man and his wife was expecting her first child when Rimbaud suggested the open road to him. Delighted and infatuated with Rimbaud and abetted by the fact that he disliked living with his wife's family,
Verlaine set off with him. It was not long, though, before Verlaine became uneasy, not only because of his wife and child, but because the hallucinations to which both he and his friend were subject, reverted to a nauseating taste when confronted with reality. Rimbaud realized, too, that he had made Verlaine a victim of his own maladjustment. Both ran amuck in literary circles, visited the dens of thieves, and companioned with the scourings of the highway. Once both were arrested for discussing imaginary robberies and murders in the railroad station at Arras. It was under Rimbaud's influence that Verlaine wrote his "Art Poetique" which summarized the principles of the Mallarmean Symbolists.

Car nous voulons la nuance encor,
Pas la couleur, rien que la nuance!
Oh! la nuance seule fiancée
Le reve au reve et la flute au cor!

For we want the nuance,
Nothing of color, only the nuance!
Oh! the nuance alone weds
The dream to the dream and the flute to the horn.

Finally, in Jules Laforgue, who was born in 1860 and who died at the early age of twenty-seven, we have one who most influenced the writers of our time. He is sometimes assumed to belong to the Symbolists--but with a difference. He rejected their famous doctrine "that the interior life represented the only reality." Laforgue would not beat the retreat from everyday reality. He held that man has two psychic streams--the conscious and the unconscious. These two he subtly revealed in his poetry and it is this that allies him to Eliot, Tate, and the rest.

43Edmund Wilson, op. cit., pp. 272 ff.
In poems, written in ordinary conversational language, about flirtations, railway stations, pianos playing in the suburbs, the little miseries of winter, or in poems built around the refrains of old songs, he accomplished, in the 'eighties of the last century, almost everything in verse which we consider to be the special expression of this modern, post-war, disintegrated age. ... Laforgue managed to convey, in verse arranged, not logically but according to the association of ideas and with a subtle use of symbolism (not the deliberate symbolism of Mallarme but a symbolism springing naturally from the subject), the mystery that lies behind the most trivial happenings.44

Eliot was influenced by Laforgue as Tate was influenced by Eliot. They have the same underlying theme—the damage to human value caused by the invasion of an industrial civilization. To portray this they have produced an "elaborate network of imagery" by which they hope to capture the nuances of the mind together with a social predicament which almost defies clarification. As stated before, this fact was significant for their symbolism was taking strides at the time when psychologists were interested in the "conscious" and the "subconscious."45 To produce a balance between these two, the real and the unreal, to perform a harmonious adjustment between the dream and the reality is the thing that characterizes the symbolism of today. It is this that differentiates them from the French symbolists.

The French Symbolists not only can but ought to be read with a lulled intelligence, for the effect of their poems is deliberately made to depend on suggestion only, on images sensed in that half-awake state when they are most allusive and least limited. Eliot's poetry has all the suggestiveness of the French Symbolists, but it has a much more complex kind of organization than their poetry has, and further, the suggestiveness manifests itself only to the alert intellect.46

44 Mary M. Colum, op. cit., pp. 336-337.
46 David Daiches, op. cit., p. 112.
IV

Since the poems of Allen Tate, of John Crowe Ransom and others of their group can be classified as metaphysical, and since much of the present-day poetry of the other American writers is metaphysical in nature, it will be necessary to consider what the characteristics of that poetry are before proceeding to analyze directly the poetry of the Nashville group.

In the foregoing paragraphs an attempt has been to show how modern poets are heirs to the symbolists. They endeavored to catch "an elusive and involved state of consciousness" which, in its final form was intended to have technical perfection. Hence it was but natural that modern poets would look back to that seventeenth century group, known as the "Metaphysical Poets."

The world at their time resembled somewhat the world of today—a world of doubts not too far removed from the doubts and perplexities which confront modern writers.

The metaphysicals of the seventeenth century witnessed political upheaval and religious persecution. Catholic priests became the quarry of the huntress. Princes and favorites were sentenced to death before they were hardly aware of their lost prestige. Theology was forced to give place to Science, and although the discoveries had shown the possibilities of the physical universe, yet men were wary. Betrayal was nothing new and there were still so many unknown facts that might reveal horror in their discovery. Then, too, there was the new learning and writers were at a loss how to couple it with received opinion. This was the background of the seventeenth-
century of the metaphysicals. 47 With such a background--

... the best minds could not produce verse that was "simple, sensuous, and passionate." On the contrary, the outstanding work of the school is complex, intellectual, and at times agonizedly skeptical. 48

Any definition given of metaphysical poetry must acknowledge that its distinctive characteristic is in its intellectual emphasis. 49

... to make poetry more cerebral, to resolve the conflict between sensation and ratiocination, between emotion and reason, between passion and logic. 50

These are the qualities that make the modern writer similar to the seventeenth-century metaphysical. They also have a point of difference. The modern metaphysical is more enigmatic, more complex, due to the fact that he aims to "reconcile widely divergent associations." In seventeenth-century metaphysical verse some central idea openly suggested these associations in the poem; but in modern metaphysical verse the central idea may not be logically stated in the poem at all because the poet fears that the overtones and the undertones of his images lose their vibrancy and force by an open statement. 51

Dr. Johnson stated his definition of metaphysical poetry in his usual forceful way. He gave the core of the method when he called it "heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together." The word yoked is too far-fetched for the moderns. They would substitute the word "united." Cleanth Brooks

48 Ibid., p. 150.
51 Elizabeth Drew and John L. Sweeney, Directions in Modern Poetry, New York: W. W. Norton, 1940, pp. 80-81.
takes that definition and modifies it with Coleridge's statements that the poet attempts the "reconcilement of opposite and discordant qualities—(with the emphasis on reconcilement)—of sameness with difference, of the general with the concrete, the idea with the image."52 This is achieved by the work of the imagination. Brooks uses I. A. Richards' statement to clarify it.

Richards, he says, distinguishes between two types of poetry—that poetry which leaves out the opposite and discordant qualities of an experience, and, secondly, that poetry in which the imagination includes the opposite and discordant qualities with the ability to resolve them. In the first group, says Richards, there are sets of impulses which run parallel; in the second group, there is an extraordinary heterogeneity of the distinguishable impulses, impulses which are opposed. Because the first class does not bear ironical contemplation, or the bringing in of the opposite, the complementary impulses, those poems become unstable. The poetry of the second, in which irony is so constantly a characteristic, is poetry of high order; if it should not happen to bear up, the reason is that the discordant materials have not been reconciled. According to Richards then, metaphysical poetry is a poetry in which the opposition of impulses which are united is extreme; according to Coleridge, it is a poetry in which the poet attempts the reconcilement of qualities which are opposite or discordant in the extreme. This definition places the emphasis on the power of the imagination for it takes the heterogeneous ideas that Johnson mentions and relates them into an organic

whole. Johnson furthermore illustrates the definition. He states that a successful comparison is like the intersection of two lines; the greater the distance to the point in which they intersect, the better the comparison. When there is too close a comparison in the objects compared, there may be no true comparison at all. Then there will be no convergence of lines, but a parallelism of lines. The seventeenth-century tendency was toward parallelism in comparison. 53

The romantic tradition had its day, and so it was but natural that metaphysical verse should come back strong, for that is the type most opposed to the romantic.

There is no type of thinking more opposite to the romantic than that of the seventeenth-century poets and their spiritual followers in modern times. So many questions are probed and sounded by this difference, variations on the doctrine of original sin, humility and true and false glory, nature as god or devil. 54

With these statements in mind, it may be said that Ransom, Tate, Davidson, and Warren belong to the modern metaphysical school. They regarded poetry as being closely allied to ideas, and these ideas are ideas "which are at base religious, and which make a philosophy." 55 To them poetry is an integral part of life, not something decorative.

In a society in which the social and economic wheels run smoothly, the poetry would mirror individuals functioning harmoniously in their faculties. But in a society run by science, such as is ours, the poet is deeply conscious of the disturbed relationship—and this becomes his theme.

53 Ibid., pp. 40-43.
55 Ed Winfield Parks, op. cit., p. CXXV.
... the ablest of the modern writers have voiced through their poetry a philosophy of living. Although it has presented ideas as well as emotions, this poetry has retained a warmth and grace which is traditional—and it has, above all, remained distinctly Southern. 56

56 Ibid., p. CXXVII
CHAPTER THREE

PRINCIPAL POETS OF THE SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIVAL:

THE FUGITIVES

The outstanding characters in the Southern literary revival first attained recognition by the publication of the short-lived poetry magazine The Fugitive. John Crowe Ransom gave impetus to the adventure. Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, and Robert Penn Warren were his whole-souled supporters. John Peale Bishop, although never a member of the Fugitive group, was allied to them in the philosophy of his thought.

In the early issues of the Fugitive, the members concealed their true names, a fact which caused much speculation among the readers. Two notable critics went so far as to say that all the various poems were the work of one man. When the October issue of 1922 appeared, it carried for the first time the true names of the poets. The following key decodes the aliases: 1

Key

Marpha... Walter Clyde Curry
Robin Gallivant... Donald Davidson
Philora... James M. Frank
L. Cafer... Sidney Merton Hirsch
Jonathan David... Stanley Johnson
Dendric... Merrill Moore
Roger Prim... John Crowe Ransom
Drimlonigher, and King Badger... Alec B. Stevenson
Henry Feathertop... Allen Tate

There were other poets who were directly or indirectly connected with

the Fugitive group and who were influenced by Fugitive policy. They include: Jesse Stuart, William Davidson, Marshall Morgan, Richmond Croom Beatty, Edwin Richardson Frost, W. R. Moses, Manson Radford, George Marion O'Donnell, and Randall Jarrell. Although the publication of The Fugitive ceased after four years, it was not a sign of decay, for the poets continued to develop along rather individual lines. Today they rank, not only as the leading poets of the South, but as the leading poets of our time.2

Like all the great poets who have had something important to say for their generation, as well as for all time, these Southern poets are chiefly concerned with the social and economic struggle, rather than with personal problems, or with personal problems as a part of the struggle. The core of many of their poems deals with the ills that people suffer in a machine age. Recognizing that modern life tempts people to become hard, indifferent, and inclined to make speed and efficiency, power and money their gods, these modern poets had to resort to a form of poetry that would portray a concrete and immediate realization of life. They found the philosophical speculations in the poetry of the Victorians or the idealizing qualities in that of the Romantics inadequate to their needs. Such poetry as theirs could not be romantic or ornamental. To portray the hard, concreteness of their subject matter, they were forced to adopt a language capable of carrying such a weight, a language that "subordinated sensuous images and melodic harmonies

to the adumbration of a rigidly conceived idea."³ Or, as Tate has put it--

A serious poet is preoccupied with the writing of poems that fuse an intensely felt ordinary experience, an intense moral situation, into an intensely realized art.⁴

The intensely felt ordinary experience compels these poets to interpret the social and political traditions that have been obscured, so that they may save the South from high-powered industrialism by holding up the inherited agrarian way of life and by calling a halt to the death-rush of modernistic civilization, chiefly by pausing and looking back. A poetry destined to encompass such an area had to be of masculine strength. Because it reflected the discord, not only in the social and economic world, but the discord in the very souls of men, in its own nature it had to be a poetry of discord. This discord was attained by juxtaposing the traditionally poetic and the common colloquial, and by the establishment of a sharp-edged diction.⁵ Hence, both in its thought and in its technique, the intelligence had to do its part.

One discerns intellectual kinship in the writings of the "Fugitives" although the poetry of each is distinctly individual. Davidson, for example, has worked through affirmation as his poem "The Tall Men" testifies. There is a brilliant ironic contrast between such men as Andrew Jackson, John Sevier, or McCrory, and the modern man--

Feet in immaculate leather

... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...
Speeding with effort only of ankle and wrist.

... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...

By the positive virtues which he gives to his "Tall Men," he portrays a great strength, a strength which Americans have forfeited because wheel and bolt have taken the place of brain and brawn.

Ransom portrays the same situation in American life, but in a different way. He works through negation instead of through affirmation. Old women, old mansions, even little Janet dispossessed of her hen—these convey the same deep message of something that should be present in our civilization, something which it once had when Nature was man's teacher. Take Ransom's last stanza of "Blue Girls."

For I could tell you a story which is true;
I know a lady with a terrible tongue,
Blear eyes fallen from blue,
All her perfections tarnished—and yet it is not long
Since she was lovelier than any of you.

These lines are a complete commentary, not only on what Southern life threatens to become, but they are a portrayal of the devastation taking place in the very souls of men who have permitted themselves to become mechanized.

Again in Tate's poetry one recognizes any number of images shrouded in darkness. In Warren the smell of earth is strong. Whatever method each of the Fugitives pursues, it may be said that while they remain distinctly Southern in their writing, yet their poetry is universal in its nature; it serves no political party, it has no alliance whatever with propaganda art. It is a poetry that answers the needs of men.
In 1923 Mr. Allen Tate and Mr. Ridley Wills produced a book printed privately in Nashville, Tennessee, entitled *The Golden Mean* and *Other Poems*. It cannot be definitely ascertained what purpose the authors had in printing the book, but one can determine from certain statements, however, that their friendship for each other permitted the good-natured bantering. Speaking of Tate, Mr. Wills says that he "is a bright and snickering figure on a fictitious horizon of bathetic intimacy with the rugged outline of Parnassus." Unless this statement be bound up with the contents of the *Golden Mean* and *Other Poems*, it is liable to assume a meaning not intended by its writer. Here it is of interest only in so far as it is representative of other criticisms made by reviewers who care neither for Tate's poetry nor for his critical theories. They do not care for Tate's poems for they are too symbolical; they do not care for his critical theories for they are too profound. Hence, the old way out for them is the way taken by Max Eastman in his "Cult of the Unintelligibles." For instance, William Rose Benét says that the poetry of Tate is full of phraseological feats which are inexact and inexpressive; that his poems are symbolically irritating; that he lacks genuine emotions of strength and simplicity; that he writes like a man in the library; and finally, that his intellectuality stifles the poetry within him. A similar criticism in another review says that Tate's obscurity

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6The first and only copy apparently available of the *Golden Mean* and *Other Poems* is in the hands of Rev. Lyle Kilvington, M.A., Rector of Episcopal Church in Cleveland, Tennessee.


is due definitely to a lack of poetic ability, a lack of any deep passion or intuitive grasp of life.\footnote{Edna Lou Walton, "On Analyzing Allen Tate's Poetry," New York Times Book Review, Vol. 92, (Dec. 1937), p. 5.} Statements of this nature leave Tate with a very thin veneer. Happily, however, he is not left stranded, for other critics and poets have recognized his substantial poetic gifts and that at a time when he was still more or less obscure. One of these is T. S. Eliot; another is Morton D. Zabel. Zabel recognizes the critical intelligence behind Tate's poetry. He holds up such poems as "The Wolves," "Mother and Son," "The Subway," "The Mediterranean" as among the finest American poems of our time, saying that "the author had written under the impact of imaginative experience so strong that it immediately gave him his necessary style and symbols." He says Tate's poetry is by turns serene and savagely intense, written in a style that shows superb economy and richness of means.\footnote{Morton Dauwen Zabel, "The Creed of Memory," Poetry, Vol. 40, (Apr. 1932), p. 39.}

Just as one can often trace the theme of a writer of fiction by reading one or the other of his poems, so in the case of Allen Tate, one need read only his novel The Fathers to find what themes his poetry carries. Because Tate is deeply conscious of the mortality of man, he has a great number of images that have to do with twilight, dusk, darkness, night, the dead. In his leading doctrine as a critic he wishes "to recover, define and possess the only framework of accepted and traditional ideas available to him. The effort of honesty to exhibit the essential strength or weakness of the human soul, becomes in the example of Tate's poetry an exhibition of the state of
man when the framework of ideas which he accepts is rejected, ignored, and opposed by his environment.\textsuperscript{11} Man is essentially weak and essentially strong and it is this strength and weakness that Tate endeavors to capture in his poems even if his so-called framework is ignored and opposed by his environment. Now what is meant by the framework of accepted and traditional ideas? Man through the centuries has accumulated a certain number of experiences. From father to son and again from father to son, and so on, the experiences have multiplied. From these experiences man has learned that certain things are undesirable and this knowledge enables him to cope with nature, with his own necessities. Tradition is the habitual way to act, and it has been found that it is best to act in the tradition.

Just as the mariner upon the ocean depends upon an inherited and concrete version of sailing in order to cope with the dangers of the ocean, so does man operate in history and in nature.\textsuperscript{12} Man must beware, however, of succumbing to two extremes. The first extreme is that of giving himself over to nature because he may consider nature as "an irreducible and mystical process" which he cannot control and in which he can only immerse himself. The second extreme is regarding nature as a machine which can be controlled because it is subject to immutable ways. Brooks says that he who regards nature as something in which he can only immerse himself because he cannot control it, is guilty of a lack of abstraction; he who regards nature as a machine, is guilty of complete abstraction. To keep a fine balance it is necessary to grasp both extremes and establish

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 421.
a medium so that he may save himself from pure mysticism or pure industrialism. Brooks cites Tate's example of the horse. He says it may be regarded as an irreducible quality, or as horsepower; the whole horse "cropping the blue grass on the lawn" is both an irreducible quality and horsepower.

Through experience science predicts how things can be made to work. Religion, on the other hand, tells how to view life in the proper perspective, how to keep a correct attitude toward the whole of life. It holds up every phase of life, shows the possibilities of man and nature, how all things influence each other, how necessary it is to see the extent and breadth of all things and how to keep them in their proper sphere.

It is at this point that various interpretations enter. The basis of religion, of course, is tradition, an inherited version of experience and of certain famous events, which are above nature, namely supernatural. Tate, who has taken over Ransom's ideas, says that the supernatural terms of religion are not intended to be taken as matter of fact, but as symbols, metaphors, fables, deliberate fictions which will aid one to look at the whole of life. Tate has accepted the metaphorical character of religious belief and has extended the notion, not only to poetry, but even to every detail of our sense experience.13

One must have deep within one's secret being a vast metaphor controlling all the rest: a belief in the innate evil of man's nature, and the need to face that evil, of which the symbol is the darkness, of which again the living image is man alone.14

The essential subject of Tate's poetry is contained within the above quota-

13 Ibid., pp. 422-423.
tion. The poet grasps the metaphors existentially, that is he is intensely aware of the concrete circumstances of his being while he contemplates the metaphors by which he lives. For instance, the poet may be a Southerner who is alive to literary, cultural, or historical problems; he may be an American who is aware of industrial dominance. Overshadowing this awareness is the idea that he is distinctly an individual, alone, unique, and "who must face the darkness, night, and death by himself." In an early issue of the Fugitive, Tate states this idea:

It is agreed, we assume, that the aesthetic problem confronting the poet is eminently practical—versification, diction, composition, in a word, mechanics being the elusive enemy to capture and subdue. The poet's individuality, his peculiar way of viewing the world, his "genius," informs the poem, although neither he nor any one else can explain the ens realissimum of that genius. And it is pretty well decided beforehand that his finished product must represent some phase of life as ordinarily perceived, and that he must look for his effects in new combinations of images representing only the constituted material world. It is possible that this notion, unlike the question of technique, is somewhat gratuitous and inadequate; and I believe that the unique virtue of the contemporary revolt is its break, in a positive direction, with the tyranny of representation.

In summarizing, one can trace, in Tate's poetry, with scarcely a deviation the pervading element of mortality—or the idea of impermanence; secondly, one is conscious of the physical process of death or decay. The breaking up of a culture, the crumbling of a society that has exploited itself—these elements, together with Tate's preoccupation with history and time, form the groundwork of his writing. The poet is aware of the present, now or past or future. For by experiencing the past along with the present, he makes the

15 Delmore Schwartz, op. cit., p. 424.
present the past, and masters it; and he alone is at the center of the ex-
perience out of which the future must come. 17

...there is a great deal of shallow nonsense in modern criti-
cism which holds that poetry—and this is a half-truth that is worse
than false—is essentially revolutionary. It is only indirectly
revolutionary: the intellectual and religious background of an age
no longer contains the whole spirit, and the poet proceeds to ex-
amine that background in terms of immediate experience. But the
background is absolutely necessary; otherwise all the arts, not
only poetry, would have to rise in a vacuum. Poetry does not dis-
pense with tradition; it probes the deficiencies of tradition.
But it must have a tradition to probe. 18

"Mother and Son," "Ode to the Confederate Dead," "The Cross," "The
Wolves" are subtle poems, highly symbolical, in the gripping strength of the
lines and the intellectual stimulation they produce. "The Cross" gives a
brilliant image of hatred of death, but of the necessity of it in order to
bring life.

There is a place that some men know,
I cannot see the whole of it
Nor how I came there. Long ago
Flame burst out of a secret pit
Crushing the world with such a light
The day-sky fell to moonless black,
The kingly sun to hateful night
For those, once seeing, turning back:

The poem in these first eight lines transports one to the bleak hill of Cal-
vary where "out of the secret pit" or the deep hole that held the cross of
Christ, a brilliant, soul-destroying, soul-vivifying light bursts forth. It
is the scene of life, the scene of death. And like in the "Sonnet of Christ-
mas" the great problem of belief, of faith, is at grips with man's intelli-

17Allen Tate, Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas, New York: Charles
Scribner's Sons, 1936, pref. XII.
18Ibid., p. 18.
For love so hates mortality
Which is the providence of life
She will not let it blessed be
But curses it with mortal strife,
Until beside the blinding rood
Within that world-destroying pit
--Like young wolves that have tasted blood,
Of death, men taste no more of it.

Here the whole scene holds in its grasp the mortality of man, his abhorrence and fear of death. In the spiritual and in the natural law, life cannot germinate unless "the seed falleth into the ground, dieth." Yet one senses all the aversion, all the struggling opposition of the ages as centered in every living thing to ward off dissolution, darkness, death, decay. And then--

Of life, without life to save,
or to die in order to live, for death brings life and out of the pit the brilliance of eternity, of salvation, illuminates the universe. But

A stag charged both at heel and head
which is an image conveying the picture of man between the devil and the deep sea, hating death, yet realizing the necessity of it, and eventually, the grip of mortality that will take him whether he wills it or no.

"Mother and Son" is more subtle, more symbolical than "The Cross." Here is the picture of a mother watching at a son's death-bed. The poem portrays a typical drama of family pride. Such qualities as--

...her importunate womanhood--

The falcon mother

Transfigured with her own devouring light:
and

To the dry fury of the woman's mind
are symbolical of the Southern adherence to custom, to established tradition, to all that the South stands for, and the Southern desire to perpetuate in the offspring this inherited tradition. Opposing this bulwark of established custom is the son—

Transfigured with her own devouring light:
The sick man craves the impalpable night
Hate, misery, and fear beat off his heart—
who endeavors to emancipate himself from all this family pride, from the accumulated evil tendencies of ancestors, so that he may strive at a new freedom. But the old holds sway. There will be no change, for the damp, dusty, murky atmosphere of the "family line" will thread its way along. How adequately the last six lines give this atmosphere to the poem.

The dreary flies lazy and casual
Stick to the ceiling, buzz along the wall,
O heart, the spider shuffles from the mould
Weaving, between the pinks and grapes, his pall.
The bright wallpaper, imperishably old,
Uncurls and flutters, it will never fall.

Consider the following poem in which Tate, in a perfect metaphor, holds forth the problem of belief and disbelief:

SONNET AT CHRISTMAS

This is the day His hour of life draws near
Let me get ready from head to foot for it
Most handily with eyes to pick the year
For small feed to reward a feathered wit.
Some men would see it an epiphany
At ease, at food and drink, others at chase
Yet I, stung lassitude, with ecstasy
Unspent argue the season's difficult case
So: Man, dull critter of enormous head,
What would he look at in the coiling sky?
But I must kneel again unto the Dead
While Christmas bells of paper white and red,
Figured with boys and girls spilt from a sled,
Ring out the silence I am nourished by.

Tate has epitomized in these fourteen lines the plight of a soul submerged in
the waters of doubt, unable to grasp at that which might bring peace and
stability and ease of mind. Would that he could believe or disbelieve! The
poet has captured this moment of experience and transferred into this sonnet
form which palpitates the experience.

Let me get ready from head to foot... .

Faith urges him to prepare for the great festival but unbelief sets in and he
must

...argue the season's difficult case

for he is a

...critter of enormous head

that has no room for that which the eyes cannot see or the hands cannot feel.
The story of Christmas might be true, but then again it might not be, in
which case he would kneel "unto the Dead," a thing he would not be guilty of.
The use of his symbols are most adequately chosen. The Christmas bells of
white and red are made of paper which ring out silence. The words "paper" and
"silence" convey the depth of the well of disbelief and the boys and girls
are on the sled of belief, but they are spilt therefrom; hence the quest for
faith, for belief is nourished by the silence of the bells, which is no
nourishment. The mastery of the form makes actual the immense plight in question. It has most minute shifts of emphasis, as in the neat point which begins the sestet, "So," and is made possible by an overflow of the eighth line; there is the subtle shift of tone in the fifth and sixth lines; and the triple rhyme which brings the poem to its conclusive line which is made to flow forth with the consummate ease of a Miltonic last line by beginning with a verb.19

In "The Last Days of Alice" Tate has written a poem that reflects the whole tendency of Western civilization. The irony is a complex, self-inclusive irony.

In "Last Days of Alice," the logical, self-consistent but inhuman world of Through the Looking-Glass becomes an ironical symbol of the modern world. The poet maintains most precisely the analogy between Alice gazing "learnedly down her airy nose" into the abstract world of the mirror, and modern man who has also turned his world into abstraction. The subsidiary metaphors--"Alice grown ... mammoth but not fat," symbolizing the megalomania of the modern; Alice "turned absent-minded by infinity" who "cannot move unless her double move," symbolizing the hypostasis of the modern--grow naturally out of the major symbolism. The poem is witty in the seventeenth-century sense; the reference to the Cheshire cat with his abstract grin, a witty comparison. But the wit, the sense of precision and complexity, is functional. It contributes the special quality of irony necessary to allow the poet to end his poem with the positive outcry:20

O God of our flesh, return us to Your Wrath,
Let us be evil could we enter in
Your grace, and falter on the stony path!

"The Wolves" is another poem of Tate that has the characteristics of fatality, mortality, and superstitious fear. One is aware of its meditative

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20 Cleanth Brooks, op. cit., p. 104.
slowness, of the halting lines that seem to pull back in fear of the "wolves in the next room waiting." Tate, in a letter graciously written to one who thought that "wolves" might possibly mean the evil tendencies in man, writes:

I think that the meaning of "wolves" that you get from the context of the poem would be right. "The evil tendencies of man" is certainly not wrong; the wolves may also be the vast, inscrutable power of nature, which even in our solitude keeps us from being alone; or, again, they may convey man's fear of the unknown, of which he is at the mercy when he doesn't believe in a personal God, or a Comforter. But the wolves as a symbol, taken alone, would be far too pretentious; so I put in the ironic expression about not even having been before where the "next room's crowded with wolves."

Hence again it is the problem of belief and disbelief which confronts a man who finds the world in a toppling condition.

There are wolves in the next room waiting
With heads bent low, thrust out, breathing
At nothing in the dark: between them and me
A white door patched with light from the hall
Where it seems never (so still is the house)
A man has walked from the front door to the stair.

"A white door patched with light from the hall," or faith and stability that once gave certainty to man and now seems to be no more.

Tate offers intellectual poems which are conspicuously lacking in a gaudy show of sensibility. One recognizes the discriminating intelligence behind his work. If Tate gives the best of himself in his poems, he likewise calls forth from his reader the best response. That is always the mark of a great poet.

21 This quotation is from a letter written by Allen Tate to Sr. M. Carmel, 205 Cottage Hill, Elmhurst, Illinois, dated March 27, 1941.
22 Allen Tate, Selected Poems, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937. All the lines quoted from Tate's poems appearing in this division are in Selected Poems.
One of Tate's best and perhaps most complex poems is the "Ode to the Confederate Dead." In it Tate does more than bring an emotion to the surface. A whole section of history is revealed in a psychological setting compact with feeling. It carries through Tate's major theme previously mentioned, how the dead past with its dead winds itself throughout the present and how the mind's eye sees the dead and recognizes that they are in a general sense more living than those who exist in the present.

Night is the beginning and the end
And in between the ends of distraction

and again

From the inexhaustible bodies that are not
Dead, but feed the grass row after rich row.

and in

The twilight certainty of an animal.

It is the dead, not the living, who have achieved security. The dead have fulfilled themselves. Here the contrast is an ironic one, for the dead soldiers had what the present poets have not—a unity of function. Today, society appears to offer limited fields for the exercise of the whole man, who wastes his energy piecemeal over separate functions that ought to come under a unity of being. The poet is honest with himself, and his condition, for the leaves are only leaves.

Seeing, seeing only the leaves
Flying, plunge and expire.

There are a number of images in the "Ode" which express Tate's obsession

23Cleanth Brooks, op. cit., p. 102.
with mortality.

You hear the shout, the crazy hemlocks point
With troubled fingers to the silence which
Smothers you, a mummy, in time.

and

Autumn is desolation in the plot

and again

You will curse the setting sun.

The "Ode to the Confederate Dead" deals with history and a locality. Paradoxically, however, it deals with neither. The poem, as Zabel states, is fundamentally "the problem of identity" and of the conflict "of private intuition in a deflated and skeptical age with idealism inherited from a rich and heroic past." The "Ode" carries that message in the rich images which give the reader a taste of desolation, death, decay, nakedness.

Tate uses, in his poetry, an astonishing number of images to convey the predicament of an individual dissociated from an industrialized society. Both he and Ransom work through negation, with a difference, however. As has been stated, Ransom uses old ladies, old mansions, which convey the lack of a way of life once good, but which is now under the heel of a way of life which does not permit the whole man--body, soul, mind to function harmoniously.

Tate, on the other hand, uses images of darkness, or images which cause revulsion. The spider is a favorite one.

The gray lean spiders come, they come and go:

\[\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\]

Like a bearded spider on a sunlit floor

O heart, the spider shuffles from the mould.

Such images as

The dusk runs down the lane driven like hail

Cats walk the floor at midnight

The flying dark with sleep like falling leaves

and

While toward the bed the rigid shadows lean

and any other number of similar images aid to complete the chaste tapestry of Tate's theme.

As will be seen later, Ransom carries, in a marked degree, the same theme as Tate, that of man's divided sensibility. "Spectral Lovers" portrays it in the last two lines.

Who touch their quick fingers fluttering like a bird
Whose sons shall never be heard.

The theme of mortality is also prevalent. In "To a Lady Celebrating Her Birthday" the poet says--

This day smells mortuary more than most
To me upon my past.

Ransom's "Triumph" is a poem about Athens overwhelmed by the Caesars. One feels, however, that Ransom refers not to Athens, but to the South and the possibility of its being industrialized.
Athens, a fragile kingdom of foam,
Assumed the stranger's yoke; . . .

But there is protest and failure and the realization that
Of where her soul inhabits I have conquered naught;
It is so far from these my Roman legions.

Davidson, unlike Tate and Ransom, attains his object through affirmation. The Tall Men exemplifies his zeal for Agrarianism through the strong contrast of Tennessee hunters and soldiers and the modern six-cylinder drivers. Davidson is the fighter of the Fugitive group. With strong-driven clarity he asks in the "Tall Men"

Where are the rifles and the lean hunters
Who strode the long trail with me? Have they left
No tall sons to hate what should be hated
And love what should be loved—the praise of men
Speaking with quiet eyes behind long rifles?

It is evident that the poetry of the Fugitives has a common denominator, that of man's divided sensibility, or his inability to function as a unity, attributable to a state of society which has courted an evil way of life. Industrialism is fundamentally wrong. It produces for profit when it should produce for use at a profit. And because of the greed that lies in its wake, man's spiritual life has suffered. The Fugitive group has realized this.

John Crowe Ransom

Just as the poetry of Allen Tate must be read in its entirety in order to appreciate better the fine work of the artist, so must the poetry of John Crowe Ransom be read in its completeness to achieve the sum-total of effect.

Ransom has a preference for short dramatic episodes, which, in the even-
ness of their quality, prevent one poem from appearing more conspicuous than another. Read in their entirety they assume a unity in which one can trace the philosophy underlying his work. Like other of his contemporaries who show a determination to place themselves in a firm ground of theory, so Ransom, particularly in his book *The World's Body* has written critical theories which make him a recognized force, not only as a teacher of literature, or as a poet, but as a professional critic with a great deal of philosophy to give weight to his statements.

Those who complain of the ineffectiveness of Ransom’s poetry do so because he fails to identify himself with their interests. Let a poem be, not tell, is Ransom’s theory. Let the reader get pure beauty, or pure thought, or pure sensation. Instead of getting a mixture of morality, esthetics, and psychology, the modernist endeavors to separate one element at a time and to give that pure and unadulterated to the reader. This Ransom labels as Puritanism on the basis that modern poetry is pure poetry. He says:

Our period differs outwardly from other periods because it first differs inwardly. Its spiritual temper is puritanical; that is, it craves to perfect the parts of experience separately or in their purity, and is a series of isolated perfections.

Because the modern poet as a professional cares nothing about morals, or God, or native land, he has performed a work of dissociation thus purifying his

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In this case, he may produce one of two poems, either the pure poem like Allen Tate's "Death of Little Boys." But in order to achieve either of this type of poem, the poet will have to avoid the pit of moralizing. If he writes a pure poem, then he will consider a subject non-moralizing in its nature, as Stevens did in the one mentioned above. If he writes an obscure poem taking a subject of human interest he will avoid positive implications by confusing his details.

Concerning the theme of Ransom's poetry, it reflects the insufficiency of a people in a world devoid of grace and myth. Because society is in a disturbed condition due to a scientific civilization, the poet finds himself against and away from society--dislocated--which has resulted in a "dissociation of sensibility." Hence his poetry becomes a commentary on the situation, colored with an irony which portrays a people essentially fine and good but who fail to attain to the completeness of their nature.

Ransom's poetry is characterized by wit and irony. The wit represents an attempt toward integration, or an attempt at the fusion of the emotional and the intellectual or critical qualities of poetry.

The instrument of wit in Ransom's poetry, whether it is employed in incidental imagery, in a certain pedantry of rhetoric, or in the organization of the entire material, is usually directed to a specific and constant effect. This effect is ironical.

Like Eliot, Ransom deals with the same problem but with a difference.

29 Ibid., p. 58.
30 Ibid., pp. 60-61.
31 Edd Winfield Parks, op. cit., pp. CXXV-CXXVI.
The irony of the latter may be called psychological, for the inherent qualities existing in his characters, qualities which potentially are qualities of strength, actually function in the opposite direction and produce weaklings. But in Eliot, whose method may be called historical, the degenerate present is suddenly thrust into contrast with the noble past. 33

Ransom's poetry loses its fullest significance unless read concurrently with the poetry of his contemporaries. It is the background that gives it color and tone. Neither is it wise to dismember his poems for it is the poem entire that conveys the poet's meaning. This union of thought and feeling is seen in such a poem as "Winter Remembered."

Winter Remembered

Two evils, monstrous either one apart,
Possessed me, and were long and loath at going:
A cry of Absence, Absence, in the heart,
And in the wood the furious winter blowing.

Think not, when fire was bright upon my bricks,
And past the tight boards hardly a wind could enter,
I glowed like them, the simple burning sticks,
Far from my cause, my proper heat and centre.

Better to walk forth in the murderous air
And wash my wound in the snows; that would be healing;
Because my heart would throb less painful there,
Being caked with cold, and past the smart of feeling.

And where I went, the hugest winter blast
Would have this body bowed, these eyeballs streaming,
And though I think this heart's blood froze not fast,
It ran too small to spare one drop for dreaming.

Dear love, these fingers that had known your touch,
And tied our separate forces first together,

33 Ibid., p. 110.
Were ten poor idiot fingers not worth much,
Ten frozen parsnips hanging in the weather.\(^{34}\)

The first four stanzas in this poem portray the longing for an absent loved one. The last two lines of the final stanza contain an image cruelly bereft of thought and feeling, leaving the reader with a surge of despair, a feeling of incompleteness. Then take the image of the fingers which are treated in four different ways—fingers that had known touch, fingers that had tied separate forces together, fingers which are idiots, and fingers which are frozen parsnips. The last two lines state the difference between the time when the lovers were together and present separation. The poem has one image throughout but used in such a way in which action becomes impossible. The final note is one of despair, one drained of thought and feeling because of the metaphor.\(^{35}\)

Such poems as "Miriam Tazewell," "Miss Euphemia," and "John Whitesides' Daughter" give dramatic portraits, pictures of private tragedies almost stark in their lack of any softening effects. In "Miss Euphemia," for instance, there is J. Alfred Prufrock dressed in feminine togs:

> Into her house she fled
> Buffeted back to prison,
> And sought the very great-chair
> From which she had arisen;
> Dawn sat in her whiteness—
> Bitter how she laughed—
> Opening doors to march, yet
> Quaking at his draft.\(^{36}\)


\(^{35}\)Elizabeth Drew and John L. Sweeney, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

\(^{36}\)John Crowe Ransom, *Chills and Favers*, p. 47.
"The Old Mansions" is a poem on the Old South which keeps its high level because Ransom does not permit himself to fall into, what he terms, in the last lines of the second stanza

... old vulgarian

Reiterations which gentle readers abhor. 37

There is a succession of ironical commentaries. The person interested in the mansion enters the house with a certain expectation.

And at last, with my happier angel's own temerity
Did I clang their brazen knocker against the door,
To beg their dole of a look, in simple charity,
Or the crumbs of legend dropping from their great store.

The first line of the next stanza gives the answer.

But it came to nothing—

for he was dismissed

By one even more wrappered and lean and dark

than the old mistress of the mansion. Ransom shows skill in handling a topic that could have easily reverted to the commonplace. Then, too, the reader feels himself swept by the irony. He is the "gentle" reader who abhors the old reiterations of a South that once was.

In "Janet Walking" which appears in Two Gentlemen in Bonds, Janet finds her hen dead—

And would not be instructed in how deep
Was the forgetful kingdom of death.

These two lines produce the desired effect because they follow lines almost childish both in their meaning and structure.

37 Ibid., p. 91.
The question of self-definition can be traced through almost all of Ransom's poetry. It can be said also of his work that it has not the complexity that much modern poetry has. There is a great deal of hard logic in it, such as appears in "Captain Carpenter," who fights a most unusual battle in which he is literally dismembered. This hard logic produces not an irony that could revert into the sentimental, but an intellectual irony.

A critic writing of Ransom says that Ransom has an extreme cut of poetic clothes and that it will be interesting to see whether they will make or break him; that he has a dangerous originality, and that he attempts to astound with a phrase rather than with a thought. Brooks is more kindly to Ransom:

Ransom's triumphs, like those of the poets of the early seventeenth century, are triumphs in the handling of tone. And his fundamental relation to those poets lies in the brilliance of his handling of tone—not in the use of a particular diction of "conceits" or in his taking a particular attitude toward certain themes. It is rather in the attention which he has given to the definition and communication of delicate shadings of attitude as a problem in itself. His poems bear their own self-criticism. And this is why they are unsentimental, tough-minded, and penetrating, and why the serious ones are powerful in the responses which they evoke.

Donald Davidson Present Southern writers are sensitively alive to material that comes off the press dealing with Southern problems. Should that material handle those problems in a way not in harmony with their way of thinking, in old Southern style, they are quick at the trigger to defend what they hold to be the true state of affairs. And so when in 1941 W. J. Cash

wrote The Mind of the South, Donald Davidson, most vigorous and aggressive spokesman of the Fugitive group, uttered his contempt of the book, after refuting the old, trumped-up Reconstruction proposals, by lapsing into good Southern slang:

I say, turn him Mr. Cash loose. I'm glad to see you all agree with me. Mr. Cash wrote that-ther book for the Yankees anyway. It's about as much as they will ever understand.40

In Davidson the Fugitives have their most vigorous spokesman. He is hostile to the industrialism which threatens to overtower the South. With his literary talent he writes both prose and poetry to save what remains of the pioneer tradition.41 In his plea to the Southern artist, and for that matter to the artist of any region, not to turn his back on the place that nurtured him, he writes:

The function of a region is to endow the American artist with character and purpose. He is born of a region. He will deny its parenthood to his own hurt. Without its background he is a home­less exile in the wilderness of modern life. That self which he is, if not ignobly impugned, will readily be a modern self; and what he creates, if he can resist the perversions of our time, will be both the expression of the region and himself, no matter what the subject or what the style. It is the office of the nation to conserve and cherish this free effort, and surely never by precept or example to delude us into thinking that a novel about a plough­boy is only a regional curiosity, but a novel about a bellboy, a national masterpiece.42

The poetry of Davidson is characterized by its blank verse style. His first volume The Outland Piper reminds one of both William Blake and of

41Fred. B. Millet, Contemporary American Authors, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1940, p. 147.
Ransom. In *The Tall Men*, an appropriate title for strong Southern men, he shows his breadth of vision. Parks points out three possible defects in the poetry of this book—his attempt at emphasis and minute analysis, and his lack of a defined climax. Like the other members of his group, his poetry contains his philosophy, which is the philosophy of Ransom—the relation of the artist to the ordered, or disordered society in which he happens to live; or the problem of the disruption of sensibility. Warren says there are two aspects to this:

...man is a creature little lower than the angels and at the same time, of the brute creation; again there is the conflict between the scientific vision of quantity and that vision concerned with quality. The issue itself is as old as man, but in the past a reconciliation has generally been possible in terms provided by a more stable way of life and a more ordered structure of ideas. The issue receives its contemporary poignancy by reason of the absence of those two things.

Davidson deals with a great deal of historical material. Much of his poetry is poetry of action with a ruggedness that makes him unique among the foemen of commercialism. Consider the poetic prose of "Lee in the Mountains":

...Hearing the voices
Whisper, Hush it is General Lee! And strangely
Hearing my own voice say Good morning, boys.
(Don't get up. You are early. It is long
Before the bell. You will have long to wait
On these cold steps...)

But then come the battles, with time soon erasing from the minds of men the

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43 Edd Winfield Parks, op. cit., CXXVII.
smoke of lost struggle.

The rest must pass to men who never knew
(But on a written page) the strike of armies,
And never heard the long Confederate cry
Charge through the muzzling smoke or saw the bright
Eyes of the beardless boys go up to death.

In the almost prayer-like ending of the poem is reflected Davidson's fiery
feeling for the South, his Blake-like touch and his philosophy.

And in His might He waits,
Brooding within the certitude of time,
To bring this lost forsaken valor
And the fierce faith undying
And the love quenchless
To flower among the hills to which we cleave,
To fruit upon the mountains whether we flee,
Never forsaking, never denying
His children and His children's children forever
Unto all generations of the faithful heart. Amen.

Davidson has been held as a model for the excellence of his craftsmanship. His talent is first-rate. This, coupled with his intense interest in the value of a cultural past, gives him a place among the moderns. Since his poems are in large measure dramatic narratives, it is difficult to show the full import of any one poem without quoting the entire poem. The reader will always be aware, particularly in The Tall Men by the vitality, the dramatic intensity, and the large swoop of vision that Davidson possesses.

John Peale Bishop once wrote that while there was always much that a young man must, of necessity, face in complete nakedness

without so much as a tatter from the past, it was not a very profitable way to go through life. With Ben Jonson he agreed that to have to learn everything for one's self was to have a fool for a master. With this conviction, one may say, in a light vein, that Bishop has shed a sweet grace upon plagiarism. Not that Bishop has shamefully stolen what others have laboriously produced, but that he has accompanied with the masters in the field, become familiar with their poetry, so that their form, theme, and style has unconsciously become his own.

The first of these influences was Rimbaud. Bishop's early work was derivative from, if not directly imitative of him. Another influence was Pound, for in Peale's translations, particularly those from the Provencal, the art and skill of Pound can be traced. Who could miss Eliot in such lines as in the conclusion to "Martyr's Hill" which appears in Now With His Love?

He seems to smoke a cigarette
And leaning on a bar of zinc
The tired lover tries to think.
Memory wipes away the night
As a damp rag might smear a dirty glass.
Above the bar he sees another face.

This quotation and some other of his poems, such as "The Dim and Ptolemaic Man" give a pointed view of what the decade following Treaty of Versailles carried with its years. One is reminded of Yeats in such a poem as "Wish in the Daytime"; of Tate's "Wolves" in "Your Chase Had a Beast in View."

49 Ed Winfield Parks, op. cit., p. CXXVIII.
Shall one look askance then at Bishop as a poet? Tate gives the answer:

It has been said that Bishop has imitated all the chief modern poets. He has virtually conducted his poetical education in public. But the observation is double-edged. In our age of personal expression the poet get credit for what is "his own": the art is not the thing, but rather the information conveyed about a unique personality. Applauding a poet only for what is uniquely his own, we lose thereby much that is good. If a poem in Yeats' manner appears in Bishop's book, and is as good as Yeats, it is as good there as it is anywhere else.51

Bishop and Tate meet on common ground in their endeavor to find a working substitute for the supernatural myth.52 As in Tate's "Sonnet at Christmas," Bishop in "Divine Nativity"53 has the same problem of belief overshadowed by unbelief, with unbelief winning the day.

Wisdom that was
Before morning's span
Wheeled into space,
Love in its van,
Through what mishap
Did that Word descend
To a young girl's lap?
And to what end?

But in the fourth stanza, the gods and mythology return in Yeats-like manner:

Adoring Leda leaned upon
A bright encumbrance of wild swan.
Europa rode rejoiced through all
The wild romp of briny bull.

And so the Christian myth crumbles before the final glance at anthropology:

Eagle, swan or dove
White bull or cloud. . .

51 Allen Tate, Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936, p. 56.
52 Ibid., p. 157.
The whole poem gives a picture of our modern unbelieving belief.

Tate has pointed out that Bishop has felt more than any other poet the lack of a central source of form—form, in its definition, being equivalent to meaning, or a scheme of reference, supporting symbolism that ceases to support as soon as it is recognized as merely that. The supernatural myth, as has been said, Bishop found unworkable; hence he was forced to find some sort of substitute for it in order to get a fixed point of reference. In such a poem as "The Return," which is too long to quote here in its entirety, but which appears in his Selected Poems, illustrates how Bishop has handled the difficulty of form by resorting to a certain violence of language. Here the form is a very general idea about the fall of Rome.

Night and we heard heavy and cadenced hoofbeats
Of troops departing: the last cohorts left
By the North Gate. That night some listened late
Leaning their eyelids toward Septentrion.

One soon recognizes the real subject, modern civilization, in the "ruins," the "columns," "the warring ornaments" and in:

Strange it was the young the almost boys
Who first abandoned hope; the old still lived
A little, at least a little lived in eyes.
It was the young whose child did not survive.

Bishop finds it impossible to get a form that will permit him to make direct, comprehensive statements about modern civilization. Furthermore "The Return" does not authorize such a conclusion and yet it is immediately sensed. The final stanza exhibits Bishop's ability to make a painting out of poetry:

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54 Allen Tate, op. cit., p. 54.
Temples of Neptune invaded by the sea
And dolphins streaked like streams sportive
As sunlight rode over the rushing floors
The sea unfurled and what was blue raced silver.

When nations fail to use wisely the qualities which have helped to make them
great, when they become surfeited with excess civilization, when the "Temples of Neptune" become invaded by the sea, then things become uprooted and
men stand bewildered. The temple of Neptune, the form, must not be invaded by the sea.55

Here and there weaknesses can be detected in Bishop's poetry. These
defects usually occur toward the end of a poem that commences with a broad
rhythm and sustained thought, but which thins as it reaches its conclusion.
One is aware of such a weakness in the last five lines of the poem "The Mothers" and in the last three lines of "Council for Grief."

Bishop uses the short, swift line in poems like "The Saints," "The Tree,"
in which flash of imagination and rapidity of thought can proceed unhampered.
In contrast to this is the long swooping line of his blank verse, clean in
its movement and which is appropriate in the poem "No More the Senator" and
in "An Interlude" in which the idea rides on the movement.56

Bishop has been called an amateur, but in the best sense of that term
and which does him honor. His poetry has reached the highest possible level
that it can reach without the poet making a life-time vocation of it. He has

55 Ibid., p. 59.
written poetry in his leisure which gives assurance that his time would be well-spent if he made a twenty-four hour working day of it.\textsuperscript{57}

More could be said of the poetry of Bishop who combines his feelings with his thinking without loss of separation and of the pleasure he gives to the eye, the ear, and the tongue. Suffice it to say that Bishop has contributed his share to American letters. Blackmur recognizes that contribution:

It might be put almost as a matter of principle that the perennial low estate of poetry is due to the insufficient number of amateurs who practice it; for to be a genuine amateur requires a genuine competence. If there were few more men like John Bishop, assuming they were read and appreciated, there would be fewer of the offensively incompetent volumes of ambitious verse.\textsuperscript{58}

Robert Penn Warren, although the youngest of the Fugitive group, has distinguished himself as one of the gifted intelligences of this era. He was the founder of such a magazine as the \textit{Southern Review}.\textsuperscript{59} In 1935 his first book of poetry was published entitled \textit{Thirty-six Poems}, although many individual ones appeared at different times in various scholarly magazines.

Warren has much in common with Tate and Ransom through ties of regional culture and personal relationship. His poetry, however, has not the complexity of Tate nor the "icy indirection" of Ransom, but exudes the richness of Southern soil and Southern characters.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., p. 199.
\textsuperscript{59} Fred B. Millet, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 628.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., p. 147.
Closely allied in spirit to the work of Ransom and Tate is that of Robert Penn Warren. It has a broader sweep and it is more directly rooted in earth. Also, Warren's language is Saxon, in contrast to the Latinity of phrase employed by Ransom and Tate. 61

When Warren explicitly uses the South in his poetry he works through landscape toward theme and atmosphere. The background may be the pine-blanketed Kentucky hills or the river swamps which assume human shapes. One sees the lean men of the hills having much in common with the stubborn, rocky ground. In "Pondy Woods" one breathes the ominous dank of the swamp.

Warren proves his skill by not permitting the background to be the "be-all" and the "end-all" of the poem. It is merely the supporting structure to a larger theme. This is well-illustrated in the third poem of the sequence "History Among the Rocks"62 from "Kentucky Mountain Farm."

There are many ways to die
Here among the rocks in any weather

and among these ways may be freezing or drowning or the bite of a snake.

By flat limestone, will coil the copperhead,
Fanged as the sunlight, hearing the reaper's feet

But these forms of death are, after all, common and almost natural to the lean men. Death comes to them in another form across Kentucky fields.

But there are other ways, the lean men said:
In these autumn orchards once young men lay dead---
Gray coats, blue coats. Young men on the mountainside
Clambered fought. Heels muddied the rocky spring.
Their reason is hard to guess, remembering
Blood on their black mustaches in moonlight.

61 Edd Winfield Parks, op. cit., p. CXXVIII.
The violence of this form of death, with its utter disregard for human life is completely sensed; yet, the poet avoids a dissertation on the evils of war. Whatever the reader experiences at this point depends upon the fullness of his own treasury. The poet has done his best. He closes the poem with two lines:

Their reason is hard to guess and a long time past:
The apple falls, falling in the quiet night.

With the falling of the apple, a thing natural in its course, the reader's attention is reverted to the earlier deaths mentioned in the poem. There is an ironic contrast between the two kinds of death. Probably the young men chose death because they were heroic. On the other hand they may have recognized the utter futility of resistance. "Their reason is hard to guess..." Why bother? After all, it was a long time ago. 63

Most of Warren's best work is of the pentameter line with an iambic rhythm; but he broadens out into varying line-lengths such as in the poem "Letter from a Coward to a Hero" in which the long line tips off to an almost single word and which mirrors the mood and the scene it presents. Then, too, and here he is unlike Tate, Warren packs his metaphysics less densely into his poetry, for his metaphors are likely to range in extent from a line to a stanza rather than from a few words to a line. 64

The delicate handling of tone is particularly marked in the poem mentioned in the preceding paragraph. Here the reality of the situation is

63Cleanth Brooks, op. cit., p. 77.
I think you deserved better;  
Therefore I am writing you this letter.

Even the most victorious hero remembers the heat of the day in the celebration and perhaps is a little weary. Varied scenes from the childhood of the hero pass in rapid review, scenes that did not require heroic conduct.

The scenes of childhood were splendid  
And the light that there attended  
But is rescinded;  
The lichenened rocks,  
The thicket where I saw the fox,  
And where I swam the river.

Warren, by an almost violent break, shows the world of the coward and how "the time is out of joint." In his childhood he didn't like

...  
The sudden backfire,  
The catcall of boys.

The poem is too full of real admiration for the hero although it would have been easy for Warren to make mockery of him. Instead he strengthens the admiration:

You have been strong in love and hate  
Rarely, you've been unmanned;  
I have not seen your courage put to pawn.

But disaster lurks in the fine symbol of the dandelion:

Admired of children, gathered for their games,  
Disaster, like the dandelion, blooms  
And the delicate film is fanned  
To seed the shaven lawn.

Here the qualities of the disaster, says Brooks, is the ability to propagate itself innocently in the most "shaven lawn" and the ironic shock is carried
by the commonplace flower, the dandelion. 65

Finally when the fields of battle become hushed, and the hero lives on his laurels, it will be his custom to recline

Clutching between the forefinger and thumb Honor, for death shy valentine.

The admiration of the coward is sincere, yet one feels that it is he who speaks with greatness and insight to the hero who might, after all, at least in the final image, be just a little boy.

The first published poems of Warren represent the work of ten years. In this book

...nothing unconsidered or unfelt has been given a place here, nothing untested by severely examined personal values and decisions. But the most compelling sign of his worth as a poet appears in the independence he has shown in growing beyond his studious youthful efforts at style and the formidable influences that supervised them. 66

Warren achieves full stature in such poems as "Pacific Gazer," "The Garden," "Pondy Woods," "Kentucky Mountain Farm" and others. He never lapses into sentiment but by acute sense of detail furnishes a picture without making the reader aware that it is being furnished. It is his use of detail and metaphor that make him the clean poet that he is.

...they manage to convey their shock and brilliance without becoming exotic or forced, and they build up a strong and authentic atmospheric pathos in the volume. Even in those poems most obviously plotted in thought, visual contact and penetration supply a sharpness of detail so invariably tempered by the right sense of situation and tone that extravagance and mere decorative cleverness are avoided. 67

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65 Cleanth Brooks, op. cit., p. 84.
67 Ibid., p. 40.
Up to this point only the achievement of the major poets of the present South has been stressed. To overlook the work of the other poets, mentioned in the opening of this chapter, would be unfair to the group as a whole. Among the minor poets connected with the Fugitive group is Merrill Moore whose career leads far afield from the Fugitive magazine he assisted in editing from 1922 to 1926. He chose medicine as his career and received his M.D. degree in 1928. He is much interested in the development of psychiatry and mental hygiene. He is the most fecund and recklessly self-indulgent of the Fugitive group, having composed approximately twenty thousand sonnets. There is little evidence of the influence of the Fugitive group upon him. Such distinction as he possesses rests on his individualization of the sonnet form.

Jesse Stuart, now a school supervisor in Kentucky, is allied to the group only in its agrarian and regional interests, not on any metaphysical grounds. His *Man With the Bull-Tongue Plow* contains seven hundred and three sonnets. His poetry is direct, highly personal and has intense drive and emotion, but it is without technical or sensitive distinction. His short stories with Kentucky mountain flavor perhaps exhibit his talent in folk humor and tradition more impressively.

The poetry of Alec B. Stevenson is in uncollected form, but he has

70 Fred B. Millett, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
71 Ed. W. Parks, *op. cit.*, p. CXXVIII.
written some valid poems. His lines are powerful and his form is strict as is seen in "Icarus in November" which was published in Hound & Horn.

The poems of Randall Jarrell, George Marion O'Donnell, Richmond Croom Beatty and the others have not yet appeared in collected form and so it is difficult to make a valid statement concerning their work. Jarrell's poems have occurred regularly in the various issues of the Southern Review, particularly from 1935 to 1941, and his book, Blood for a Stranger, appeared in 1942; the poems of George Marion O'Donnell share the sharp critical spirit and personal individuality of Jarrell's, but not their precocious technical skill and wit. Richard Croom Beatty has written a number of critical articles on various literary men which have appeared in the Philological Quarterly, the PMLA, and the Virginia Quarterly.

It will be interesting to follow the literary career of these minor poets. So far they have made a substantial start in the literary field. Their future work will determine just how close in prestige they will come to Tate and the others responsible for the Southern Literary Revival.

The work of the major poets speaks for itself. A careful study of this chapter shows the common ground on which these poets stand. A basic theme is shared by all—the loss of form, the loss of myth, the loss of pattern, and the effort to restore these to modern culture. They attempt to define the meaning of a personal experience in a world which is meaningless. Yet by what devious means they have succeeded in meeting on this common ground. Tate's poetry could scarcely be mistaken for Ransom's. What they all have
succeeded in doing is presenting an experience which includes both positive and negative elements into a sort of unity. That is why their poetry is so difficult to paraphrase. In most cases, it becomes an impossible feat.

In spite of the fact that these men have a common interest in regionalism, a description of a Southern scene by any of these poets is not the basic reason for the poem. The poem has an integrity of its own; it exists in its own right. It is a poetry of feeling as much as of intellect. Words have been worked harder than they have ever been worked before, for within the smallest possible compass of language there is a tremendous density of idea.

The poetry, too, is well within the English tradition, although it has freely adapted whatever has suited its needs. It has welded the past with the present, thus avoiding a problem faced by other poets of this age. And because the men who wrote it have cultivated a grave concern with life, it is safe to foretell that this poetry will survive the harsh criticism of its age.
CONCLUSION

The last few years have brought a new spirit into the South. With the recovery of her economic life has come the opportunity of renewing a culture deeply ingrained in the people of that section. New forces are at work. True to inherited standards, Southerners are taking part in the issues that concern their welfare. Although they are not always united in the issues, yet their very disagreement betokens new social, economic, and political health.

The problem of agrarianism has been a major dispute during the last several years. When the Twelve Southerners united in presenting their ideas for a better South in the book *I'll Take My Stand*, it seemed for a time that the problem had resolved itself into Agrarianism vs. Industrialism. Such a stand was naturally to be deplored. That there should be no industry in the South was not the idea of the agrarians. They held that an agrarian society was merely one in which the leading vocation was agriculture. Such a vocation was to give a dignified local life to the many Southerners who were allied to the land centuries back. With such a program the South would retain a flavor of individuality; furthermore it would give them a unity such as no industrialized section could ever attain. It is not in the Southern character, says Davidson, to junk an entire system of ideas almost overnight, as the North does in its race for mechanization.

Among those who took sides in the economic dispute were men of literary
merit. They found time to write poetry as well as articles on economics, and before long they were spoken of as the Southern poets. When they grouped themselves into that band known as the "Fugitives," they realized what price they would have to pay in their desire to be the poets nature intended them to be. Loss of prestige and popular acclaim, however, they looked at with a supercilious air. Bound by a common cultural inheritance and united by intense neo-agrarian sympathies, they found intellectual kinship in each others company. When their magazine went the way of many others, the members fortunately began to develop along individual lines. But what they share in their poetry is a preoccupation with decadence and death, an easy allusiveness to a culture with which most of their readers are unfamiliar, and those qualities mentioned which make the modern poet modern. They have voiced a philosophy of living; furthermore, they have succeeded in keeping their poetry distinctly Southern.

The modern Southern poet has the same inherent desire that the poet of any other age had, namely the desire for an harmonious and full life, coupled with the knowledge that by playing his part well, he would be of some value to his community. Obstacles face him, however, and possibly the most disheartening one is the fact that he and his poetry are no longer wanted. Men have turned to other fields of intellectual activity so that the poet, with his poems in hand, stands almost as the man without a country. With economic chaos, civil wars, class hatreds, with democracy making its final stand, public men seem to think that art had better pull up stakes until the disturbances have resolved themselves.
Men of other ages had a cultural tradition. They were educated in literature to such an extent that their social and political life were intimately bound up with it. Today things have become industrialized. The radio strums out its cheap tunes, printing presses clutter doorsteps with sensational reading, popularized verse finds easy columns. The poet's world has changed in such a way that he finds it impossible to come to terms with it. His poetry becomes a poetry of protest for he no longer can meet intelligent men on common ground.

Seventeenth century poets had the same experience in a somewhat similar degree because their age was also characterized by civil disturbance. They, like our present day poets, felt that a culture was dying and what was to take its place had not yet been born. They could not communicate with their fellowmen because their fellowmen could not assimilate them; or, art could not enrich culture for culture was dying. Seventeenth century poets, however, did not take the situation so seriously as the modern poets did for they were more interested in religion and love, things highly personal in nature. The modern poets, on the other hand, wish to establish a relationship between themselves and their community. They wish to become strong, living members of it, to draw from it and to give themselves in return. But since society has nothing to offer them, they withdraw from it. Instead of spreading out, they have been driven inwards. As one writer has aptly put it—modern poets try to integrate the disintegrate, to harmonize the unharmonious. Hence the complexity of modern poetry. The intelligence takes precedence; poetry becomes charged and lucidity gives way to intensity. Con-
temporary poets reveal a situation without interpreting it. They present the case without the final verdict.

What was the situation when the earlier American poets began to write? They found themselves confronted with worn-out literary material. They promptly rejected the lifeless conventions of what the term "Victorianism" included and set to work writing about the American way of life. They rejected what tradition had to offer, not realizing that tradition was longer-lived than the nineteenth century. In view of the circumstances such a revolt was healthy, even though some of its methods were dubious. As Brooks has so aptly stated—"Too often the American poet, after discarding the rags of Victorianism, was to be found walking in a barrel."

These early poets might have learned a lesson from Wordsworth and Coleridge, who, after rejecting Pope and Dryden, did not launch out on their own. True, they found Pope and Dryden inadequate to their needs, but on looking around, they found elements in tradition which had been previously neglected, such as the folk-ballad and the romantic Shakespeare.

The new poetry was definitely a poetry of revolt. It succeeded in launching a new era. If it failed to reach the mark because of what it wrote, it certainly ought to be given some deep recognition for what it refused to write. It refused to clothe itself in "Victorian rags."

What then did it produce? Because it threw off formal verse systems, it took up the loose chant lines of Sandburg's "Chicago," the detail on detail of H. D.'s "Sea Gods," the raw content of Master's "Spoon River Anthology."

64Cleanth Brooks, op. cit., p. 74.
These poets thought they had to make a choice between the raw, unqualified present and the dead past. Hence they failed to see what the contemporary poets saw, particularly what the Fugitive group saw so well, that it was not necessary to make a choice of either of these. What the Fugitive group did was to avoid the dilemma by taking the past and the present and welding it. It was not a question of regionalism or traditionalism, but a blending of these two elements. They saw that every past is dead which is unconnected with the present, just as every present, unrelated to history, is merely a present of sensation.

It is impossible here to go into the specific work of the writers of this era. What the new poetry achieved was freedom from "poetic diction," freedom from cliches that tended to stunt growth. Colloquial speech in poetry became popularized by Sandburg, Masters, Frost, and Lindsay. Conversational tone was used by E. A. Robinson and, in her different fashion, by Edna St. Vincent Millay. In the train of Eliot came Archibald MacLeish, Conrad Aiken, Horace Gregory, and the entire Nashville group who startled language itself by rapid leaping from image to image.

At this point it is logical to ask what the future of Southern poetry is likely to be. Considering the extraordinary confusion into which industrial civilization has got itself, it seems pertinent that these poets, who are also largely the critics, will go farther than any other writers toward realizing the ideal of a free expression of the Southern character in literature. They are unpopular because they have refused to become commercially tainted.
But they have something real to offer. America at last is becoming critical in its literature. And in the work of these writers it seems that at last American literature is coming into its maturity and spiritual independence.
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