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14 The Poet-Critics, Regionalism, and the Rise of Formalism

Abstract: The article examines one of the closest links between poetry and theory in the history of American literature: the work of the poet-critics John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren. In the 1920s these writers emerged as the most talented members of the Fugitive group, which sought to revitalize Southern poetry by introducing modernist ideas and techniques. After a short-lived attempt at political activism in the Southern Agrarian movement, they returned to literature and established the New Criticism, an approach that emphasized the close analysis of form-content relations within literary texts. The article traces several tensions that emerged in Fugitive poetry and continued into the theoretical assumptions underlying the New Criticism: the tension between the poet-critics' provincial background and their cosmopolitan outlook; their conception of art as both rooted in its cultural environment and autonomous from it; their ambivalent relationship to science; their self-reflexive construction of a supposedly stable historical tradition; and their efforts to suppress the question of race that loomed so large in Southern history. The article breaks fresh ground by tracing these assumptions not primarily to the Fugitives' critical writing but to their conflictive negotiations of the Southern tradition in their early poetry. The concluding section, moreover, reads their poetry as an inroad to the ambivalences of the new formalism that emerged in the early twenty-first century.

Keywords: Fugitive poets, Southern Agrarianism, New Criticism, New Formalism

1 Context

To no small degree, the shift toward modernism in American poetry was initiated by small groups of consciously avant-garde poets who discussed new techniques and created opportunities for publishing experimental poetry. The most closely knit of these groups, and one of the most influential, were the "Fugitives" who formed at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, around the writer and literature professor John Crowe Ransom. Their name derives from *The Fugitive* magazine, which they edited from 1922 to 1925 and in which much of their early poetry appeared. Most of the 16 poets listed as Fugitives in the magazine are now forgotten. A few remain familiar to specialists – for example, Merrill Moore, one of the most prolific sonneteers in history, and Laura Riding, a poet and literary critic whose liaison with the English writer Robert Graves made her something of a literary celebrity at the time. Some are remembered for their politics rather than their poetry – for example, Donald David-

son, who became a notorious defender of the Old South and its racist legacy. While some of these figures will occasionally appear in the following pages, this article focuses on the three Fugitives who did achieve lasting renown: Ransom himself and two of his students, Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren.

The Fugitives were among the first intellectuals in the American South to engage the modernist ideas and techniques that had been emerging in Europe since the turn of the century. They were soon followed by a range of innovative writers from across the region: Thomas Wolfe and Elizabeth Madox Roberts, who published widely acclaimed novels about the traditional South; Caroline Gordon, Tate's wife, who also became a novelist of note in the 1930s; the bohemian Katherine Anne Porter, who wrote stories about the rural Texas of her youth while restlessly traveling the continent; and above all the towering figure of William Faulkner, whose internationally admired oeuvre transformed his rural Mississippi hometown into one of the great fictional universes of literary history. The remarkable output of these writers from the 1920s to the 1950s is now often called the "Southern Renaissance," a label invented by Tate and popularized mainly by his fellow Fugitives and their close collaborators (Tate 1948, 282–293; Rubin and Jacobs 1966). Both the term and the self-promotion it involved are characteristic of the Fugitives' approach to literature.

For one thing, the underlying attempt to write their own history indicates the unusual importance the Fugitives attached to literary criticism. The purpose of their regular meetings was to discuss poetry, especially their own poetry. Members would read drafts of new poems and submit them to critical response from the group. It is no coincidence that the poets who profited most from these discussions – Ransom, Tate, and Warren – also became prolific literary critics. In fact, they wrote more criticism than poetry from the mid-1930s onward (though Warren returned to poetry later) and became the driving forces of the New Criticism, a movement that fundamentally shaped the way literature has been taught, studied, and evaluated ever since. One advantage of this dual career was that it gave the Fugitives many opportunities to promote one another's work in their criticism. In the essay that coined the term, Tate defined the Southern Renaissance as the first emergence in the South of "a literature of considerable maturity which was distinctive enough to call for a special criticism which it failed to get" (1948, 290). What makes this statement typical of the Fugitives' approach is its open admission that the purpose of their literary criticism was to secure the reputation of deserving writers – and the tacit assumption that this category included the Fugitives themselves. This strategy established a feedback loop between poetry and criticism. The Fugitives' poetry was shaped by critical debate, but at the same time it created the principles on which their critical judgments relied. While the core ideas of the New Criticism have usually been traced to the Fugitives' critical writings, this article changes perspective and shows that many of these ideas already emerged in their early poetry.

The label Southern Renaissance signals a number of tensions that arose in Fugitive poetry and carried over into the New Criticism. The word "renaissance" – even

more so in Tate's archaizing spelling, "renaissance" – invokes a European cultural tradition ranging from Dante to Shakespeare and beyond. Prefacing it with "Southern" opens up a more regional perspective and declares allegiance to the cultural history of the American South, which had been influenced by European models to a considerable degree. The racist legacy of Southern culture was a deeply problematic one, and intellectuals like Ransom, Tate, and Warren found themselves negotiating between the stubborn patriotism that persisted in the South and stereotypes of Southern backwardness in the North. Fugitive poetry thrived on some of these tensions, especially the interplay of local storytelling and international modernist poetics that inspired its singular blend of regional and cosmopolitan perspectives. A related tension unfolded between the cultural rootedness of their subject matter and their efforts to assert the autonomy of poetry from its cultural environments. Their adherence to Renaissance ideals of humanistic learning also led the Fugitives to reject the modern sciences, which they regarded as forces of mental and social alienation. Yet at the same time the Fugitives strove for a distanced, objective approach to their subjects that approximated the scientific gaze.

The most striking consequence of the Fugitives' ambivalence toward the South was their unusual awareness of the textual construction of history. Their own identity as Southerners depended less on past events, they realized, than on the way these events were remembered by later generations. The Fugitives' literary, political, and critical writings are on one level attempts to influence this ongoing construction of a Southern tradition, while on another level they depict this tradition as stable, reliable, and worth preserving. This was a fairly productive tension as far as historiographic self-reflection goes, but their preoccupation with traditional aspects of Southern life ultimately kept the Fugitives from examining the interrelations between culture and race with the rigor that their far-ranging political claims required. It was this failure, as we will see, that eventually discredited much of their achievement. Their political ideas were written off as reactionary, their reputation as poets suffered as a result, and while their criticism laid the foundations of literary studies as we know it, the question of race became a central preoccupation in that discipline. The literary history of the Southern Renaissance now looks very different from the one Tate had in mind – not least because African American writers such as Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston have replaced the Fugitives in recent scholarship on the period.

The origins and implications of these various tensions are most immediately visible in the political statements the Fugitives published in the early 1930s. After establishing themselves as poets, they collaborated with colleagues from other disciplines to form the "Southern Agrarian" movement, which sought to defend the Southern way of life against the industrialized North. The founding manifesto of Southern Agrarianism, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930), blames Northern industrialism for putting material profit above all other considerations and thus alienating people from the land and from one another. As a remedy, the "twelve Southerners" listed as authors recommend a society of subsistence farmers "in which

agriculture is the leading vocation” (li). They argue that the agrarian approach is best realized in the rural South, and each contributor elaborates on a particular aspect of this model society.

Like the Southern Agrarian movement as a whole, *I'll Take My Stand* was primarily Ransom's and Davidson's project, which explains why so many of its contributors focus on cultural rather than economic or political issues. As a result, the idea of Southern culture underlying the movement and its manifesto acquired a strong imaginative component. Large parts of the South had never known – and could not have sustained – the happy communities of decently-off subsistence farmers that the Agrarians celebrated. In fact, much of the agricultural output in the Old South was generated by a farming system that was itself industrial. Plantation slavery and the sharecropping economy ruthlessly exploited large parts of the population and left them in a worse position than the laborers in the industrialized North. In his contribution to *I'll Take My Stand*, Warren concluded that Southern Agrarianism needed to offer options to African Americans to gain traction as a large-scale political program, but the other essays in the volume show how unlikely that was. Some of the contributors openly ridiculed blacks, and all seemed to regard segregation as the natural and sensible solution to the question of race. This ignorance ran through the entire movement. Far from incorporating the shortcomings of the rural South into their analysis, the Agrarians reimagined the region as a pastoral idyll.

In the academic sphere, the Agrarians believed this idyll to be under threat from the modern sciences, which they regarded as the intellectual branch of industrialism. Since industrialism requires disciplined, compartmentalized labor, they argued, it replaces the “classical and humanistic learning” of traditional education with the superficial specialization promoted by the applied sciences (14). The recipients of such instrumental training no longer have the intellectual faculties to think or work outside the industrial system. As a result, even the cultural sphere is subordinated to the market economy, and artists become mere producers of mass entertainment. This dimension of Agrarian thought strikingly parallels the critical theory that a circle of intellectuals around Theodor Adorno was developing in Frankfurt, Germany, at the time (cf. Wilson 2012).

Like the Frankfurt School, the Agrarians remained ambivalent about the role of art in modern society. While they saw the very existence of art endangered by industrialism and the applied sciences, they also asserted that art possessed inherent qualities that eluded and resisted these forces. “Art makes its own rules, which are not the rules of commerce,” Davidson confidently wrote in *I'll Take My Stand* (31). The Agrarians departed from the Frankfurt School in the solution they recommended for this problem: a return to the agrarian way of life, where artists could reconnect with the community, overcome their alienation from modern life, and pursue their art unaffected by the quickly changing fashions of city life (53). In this scenario art is no longer autonomous from society but conditioned and fundamentally shaped by it. This ambivalent stance on the relationship of art and society created another set of inter-

nal tensions that the Agrarians ignored, and that continued to haunt the literary and critical writings of the Fugitive circle as a result.

One problem was so glaring that even the Agrarians had to address it: the South had not yet produced any outstanding artists. The American writers, painters, and composers who had achieved international recognition by the 1920s had lived and worked primarily in the allegedly mercantile North. The main response to this dilemma among artistically-minded Agrarians was to redefine the criteria by which artistic success should be evaluated. Davidson flatly denied that great art can “be accepted as a final criterion for judging a society” (*I’ll Take My Stand* 55) and argued that successful societies integrate art into everyday life. The South “always had a native architecture,” he explained, and was “rich in the folk-arts”: “in ballads, country songs and dances, in hymns and spirituals, in folk tales, in the folk crafts of weaving, quilting, furniture-making” (54–55). In a similar vein but with characteristic emphasis on formality, Ransom argued that the South had achieved excellence in “the eighteenth-century social arts of dress, conversation, manners, the table, the hunt, politics, oratory, the pulpit” (12). Tate drew up an entire catalog of aesthetic criteria while ostensibly discussing religion: “The Southern mind was simple, not top-heavy with learning it had no need of, unintellectual, and composed; it was personal and dramatic, rather than abstract and metaphysical; and it was sensuous because it lived close to a natural scene of great variety and interest” (171–172). Finally, Stark Young’s afterword asserted that Southern life involved “an innate code of obligations” that prized “self-control,” not “the expression of you and your precious personality, not the pleasures of suffering or of denying your own will” (350). The Agrarians were united in their rejection of such “Romantic” self-expression and called for a “realistic,” “stable,” and “hereditary” art instead: one that worked within the traditional forms and shared values of a communal society (5).

In presupposing that art is closely intertwined with its social environment, these arguments contradict both the Agrarians’ own assertions about the autonomy of art and another key conviction that had emerged in the Fugitive circle: the view of art as a cosmopolitan phenomenon that transcends political boundaries. In their efforts to modernize Southern poetry, the Fugitives read widely in Western intellectual history and unanimously accepted Europe as the standard by which cultural achievement should be measured. In their Agrarian writings they sought to enlist this cultural authority by claiming that the Old South had much in common with Europe – for example, an intellectual elite, a sense of history, and “a principle of conservatism” that contrasted with industrial America’s belief in “Progress and Service” (11). While some historians have called Southern Agrarianism a defection from the cosmopolitan outlook of the Fugitive circle (Langdale 2012, 38; Rubin 1978, 192–193), these statements and many others reveal the fundamental continuity between the two movements. Rejecting the influence of the industrial North, both movements looked to Europe for intellectual inspiration and cultural guidance, and both emphasized the affinities between the European and the Southern traditions. In the Fugitives’ poetry, at least, the

ambivalences of this “cosmopolitan regionalism” (Lutz 2004) created the sort of interplay between the local and the cosmopolitan that characterized much modernist writing and that the New Criticism later valorized as a hallmark of literary achievement. This line of influence is the focus of the following section, which traces core assumptions of the New Criticism in selected Fugitive poems from the 1920s.

2 Close Reading

Of the three major poets in the Fugitive circle, only Ransom published his mature work in *The Fugitive* magazine. Tate wrote his best poems after the magazine folded, and Warren was only beginning to find his voice in the 1920s. Yet both the magazine and the group gave the younger poets crucial opportunities to hone their style against poetic traditions and modernist experiments alike (see Pratt 1991 for a representative selection of the poems published in *The Fugitive*; see Cowan 1959, 258–267 for a full list.) The Fugitives’ early poetry reveals the emerging tensions that would shape their work in the decades to come. In the following, these tensions will be traced in close readings of Warren’s “Alf Burt, Tenant Farmer” and Ransom’s “Bells for John Whiteside’s Daughter,” both of which appeared in *The Fugitive* in 1924, as well as Tate’s “Ode to the Confederate Dead,” which circulated in manuscript among the group before its initial publication in 1927 and was included in the *Fugitive Anthology* of 1928. All three poems revolve around death, a common motif in the Fugitives’ early poetry that indicates their preoccupation with questions of history, transience, and endurance.

Readers familiar with Warren’s poetry might object that this selection is doubly misleading. While Ransom and Tate are represented by poems that rank among their very best, “Alf Burt” is an apprentice piece that hardly foreshadows Warren’s later achievement. Moreover, its regular form and distanced perspective differ strongly from the ruminative, autobiographical style Warren developed from the 1950s onward as he turned to freer verse forms and longer, narrative poems. In his greatest poems, such as “Evening Hawk” (1975) and the book-length *Audubon: A Vision* (1969), this style enables Warren to combine close observation of nature with existential meditations on the place of humans in the world (Strandberg 1977; Ruppensburg 1990). Yet his early poetry holds greater interest in our context because it follows the poetic principles of the Fugitive circle and shows how Warren gradually developed elements of his later style out of these principles – for example, the compact rendering of thoughts and observations and the sudden shifts from one to the other.

“Alf Burt, Tenant Farmer” stands at the beginning of this process and reveals the ambivalences that stimulated the poetry of the Fugitive group. Beginning with the reference to tenant farming in the title, the content and language of the poem are indebted to its Southern cultural roots. Its driving force, however, is the effort to turn a local event into a piece of art that transcends its immediate environment. This univer-

salizing impulse deflects attention from the social hierarchies of the rural South, such as the tenant system that kept the lower classes dependent on big landowners. “Alf Burt” reinforces these hierarchies by describing the eponymous farmer as part of the natural world, contrasting him with an educated speaker, and inviting readers to identify with the speaker rather than the farmer.

The title of the poem already announces the rural – and by implication Southern – setting of the poem, and the first lines imply a deep familiarity with the cycles of agrarian life that turn the eponymous farmer into one of the natural forces that interact in the cycles of day and season.

Despite that it is summer and the sun
Comes up at four and corn is rank with weed
Old Burt is abed and won't see the plowing done
Nor find a harvest where he laid the seed.

A fatter harvest than he's ever known
He will reap perhaps in field where he is gone—
Harvest of farmlands fairer than our own.
There will the plowshare never bite the stone

(Warren [1924] 1998, 15)

This second stanza elevates the scene into the universal realm of death and afterlife. It establishes an interplay of the concrete and the abstract, the agrarian and the metaphysical, that is sustained throughout the poem. The contrast between these levels is marked not least by the language, which establishes a sharp distinction between subject and speaker. Alf Burt is portrayed as a simple man who moves instinctively with the seasons, a man whose intellectual range is conditioned and limited by the agrarian life on his farm. In contrast, the speaker's claim to superior knowledge is emphasized at the very outset, in the first line of the second stanza, and he supplies all of the metaphysical reflection in the poem. Rather than undercutting this distance, the organizing conceit of the poem – the speaker describes Burt's death in imagery taken from the farmer's familiar world – reinforces it because it appropriates the agrarian images into a conspicuously poetic register.

The poem establishes this register by drawing on the European literary tradition. Conventional metaphors like “farmlands fairer than our own” and “Perpetual seed-time meets with summer there” (line 15) recall the meditative poetry of the Victorian period, which was widely read in American middle-class families at the time. The neatly rhymed quatrains and the shift from the mundane to the ideal are also reminiscent of this period. Another significant manifestation of the European literary tradition is the biblical language the poem uses to contrast Burt's idyllic afterlife with the problems he confronted on his farm:

Never will work the plague and weevil there,
Nor yet descend the locust on the land.

Nor pestilence. It is a country where
 No frost can come for Old Man Burt to fear.

(15)

The poem draws on such literary antecedents for the transnational cultural authority they confer on its subject, but at the same time it insists on the Southern origins of that subject, as is indicated by the appearance of the local “weevil” among the biblical threats to agrarian happiness. This combination of the local and the transnational is not ultimately successful in “Alf Burt” because the language is too stilted and conventional to render the rural scene convincingly. In this respect the poem is typical of the Fugitives’ apprentice work, which relied too heavily on the European models they were assimilating but did prepare the way for their eventual strategy of using these models to lend broader significance to their Southern themes.

Scholars of Warren’s poetry have pointed out that the analytic distance and strict order of poems like “Alf Burt” also serve another purpose: they allow Warren to deal with the Southern tradition without lapsing into the sentimental nostalgia of earlier Southern literature (Szczesniul 39–56). The separation of speaker and subject; the lack of a lyrical I; the controlling metaphor of the afterlife as an agrarian idyll; the broken rhythm; and the potential “fall” into thorns, thirst, and hunger at the end (line 23): all of these devices combine to render one of the classic scenes of sentimental literature – the deathbed scene – in relatively unsentimental terms. In this sense, “Alf Burt” works toward the kind of poetry that the New Critics would call “objective.” As Ransom argued in one of his earliest New Critical essays, the qualities that produce this kind of objectivity are its fictional subject and the meter and tropes it uses in presenting that subject in unfamiliar ways (1938, 233–260). This approach could be put to various uses. In “Alf Burt,” Warren deploys it to avoid idealizing the Old South, while presenting its social hierarchies as a sort of natural state. Such ambivalences are distinctive of Fugitive poetry, which takes up the cultural self-conception of a “Southern tradition” even as it acknowledges its conflicted history, and above all the role of poetry in (re)creating that tradition.

Ransom was the most resolute of the Fugitives in pursuing this poetics of objectivity. His mature poetry, which is collected in the volumes *Chills and Fever* (1924) and *Two Gentlemen in Bonds* (1927), employs a wide range of objectifying devices. The temporal and spatial setting is often left unspecified, which clearly situates the poems in the realm of the imaginary and discourages readings that identify the content of the poem with the poet’s or the reader’s personal experience. The poems have a more regular meter than Tate’s or Warren’s, and they often follow traditional formal patterns. Additional distance is created by the archaic language, the ironic tone, and the absence of a lyrical I – even Ransom’s love poems are usually in the third person. These devices position his poetry closer to narrative and drama than to the lyrical self-expression that had dominated the previous century. Ransom’s favorite poetic form, the ballad, exemplifies his stylistic preferences. Located at the intersection of poetry, music, narrative, and drama, the ballad carries with it a long genre history

and encourages meter, rhyme, and traditional poetic diction. Perhaps most importantly for Ransom, its typical subjects are taken from the past rather than the present and from communal rather than individual experience.

All of these features come together in Ransom's most widely admired poem, "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" (1924), whose narrative setup, conversational tone, and tetrametric ABAB stanzas with trimetric concluding lines clearly invoke the ballad tradition. While the title refers to the funeral service for a girl, the poem itself centers on the memories this event triggers among her acquaintances. This intrusion of the past into the present is signaled by the inverted opening stanza, which begins with remembrance before moving into the current moment:

There was such speed in her little body,
And such lightness in her footfall,
It is no wonder her brown study
Astonishes us all.

(Ransom [1924] 2015, 55)

The plural speaking voice goes on to detail the community's memories of "the little / Lady with rod" who liked to chase the geese at the pond (lines 13–14). The conflict between speed and stasis, lightness and gravity, established in the opening lines continues through the poem and indicates that the community was charmed by the girl even while it disapproved of her wildness. The last of the five stanzas returns to the narrative present:

But now go the bells, and we are ready,
In one house we are sternly stopped
To say we are vexed at her brown study,
Lying so primly propped.

(55)

The short last line of each of these framing stanzas recalls the ballad form but acquires a deeper psychological dimension. It suggests that there is something missing from the speaker's account, that perhaps the community tends to leave things unsaid – a suggestion that reinforces the distance between the community and the girl, and also between the narrative voice and the reader. By prodding the reader to study the simple lines for clues to the speaker's feelings, the poem turns the community that is ostensibly speaking these lines into the object of the reader's contemplation, just as the community turns the girl into the object of its reflections. In both cases this observation is haunted by a sense of belatedness. The community's relationship to the girl is limited to past experience since they can never hope to revive her light footfall. The reader's view of the community is limited with equal finality by the boundaries of the poem, which – signaled by the falling verse feet of the last line – circumscribe the existence of its fictive world and the voice that reports from it. By establishing this double finality, the poem discourages any attempt to relate its content to the author.

This is no “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” in a Romantic vein (Wordsworth [1800] 1992, 744), and nothing will be gained from an autobiographical reading.

This reading indicates that “Bells for John Whiteside’s Daughter,” like many Fugitive poems, is on one level about poetry itself. Like its heroine, the poem shifts dramatically from speed to slowness, from lightness to gravity, until it presents itself, “primly propped,” in its final motionless form. Like the little lady governing her geese, the poem sets up a charmingly imaginative world of its own. Like the girl’s “brown study” – an old term for a self-enclosed attitude or mood – the poem exudes a puzzling sense of melancholia that prods the outside observer to examine the contrasts and limitations from which this melancholia emerges. On another level, the ballad stanzas and the archaic vocabulary (“bruided,” “lady,” “rod”) signal the imposing tradition in which the poem situates itself: the tradition of the European literary ballad, a genre that molded folk narratives into art by rendering them in poetic yet accessible language. Ransom draws on this tradition, and on his own poetic craft, to lend the mundane occurrence of a girl’s death an existential significance that points far beyond the local subject matter of his poem. This conjunction of the local and the universal – and, on the aesthetic level, of folklore and high art – is characteristic of Ransom’s best poetry.

Astute literary critics that they were, the Fugitives continually revised their own poetry, even after publication. In “Bells for John Whiteside’s Daughter” these revisions are limited to a few punctuation marks, but Tate’s “Ode to the Confederate Dead,” the last poem to be discussed here, went through multiple substantial revisions between its initial composition in 1926 and the version included in *Selected Poems* of 1937, which Tate declared the final one (Kingsley 1977). Many of these revisions were suggested by other Fugitives. Tate circulated the manuscript among the group, as was their custom, and incorporated advice from Davidson, Ransom, and Warren in the first published version of 1927. The other major revisions, in 1930 and 1937, also incorporated suggestions and even entire lines from Warren and Stark Young. One way of reading the “Ode” is as a collaborative project, then: as a record of the development of Fugitive poetry and poetics between the end of the magazine and the protagonists’ turn to criticism in the mid-1930s.

This was also the period when Tate reached the height of his poetic force and published a series of complex poems that intertwined reflections on Southern history with universal concerns such as moral choice, friendship, transience, and death. By this point he had assimilated the work of his poetic precursors – especially T. S. Eliot – into a distinct style. He retained an old-fashioned, erudite language and a portentous speaking voice but fragmented the closed form of traditional poetry by introducing free-verse elements and combining strikingly disparate words (Meiners 1963; Schöpp 1975). His revisions of the “Ode” illustrate not only the gradual refinement of this style, but also his increasing engagement with the tensions and ambivalences that would mark the Agrarian movement and the New Criticism.

The poem opens with the speaker standing in a military cemetery, where he is looking at the fallen soldiers' headstones. As in "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter," the focus of the poem soon shifts from the dead to the speaker's reflections on their struggle and the tradition they represent. Where the first version of the "Ode" had puzzlingly rendered these ruminations in economic terms, the revisions increasingly rely on religious images that seem to derive from the subject matter of the poem. These substitutions are part of a general tendency, in the revisions, to disconnect the poem from everyday concerns and especially from the cultural history of the South.

Aside from the unequivocal title, the final version of the "Ode" (on which the following discussion is based) contains only two lines that explicitly reference the South: the speaker's invocation of Stonewall Jackson and, immediately afterward, an enumeration of Civil War battles. By the point these references occur, about halfway through the 92-line poem, the "Ode" has already gone through a series of general reflections on death, nature, and history. It has anchored these reflections in ancient Greek philosophy ("Zeno and Parmenides," line 33), and it has positioned itself in the tradition of the meditative elegy rather than the commemorative ode.

This broad frame of reference distances the poem from the parochial nationalism of many previous Civil War commemorations by Southern poets – as does the intricate, fragmentary style, which discourages sentimental identification with the confederate cause (Kuhn 2015). The stylistic model of Tate's "Ode," as many critics have pointed out, is Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), a poem immersed in the European intellectual tradition and a signature piece of expatriate modernism (Bishop 1967, 17–33). The form of the poem thus signals a transnational scope that, along with the universal themes it invokes, rewrites Southern history as part of a generically human history. As in Warren's "Alf Burt, Tenant Farmer," this universalizing approach bypasses the inequalities of Southern culture, such as the racist hierarchies that led to the Civil War in the first place. At the same time, Tate's "Ode" invites critical reflection on the process of writing Southern history in which the poem itself engages.

Like its precursor, Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead" (1927) begins in a waste land suffused with the voices of the buried dead. The opening lines foreground the generic quality of this setting and would have evoked in contemporary readers the vast battlefield cemeteries of World War I as much as the burial grounds of the American Civil War:

Row after row with strict impunity
 The headstones yield their names to the element,
 The wind whirrs without recollection;
 In the riven troughs the splayed leaves
 Pile up, of nature the casual sacrament
 To the seasonal eternity of death;
 Then driven by the fierce scrutiny
 Of heaven to their election in the vast breath,
 They sough the rumour of mortality.

Autumn is desolation in the plot
 Of a thousand acres where these memories grow
 From the inexhaustible bodies that are not
 Dead, but feed the grass row after rich row.

(Tate [1927] 1977, 20)

The elegiac tone and spiritual vocabulary in these lines already indicate that the poem is a meditation more than an ode, and a meditation on death in general more than on the confederate dead. As the setting transcends the confederate cemetery, the temporal scope of the poem expands into the boundless cycle of the seasons where the dead become the seeds of new life. This universal scope stands in marked contrast to the historical specificity of the title. Where most Civil War poems resolve such contrasts into a straightforward political message, Tate sustains their tension to explore the ambivalences and contradictions of cultural memory. This approach heightens the complexity of his poem while at the same time deflecting attention from the political causes of the Civil War.

By treating poetry and politics as separate spheres, Tate sidesteps the moral responsibility of the Old South and asserts the autonomy of poetry – a double strategy that both Southern Agrarianism and the New Criticism would adopt. While simple political messages can be stated in any form, the New Critics agreed, the complexity of concepts such as history, memory, and death requires a form that can assimilate their manifold implications and interrelations. Tate’s “Ode” anticipates this position by sustaining complexity on various formal layers, from the erudite vocabulary to the heavy symbolism and structuring imagery (Rubin 1978; Stewart 1965). The most prominent image is the leitmotif of the falling leaves, which is introduced in the opening lines and repeated in each of the four interjected couplets that structure the poem. A traditional symbol of death and transience, the leaves assume a pivotal role in interlinking the natural cycle of decomposition and rebirth (their fall marks the fall season), the historical cycle of defeat and renewal (the fall of the South as personified in its falling soldiers), and the metaphysical cycles of sin and salvation (the biblical fall, to which the poem frequently alludes). The “Ode” links these cycles symbolically, the more material layer evoking the more abstract. The leaves evoke the soldiers, the soldiers evoke the South, and the fate of the South evokes the fate of humankind. The resulting density of meaning makes a strong claim for the distinct complexity of poetic language, and it distracts from the shortcomings of the Old South, whose guilt in defending slavery is after all quite different from the universal guilt asserted by Christian theology.

While Tate’s poem hardly resembles Ransom’s in style, it aims for a similar poetics of objectivity. Unusual for a meditative elegy – but typical, as we have seen, of a fugitive poem – the “Ode” has neither a lyrical I nor a personalized speaker. The only entity with personal traits in the poem is an ambiguous “you” that might refer to the speaker, the reader, someone in the speaker’s imagination, or a character in the poem. Together with the complex syntax and abstract language, this ambiguity allows for an objective

reading experience of the sort Ransom advocated. Rather than inviting emotional identification with a speaker, the “Ode” requires an analytic reading that makes the speaker the object of the reader’s scrutiny. This kind of “self-objectification” is a widespread and characteristic technique in modernist literature (Müller 2010), but Tate employs it for a particular purpose: he duplicates the speaker’s self-reflection on the level of the poem as a whole. Just as the speaker meditates on his relationship to history, the poem meditates on its relationship to historiography: on the role of poetry in transmitting and constructing the configuration of stories, myths, and values that makes up the (Southern) tradition.

This self-reflexive layer is sustained by the leitmotif of the leaves, which traditionally refers not only to foliage but also to the leaves of paper on which poems are composed, and thus to poetry itself. While scholars have discussed various other meanings of the leaves motif in Tate’s “Ode,” its poetological dimension has largely gone unnoticed. This is the more surprising because the entire poem is saturated with self-reflexive poetological references. In the opening lines, the graves, like poetry, unfold “row after row” to the reader; the headstones, like the poem, “yield” information about the soldiers in writing; and the falling leaves, again like the poem, vicariously communicate the soldiers’ reflections on mortality. These analogies trigger a chain of metaphoric signification: the trenches of the war become the graves of the dead become the seeds of new life become poetry; reversely, poetry becomes the seed of life, the voice of the dead, and the voice of history. Poetry does not merely render history, these images suggest, but it creates history in the first place by bringing it to life in the act of writing. In this sense, Fugitive poetry amounts to a Southern Renaissance indeed: it involves not only the creation of a new Southern tradition but literally a rebirth of the old one; its innovative formal composition advances a conservative political agenda.

A similar tension is created by the other leitmotif of the “Ode”: the wind, which is interlinked with the leaves throughout. Wind has been closely associated with lyrical poetry since antiquity, when poets, like wind, played on the lyre to accompany their works (such as odes). This tradition is evoked in the opening lines of Tate’s poem, where wind is the “element” to which the dead “yield” their stories by “sough[ing]” them “in the vast breath.” The imagery emphasizes the importance of poetry as a medium of the soldiers’ collective memory, and thus of the history of the Civil War. At the same time Tate distinguishes his “Ode” from the Romantic notion of spontaneous song – the wind playing on the lyre – by emphasizing that the wind “whirrs without recollection.” Only when the poet himself plays the lyre is recollection possible. In other words, the poem suggests that history is not simply there but is created by the poet’s craft. The suggestion is reinforced later in the poem, when the speaker muses that “The singular screech-owl’s tight / Invisible lyric seeds the mind / With the furious murmur of their [the soldiers’] chivalry” (lines 71–73). What the speaker ascribes to birdsong is really the work of the poet: The soldiers’ struggles and motivations enter historical memory because the poet turns the “tight” lyrics of the natural world into the kind of “tight,” condensed poetry the Fugitives wrote. Tate has been accused of

mixing metaphors in this passage (Stewart 1965), but the motif of seeding contributes to the overall coherence of the poem by sustaining the poetological connotations of the wind image. In the natural world, after all, it is wind that transports seeds to places where they can create new life. This imagery contributes to the poem's universalizing tendency, transcending the specific causes and consequences of the Civil War.

Like the "row[s]" and the "plot" of the opening lines, the seeds also invoke potential references of Tate's various versions of the "Ode." On this level the poem is surprisingly practical. For all their elegiac tone, the lines about "the inexhaustible bodies that are not / Dead, but feed the grass row after rich row" ultimately describe the soldiers as fertilizer. More momentously, agriculture is traditionally a poetological image, too. The very word "culture" recalls the longstanding notion that poets cultivate the mind as farmers cultivate the land; in the early twentieth century, when the Fugitives were exploring the literary tradition, poetry was often described in Romantic terms, such as Wordsworth's "scanty plot of ground" ([1802] 1983, 133; Ward 2015). In the poems of Warren, Ransom, and Tate, agrarian imagery thus assumes several functions at once. By interlinking life in the rural South with the literary tradition, these tropes emphasize the universal significance of their regional subjects as well as the importance of their own work. As a particularly complex and effective archive of the Southern tradition, poetry distinguishes itself from other discourses even while it fulfills an important social function: to revive, reiterate, and sustain that tradition for each successive generation of readers.

3 Poetry into Theory?

The ambivalences at work in these poems continued to shape the Fugitives' approach to literature in the following decades. The main purpose of their Vanderbilt meetings had always been the critical analysis of poetry, including their own, and they frequently reviewed other poets. These activities confronted them with questions of a more general nature: how does poetry work? By which criteria is it judged? What is its role in society? The first of these questions was central to the development of their own poetic style; the last, as we have seen, had a prominent place in their writings of the Agrarian phase. Both of these questions are bound up with the second one, that of the criteria of aesthetic judgment. It was this question to which Ransom, Tate, and Warren devoted themselves in the late 1930s, when their poetic careers were well established and the Southern Agrarian movement had collapsed. Their combined efforts resulted in an enormously influential project that would dominate the study and teaching of literature in America for decades: the New Criticism.

A main factor in the rapid ascent of the New Criticism was the poet-critics' realization that literary debates were increasingly dominated by universities rather than independent magazines and public intellectuals. This realization originated in their

Agrarian phase, when they had blamed the shift from an agrarian to an industrial way of life not least on the expansion of the public education system. By providing vocational training, the Agrarians came to believe, public education drew younger generations of students from agriculture to manufacturing, and thus to the instrumental thinking and progressive habits of the industrial North. It replaced the arts with the applied sciences and prioritized grade scales over intellectual debate (*I'll Take My Stand* 2006, 92–121). This belief in the fundamental social impact of education carried over into the New Criticism. Unusually for an intellectual movement, the most influential publications of the New Criticism were student textbooks: the introductory guides to *Understanding Poetry* (1938) and *Understanding Fiction* (1943) that Warren co-authored with Cleanth Brooks, another former Vanderbilt student. The theory behind these widely used books was laid out in Tate's *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas* (1936) and Ransom's *The World's Body* (1938) and *The New Criticism* (1941). Other key works associated with the New Criticism include Brooks's *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939), René Wellek and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature* (1948), and philosophers William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's essays "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946) and "The Affective Fallacy" (1949).

The appearance in this list of Wellek, a Czech immigrant associated with the Prague School of Structuralism, indicates that the New Criticism was never simply a Southern project. It drew from a range of intellectual sources, most of which were European: new developments in French and German philosophy, the formalist and structuralist schools of Eastern Europe, the analytic approaches to literature explored by their British colleagues I. A. Richards and William Empson, and the influential critical writings of their poetic role model, T. S. Eliot, who had become a British citizen and a pan-European intellectual in the 1920s. One manifestation of these transatlantic exchanges was a note in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), Empson's seminal book of analytic criticism that Ransom popularized in the United States. The inspiration for his book, Empson noted, had come from the literary criticism of Graves and Riding, who had been one of the original Vanderbilt Fugitives. Like Fugitive poetry, the New Criticism thrived on the tension between its cosmopolitan scope and the Southern (Agrarian) circles from which it emerged. The other tensions of Fugitive poetry – delineated in the previous section – had a similarly foundational impact in that they informed the main theoretical principles of the New Criticism.

The relationship between art and its cultural environment, for example, had become a vexing question in the poet-critics' Agrarian phase. As poets, they had always insisted on the autonomy of their work, but as Agrarians they emphasized the interrelations between art and society. This had resulted in the contradictory claims of *I'll Take My Stand*, where most contributors seemed to assume that society had a direct, causal effect on art: that the arts required an agrarian system to flourish. The Fugitives never quite believed this, as we have seen, and by the time they regrouped into the New Critics they had substituted the idea of cause and effect with a model derived from their own poetry. Rather than reflecting or transmitting its cultural environ-

ment, they now argued, art used specific techniques to transform aspects of that environment into a different, higher order of knowledge. As a consequence, the task of the critic was no longer to judge the accuracy or the moral implications of the artist's rendition, but to identify formal techniques and explain their relevance to the overall experience of the work (Ransom 1941, 216). This shift of perspective resulted in two core ideas of the New Criticism: that literature was defined by its form and that literary works needed to be analyzed independently of their authors.

The fundamental difference between a nonliterary text and a poem, Brooks and Warren argued in the opening pages of *Understanding Poetry*, is that the poem communicates its content in a "massive," "special" manner (1961, 6). It condenses an unusual mass of information and an unusual range of perspectives into a short text, and it does so with the help of special devices: images, rhymes, shapes, and so forth. If these formal devices distinguish literature from other forms of communication, the New Critics argued, the value of literary texts lies not primarily in their plot or message but in their artistic composition. Ransom called these dimensions the logical 'structure' and the expressive 'texture' of a literary work; other critics simply spoke of content and form (1941, 219–221). An important consequence of this distinction was that biographical information about the author became largely irrelevant to literary analysis. The very notion that literary works revealed the author's underlying "intention" was illogical, Wimsatt and Beardsley argued, because literary works take shape gradually in the author's mind and any intention ascribed afterward is merely a speculative assumption about a random point in the composition process (Wimsatt 1954, 3).

This meant that the discipline of literary studies needed a new method. Where previous scholars tended to read literature against political programs or the author's biography, the New Critics preferred the 'close reading' of form-content relations within the text, which excluded such outside material. The purpose of close reading was to identify the formal strategies at work in a given text and to determine whether they stood in an "organic" relationship with the content. A successful literary text, the New Critics argued, operates with formal strategies that derive logically from its subject, and it uses these strategies to enhance and condense its rendering of that subject (Brooks and Warren 1961, 16–19). Underlying this emphasis on formal achievement was a broader concern for the status of the arts and humanities. For Ransom, bad poetry was not just a matter of taste but threatened all artistic and intellectual endeavor. "It involves in a general disrepute all poets, the innocent as well as the guilty, by comparison with . . . the scientists," he worried; and what was more, the scientists would surely "make the most of the comparison" (1938, 279). The goal of the New Criticism, in other words, was to secure for literature and literary studies the kind of authority that was usually reserved for the hard sciences.

This strategy contributed decisively to the rapid success of the New Criticism in the academy. Where many earlier critics had sounded mystical and subjective, the New Criticism seemed to offer a rigorously analytic approach that could be applied to any literary text and thus legitimized literary studies as a distinct academic discipline.

At a closer look, however, the assumptions underlying this model are not as universal as they appeared. The assumption that literature can be defined by a set of formal features, for example, applies to poetry much more than to narrative or dramatic texts. It also privileges formally experimental texts over those whose primary function is referential – for example, realist narratives, biographies, and oratory. What the New Critics presented as a standard method for any critical reading, in other words, was closely modeled on their own work: on poems that emphasized formal complexity over direct expression in order to maintain a distanced, analytic attitude to their subject matter.

Their poems were ambivalent responses to a changing South, as we have seen in the previous section, and these ambivalences carried over into the putatively neutral standards of the New Criticism. By affirming formal innovation as the main standard of literary value, the New Critics pursued a consciously modernist agenda while at the same time discouraging works that foregrounded political messages.¹ Their conservative tendencies showed in their sweeping rejection of Harlem Renaissance and Great Depression writers, whom they faulted for an overly political approach. Yet they also debunked the favorite poets of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, such as Tennyson and Longfellow, whom they found imitative and banal. Instead, they promoted formally innovative writers, preferably those that maintained a certain respect for literary and cultural traditions: Emily Dickinson and Gerard Manley Hopkins, who wrote enigmatic poems with religious overtones; James Joyce and William Faulkner, who chronicled traditional cultures in experimental novels; Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, whose complex poetry was saturated by the literary tradition. The New Critics were unusually successful in reorienting literary history toward these major representatives, and they were unusually candid about their canon-building. They regarded it as the duty of literary critics to assess the value of individual texts and lay out the standards on which their assessments relied.

The New Critics were much more reluctant when it came to another challenge that had pervaded their Fugitive and Agrarian work: the question of race. In fact, the seemingly neutral method they developed for literary criticism helped them deflect this question: it allowed them to continue marginalizing writers of color while shifting the blame to these writers. If no African Americans were represented in the canon, the New Critics could argue, this was simply because their work was too conventional or too directly political. This created a double bind for African American writers. If they wrote to white standards they could be dismissed as too conventional; if they rejected these standards in favor of black concerns and black aesthetics, on the other hand, they could be dismissed as too political. The closely guarded canon of the New Criticism thus excluded entire fields of literary production.

¹ See also ¹Framing Modern Subjectivity; ¹¹Modern(ist) American Poetry; ¹²Modernist Materialities.

This stifling effect was a main reason why the dominance of the New Criticism was challenged by the political left from the 1970s onward (Kalaidjian 1996). As the academy became more diverse, younger critics began to question the universality of New Critical assumptions. To feed questions of race and identity back into the discussion, they introduced alternative approaches that foregrounded the political work of literature: poststructuralism, which read texts for marginal voices and resistant meanings rather than organic unity; cultural studies, which read texts as expressing and shaping the social structures from which they emerged; the new historicism, for which literature was not so much the work of genius than a conduit of the power struggles of its time.

While all of these approaches challenged the idea of the organic, autonomous work of art on which the New Criticism relied, they retained some of its other features: its reliance on close reading, its attention to ambiguity and ambivalence, its claim that the humanities were equally important as the exact sciences. In a way, they even expanded the range of these methods and claims beyond the literary text to encompass society as a whole. It is a key contention of cultural studies that everything from social structures to everyday behavior to material objects needs to be examined for the way it deploys signs to affect people – an approach some of its practitioners explicitly derive from formalist close reading (Faflik 2020). Deconstruction and the new historicism share an interest in the political implications of ambiguity and ambivalence, which they often demonstrate in close readings of sources selected for their density and complexity of meaning (de Man 1983; Greenblatt 1980). In applying these methods to sociopolitical issues, the new approaches extended the range of literary studies to areas previously reserved for the social (and natural) sciences, thus mounting an even broader claim for the significance of the humanities than the New Critics had.

In the early 2000s, when this sociopolitical agenda had come to dominate literary studies, there were growing concerns that the discipline was dissolving into a weaker version of the social sciences. As a countermeasure, some scholars proposed a ‘new formalism’ that shifted the focus back to the aesthetic qualities of literature. Not to be confused with the group of poets that assembled under the same label in the 1980s, the new formalist scholars argued that literary texts should be approached as works of art rather than as interchangeable sources of socio-historical information. In their view, the social significance of literary texts does not lie in statements about particular political questions but in the strategies these texts employ in representing the social. When new formalists speak of form, they refer not only to the stylistic or structural properties of texts – as the New Critics had – but also to such deep-structural patterns of representation, which they take to shape collective perception on a more fundamental level than explicit statements could. This broadened conception of form is signaled by the title of Caroline Levine’s *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015), one of the programmatic texts of the new formalism. By understanding these four categories as forms, Levine wants to overcome the distinction between “the formal and the social” (2)

and instead attend to the ways in which literature establishes, negotiates, and modifies the “organizing principles” of society: its forms (9).

While Levine’s four types of form recall Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, she takes care to distinguish her approach from the New Critics and their conservative politics. She shares this concern with many other new formalists, who often acknowledge the influence New Critical legacy but deflect its implications by focusing their analyses on politically progressive writers or topics (Theile and Tredennick 2013). In spite of these gestures of distinction – or maybe because of them – it is illuminating to read new formalist criticism against Fugitive poets like Ransom, Tate, and Warren. For one thing, this opens up new perspectives on the poets, whose work has largely escaped critical contextualization because later scholars either dismissed it as reactionary or read it through the lenses the poet-critics themselves had established. This article, by contrast, has pursued a new formalist approach in that it has situated the formal complexities of the poems against the sociopolitical debates in which these poems participated. Such an approach acknowledges the mutually formative impact of the literary and the social without reducing either of these spheres to the other.

Another way of reading the new formalism against Fugitive poetry is to use the poetry as a lens onto the theory and practice of new formalist criticism. Whereas the ‘old’ formalism of the Fugitive poet-critics developed out of their own poetry, the new formalism emerged from the study of earlier literary periods and conspicuously avoids modernist experimental writing. By approaching it through Fugitive poetry, we can thus gain a more comprehensive perspective on the new formalists and subject their self-descriptions to critical analysis. One such self-description is that new formalism levels the playing field by expanding its range beyond canonic writers. By analyzing a wide range of texts, even beyond traditional literary genres, the new formalists challenge the distinctions between high and low, innovative and banal, avant-garde and mass culture, that had shaped New Critical practice.

Since new formalist readings start from the texts and their formal composition, however, they too work best with complex artistic texts such as Fugitive poems. After all, the social and political implications of form can be demonstrated most effectively in texts that draw on a broad formal repertoire to present their message in a condensed, polysemic manner. This kind of presentation reached its purest manifestation in the poetry of the Fugitives and other experimental modernists, who made it the primary goal and aesthetic principle of their writing. It generally occurs most often in poetry, the most compact and most formal of the genres, and especially in the poetic tradition that forms the lineage of experimental modernism: that of the English Renaissance and the Romantic period. The new formalist approach emerged mainly from the study of these periods, and it is hardly accidental that poems remain its most frequent case studies (Bogel 2013; Wolfson and Brown 2006).

Another affinity between Fugitive poetry and new formalist approaches is their shared interest in traditional genres such as the ballad, the ode, and the sonnet. This interest distinguished the Fugitives from other poetic avant-gardes of their time,

whose experimental approach often led them to reject or disrupt established genres. As the readings in the previous section have shown, the Fugitives associated formal and generic patterns with social order, if only in the paradoxical act of modifying them to salvage traditional orders. A similar unacknowledged interplay can be observed in new formalist criticism, where it works the other way around. Instead of deploying change to assert order, the new formalists tend to deploy order to assert change. Much new formalist scholarship focuses on traditional poetic genres but reads these genres primarily for the challenges they pose to both generic and social orders. From this perspective Elizabethan sonnets are interesting because they challenge Petrarchist conventions, for example, and African American sonnets because they interrogate the association of high culture with whiteness (Dubrow 1995; Müller 2018). Such scholarship often focuses on deviations from formal or generic standards, but it needs to assert the standards in order to identify deviations in the first place. It reaffirms stability to highlight change.

This paradox even made its way into theoretical accounts of the new formalism. Caroline Levine, for example, proposes a distinction between form and genre on the grounds that genre changes over time while forms are independent of historical context. “Once we recognize the organizing principles of different literary forms—such as syntax, free indirect speech, and the sonnet,” she argues, “they are themselves no longer matters of interpretive activity or debate” (2015, 13). This is one of the starkest affirmations of stability in new formalist scholarship, and also one of the most readily contradicted: after all, there are numerous ongoing debates around the very forms Levine mentions. Like other poems that use recognizable forms, but more radically so, the Fugitive poems discussed above reveal the dynamics underlying such affirmations. These poems draw on literary form to assert the stability of all forms, including cultural patterns and traditions. Yet even poetic forms are far from stable. They need to be adapted to achieve the unity of form and content at the core of Fugitive poetics, as for example in the modified ballad stanzas of Ransom’s “Bells for John Whiteside’s Daughter.” The Fugitives’ awareness of this instability shows not only in their later critical and theoretical writings, but already in the self-reflexivity of their early poetry. Most openly, the pervasive metapoetic imagery of Tate’s “Ode to the Confederate Dead” invites critical reflection on the poem’s formal composition, just as the formal composition invites engaged contemplation on the speaking voice and on the historiographical processes that construct a Southern tradition. In the very act of projecting stability, Fugitive poetry thus opens a window onto the dynamic processes in which forms become recognizable in the first place.

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