

PART II
THE WRITER AS
SOUTHERNER

With one stroke the Agrarians thus countered the tendency to regard the rise of a new class of southern intellectuals as commensurate with the development of liberalism in the region. Now there suddenly was—or appeared to be—an active conservative voice ready to affirm Old South values in twentieth-century terms.

—Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within*

When journalist H. L. Mencken, upon observing the Scopes Evolution Trial, described the South as the “bunghole of the United States, a cesspool of Baptists, a miasma of Methodism, snake-charmers, phony real-estate operators, and syphilitic evangelists,”¹ he did more than insult the religious faithful of Dayton, Tennessee. To the reading public of the South, the Sage of Baltimore came to embody the barrage of public criticism that accompanied the myriad of “causes célèbres” intended “to agitate metropolitan newspapers and to bring to Southern capitals protesting telegrams, eminent attorneys, and roving bands of petitioners, investigators, and missionaries.”² For one specific group of talented southern intellectuals, self-titled the Fugitives and gathered at Vanderbilt University, these attacks on the South and the negative identity construction that followed would catalyze their transformation, not once, but twice. Talent does not inherently insulate one from ridicule, but it did give this group, which included John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Donald Davidson, a vital tool to overcome the disparagement. Nicknamed for the literary journal, the *Fugitive*, that they published from 1922 to 1925, these writers originally intended to throw off the sentimentality of southern romanticism and bring modernism to southern arts and letters. However, the blistering coverage of the Scopes Trial awakened a dormant historical consciousness among the young writers, who realized that their individual identities were part of a larger regional identity at odds with American national identity.

Davidson personally referred to the media that descended on Dayton as “shock troops,”³ revealing a “new mood of defensive anger.”⁴ In an effort to

respond to this public criticism, the Fugitives abandoned their emotional and psychological flights from their homeland, morphing into a community intent on reclaiming the southern past and using it specifically to garner recognition in the literary world. This transformation resulted in a series of publications, including biographies of the likes of Jefferson Davis, poetry infused with local lore and nostalgia, and critical essays championing tradition, authoritarian religion, and self-determination. However, this effort to resuscitate southern art and revise southern history failed to effectively counter the public denunciation of the South. C. Vann Woodward argued that for the Fugitives, “the best defensive was an offensive”⁵—and so it was, at least momentarily. In an effort to prove that intellectual life in the South did exist and to seek recognition from the critics, Ransom collected and published individual articles by his fellow Fugitives, promoting the integrity and purity of the white southern experience. The regional manifesto, titled *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930), aggressively defended the agrarian lifestyle against industrialization, offering an idyllic picture of the white southern way of life. The South that Ransom and his fellow contributors described, however, never really existed, for they brushed over most aspects of the atrocities of slavery and sharecropping. Ransom’s essay in the collection was appropriately titled “Reconstructed, but Unregenerate,” and in his version “the South was a fine spun living dream . . . rosy, romantic, and unreal.”⁶ Close readings of *I’ll Take My Stand* and the published and unpublished correspondence among the contributors, as well as the critical reviews of the book, expose further evidence of this striving for recognition.

The Fugitives-turned-Agrarians did not get the respect that they sought. Despite promoting their white southern cosmology in a series of five public debates, as well as in countless essays and even in a sequel entitled *Who Owns America*, Agrarianism failed to succeed as a real alternative to American capitalism. Nor did it resurrect the South or prove its culture to be more genuine, if at all viable, in the new modern temper. In fact, more criticism and public ridicule from journalists from both the North and the New South followed. Characterized as southern apologists and delusional neo-Confederates, the Agrarians, despite their best efforts, seemed only to initiate a “second phase of the Fundamentalist campaign.”⁷ The resulting wave of criticism was followed by a transformation as distinct as that which initially turned these Fugitive poets toward the cause of Agrarianism.

Recognizing the futility of their efforts, Ransom encouraged his former students and fellow writers to return to their authentic field of expertise, the English departments of universities throughout the South, cultivating, penning, and promoting a distinct type of literary analysis that came to be known as New Criticism. Named after the title of Ransom’s book, *The New Criticism*,⁸

this modern, yet reactionary, method of evaluating literary techniques and artistic value emphasized the critical, yet nonscientific, knowledge that was accessible only to poets and writers. According to Terry Eagleton, New Criticism insisted that “rescuing the text from author and reader went hand in hand with disentangling it from any social or historical context.”⁹ And these southern New Critics encouraged an almost-fundamentalist close reading of the text, while giving less importance to the historical and social context of the work. Though the New Critics’ attention to form and the text was primarily driven by their aesthetic vision, the method, which so directly contrasted with their Agrarian views, can also be seen to some extent as a compensatory response—the drive for recognition and superiority—to this second wave of public criticism. New Criticism not only offered these embattled Agrarians a place of significance as artists within the modern, industrial world; it also handed these Nashville-bred critics the gavels of judgment, while downplaying the southern culture that they once had argued deeply affected their worldview and their creative process.

Solidifying their place in American literary history, Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks wrote two best-selling textbooks, *Understanding Poetry* (1938) and *Understanding Fiction* (1943), which taught numerous generations of both teachers and students the methods of evaluation fundamental to New Criticism. In general, scholarly explanations of the transformation from Agrarianism to New Criticism either attempt to locate some core element shared between the two expressions, thus downplaying the dramatic nature of the shift, or simply note that Agrarianism was abandoned in favor of a return to art and critical theory. Their essays, including Ransom’s collection *The New Criticism* (1941), as well as the correspondence among Ransom, Warren, and the other New Critics, reveals New Criticism to be part of a larger and more complicated regional response to the well-documented denunciation of the South. Moreover, this transformation had significant political consequences. By championing white southern economic values, the Agrarians established a rhetoric of rural southern superiority and resistance to modernization. And the New Critics, by championing white southern aesthetic values, stripped the American literary canon of any diversity or challenge to their southern perspective for decades following their emergence. Though there are aspects of the New Critical attention to form and text that surely benefited the generations that followed, this specialized vision of American art belied the true complexity of the southern and national experience. Thus, examining the evolution of but a fraction of this particular cohort of successful writers sheds new light on their metamorphosis as a group and also reveals the effects of the expansive reach and pervasiveness of public criticism on the formation of southern white identity.

CHAPTER 4

FUGITIVES CAPTURED

THE WASTELAND OF

SOUTHERN IDENTITY

I can hardly speak for others, but for John Ransom and myself, surely, the Dayton episode dramatized more ominously than any other event easily could, how difficult it was to be a Southerner and also a writer. It was horrifying to see the cause of liberal education argued in a Tennessee court by a famous agnostic lawyer from Illinois named Clarence Darrow. It was still more horrifying—and frightening—to realize that the South was being exposed to large-scale public detraction and did not know or much care how to answer.

—Donald Davidson, quoted in Thomas Daniel Young, *Waking Their Neighbors Up: The Nashville Agrarians Rediscovered*

For the Fugitive poets of Nashville, Tennessee, the experience of white southern identity began in the wake of the “cold Civil War,”¹ when the Dayton evolution trial, according to Donald Davidson, “broke in upon our literary concerns like a midnight alarm.”² During adolescence, acknowledged Allen Tate, “we knew we were Southerners, but this was a matter of plain denomination; just as we knew that some people were Yankees. . . . This was our long moment of innocence.”³ This midnight alarm, however, somehow catalyzed in the minds of these writers an awareness of the South’s alienated status within the nation as a whole. This recognition of southern “otherness,” of a South that has been defined in opposition to American culture, resulted in a skewed self-perception, muddying both the white southerner’s sense of regional identity and his or her American identity. Such inner conflict resulted predictably in an artistic regional culture that often proved resistive, frustrated, and self-absorbed. Though these writers and critics had the benefit of education and innate talent, they were not immune to the public criticism of the South. In fact, their awareness of historical precedent only deepened the wounds inflicted in Dayton. And the attacks, particularly H. L. Mencken’s, were not limited to religious fundamentalism, but spread to southern art and letters and culture in general. For these promising young writers, who thought they would rescue southern literature and put it on the map, the Scopes Trial criticism made them realize the depth of disdain for the South.

In an unpublished essay draft titled “The South and the Nation: A Historical Essay, No. 2,” Davidson pointed to the repercussions of this historical awakening that transformed the Fugitives, locating in the 1920s’ public denouncement of the South a pattern reflecting the “days when abolitionism first began to be militant.” According to Davidson, in the War between the States and thereafter, “the South has repeatedly served as a stalking-horse for bagging game that in the last analysis had little to do with pious rewards and humanitarian reforms. Whenever the Northeast has felt a threat against its power or has wished to gain new power, the familiar story of the Southern ‘outrage’ begins to flood the press.”⁴ Thus, the experience of criticism in the 1920s seemed part of a unique regional heritage; one conflict seemed to merge into the next. The bloody clash between slaveholders and humanitarians, between high tariff and low tariff advocates, now snowballed to include the cultural collision of science and religion, industry and agrarianism, urban and rural, and, of course, North and South.

The contemporary drama, for the Fugitives, now played out against the backdrop of its historical ancestry or heritage. Such damnation, concluded Davidson, not only served to “discredit Southern opinion, and prevent it from making headway in the nation, but it also indoctrinate[d] the South, under present conditions, with a feeling of its own inferiority and so divides the South against itself.”⁵ In order to appreciate fully the way in which negative identity construction transformed this group of writers, it is necessary first to understand what their collective intentions were in their first incarnation as the Fugitives and what motivated their efforts. Unlike the community in Dayton, the Fugitives expressed, in their correspondence and in their writings, their sense of alienation and their striving for recognition. Eventually, Davidson, Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Penn Warren would go their separate ways, but for the decades of their collaboration, their aesthetic and political choices, in some measure, reflected a shared sense of inferiority and their struggle to overcome it and to secure acceptance and acknowledgment in the literary world.

THE CIRCLE FORMS

Led by Sidney Mtttron Hirsch, a professor of English and respected aesthete, this informal gathering of gentlemen poets offered both their latest attempts at verse and their philosophies of art, experience, and the nature of poetic knowledge. Donald Davidson, a student at Vanderbilt before the war, was drawn into the circle through his acquaintance with Goldie Hirsch, the daughter of this local man of letters and Fugitive founder.⁶ Inspired by his Shakespeare

instructor, John Crowe Ransom, Davidson soon extended his mentor an invitation. Ransom's scholarly reputation—he graduated first in his class from Vanderbilt in 1909 and was soon thereafter awarded a Rhodes Scholarship—quickly made him the academic captain of the troupe. Ransom had returned to Nashville after serving as an artillery officer in France and published a small volume, *Poems about God* (1919). The collection had been encouraged and praised by Robert Frost, consequently elevating Ransom's status among the participants in the evening discussions. After completing his service as an infantry company commander in France, Davidson also returned to Vanderbilt. He was now a member of the faculty, and it was at this time that he met Allen Tate, whom he considered to be one of the most talented and well-read students of his teaching career.⁷ Naturally, Davidson encouraged Tate's affiliation with the Saturday night critics, and Tate was happy to join. Reminiscing about the invitation, Tate acknowledged that his excitement resulted from his own vanity: "Don and John were professors; and when I got there the next Saturday night, being the only undergraduate present, I was flattered."⁸

Robert Penn Warren arrived on campus in the fall of 1921 at the age of sixteen and enrolled in two composition classes taught by Ransom, whose work and teachings would ignite Warren's passion for poetry. According to biographer Joseph Blotner, when Warren read Ransom's *Poems about God*, he "felt a shock of recognition."⁹ "For the first time," Warren confessed, "I saw the world that I knew around me to be the stuff of poetry, because that book was a book with the same background of the upper South. It was strange and even disturbing, that discovery."¹⁰ To his fellow teachers, Ransom would confide that "Warren was the brightest student that they had ever seen around here."¹¹ "Red" Warren, nicknamed for his infamous fiery locks, joined the Fugitive community in 1924.¹² At that point, the group was already fairly well established, with a publication of the same name, the *Fugitive*, backed by donations from the Nashville community and garnering some recognition in the local literary community. In addition to Davidson, Ransom, Tate, and Warren, several other local academics and artists rounded out the membership. The list included Hirsch's brother-in-law and local host for the meetings, James Marshall Frank; Nashville banker Alec Brock Stevenson; local businessman Jesse Willes; mathematician Alfred Starr; Boston psychiatrist Merrill Moore; English instructor Stanley Johnson; well-regarded literary scholars Walter Clyde Curry and William Frierson; political science scholar William Yandell Elliott; creative writer Andrew Lytle; and a Kentucky homemaker, Laura Gottschalk Riding.¹³ Cleanth Brooks Jr., who later worked extensively with Warren at the *Southern Review* and in coediting the popular New Critical textbooks, *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction*, enrolled at Vanderbilt just as

the *Fugitive* journal ceased publication, though he is often considered part of the creative swell of this period.

In its new setting, Dr. Hirsch—according to Tate, “attendance at the meetings seemed to confer upon us all the degree of Doctor, but Doctor of what I never knew”¹⁴—called on his colleagues to read aloud their respective works while carbons were passed out to the audience. On one such night in 1922, Dr. Hirsch first suggested a magazine, an outlet for all the manuscripts that these evenings had produced. Though the group seemed to be unanimously agreeable to the endeavor, Tate and Davidson were cautious. Tate, specifically, regarded the idea as one “of the utmost temerity; if not of folly.” Davidson, although thrilled with the notion, insisted that he “could not believe, at first, that my friends would really go through with this undertaking.” “I thought it was bold,” Davidson conceded, “but not folly.”¹⁵ Davidson felt sure that the poetry being discussed in closed session on Whitland Avenue would rival any work being published in a burgeoning young band of southern journals, including the *Reviewer* of Richmond, Virginia, and the *Double Dealer* of New Orleans. The project quickly materialized, with poems chosen democratically by group members,¹⁶ and the most economical printing company was selected, which in this case was an African American–owned business.¹⁷ The cost was shared by these Nashville “doctors,” and public copies sold for 25 cents per issue. The selected contributors adopted pseudonyms for the first issue, a tactic that, according to Tate, was “less for concealment, I believe, than for the romance.”¹⁸ Perhaps more significant than their choice of romantic aliases was the title chosen for their journal—contradicting accounts credit the title to both Hirsch and Stevenson. The name conjured feelings of flight and escape, but to Tate the intent was clear. “For a *Fugitive*,” he proclaimed, “was quite simply a Poet: the Wanderer, or even the Wandering Jew, the Outcast, the man who carries the secret wisdom around the world.” In the foreword to the first issue in April 1922, Ransom “announced rather majestically that one hope of the contributors was to open the channel so that Southern literature, which had expired, ‘like any other stream whose source is stopped up,’ might flow again.”¹⁹ The hard work and creative discipline required to produce the magazine seemed to indicate a promising literary future for the young southerners.

ESTABLISHING AN OASIS IN THE DESERT OF DIXIE

In truth, the triumph, as Davidson called the publication of the inaugural issue of the *Fugitive*, signified a turn in southern letters, or so it seemed to the contributors, who were well aware of the accusation of southern cultural aridity made

by Mencken. The Baltimore journalist had actually espoused his disdain, pity, and scorn for the South as early as the first decade of the twentieth century. In a 1907 essay titled “The Passing of a Civilization,” Mencken argued that “the Old South had been failing for years.”²⁰ Less than two years later, in his new position as the book editor for the glossy *Smart Set*, Mencken observed that southern books were growing increasingly scarce. The appearance of Montrose J. Moses’s *The Literature of the South* elicited an intensely visceral Mencken review featured in the *Los Angeles Times*. According to southern historian and Mencken biographer Fred Hobson, this 1910 review foreshadowed Mencken’s future commentary on what he considered countless southern deficiencies: “Not until the Southerner overcame the cult of hero-worship, Mencken stressed, would he stop producing ‘shameless mush.’ Not until he forgot the nineteenth century and concentrated on ‘the dilemmas and difficulties which confront the southern people today’ would he be taken seriously outside the South. To be of any value at all, Mencken maintained, Southern literature had to be ‘first of all, a criticism of life.’”²¹ This, of course, was not the intent of this group—the Fugitives—who were seeking to flee the sentimental culture of the Old Confederacy.

Mencken’s most frequently cited essay, “The Sahara of the Bozart,” published in 1917, reiterated his perception that southern literature was virtually nonexistent. Yet this piece, unlike the *Times* essay, did not offer a theory as to how a regional revival could be fashioned; rather it vilified Dixie for its comprehensive cultural and artistic sterility. His tone had changed; upon observing the South in the new century, Mencken insisted that “the picture gives one the creeps.” At the center of Mencken’s contempt for rural religion demonstrated during the Scopes Trial lay the South’s complacency and anti-intellectualism. This perceived cultural stagnation had actually prompted this verbal beheading for the South, one that was not aimed solely at the unschooled bucolic masses. “The Sahara of the Bozart” portrayed the South as a wasteland that would not be missed if it were to dissolve into the sea. This piece incensed educated southern artists and academics, particularly the Fugitives. According to Mencken, the essay “made me a dreadful bother to the South, and brought me a great deal of violent denunciation, but all the more enlightened Southerners had to admit its truth.”²² Linking the southern past with the contemporary moment, Mencken further explained:

It is as if the Civil War stamped out every last bearer of torch, and left only a mob of peasants in the field. One thinks of Asia Minor, resigned to the Armenians, Greeks and wild swine, of Poland abandoned to the Poles. In all that gargantuan paradise of the fourth-rate, there is not a single picture

gallery worth going into, or a single orchestra capable of playing the nine symphonies of Beethoven, or a single opera-house, or a single theater devoted to decent plays, or a single monument worth looking at, or a single workshop devoted to making beautiful things. Once you have counted James Branch Cabell (a lingering survivor of the ancient regime; a scarlet dragonfly imbedded in opaque amber) you will not find a single Southern prose writer who can actually write.²³

The essay was read widely throughout the South, and many considered it an unwarranted assault. More important, the attack came from someone whom, despite being a native of the peripheral southern state of Maryland, many considered to be an outsider.²⁴ His scathing essays on the South and his personal elitism further dissolved any perceived empathy for the region. For the Fugitives, Mencken's diatribes served merely as a challenge of sorts, and they positioned themselves to be the exception to the cultural lag highlighted by the journalist. Mencken was a mighty antagonist, and his influence on the growing self-conception of the region that the Fugitives called home would become a profound and debilitating one.

As counterintuitive as it may seem in retrospect, Mencken was actually popular at one time on the Vanderbilt campus, and Tate was known to carry some of Mencken's writings with him.²⁵ Even Davidson, who would eventually attack Mencken publicly in the years following the Scopes Trial, seemed to hold the journalist in great regard in the early days of the Fugitive project. The group was so anxious to impress Mencken—he was, after all, the foremost cultural critic of his day—that they quoted him in the advertising copy for the *Fugitive*²⁶ and sent him a copy of the first issue, accompanied by a letter from Tate that emphasized the purpose of the magazine. The foreword also made a similar argument:²⁷ “Official exception having been taken by the sovereign people to the mint julep, a literary phase known rather euphemistically as Southern Literature has expired, like any other stream whose source is stopped up. The demise was not untimely: among other advantages, THE FUGITIVE is enabled to come to birth in Nashville, Tennessee, under a star not entirely unsympathetic. THE FUGITIVE flees from nothing faster than from the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South.”²⁸

The Fugitives were obviously determined to aggressively distance their work from that which had been deemed so lacking, so unnoticeable as to be virtually nonexistent in Mencken's Sahara.

Tate actually agreed with Mencken's depiction of the South, not only with the alleged infertility of southern literature, but also with the general intellectual

vacuum that had become the New South. In his “Last Days of the Charming Lady,” written only months before the Scopes Trial and carried in the *Nation*, Tate went so far as to express his own frustration with the growing fundamentalist movement, which he would defend against southern critics in only a few short years: “And so it is not surprising that the second generation after the Civil War is whooping it up in boosters’ clubs along with the veritablist descendant of carpet-bagger and poor white. For this second generation, like its forebears, has no tradition of ideas, no consciousness of moral and spiritual values, as an inheritance.”²⁹ Louise Cowan’s early history of the Fugitives reinforces this antisuouthern sentiment, though she insists that their disdain was subconscious: “Surrounding them in their native territory they could see only the ugliness, the ignorance, and the insensitivity of many of the people with whom they dealt. . . . At the time their topics of discussion were medieval, Elizabethan, Italian Renaissance, Oriental, or nineteenth-century French—anything but Southern.”³⁰ But for the Fugitive band of writers, for whom “conventional Southern smugness and insensitivity to aesthetic values was a common point of departure” and for whom “a kind of wisdom the common goal,”³¹ perhaps the sacrifice of their southernness seemed a small price to pay for acceptance in the significant modern literary circles of the North. But the Fugitives would reverse course abruptly and with great drama. By the time the “Last Days of the Charming Lady” reached newsstands in November 1925, Tate and his colleagues would embrace an all-consuming inspection of their white southern heritage. As a result, these poets would soon adopt a political stance that resembled nothing so much as self-appointed southern knights engaged in a duel to the death with Mencken, the dark knight himself.³²

Mencken responded quite nonchalantly to the initial volume of the *Fugitive*, all the while insisting that the entire publication was “written by one man: its whole contents are the same key, and the names signed to the different power are obviously fictitious.” He further announced, incredulously, “Why the author does not announce himself more frankly I do not know: his writings constitute, at the moment, the entire literature of Tennessee.”³³ His inability to distinguish the various styles and aesthetics of the nine contributors could simply be Mencken’s way of homogenizing the South once again; or, perhaps, Davidson’s opinion that Mencken was not a discerning literary critic had merit. Hobson argues that in his original assessment of the Nashville writers, Mencken’s “chief weakness as a literary critic had been exposed.” Hobson concluded that “although he [Mencken] could detect the movement of a national or regional literature, he often could not recognize distinctions in the individual poem—and he could not distinguish one poet from another when the two poets happened

to belong to the same broad 'school.'"³⁴ Mencken's initial support of a rebirth in southern literature was intended to spark a regional consciousness that would force southern intellectuals to respond to the socioeconomic and political aspects of their diseased society. He was, first and foremost, an instigator, as well as an extraordinarily gifted polemicist. And he could muckrake, when muckraking was called for, with the best of them.

Mencken's role as catalyst for spawning southern critics within the South was noted by the northern and eastern media. Hobson records a specific example: "When T. S. Stribling of Tennessee wrote *Birthright* (1922) about racial prejudice in a small town, the *Charlotte News* charged that he was 'strongly under the Mencken influence.'"³⁵ But not all southern writers, particularly Ransom, Tate, Warren, and Davidson, followed in Stribling's shoes. Rather than expose the very real southern problems finally coming to light around them, the *Fugitives* chose effectively to eliminate all southern references—and especially socioeconomic issues—from their verse. Even Harriet Monroe, editor of the influential *Poetry* magazine, suggested that the Nashville circle embrace the local that she considered "so rich in racial tang and prejudice, so jewel-weighted with heroic past." Tate voiced his disagreement to Monroe, insisting that "we who are Southern know the fatality of such an attitude."³⁶ Their efforts to escape would not impress a certain journalist.

Mencken supported the efforts of similar southern projects such as the *Reviewer* and *Double Dealer*, commenting on their value in his own journals such as *Smart Set* and the *American Mercury*. The *Double Dealer* had declared specifically—and one year earlier than the *Fugitive* proclamation regarding its intention to flee the Old South—that "the traditions are no more. . . . The Confederacy has long since been dissolved."³⁷ But Mencken saw a vast distinction between the critical analysis, or the prose, that the New Orleans publication was generating and the poetry embraced by the Nashville writers. The *Fugitives* were committed to breaking free from the "mint julep and magnolia stream of literature,"³⁸ but this was not the oasis in the desert for which Mencken was looking. He saw it only as "a stage in the Southern literary revival."³⁹ He insisted that poetry was "much easier to write than prose, and so it is always turned to by young writers and young literatures."⁴⁰ Ransom clearly delineated the journalist's position: "H. L. Mencken, with damnable iteration, declares that poetry is nothing but paregoric of lullaby, good for making him go to sleep, two teaspoonfuls of the drug doing the work if it is sufficiently pure."⁴¹ The *Fugitives* had been unwilling, and perhaps uninterested, in commenting on Mencken's animosity toward their homeland; but they took the bait, so to speak, when he disparaged poetry in general. And, despite their recognition of Mencken's influence on the

intellectual world, the Fugitives did perceive that they were actually succeeding at dismantling the Old South's "genteel tradition" and the "sentimentality, cant, and intellectual softness" that defined their regional predecessors.⁴²

Although the Fugitives believed that they were destined to create an oasis in the Sahara of American literature below the Mason-Dixon Line, not all southern intellectuals supported the new journal. Edwin Mims, arguably the most senior member of the Vanderbilt English department, attempted to persuade the members of the group to submit their work to established scholarly and creative journals in the North, publications that would heighten their reputations (and thus the reputation of the Vanderbilt English department) more substantially than publication in a local project.⁴³ The need to gain approval from the traditional sources of academic validity located outside the region further emphasized the potential inferiority of any independent southern literary project. Chancellor James Hampton Kirkland did not support the magazine, and he rebuffed Tate in person when he arrived at the administration's office to sell him a subscription.⁴⁴ To Kirkland, the endeavor "smacked of rebelliousness—against the university, against status distinctions between students and faculty, against conventional moral seriousness, against sentimental evocations of the Old South." Moreover, the journal's "bohemian overtones" troubled the chancellor; after all, "plans for *The Fugitive* emanated from the off-campus home of a Jew," and "there were rumors that women had been seen emerging from the windows of some of the young poets' quarters."⁴⁵

Though the Fugitives did make a conscious effort to break ties with the traditional culture of their Old South upbringings, they had other reasons for focusing specifically on poetic form and aesthetic theory. In part, such a focus seemed to be the subject of a mature and educated community of letters, while regional subject matters seemed narrow and a hindrance to gaining the national audience and recognition to which they aspired. Paradoxically, northern intellectuals praised southern writers and journalists who exposed their local plagues such as the Ku Klux Klan or the ever-expanding evangelical movement, which was just the kind of self-criticism that Mencken wanted from the Fugitives as well. Their desire to separate from society suggested an alienation from their environment that was not merely a response to southern condemnation, but also, quite notably, to the tidal wave of modernism. The opening poem of the first issue of the *Fugitive*, entitled "Ego," was attributed to Roger Prim (Ransom) and espoused the desire to flee from this culture to which the writer does not belong, finding refuge only with this community of poets in their safe haven on Whitland Avenue: "I have run further, matching your heart and speed / And tracked the Wary Fugitive with you."⁴⁶ Ransom and his fellow writers would be

heavily influenced by the burgeoning modernist literary movement, a movement that insisted upon their rejection of their southern identity. However, as modernism grew increasingly opposed to the white southern tradition—a battle that is much in evidence during the Scopes Trial—Ransom and his fellow writers would have to choose sides.

THE MODERNIST DILEMMA

In order to appreciate fully the transformative choice that these white southern Fugitives would make—and in order to see how complete this transformation would be—it is necessary to understand how attractive and powerful the modernist example was in their early creative years.

Many intellectuals and writers of the 1920s, not to mention everyday men and women, sensed that the Victorian value structure had collapsed, leaving a vacuum where once a definable tradition had stood with clear standards of judgment. World War I had moved people across continents and exposed them to a diversity that suggested new realities. Additionally, advances in science promoted a more relative and dynamic universe constantly changing and evolving, heightening this sense of instability. Christianity and the nature of revelation came under scrutiny by critical historians and practitioners of biblical exegesis; moreover, the new human behavioral sciences such as psychology and psychotherapy insisted that one's actions were somehow biologically or scientifically driven, and that human motivation, as noted by Nietzsche, operated as a buried and unseen force of nature. Practically speaking, in American daily life, the post-World War I era witnessed the “development of corporate capitalism, the rise of consumer culture, changes in the position of women, and the growth of scientific management.”⁴⁷ In the arts, the rise of impressionism, as opposed to consensus and collective judgment, signaled dramatic change. As William Butler Yeats famously proclaimed: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”⁴⁸ The year 1922 marked the publication of two landmark modernist works, *Ulysses* by James Joyce and *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot. Joyce broke modernist ground for the novel, while Eliot, more significant to the Fugitives, ushered in modern poetry.

For Warren, Eliot's poem, which appeared in the *Dial* on November 22, was a watershed moment in his young career as a poet. Warren recalled standing in line to buy every issue of the *Dial*, specifically the copy with Eliot's *Waste Land*,⁴⁹ but his biographer claims that Davidson lent Warren his copy of the issue. In any case, “its effect was stunning,”⁵⁰ and Warren insisted that he “was completely overwhelmed by it.”⁵¹ Nevertheless, the impressionable Red claimed that he

and his fellow students “memorized the poem and went about quoting it all the time” and confessed that “we intuited the thing as belonging to us”⁵² (Warren was known to have recited the entire 434-line poem at a speakeasy with his fellow teaching assistants years later in California).⁵³ Part of the impact of *The Waste Land* lay, for the Fugitives, in its utter lack of regionalism. Though edited substantially by his friend Ezra Pound, Eliot’s *Waste Land* manages to merge various religious and mythological symbols as well as languages (including the famous Sanskrit line “Shantih, Shantih, Shantih”) into a transnational denouncement of the disillusionment and chaos of the modern existence.

The sources for Eliot’s poem were particularly influential among this southern cadre of writers, who were looking for the kind of antiregionalism that Eliot’s poem exhibited. Eliot juxtaposed references to Arthurian legends, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, the *Satyricon*, the Bible, and two contemporary works, specifically Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* and Sir James Frazier’s *The Golden Bough*, from which he draws his title, all sources obvious and well known to literary scholars. Both Weston’s and Frazier’s works examine the influence of fertility and reproduction mythology on modern culture; and both note the significance of the Fisher King, a figure prominent in ancient lore, who has been wounded in his genitals and is unable to populate his dying kingdom. Legend attests that whoever can cure the Fisher King thus saves the country from becoming a virtual wasteland. But perhaps more significant was the tone of gloom and futility, the pessimism that suggested there was no way to save the Fisher King in this postwar era, a tone completely devoid of the sentimentality and emotion that tainted Victorian verse. Southern historian and literary critic Louis D. Rubin emphasized the Fugitive attraction to modernist literature, insisting that for this community of writers, “the flaccid language convention and the evasive platitudes needed to be discarded.” They subscribed to Eliot’s pronouncement that the poet “must force the intellectual and emotional complexity of contemporary experience into the poem, at the risk of ignoring a general, middle-class audience.”⁵⁴ Like the multitude of voices in *The Waste Land* all crying out for an audience, Eliot had found his. And the Fugitives, in turn, set about finding theirs; they envisioned themselves as part of a worldwide angst well beyond Dixie. Poetry now rang important, valuable, elite, and, above all, transcendent of geographic limitations in this new world order. Eliot had shown the Fugitives how to transcend the South.

Warren, Davidson, and particularly Ransom and Tate would debate Eliot’s contribution as both poet and critic in the years that followed the birth of their magazine, and they would not always agree. But Eliot, a midwesterner reared in St. Louis, shed his American identity by moving to England, marrying an

English governess, adopting an English accent, and eventually becoming a British citizen. Eliot was more than just an example of literary modernism; he was, in fact, the ultimate Fugitive, an escape artist able to transcend his roots and garner national and international recognition as a substantial literary contributor. Tate envisioned that the project and conversations in which his Nashville friends were participating could result in a greatness that would mirror that of Eliot and Pound. When reflecting on his Fugitive experience, Tate declared: “I may disregard the claims of propriety and say quite plainly that, so far as I know, there was never so much talent, knowledge, and character accidentally brought together at one American place in our time.”⁵⁵ Tate’s confidence is not entirely misplaced, or arrogant for that matter. The Fugitives, in their efforts to break free of southern convention and to embrace the complexity of literary modernism, actually made substantial advances in their careers. They were not, by any means, poets of national rank and power yet, nor had their aesthetic critiques reached the heights they would under their future manifestation as the New Critics; nevertheless, their artistic production during the years in which their journal was published proved impressive.

First and foremost, the magazine provided a consistent outlet for their poetry, allowing Ransom, Tate, Davidson, Warren, and their colleagues to experiment with poetic form, and as nonsouthern modernists they garnered some success. In the three years of its publication (the last issue appeared in 1925), Ransom saw several of his most acclaimed poems grace its pages, including “Philomela” (1923), “Bells for John Whiteside’s Daughter” (1924), “Captain Carpenter” (1924), and “Piazza Piece” (1925), to name a few. Additionally, Ransom’s Fugitive years saw the publication of two books of poetry by major presses. *Chills and Fever* (1924), with Alfred A. Knopf, was reviewed in prominent journals, including the *New Republic*, the *New York Times Book Review*, and the *Saturday Review of Literature*. Meanwhile, Davidson’s poetry, under the title *The Outland Piper* (1924), found an outlet with Houghton Mifflin, and he was named editor of “The Book Review and Literary Page” for the *Tennessean*, where he would begin to sharpen his critical claws. Allen Tate, in his student days at Vanderbilt, published the poems “Red Stains” (1919) and “Impossible” (1920) in *American Poetry Magazine*, as well as “Calidus Juventa,” “Euthanasia,” and “William Blake” in the *Double Dealer*.

Ransom and Tate had an exchange of letters regarding the significance of *The Waste Land* that was published in the *Literary Review*. Additionally, when Tate left Nashville for New York only months after graduation, not only had he secured freelance assignments with the *New Republic*, the *Nation*, and the *Herald Tribune*, he had “already been called ‘the White Hope of the South,’ in poetry, and would

soon be deemed as ‘the only critic worth reading in the United States.’”⁵⁶ Even Warren, the youngest of the group but whose major contributions would surpass those of his Tennessee friends, had the distinct pleasure of seeing his earliest poems in print on the pages of the *Fugitive* alongside Robert Graves, William Alexander Percy, Louis Untermeyer, and John Gould Fletcher, all up-and-coming American poets.⁵⁷ The journal clearly benefited from the networking efforts of the *Fugitives* as well as the lack of publishing opportunities available for young, unknown poets. Despite the success of the new journal and of its core members, the workload involved in editing and producing the *Fugitive* grew increasingly burdensome for the writers, who wanted to focus more on their own work—and jobs and fellowships were pulling them in various directions, both literally and artistically—and thus the journal ceased publication in 1925. On the eve of the greatest media spectacle in Tennessee history—the Scopes Evolution Trial—the *Fugitives* sat poised to make a major contribution to American letters. Mencken’s Sahara now seemed a budding garden at first spring.

THE BURDEN OF PUBLIC RIDICULE

The *Fugitives* did not comment on the passage of the Butler Act outlawing the teaching of evolution in the Tennessee public school system when it made headlines in January 1925. But Tate seemed to recognize the brewing storm that was to come in the great showdown the following summer. In a handwritten postscript to a letter that Tate wrote to Davidson on May 27 of that year, he mentioned that he was currently in negotiations with the *Nation* to cover the trial.⁵⁸ He was, in fact, hoping to be sent to Dayton, but he lost the job to fellow Tennessean and southern expatriate Joseph Wood Krutch. No one, particularly the *Fugitives*, could have predicted the media sensation that would forever alter the image of the South, particularly of the Protestant faithful, to the world at large. Such a sensation would ultimately capture and resurrect the historical imaginations of these southern writers, forcing them to critically examine their heritage. What was once a war fought by their grandfathers against the Yankees now became not only a war of geography, not only a war of slavery versus freedom, but a war of city versus country, the educated (and a specific type of scientific education) versus the rural and ignorant, or the modern versus the antimodern. The observations made by Mencken regarding the cultural wasteland of the South now read less as observation and more as judgment. For the first time, this intellectual and elite community of writers envisioned themselves as part of that which Mencken and Krutch, among others, were ridiculing; they realized that they “belonged to a scorned minority and that their own lives and

careers were ineluctably enmeshed with the history and the future of their region.”⁵⁹ The wasteland of modern life was now not merely a world of exhilarating and disorienting chaos, it was a world against which these Fugitives would position themselves.

This white southern consciousness began to outweigh their literary and aesthetic visions. Cultural critic Mark Jancovich argues that this introspection began collaboratively, confessed in letters to each other in the immediate years following Scopes. “It is within these communications,” Jancovich declares, “that they begin to identify themselves consciously as Southerners for the first time.”⁶⁰ For example, Ransom wrote to Tate that “our fight is for survival. . . . I can see clearly that you are as unreconstructed and unmodernized as any of us, if not more so.”⁶¹ This burgeoning consciousness would be inextricably linked to feelings of inferiority generated by the trial and its coverage around the world. Prior to this awakening of sorts, “the gallantries of the Lost Cause, the legends of southern history,” Tate insisted, had been “mouthed over and cheapened.”⁶² They had not been passed down with any real comprehension of their significance or meaning. Cowan argues that the underlying defensive attitude that the poets would express in the years following the events in Dayton was present all along. “What happened to them involved no real change of heart and character,” Cowan insisted. “Instead it was a movement toward wholeness, toward accepting with their minds something they had known all along in their poetry.”⁶³ However, when viewed within the broader context of their entire careers, Cowan’s argument seems short sighted. Their reaction, rather than being a “movement toward wholeness,” was a sharp and radical transformation; rather than passively accepting their white southern heritage, they initiated a campaign for southern credibility. They thought they could garner respect nationally by glorifying an idealized Agrarian vision of the South.

The Scopes Trial and the subsequent condemnation of the “Savage South” instigated a dramatic shift in the Fugitives’ worldview, as they themselves noted publicly at the well-known Fugitive reunion of 1956 and in published interviews and personal memoirs. The writers knew that their magazine, the *Fugitive*, had failed miserably in New York bookstores;⁶⁴ they knew that Mencken was encouraging the southern self-critics, rather than those who sought to escape their roots. Daniel Singal, in his extensive work *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919–1945*, insists that “many writers have unfortunately connected these events”—the *Fugitive* turn toward southern Agrarianism—“to the Scopes trial.” But such critics simplify the *Fugitive* reaction to Scopes, noting that it “was simply a case of the ‘old atavism’ bursting forth in response to the infamous mockery of the South by northern journalists covering the trial.”⁶⁵

Singal downplays the role of the Scopes Trial by noting that “Davidson had already drafted his seminal article, ‘The Artist as Southerner,’ by May 1925, two months before the trial began.”⁶⁶ The article, in which Davidson tackles the place of the white southern writer within the modern temper, would eventually be deemed by its author as his “spiritual Secession.”

The influence of the episode in Dayton, if one bases it narrowly—as Singal does—on the comments made during that two weeks in July 1925, would not seem great. But considered within the broader context of the barrage of public criticism that accompanied not only the trial but also the anti-evolution movement and the death of William Jennings Bryan, the significance seems undeniable. For example, the passage of the Butler Act in January 1925 alone received considerable attention from the *New York Times*. The lead-up to the trial, including Mencken’s efforts to secure Darrow as lead counsel for the defense and the effort to convince William Jennings Bryan to make one last stand as the great orator of the common man, was hyped in media outlets across the country. And all such reports would have reached and interested the Nashville writers. Likewise, the Fugitive poets were well aware of the entirety of southern faults that were exposed in reports throughout the country in the months preceding the trial. But the Fugitives were not just reacting to a textbook controversy in Rhea County, Tennessee. The Scopes Trial was perceived, in effect, as the symbolic final blow against the benighted South—the culmination and pinnacle of national rejection.

■ In his 1958 tome, *Southern Writers in the Modern World*, Davidson labels the decade of the 1930s as the period of “Counterattack,” a reaction to the benighted South of the 1920s, and he notes the recognition by himself and his colleagues of the subtle shift in the intensity of the public criticism of the South that seemed to emanate from Dayton. Prior to the 1920s, Davidson insists that the “northern criticism of the South was couched in the dainty and still fairly plausible language of nineteenth century liberalism.” But, “gradually,” he observes,

the criticism became a little more biting specific. We were religious bigots. We were Ku Kluxers. We were lynchers. We had hook worm, we had pellagra, we had sharecroppers, we had poll taxes, we had poor whites, we had fundamentalists. We did not have enough schools, colleges, Ph.D.’s, Deans of Education, paved roads, symphony orchestras, public libraries, skyscrapers—and not near enough cotton mills, steel mills, labor unions, modern plumbing. But we had too many U.D.C.’s, D.A.R.’s, W.C.T.U.’s, too many Methodists and Baptists, too many one-horse farms, too many

illiterates, too many Old Colonels. Our women were too hoity-toity about ancestors. Our men all chewed tobacco or drank mint juleps and our preachers encouraged our flocks to indulge in religious orgies. That was, it was claimed, the only relief we could get from our dull rural life—except the lynching of negroes. We were a bad lot, a disgrace to the United States—and the only possible salvation for us was through instruction from Northern sources.⁶⁷

Davidson's memoirs and rhetoric grew defensive and vitriolic as he grew older. But his general point still sheds light on the transformation of the Fugitive writers from those who fled the South artistically to a political community attempting to make a case for the southern way in the modern world. It is a point worth repeating: knowledge of the criticism of the South was not the same as coming to terms with one's southern consciousness. The "dainty" censure of the Gilded Age was not internalized to the same extent as the benighted condemnation that would follow. The early disapproval of Mencken and others did not seem to apply to these gentlemen poets, who, for a brief time, saw themselves as the solution to the sentimentality of southern literature.

But as the attacks did, indeed, become increasingly specific, not to mention all-consuming, they grew much more difficult to ignore, until finally the Fugitives witnessed the evolution spectacle in their own backyard, in the Tennessee that had not only been their intellectual home but for many the place of their birth and the birth of their ancestors, and, in fact, the only home they had ever known. Though the pronouncement of the guilt of John Scopes may not have been the exact moment upon which the Fugitive energy changed course, its significance as a capstone of sorts is evident. "The war on the South," professed Fred Hobson, "was conducted on several fronts: Mencken, in general command, his special domain being cultural sterility; [Frank] Tannenbaum concentrating on social ills; Oswald Garrison Villard and *The Nation* crusading against lynching; and [W. E. B.] Du Bois filling the paces of the *Crisis* with bitter indictments of the Southern white."⁶⁸ The cup runneth over, so to speak, and with it came a rush of self-knowledge and an incredulity that southern voices seemed all but silent in the wake of this verbal abuse. Moreover, the timing of the Fugitive engagement with the South resulted not only from this personalization of northern criticism but also from the realization that such attacks were just as profuse from southern journalists. Historian George Tindall argued that exposés of the South by its own citizens became a genre in and of itself in the 1920s. All in all, Hobson notes, "southern newspapers rode the theme of the benighted South to a total of five Pulitzer prizes between 1923 and 1929."⁶⁹ Their

efforts were lauded by Mencken but would be deplored by the Fugitives, who saw the southern self-critics as succumbing to the New South vision of progress as defined and dictated by northern industry and values.

To see the Fugitive turn to Agrarianism as merely a knee-jerk reaction to the public ridicule that accompanied the Scopes Trial is short sighted. As previously mentioned, the Vanderbilt poets were well aware of the opinions of northern journalists and southern critics regarding the state of white southern culture in the interwar years. But this criticism only heightened a deep-seated sense of inferiority and insecurity that accompanied the rush to modernism that seemed inevitable, insatiable, and relentless, uprooting the Victorian value system and the Christian cosmology without compromise. For these talented southern writers, the change was all the more disconcerting because the physical changes in the South were all the more extreme. The volatility of the post-Civil War period included, abstractly, a stifling of intellectual ideas in the South, a cultural lag. Thus, the explosion of literary modernism, of science, of institutes of higher learning, of psychology and behavioral studies was more dramatic by comparison.

Davidson's primary complaint in "The Artist as Southerner," in fact, addresses the cultural anxiety that such a radical juxtaposition elicits. The southern writer in such an environment is burdened with "a set of complex inhibitions that make him extremely self-conscious in his attitude toward his own habitat. And the more completely he is aware of the phenomena of modern literature—the more nearly he approaches a perfection of his technical equipment—the greater these inhibitions will become. He is obliged to realize the incongruities of his position as artist in the South."⁷⁰ Despite their early and future success, the sense of inferiority lurked within the Fugitive experience. The suppression of their white southern identity became a part of what Matthew Arnold described as "The Buried Life,"⁷¹ that which gets lost by the artist as he or she becomes increasingly alienated from the modern world. And in this case, this sense of alienation was heightened by the confrontational image of the savage South.

CHAPTER 5

A KNOCK AT MIDNIGHT

THE AGRARIAN PLEA

FOR THE SOUTH

I believe that religious myths, including those of the Bible, are unhistorical and unscientific, precisely as our gallant historians and higher critics have recently discovered; but that their unhistorical and unscientific character is not their vice but their excellence, and that it certainly was their intent.

—John Crowe Ransom, *God without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy*

Nobody now proposes for the South, or for any other community in this country, an independent political destiny. That idea is thought to have been finished in 1805. But how far shall the South surrender its moral, social, and economic autonomy to the victorious principle of Union? That question remains open. The South is a minority section that has hitherto been jealous of its minority right to live its own kind of life.

—“Statement of Principles,” *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*

The national and international denunciation of the South during the Scopes Trial and the negative associations of white southern identity that followed activated a collective response from southern writers, including John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson, who could no longer ignore their shared regionalism under attack. The result, the anthology *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930), is more than simply an apology for the South, more than simply a reassertion of the myth of the Lost Cause. Rather, the Fugitives morphed into their new status as Agrarians, attempting to establish an expanded mythology of the white South, characterized by a veneration of the sacred, a demonization of the urban, industrial wasteland, and an association of white southern culture with both high European culture and a singular, authentic Americanism. This assertion of authenticity as artists and as southerners was yet another example of this striving for recognition. Yet this time these talented writers turned away from their modernist icons and sought acceptance and praise from reactionaries both inside and outside the South.

Reexamining their efforts as young artists, those attending the Fugitive re-union of 1956 “generally agreed that the two endeavors [the Fugitive and Agrarian movements] really were phases of a single movement, the one growing naturally out of the other, and that the artistic concerns of the Fugitives could not be separated from the social and political concerns of the Agrarians.”¹ Despite the general assumption concerning the common ground shared by the two movements, the transformation was drastic. The products of each movement’s efforts were radically different—modernist poetry as opposed to economic, political, and theoretical essays championing traditional regional values at odds with a burgeoning modernism in America. Perhaps the only commonality lay in the motivation behind each movement and not in an abstract aesthetic way as noted by literary historians. The Fugitives-turned-Agrarians had always wanted to be taken seriously as American writers, to become prominent figures on the literary stage. In the wake of the criticism echoing from Dayton, Tennessee, such motivation took a strange turn. Ransom, Davidson, Warren, and Tate, each in his own way, attempted to salvage a growing list of determinants of white southern identity—God-fearing religion, an imagined European hierarchy, and a sanctified genealogy—all of which they believed provided stability in the turbulent onslaught of industrialism and progress. In an effort to convince northern and southern audiences of the superiority of the white southern way of life, they were, in effect, masking their own sense of inferiority. They were no longer fugitives fleeing the South. They embraced it and tried to convince others to do the same.

The publication of *I’ll Take My Stand* marked the culmination of these efforts, and it was exactly that—a final stand. In the five-year interim between the Scopes Trial and the publication of this southern manifesto, Ransom, Davidson, Tate, and Warren tackled their newly embraced and somewhat problematic white southern identity and the growing sense of inferiority associated with it. Unlike the fundamentalists creating William Jennings Bryan College, whose identities must be gleaned from early college pamphlets, the thoughts, intentions, and feelings of the Fugitives-turned-Agrarians are revealed directly in their writings and correspondence. And they applied their considerable talents and education to their efforts to combat these critics. Ransom and Tate sought recognition for a “cultured” southern ancestry and attempted to convince northern audiences that southern culture was highly civilized, descended from the highly mannered European system that the new American elite emulated and envied. And Ransom and Davidson championed the structure and function of fundamentalism at a theoretical and, in Davidson’s case, confrontational level. Warren and Tate, through biographies, drew attention to southern historical icons; and Tate and

Davidson resurrected their “gallant” Confederate ancestry, in both their post-Fugitive poetry and their fictional works. And all of this before their ultimate decision to present the Agrarian alternative to northern industrialism—a superior alternative, at that, which would unfortunately become yet another point of ridicule, eliciting peals of critical laughter and disdain and indelibly marking each with the southern label.

RANSOM’S SEARCH FOR DIVINE AUTHORITY

According to Fugitive historian Louise Cowan, Ransom was less attached to the South than Davidson, feeling somewhat sentimental about his homeland rather than defensive. But the Dayton trial, insisted Cowan, “and the arrogant and ill-natured attacks on the South had involved him more deeply with his society, placing him in the somewhat surprising position of defending Fundamentalism.”² Perhaps his convictions were more theoretical or less public, but in the immediate aftermath of the trial, Ransom began fleshing out the ideas that would eventually constitute his controversial book *God without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy* (1930). The book, which was considered by fellow Agrarians to be profound but was dismissed as “theological homebrew”³ by critics, would eventually be seen as a spiritual companion to the more political tract *I’ll Take My Stand*. The original impetus for the book—although Ransom had undoubtedly been wrestling with the core concepts in the confusion of the post-World War I mood—resulted from a direct confrontation with Edward Mims, his chair in the Vanderbilt English department. Mims, who voiced his humiliation regarding the dark shadow cast on Tennessee after the Scopes Trial, called for his fellow southern intellectuals to denounce fundamentalism, showing the world that such blind belief, such intolerance, did not characterize the state majority.

Ransom rejected Mims’s request, “arguing that the issue at Dayton was not tolerance versus free inquiry but rather science versus religious mythology.”⁴ He admittedly wrote the book in a “hot and hasty”⁵ manner, but the breadth of its argument proves the long germination of its ideas. John L. Stewart sees a natural transition from Ransom’s attention to poetry during his Fugitive days to his focus on the relationship between science and aesthetics:

The more he thought about them, the more it seemed that poetry was but one of a number of analogous means of representing man’s sense of the character and value of his experience. Among these were the other arts, religious rituals, public ceremonies, traditional codes of conduct, and, supremely, myth. All of these brought order and meaning into the flux of

life without denying the presence and even the charm of contingency and particularity in the local scene—and without denying the mysteriousness and uncontrollableness of the universe. They had the pluralism he missed in science and the monistic philosophies.⁶

Thus, art (and specifically poetry) seemed for Ransom, as well as for many artists, to be an anchor in the modern world, and he praised it and encouraged its presence in society. Perhaps such feelings would seem a natural evolution, considering what writers in the 1920s encountered, but for Ransom the revelation had a second, more pressing purpose. His elevation of the role of myth as counter to the post-Victorian disorder seemed to shed light on the controversy that erupted at the Rhea County Courthouse in Dayton, Tennessee. The media frenzy and the unquenchable thirst of the spectators, radio listeners, and readers worldwide seemed to indicate a collective anxiety. The fundamentalists had gotten a bad reputation, Ransom concluded, from the egregious depictions made by journalists. But at the root of their belief system lay the structure and ritual that eluded modern culture. “Suddenly,” claimed Stewart, Ransom “saw that he had an answer to the North.” The epiphany resulted in a furious nine-week writing stint that produced the completed version of the book in the summer of 1929, in which, ultimately, Ransom praises “southern fundamentalists for clinging to their myths as more sufficient and satisfying representations of life than the new rationalism.”⁷

Though Ransom rarely mentions the South specifically in *God without Thunder*, critics generally recognized that Ransom was “transmuting the spirit of Dayton” into what literary scholar Richard King has labeled “a rather dubious historical-theological generalization.”⁸ The primary problem with the book, King has argued, resulted from the fact that Ransom was not a fundamentalist, nor was he a scholar of religion or science, a fact pointed out by hostile reviewers such as John S. Middleton, who titled his review “Thunder without Light.”⁹ In *God without Thunder*, Ransom criticizes, for example, all American sects that, regardless of their stance on biblical literalism (with which Ransom did not agree), have lost their fire and brimstone as well as their reverence for the mysterious and the supernatural. “Little by little,” Ransom, echoing William Jennings Bryan, articulated to Tate, “the God of the Jews has been whittled down into the spirit of science, or the spirit of love, or the spirit of Rotary; and now religion is not religion at all, but a purely secular experience, like Y.M.C.A. and Boy Scouts.”¹⁰

Ransom’s philosophical glorification of the abstract cultural benefits of a god with thunder, of a “god that invites fear and trembling, that created both good and evil,” was a more sophisticated and highly learned response to the

same sense of inferiority that confronted the citizens of Dayton and the faithful founders of William Jennings Bryan College. Ransom focused on the ontological differences between science and religion, on the danger of worshipping what he considered the “God of Progress” or the “God of Evolution,” or the “God of Machines” (all of which he saw as growing out of the same evil),¹¹ and on the dehumanizing effect of the “scientific ordering of our experience.”¹² Ransom’s theoretical argument, in which he connected the battle of science and religion with the growing battle between progress and tradition, grew out of his frustration with the New South advocates and the industrial culture he perceived as being forced upon the South. He rejected “the new gods and the modern liberal religion of a Kirkland or a Mims,” which he considered the “products of essentially impious men, of men who denied evil, defied fate, and foolishly claimed human omnipotence.”¹³ Ransom produced a somewhat confusing book, and his efforts to map the advantages of the “old-style” religion over onto the empirical relationships of science “remained loose and imprecise.”

Though Ransom’s primary intent was to resurrect the God of the Old Testament and champion the necessity of institutionalized myths, he succeeded in adding a new layer to southern whiteness. Now the white southerner was defined in opposition to the onslaught of industrialism—the crux of the Agrarian movement. “Industrialism,” Ransom asserts, “assumes that man is merely a creature of instincts. That is, he is essentially an animal with native appetites that he must satisfy at the expense of his environment.”¹⁴ For the Vanderbilt professor, progress, as defined by the capitalist industrial system, was one such dangerous appetite. It would, in his mind, destroy his idealized rural and agricultural South. Immersing himself in the abstractions of the southern conflict—the war between scientific rationalism and authoritarian religion as well as the threat of an industrial, mechanical coup—Ransom’s sense of the South’s alienation from the country at large intensified, as did his sense that this latest battle was part of a historical struggle for existence. Furthermore, in a letter to Tate, Ransom proclaimed that “the more I think about it, the more I am convinced of the excellence and the enduring vitality of our common cause. . . . Our fight is for survival.” He wrote to Tate: “I see clearly that you are as unreconstructed and unmodernized as any of us, if not more so.”¹⁵ Ransom’s defense of fundamentalism at a philosophical level—though perhaps his most thorough and provocative—would not constitute his only attempt to reconcile the southern experience, of which he was acutely aware, with the industrial North and the increasingly urban New South.

In addition to his most intellectual tactic of highlighting the potential consequences of living in a society devoid of myth and ritual, without a Christian

hierarchy, Ransom tried to explain and rationalize the provincialism of southern culture, which had become a driving factor in the negative identity construction of southern whiteness. In two separate essays, Ransom historicized white southern culture by highlighting its similarities to European culture in an effort to elevate the agrarian social system and give it credibility. In “The South—Old or New,” which appeared in the *Sewanee Review* in April 1928 and was reprinted as a pamphlet, Ransom argued that the program to industrialize the South and to bring it in “line with our forward-looking and hundred-percent Americanism” could constitute a “charge of treason.”¹⁶ His primary thesis, stated clearly and forcefully in the essay, espouses a white southern exceptionalism based on the perception that “the South in its history to date has exhibited what nowhere else on a large scale has been exhibited on this continent north of Mexico, a culture based on European principles.”¹⁷ In an effort to combat the criticism of the savage South, Ransom turned the criticism back on its source, declaring that the obsession with materialism and ambition is a “dream of youth,” beyond which European and southern culture had matured. The paternalistic and violent image associated with the Ku Klux Klan, lynching, and, of course, the southern slave system was subtly combated by Ransom, who depicted the North as aggressive and belligerent, as a culture that, although it had enjoyed a military victory in the Civil War, had suffered a spiritual defeat. The northerner was now, like the biblical Adam, cursed by Eve, analogized Ransom; he was resigned “every morning to keep up with the best people in the neighborhood in [taking] the measure of his success,” and such ambition promoted “personal advancement at the expense of the free activity of the mind.”¹⁸ Thus, he posited that the leisure of white southern life was not characteristic of an illiterate or lazy culture but was superior, and particularly well suited for the artist, who required an authentic and creative intellectual freedom.

Ransom reiterated his argument in his essay “The South Defends Its Heritage,” which appeared in *Harper’s Monthly* the following year. This time Ransom called on European audiences to support the southern way of life, which he saw as suffocating under the authoritative definition of Americanism advanced by industrial capitalists. Southern historian Ulrich B. Phillips noted that Ransom unearthed in the white southern condition the type of stability that characterized European culture in American eyes—a stability, both physical and intangible, for Ransom, that was absent in modern society.¹⁹ Ransom chastised the southerner who dwelled exclusively on the past, “who persists in his regard for a certain terrain, a certain history, and a certain inherited way of living. He is punished as his crime deserves.”²⁰ And he even acquiesces to the inevitability of industrialization—though in moderation—but his conclusion reveals his

personal truth. In his effort to see southern culture preserved, Ransom called on the Democratic Party, which at this time still enjoyed the loyalty of the Old Confederacy, to redefine itself as “agrarian, conservative, profoundly social.” If this major party was to make a defensive stand against the modern North, Ransom concluded, “then the South may yet be rewarded for a sentimental affec- tion that has persisted in the face of many betrayals.”²¹

Rather than rely solely on his argument of the aesthetic superiority and cre- ative functionality of the yeoman South, here Ransom sounded a call for an al- most populist political movement, and such a call signified loudly the despera- tion with which Ransom wanted to get his ideas across to a national audience. Eventually Ransom would incorporate his defense of the white South with those of his fellow colleagues in the southern symposium *I’ll Take My Stand*. Clearly, they were not now fleeing the “Old Brahmins” of the South—the antebellum, traditional intellectual elite whom they chastised in the original issue of the *Fugitive*—as they had done in their youth. The shift away from the aesthetic arena toward the pulpit of economic politics revealed a new desire for credibility and recognition, a desire that directly reflected a heightening sense of inferiority.

TATE’S AND WARREN’S SEARCH FOR A USABLE PAST

Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren proved less defensive and perhaps more de- liberative than Ransom in their responses to public criticism of the South. As writers, they both tried to make sense of the southern narrative that had given rise to the current moment, and both felt compelled to recast the white South as the recognized source of American authenticity and morality. Tate, who had moved to New York after completing his studies at Vanderbilt, was heavily influenced by Ransom’s Euro-southern model and his general defense of the region. After read- ing a 1927 draft of Ransom’s “The South—Old or New,” originally titled “Pioneer- ing on Principle,” Tate wrote to Davidson, declaring: “I’ve attacked the South for the last time.”²² Ransom’s correspondence with Tate also began to consider their shared white southern identity and its persistence. In a letter to Tate composed later that year, Ransom expressed his conviction that “something ineradicable in Southern culture” existed and was made manifest in his interaction with his fellow southern writers, particularly those like Tate who “exhibit the same stub- bornness of temperament and habit’ [and] go North but cannot bring ‘them- selves to surrender to an alien mode of life.’”²³ Tate, perhaps more than his fellow Fugitives, had accepted the superiority of the established, dominant New Eng- land literary models such as Hawthorne, Melville, and Emily Dickinson,²⁴ making his transformation to a committed student of the South all the more striking.

Tate's introspection was not merely literary or personal—though perhaps it began that way. Rather, his efforts to discover a redeemable South as both an alternative to northern industrialism and an affront to the public ridicule of the 1920s, were also clearly political. Tate's biographer, Thomas A. Underwood, describes Tate as confronting his own feelings of alienation in New York: "He began wondering instead whether Northern values dating back to the Civil War era were responsible for the feelings of emotional fragmentation that were plaguing him—and whether those values had caused the disintegration of his own family. Although he had never been pious, he was beginning to feel not only a need for religion, but also for a hero for the South."²⁵ Just as fundamentalists desired to memorialize William Jennings Bryan and what he represented after his death, Tate was looking for a southern conqueror. And just as the events in Dayton had sparked Ransom's defense of the South, so too did the attacks inspire an identity crisis in Tate (his original essay concept for *I'll Take My Stand* included a historical interpretation of the Scopes Trial). Like Ransom, Tate would make several attempts to redeem some aspect of his benighted southern heritage, including revising southern history, highlighting the European influence of southern culture, and eventually championing a reinvented notion of southern tradition that provided him with a "monistic principle," which would give him "a feeling of belonging to the universe."²⁶ Moreover, "in response to his crises of identity and art," surmised Robert Brinkmeyer, "Tate began a vigorous exploration of his white southern heritage. Hoping to discover a rationale in history for order and community, he pored over books of the southern past and became an expert on the Civil War, even on the intricate battle strategies." Brinkmeyer noted that "sometime during the period of these studies, Tate began to assume the stance of a southern gentleman, both to gird himself against what he now saw as the chaos of New York and also to assert his allegiance to his southern identity."²⁷ In only a few short years, Tate would not only look to his band of poet brothers, all struggling with their own heritage, for support in his status as the prodigal southerner, but would also call for a symposium to answer the charges at Dayton. But first he would undertake a quite productive journey deep into Civil War history.

Despite their shared dislike for the public criticism that befell the South in the 1920s, Tate's fellow Fugitives, whom he would refer to in correspondence as "Confederates,"²⁸ admitted their surprise at Tate's first prose effort: a biography of southern general Stonewall Jackson. The biography, *Stonewall Jackson: The Good Soldier* (1928), resulted from Tate's immersion in southern history and his resulting obsession with the Civil War and the altered course of southern history that accompanied surrender. Writing to Davidson in April 1927, after

successfully placing the proposed biography with publishers Minton, Balch and Company, Tate announced that “since I’m convinced that the South would have won had Jackson not been killed, I’m doing a partisan account of the Revolution. The Stars & Bars forever!”²⁹ *Like God without Thunder*, Tate’s biography of Jackson was written with great speed and intensity, with Tate producing close to 40,000 words in ten days.³⁰ He visited Civil War graveyards, including Gettysburg, where his own grandfather had fought for the Confederacy.³¹ The experience was intensely personal. In a radical revisionist account of the Civil War in general, Tate “took pleasure in reversing the roles conventionally assigned by historians. Tate’s southerners were ‘Constitutionalists,’ his northerners ‘Rebels.’”³² His agenda is strikingly clear. Jackson, from childhood, is characterized as moral: “Tate’s young Stonewall is a cloying composite of Honest Abe (reading borrowed books) and Tom Sawyer (stripped of mischief and humor).”³³ As a general, Jackson is praised for his single-mindedness and authoritarianism, a certainty in great demand in the modern world. Warren scholar William Bedford Clark argues that “most disturbing, perhaps, is Tate’s determined preference for Jackson’s monomaniacal religiosity (a concomitant willingness to shed blood) over the balanced restraint of the more morally circumspect Lee, who drew distinctions between ‘war’ and outright ‘massacre.’”³⁴ The hagiographic narrative, according to Allen Huff, “turned Jackson into an icon of the fierce Christian warrior.”³⁵ Jackson is, in a sense, the historical and military version of the God with Thunder that Ransom desired.

Perhaps more significant in exposing Tate’s revised perception of his homeland was his depiction of northern culture as contrasted to the southern culture that composed the background of the Jackson biography. In an effort to invalidate historically the damnation of the South in the 1920s, Tate shone the critical spotlight on the mind of the North during the mid-nineteenth century: “There were people in New England who wanted to destroy democracy and civil liberties in America by freeing the slaves. They were not very intelligent people; so they didn’t know precisely what they wanted to destroy. They thought God had told them what to do. A Southern man knew better than this. He knew that God only told people to do right: He never told them what was right. These privy-to-God people were sending little pamphlets down South telling the Negroes, whom they had never seen, that they were abused.”³⁶ Tate glorified the organization of the Confederate military, and he depicted the southern cause as an admirable defense of self-determination and federalism. The madness that Jackson faced on the battlefield seemed symbolic of the modern culture that confronted Tate in New York; and Jackson himself embodied the type of decisive man to which Tate aspired. Michael O’Brien has argued, in fact, that

Tate's "view of the Civil War was the mirror image of the warfare in Tate's mind between religious temperament and an atheist mind, a conservative view of culture and a modernist training." O'Brien concluded that "Tate was as divided against himself in 1928 as had been the Union in 1861," and he further explained that "the Confederacy stood for what he [Tate] wanted to be, the Union for a pessimistic diagnosis of what he feared he was."³⁷

The resurrection of the southern past further contributed to the contemporary relationship between region and nation. And Tate believed the North acted on abstract principles with no regard for tradition and history and that such moral absolutism and a blind faith in progress had resulted in the turmoil of the interwar years. Tate quickly followed his successful biography of Jackson with a similarly hagiographic portrayal of the Confederate political leader in *Jefferson Davis: His Rise and Fall* (1929). He wrote the book while living in France on a Guggenheim fellowship, and the underlying theory of the work reflected his experience abroad. Just as Ransom argued that southern culture was the only European social system to be re-created in the Americas, so too did Tate attempt to position the conflict between North and South on the world stage. He recounted in detail the efforts of the Confederacy to attain ally status with France and England and concluded that the lack of success in these efforts ensured southern defeat.

Tate needed to find a replacement for what Charles Reagan Wilson has called the Lost Cause civil religion that would be authoritative and structured but void of the sentimentality of antebellum Dixie, and he personally found such a faith in Catholicism—to which he converted. His effort to redesign the region as a sacred landscape required Tate to reconstruct a mythical South, which scholars have noted did not actually exist (this would be one of the most prominent criticisms of *I'll Take My Stand*). Willard Arnold made precisely this point: "It was not the real South of that era which he looked to but rather a myth, a convenient symbol of an aristocratic tradition based upon moral order and benevolent democratic aristocracy. It was a culture which Tate once called a 'buried city'—yet one they must defend and whose example they were ready to apply in the face of all those forces that once destroyed it."³⁸ This mythologized southern tradition allowed Tate to embrace his regional culture, despite the public denouncement of it in the 1920s. Such a tradition was superior, implied Tate, to the industrialist vacuum of the North, and it offered the writer a stable perch from which he could create.

For Tate, the mythology of the South would also begin to figure prominently in his poetry, specifically his "Ode to the Confederate Dead" (1927), as well as in his novel, *The Fathers* (1939), in which Tate investigated his family

genealogy and transformed it into a source of inspiration. In “Ode to the Confederate Dead,” Tate showed early signs of his inability to escape his southern past, and he mourned the inability of modern southerners to connect fully to their regional history, which he felt was being ridiculed and wiped out of contemporary culture. But personally Tate was torn between the choices to protect and preserve the traditional culture of the South or to embrace the present, modern temper and turn his back on his regional heritage. His angst regarding this choice figured prominently in his ode. He catalogs the battlefields, “Shiloh, Antietam, Malvern Hill, Bull Run,” and confesses in his final line that the past “Smotheres you, a mummy, in time.”³⁹ Tate clearly believed that the southern dead and the Confederate memory continued to influence the generations that followed. But just as surely as he appreciated the rich and dark history of the South, he recognized the suffocating burden that remained just as constant. This internal conflict would trouble Tate repeatedly throughout his career.

Tate’s success in publishing two biographies in such a short period of time convinced him to encourage his friend Red Warren to undertake a similar attempt at narrating their shared regional history. With Tate’s help and introduction, Warren too secured a contract with the newly established press of Payson and Clarke for a biography, but this time not of a likely southern hero. Even so, Warren’s *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (1929) was just as reflective of the antinorthern sentiment expressed in Tate’s portrayals of Jackson and Davis and shared by his fellow Agrarians. While Tate’s biographies functioned primarily to mythologize his southern heroes, Warren’s biography of John Brown attempted to deconstruct the martyrdom of the northern abolitionist who killed five proslavery advocates in Kansas and led the raid on Harpers Ferry in Virginia. Warren describes Brown as an egomaniac of sorts; he embodies the Puritan vision of the selectman and attaches himself, somewhat obsessively, to the abstract concept of freedom with no regard for the practical application of his passion. In Warren’s version, Brown is “blissfully untroubled by self-knowledge.” Charles Bohner, another of Warren’s biographers, notes that “in his stiff-necked resistance on being right, he [John Brown] represents a type which has fascinated Warren ever since: the man who possesses or develops ‘an elaborate psychological mechanism for justification.’”⁴⁰ Brown’s vision of justice allows the end to justify the means, and the more abstract the goal, the more readily comes the justification.⁴¹ This new emphasis on biography reflected not only the Fugitives’ need to control the historical narrative but also their desire to establish a pantheon of white southern heroes and American demons who could be moral archetypes for modern audiences.

Perhaps more so than the other Fugitives at this particular crossroads in their struggles with self-identification, Warren understood the complexity of southern identity and the powerful influence of history, which remained both a burden and an inspiration. William Bedford Clark argues that “Tate’s ‘Agrarian’ biographies are thesis books,” while “Warren’s account of the ambiguous career of John Brown, in spite of the youthful author’s unabashed biases, is something more—an evolving meditation on history.”⁴² Such a meditation, which began in response to the public denunciation of the South in the 1920s, would extend throughout Warren’s creative life, and history would become “the thematic core of all of his writing.”⁴³ The Fugitives-turned-Agrarians longed to stand on the right side of history, on the side of vitalization. Each was attempting to locate something in their shared regional identity of value and significance, an identity marked with a scab of inferiority, picked at every turn by yet another public denunciation of the South.

DAVIDSON’S SEARCH FOR SECTIONAL FIRE

Not surprising, Davidson’s frustration with northern critics and their southern counterparts had reached full throttle by 1927. In a letter to Tate dated May 9, 1927, he declared that upon sight of the magazine entitled *The New South*, “I get sick with the black vomit and malignant agues.” His reaction to the *New Republic*, which he also saw as trumpeting science, modernism, industrialism, and racial progress, proved equally visceral. Upon reading it, he was “willing to take to my bed and turn up my heels,—except that I am too mad to die just yet, and itchin for a fight, if I could only find some way to fight effectively. If genuine sectional feeling could be aroused there might be some hope.”⁴⁴ Davidson was less entranced with modernism than his fellow Fugitives, but he proved much more attached to his southernness, proclaiming his identity loudly, not only in the aftermath of the Scopes Trial but throughout the racial controversies of the civil rights movement.

At the 1956 Fugitive reunion, Davidson insisted on the centrality of the Scopes Trial to his resurrected regional sympathies. However, just as Ransom, Tate, and Warren offered variations on their defense of the southern past, so too would Davidson. His reaction to the benighted South was not instant or consistent. Davidson’s overarching position was to point to the right of self-determination for the southern states (an opinion that he would reassert during the integration crisis that followed the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision): “To contend that there are different ways of progress is not to be a foe of progress. The Southerner who takes such a journey may well ask himself what sort

of progress he is going in for. To make Charleston over into the image of Pittsburgh or Akron would be a crime worse than the Dayton crime. And those who advocate progress without any positive regard for the genius of the South may presently find themselves in the unenviable position of the carpetbaggers and scalawags of the First Reconstruction.”⁴⁵ Davidson’s praise for this “genius of the South” would appear in his critical reviews, personal essays, and poetry, as he simultaneously attempted first to explain the South, then to justify its way of life, and finally to promote its superiority. “The Southerner,” Davidson argued, “has been obliged to live in a world that he never made.”⁴⁶ Living as an alien of sorts, Davidson, not unlike his colleagues, began to see the South as a culture in recoil. He was desperate for a supportive voice to be found somewhere in “the organized wrath of the outside world.”⁴⁷ To Davidson, the fundamentalists had been one of the most vulnerable targets of this wrath, and so, similar to Ransom, Davidson jumped to their defense.

In an undated essay draft titled “The South and Intellectual Progress,” which would appear in 1928 in *Forum* magazine as “First Fruits of Dayton,” Davidson actually mimics his New South nemesis and former department head at Vanderbilt, Edwin Mims, insisting that the diversity of the South was clearly demonstrated by Chancellor James Hampton Kirkland’s reaction to the Dayton affair. In the wake of the criticism, Kirkland promised to fund the construction of more labs on campus in an effort to prove that Vanderbilt University embraced modern science. Despite Davidson’s disclaimers, his true intention—to fire back at Mencken and the press—quickly surfaced. These fundamentalists, demanded Davidson, are merely pawns in a broader cultural “cold Civil War,”⁴⁸ instigated by condescending northern intellectuals against southern conservatives. Davidson continued by outlining his rationalization for the William Jennings Bryan side of the great monkey debate. “Anti-evolution legislation,” he contended, “may even be taken as a kind of progress, for it signifies that Fundamentalism appeals to an issue of battle, already lost elsewhere, to law-making bodies, and that sort of appeal is characteristic of the American idea that law can effect what society in its innerworkings cannot.” Or Davidson encourages: “Consider, too, that Fundamentalism, whatever its wild extravagances, is at least morally serious in a day when morals are likely to be treated with levity; and that it offers a sincere, though a narrow, solution to a major problem of our age: namely, how far shall science, which is determining our physical ways of life, be permitted also to determine our philosophy of life.”⁴⁹ The essay also gives way to Davidson’s historical interpretation of the significance of the region’s agrarian economic system, which he believed incorporated ethics and accountability, rather than the greed and profit motives of industrialists of the

twentieth century. Colonial Virginia had adopted the chivalry of the Cavalier archetype and established a solid southern business practice:

The South has never blushed to acknowledge that the good life has its foundation in economic matters. But the plantation masters of the old days and even the factory builders of the late nineteenth century mixed a considerable amount of civic responsibility and generous paternalism with their business affairs. The Southern business men of to-day seem to be out of touch with this tradition. . . . They are ready to egg on their industrial revolution enthusiastically without ever counting the evils they may be dragging in with it, and without considering whether they are hurrying the South into an artificial prosperity.⁵⁰

Davidson even depicted the northern train stations as dirty and ugly, while positing the Garden of Eden vision of the South.⁵¹ He was likewise preoccupied with the actual definition of progress for the South, encouraging his fellow southerners to think critically about what they were losing if they blindly accepted the northern model at the expense of regional integrity.⁵² The dangers of industrial decay and the New South lust for “artificial prosperity” permeated *I’ll Take My Stand*, which would take shape in only a few short years as the Agrarian politics of these once-Fugitive poets reached fruition.

The defense of fundamentalism that appeared in one portion of “First Fruits of Dayton” was not Davidson’s first attempt at equating fundamentalism with moral gravity. The idea had reached mass audiences in a 1926 essay, “The Artist as Southerner,” which appeared in the *Saturday Review of Literature*.⁵³ Its appearance, nonetheless, shocked many of its readers, whose memories were still fresh with the accounts of Holy Rollers dancing wildly in Rhea County, Tennessee. Careful reading of the piece, however, reveals that Davidson was not solely or wholeheartedly defending the actual practices or beliefs of the Bryan followers or even biblical literalists; on the contrary, Davidson tried to locate in the phenomenon of fundamentalism a usable past for the southern writers (much as Tate had tried to excavate the same gem in southern history). Davidson urged his fellow artists to embrace the fundamentalist cause as indigenous to the South: “Fundamentalism, in one aspect, is blind and belligerent ignorance; in another, it represents a fierce clinging to poetic supernaturalism against the encroachments of cold logic; it stands for moral seriousness. The Southerner should hesitate to scorn these qualities, for, however much they may now be perverted to bigoted and unfruitful uses, they belong in the bone and sinew of his nature as they once belonged to Milton, who was both Puritan and Cavalier. To obscure them by a show of sophistication is to play the coward; to give them

a positive transmutation is the highest function of art.”⁵⁴ Just as Tate sought a tradition and Ransom a thunderous god as necessary for the production of high art, so too did Davidson portray his support of fundamentalism as an aesthetic concern. And surely their concerns were aesthetic to a certain point, but the Fugitives-turned-Agrarians were also angry at the hypocrisy of the northern media and the cultural treason of their fellow southern turncoats.

The essay, as its title suggests, also pointed to the dilemma of the southern writer, for whom, Davidson declared, there were only two paths. Writers such as himself, in the face of the benighted South stereotypes, could either reject their southern identity and embrace “the remote, austere approach of the uninhibited modern,” or they could fall into the habit of local colorists and their southern predecessors and choose “the empty provincial approach of the inferior writers who have ‘moonied over the Lost Cause and exploited the hard-dying sentimentalism of antebellum days.’”⁵⁵ Inferiority, of one sort or another, was much on Davidson’s mind during these years, and it is an obsession that fundamentally organized this period of southern history, in both its political and its aesthetic formations. Davidson yearned for a middle ground, a ground that he saw as promoting the vision of Agrarianism that counters northern industrialism without directly attacking the North. Such a stance would also have the benefit of avoiding race altogether. He would soon find, however, that critics did not make room for a southern compromise.

Warren, Tate, and Ransom all spent time away from Nashville, even abroad for that matter, in the years between the Scopes Trial and the publication of *I’ll Take My Stand*, but Davidson stayed close to home, perhaps accounting for the intensity of his regional commitment. On September 7, 1924, Davidson became the editor of “The Book Review and Literary Page” of the *Tennessean* and “The Weekly Review—A Page about Books.” The position put Davidson in constant contact with forthcoming histories, sociological studies, and new novels about the South. His new status as literary critic was empowering for a young English professor, and he contributed reviews to numerous journals in addition to the regular column. Davidson took the opportunity to promote consistently what he deemed to be the correct type of southern fiction, and his reviews suggested that Stark Young’s work fulfilled these lofty ideals (Young would later contribute to *I’ll Take My Stand*). For example, in an October 6, 1929, review carried by the “Critic’s Almanac,” Davidson explained why Young was particularly deserving of praise:

Of the many people writing novels about the South, Stark Young is, so far as I know, the only one who sees the Southern way of life as a whole and

communicates it with the grace and conviction that it deserves. Others, no matter what their distinction, too often seem special pleasers; bright or gloomy features distract them. They are not able to see beyond the case of the Negro, the poor white, the mountaineer. Like Ellen Glasgow, they are stricken with a contrary itching to deride; or, like Cabell, they achieve a bitter escape to romance, or like William Faulkner, they become terribly conscious of pain and decay.⁵⁶

In retrospect, Davidson's track record as a reviewer would be questioned, considering that many of the authors, such as Faulkner, that he dismissed remain irreplaceable in the field of American literature. Yet another future fellow Agrarian and Vanderbilt colleague, Frank Lawrence Owsley, found his book *State Rights in the Confederacy* (1925) reviewed by Davidson. In an extra review printed in the December 20, 1925, issue of the *Tennessean*, Davidson admitted his Confederate biases regarding the history of the Civil War, though he credits Owsley with revealing some credible flaws in the Confederate psychology: "Like every other Southerner, I was brought up to believe in the gallantry and invincibility of the Confederate armies during the Civil War. The defeat of the Southern armies was to be attributed to the obscure manipulations of incomprehensible fate, or, at most to pressure of numbers and resources. There was furthermore a picture in the mind of admirable and desperate loyalties, all the men and all the women of the South were beyond measure devoted to the Cause, and in the great drama of the Civil War the only villains were Yankees."⁵⁷ The process of offering critical judgments of these works sharpened Davidson's position regarding the place of the South in the larger American historical narrative. His anger at the actions of the North's Reconstruction policies fueled his anger at Mencken and his fellow northern journalists, whose disparagement of the South in the 1920s now seemed part of an unrelenting pattern.

Reviewing these historical works resurrected southern history for Davidson and connected the struggles of the Confederacy with the twentieth-century battle for white southern traditional values. For example, in his review of Claude Bowers's *The Tragic Era: The Revolution after Lincoln* (1929), Davidson declared the Radical Republicans of the post-Civil War era to be the devil himself. Their Reconstruction plan, proclaimed Davidson, was "a conspiracy of made partisans willing to go to any length for power, a complete subversion of American institutions, a crime to which the slightest gilding of mistaken idealism cannot possibly be applied."⁵⁸ Southern novelist T. S. Stribling also stood on the receiving end of Davidson's anger and frustration. His 1926 novel *Teeftallow* contained, according to Davidson, "a check list of all the matters on which Tennesseans

need to be admonished, for the book clicks these off neatly as an adding machine, with a very unpleasant sum-total.”⁵⁹ For Davidson, southern writers such as Stribling were pandering to the New South audience, an audience that he deplored. His frustration resulted not only from the barrage of public attacks that the South was receiving (particularly from many of its home-grown intellectuals and journalists), but also from his struggles as a “provincial,” as he described it, book page editor. Davidson was handicapped by a meager editor’s salary, which was less than the compensation received by the more important southern sports writers and society column editors—yet another sign of the inferior status of the South’s artistic culture.

Moreover, Davidson considered his post extremely trying, due to the national consensus that seemed to make offering a counter opinion to northern critics a virtual literary suicide.⁶⁰ In his time as book page editor, Davidson did, however, present one surprising review. Upon reading James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, in which the main character is able to pass between white and black society due to the ambiguous color of his skin, Davidson claims to have felt a kinship with the author. In the September 11, 1927, review, Davidson announced that the book was “the autobiography of a traitor,” a traitor to oneself. Biographer Mark Winchell describes Davidson’s empathy:

Within the larger intellectual community, defenders of the southern tradition were a maligned and ridiculed class. Only those southern writers who were willing to abandon that tradition and embrace the cosmopolitan values of the North would be allowed full citizenship into the dominant culture. Such writers were in a position analogous to that of the mulatto who “passed” for white. Although Davidson would surely have been amused, perhaps even offended, by the metaphor of the southerner as nigger, it is clear that by the time he read *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, he was determined not to sell his own birthright for a mess of pottage.⁶¹

In a sense, Davidson understood the instinct of wanting to pass for something else—to escape the burden of one’s own besieged identity. Though it was something he could never do, and although his situation was in no way comparable to what African Americans experienced, he boldly announced the connection all the same. Thus, he continued to express his opinions on all things southern both through his book page reviews and in his own creative efforts, but he was moving quickly toward a political stance, envisioning a symposium that would register with northern critics and pack a substantial punch.

Davidson’s collection of poems *The Tall Men* (1927), in a sense, embodied all of the arguments made against his fellow gentlemen poets. In his own words,

Davidson described the book as “a dramatic visualization of a modern Southerner, trapped in a distasteful urban environment, subjecting the phenomena of the disordered present to a comparison with the heroic past.”⁶² The disorder that Davidson articulated centers primarily on the machine and industrial culture that he saw as overtaking the cities of the South. Once again, in his poem “Geography of the Brain,” he waxes sentimental as he details the beauty of his pastoral homeland, a beauty slowly eroding in the modern era. “Over the Southern fields green corn is waving, / Husky and broad of blade,” writes Davidson, and “pollen falls in my heart, / A dust of song that sprinkles fruitfulness, / Mellowing like the corn in Southern fields.”⁶³ More than simply reflecting on the splendor of the regional landscape, Davidson’s *Tall Men* “was sounding the bugle call of Agrarianism,”⁶⁴ a return to the mythical southern Eden that echoes loudly in *I’ll Take My Stand*. Davidson, in line with Tate and Warren as biographers, looked to the past for evidence of the southern heroic spirit. Contemporary southerners, according to Davidson, demonstrated a “spiritual and moral softness,” as compared to the “common devotion of his pioneer forebears.”⁶⁵ Despite its local color, *The Tall Men* was published by a northern press—the lack of southern publication houses was a constant complaint made by many of the Agrarians. However, Davidson’s anger at what he considered the discrimination against southern authors was mounting. According to Daniel Singal, Davidson as late as 1925 had considered moving to New York, the place he considered the American literary “Mecca.” But after the *Nation* selected a modernist poem rather than Davidson’s submission for a 1926 literary prize, Davidson became deeply agitated, complaining to Tate “about ‘midwestern jackasses’ and ‘Yale-Harvard-Princeton pretty boys’ dominating the New York literary scene.” Davidson continued, “‘As a Southerner egad, and a gentleman (I hope) of independent mind, I hate these cliques and Star Chambers.’”⁶⁶ In truth, Davidson wanted his own southern clique, which is exactly what his Fugitive band of poets had been. This time, however, they would take a political stance, denouncing the northern and New South culture of their detractors. “I propose to fight ‘em like hell,”⁶⁷ Davidson proclaimed.

THE AGRARIAN INTENTION

Literary scholars naturally look to the published works of Ransom, Davidson, Tate, and Warren to identify their inner struggles with modernism and their growing attachments to their southern identities. Additionally, Tate’s correspondence with his fellow Fugitives and Agrarians reveals a distinctly political effort to counteract the mass criticism of the South and the cultural inferiority

complex that followed. Such criticism obviously contributed, perhaps dominantly, to Tate's newfound Dixie pride, as can be clearly seen in his 1929 call for a symposium to defend the South. Tate had originally proposed an anthology of essays intended to draw together the ideas about southern religion, southern history, and the threat posed by science and industrialism that his fellow Fugitives had been exploring since their magazine ceased publication. As their individual interests in the South gathered steam, Davidson mentioned the notion to Tate, who responded with a detailed plan. Historian Thomas Daniel Young characterizes the exchange of letters between Tate and Davidson as a new phase in the group's history: "Instead of a vague notion of wanting to do something to counteract the bad publicity the South was getting from the Northern press, what they now had in mind was a defense of their sectional heritage, which only a few years before they were either oblivious to or felt a compelling urge to escape."⁶⁸

However, Tate was not satisfied with the publication of one southern manifesto; rather he proposed a three-pronged attack to restore and increase the credibility of southern intellectuals and to create a formal club to which they could belong and in which they dictated the rules of membership. In a letter to Donald Davidson dated August 10, 1929, he outlined his plan:

1. The formation of a society, or an academy, of Southern positive reactionaries made up at first of people of our own group.
2. The expansion in a year or two of this academy to this size: fifteen active members—poets, critics, historians, economists—and ten inactive members—lawyers, politicians, private citizens—who might be active enough without being committed at first to direct agitation.
3. The drawing up of a philosophical constitution, to be issued and signed by the academy, as the groundwork of the movement. It should be ambitious to the last degree; it should set forth, under our leading idea, a complete social, philosophical, literary, economic, and religious system. This will inevitably draw upon our heritage, but this heritage should be viewed, not in what it actually performed, but in its possible perfection. Philosophically, we must go the whole hog of reaction, and base our movement less upon the actual old South than upon its prototype—the historical, social, and religious scheme of Europe. We must be the last Europeans—there being no Europeans in Europe at present.
4. The academy will not be a secret order; all the cards will be on the table. We should be secretive, however, in our tactics, and plan the campaign

for the maximum of effect. All our writings should be signed 'John Doe of the _____,' or whatever we call it.

5. Organized publication should be looked to. A newspaper, perhaps, to argue our principles on the lower plane; then a weekly, to press philosophy upon the passing show; and third, a quarterly devoted wholly to principles. This is a large scheme, but it must be held up constantly. We must do our best with what we can get.

"The advantages of this program," Tate continued, "are the advantages of all extreme positions":

It would immediately define the muddling and *unorganized* opposition (intellectually unorganized) of the Progressives; they have no philosophical program, only an emotional acquiescence to the drift of the age, and we should force them to rationalize into absurdity an intellectually untenable position. Secondly, it would crystallize into opposition or complete allegiance the vaguely pro-Southern opinions of the time. These two advantages of my proposed academy seem to me decisive. Without the academy we shall perish in two ways: (1) under the superior weight of metal (not superior strategy) of the enemy (Progressives); and (2) our own doctrine will be diluted with too many shades of opinion.

In short this program would create an intellectual situation interior to the South. I underscore it because, to me, it contains the heart of the matter.

For the great ends in view—the end may be only an assertion of principle, but that in itself is great—for this end we must have a certain discipline; we must crush minor differences of doctrine under a single idea.⁶⁹

Obviously, Tate's concern with his southern image, as well as the reputations of his friends and colleagues, extended well beyond their literary interests or their internal dissent with the modern mood of the country. Tate clearly intended to reestablish the southern hierarchy—or some version of it—beyond the boundaries of influence once sought by the Fugitives. Davidson thought Tate's idea for a Southern Academy of Arts and Letters, as he called it, was modeled after the French Academy, which Tate had revered during his time abroad and that such an idea was "an act of vast presumption."⁷⁰ But the book would come to fruition and irrevocably alter the public image of the Nashville poets and writers.

The individual essays written by Ransom, Tate, Warren, and Davidson in *I'll Take My Stand* reflect this sense of inferiority and its corollary, the striving for recognition. "Reconstructed but Unregenerate," Ransom's contribution, devotes much of its content to repeating the mantra that white southern culture

is European culture. He does find fault with the Old South for not establishing an intellectual culture that would have rivaled ancient Rome or Greece. And, of course, he warns of the impending industrialization of his homeland, conceding that “the South at last is to be physically reconstructed; but it will be fatal,” Ransom prophesies, “if the South should conceive it as her duty to be regenerated and get her spirit reborn with a totally different orientation toward life.”⁷¹ The sectionalist spirit must be revived, urges Ransom, and “it will be fiercest and most effective if industrialism is represented to the Southern people as—what it undoubtedly is—a foreign invasion of Southern soil, which is capable of doing more devastation than was wrought when Sherman marched to the sea.”⁷²

Tate took an equally defensive stance, theorizing that the South, particularly southern religion, had collapsed under the cultural prescription of the North. The South had failed, according to Tate, to develop and render viable a religious tradition capable of sustaining its way of life. “The South, as a political atmosphere formed by the eighteenth century, did not realize its genius in time,” reasoned Tate, “but continued to defend itself on the political terms of the North; and thus, waiting too long, it let its powerful rivalry gain the ascendancy.” Tate further complained that the South’s “religious impulse was inarticulate simply because it tried to encompass its destiny within the terms of Protestantism, in origin, a non-agrarian and trading religion; hardly a religion at all, but a result of secular ambition.” This failure, remarked Tate, meant that southern defenders “could merely quote Scripture to defend slavery . . . and this is why the South separated from the North too late, and so lost its cause.”⁷³

While Tate blames his abstract South for a lack of backbone, Davidson blames industrialism solely for the suffering of the artist. But for Davidson there is a solution: “The supremacy of industrialism itself can be repudiated.” He continues: “Industrialism can be disposed as a regulatory god of modern society.” Davidson predicts that the artist in this type of culture “has no reason to hope that those who hold the machine will ever subdue it.” “Lonely exile though he be,” Davidson advises, “he must be practical enough to distrust the social philosophers who promise him a humble corner in the Great Reconstruction that they are now undertaking to produce for our age.”⁷⁴ The South, Davidson insists, is the only region that can provide the leisure and sanctuary that the artist requires, but only if it refuses to bow to the capitalist machine. Warren’s argument against industrialism begins with his exploration of the position of freed African Americans in the post-Reconstruction South. He questions why African Americans should be educated, though he supports Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee model of vocational instruction, which Warren insists is not “a piece of white

man's snobbery."⁷⁵ He warns that industrialism and the opportunities for low-paying unskilled jobs for African Americans will heighten the animosity of poor whites, and from that hostility will "come much of the individual violence, such as lynching, which sometimes falls to the negro's lot."⁷⁶ In an effort to educate the reading public on the complication of industrialization in a racially charged society, Warren concludes that "the Southern white man may conceive of his own culture as firmly rooted in the soil, and he may desire, through time and necessary vicissitude, to preserve its essential structure intact. He wishes the negro well; he wishes to see crime, genial irresponsibility, ignorance, and oppression replaced by an informed and productive negro community. . . . The chief problem for all alike is the restoration of society at large to a balance and security which the industrial regime is far from promising to achieve."⁷⁷ Warren clearly desires, along with his fellow Agrarians, a reinstatement of the old southern hierarchy. Such structure and rules would provide artists with a clear place in society, rather than forcing them to fit into a modern culture in which they are not valued.

The Agrarians obviously saw their efforts as an authentic expression of regional concern, though they most assuredly did not see it as related to economics in the least. Davidson even proclaimed that the "symposium I'll Take My Stand can be taken as a defense of poetry as it can be taken as a defense of the South,"⁷⁸ a statement with which Tate publicly agreed. Lewis Simpson points to the inherent contradiction of the book: the type of culture that the Agrarians—specifically Tate in his letters—sought to reconstruct would have inevitably collapsed. Simpson contends that Tate wanted "to join a movement of men of letters in the American South to the central motive of modern Western letters: a paradoxical and aggressive movement of mind against itself."⁷⁹ Tate advocated a nearly cerebral utopia in which the critical mind developed, controlled, and regulated the landscape of southern life. Along with his fellow Agrarians, Tate wanted to emphasize the intellectualism of southern men of letters, but to what extent they desired a reversal of the roles of mind and society for the masses is unclear at best. For surely such a critical self-assessment of the region in the 1920s and 1930s would have produced exactly what the Agrarians loathed: treasonous denouncements from their native countrymen. After all, the Agrarians were neither social workers nor economic theorists. They were literary men, and their collective endeavor was political at its core. The manifesto was written to acquire recognition and power for their region; it was a direct attempt to refute the criticism of the benighted South, to respond to this crippling sense of cultural inferiority, and, thus, to overcome such alienation by proclaiming the white South to be, paradoxically, more American than the progressive regions

that lay glaringly to the North. The authentic impact of *I'll Take My Stand* lay not in its content but in its motivation.

Perhaps the most obvious example of the contrived nature of the southern manifesto was not in what it argued but in what it excluded. These educated contributors sought recognition for the superiority of white southern culture but failed to address the institution of human slavery and the post-Reconstruction wall of Jim Crow. Other than Warren's essay, "The Briar Patch," which commented on southern race relations directly, *I'll Take My Stand* made few allusions to the plantation system. The overarching sentiment echoed the old paternalistic argument of the notorious nineteenth-century Confederate polemicists, secessionist John Calhoun and proslavery social theorist George Fitzhugh. When forced to defend the enterprise, the Agrarians were quick to redirect the attention to the inhumanity of industrial labor. "According to Tate," notes Alexander Karanikas, "the Negro slave of the Cotton Kingdom was better off than the modern wage-earner because he could never join the ranks of the unemployed."⁸⁰ Richard Gray argues that race, or in this case the absence of attention paid to the "peculiar institution" of slavery, was the defining feature of the book. *I'll Take My Stand*, he proclaims, "is not just Southern as a matter of historical accident but distinctly and determinately so." He further demands, "It belongs first and last to a body of writing for which the constitutive absence, the invisible or at best marginal character, is and always has been the black."⁸¹ The failure of the authors to apply the same, though somewhat amateur, historical and economic analysis that permeates the rest of the book to their own past, choosing instead to highlight simply their perception of northern hypocrisy, makes the authenticity of their cause less credible.

And the Agrarians were, indeed, tapping into larger national and international forces, including a developing inward appreciation for regional distinction—in this case southern nationalism—and an outward trend toward disillusionment with modern society. In his book *Revolt of the Provinces*, Robert Dorman argues that the rejection of a homogeneous America was expedited by the perception by many Americans "that Western culture in general was being left behind, as it were, by the abstract and fragmenting urban-industrial order."⁸² Thus, not only did many white southerners attempt to define their agrarian Eden, but Native Americans sought cultural distinction, as did African Americans active in the Harlem Renaissance. These movements were characterized, insists Dorman, by "backward glances" and were demonstrated in significant historical events and movements such as "prohibition, the Scopes Monkey Trial, the 1924 immigration laws . . . Henry Ford's Greenfield Village, the Ku Klux Klan, the 1928 gubernatorial victory of Huey Long, Rockefeller's Williamsburg." In each, "all had constituencies, audiences, or visitors clinging

confusedly, swearing allegiance to, wistfully remembering, an older America.”⁸³ But the southern Agrarians were not only dealing with a sense of estrangement between the national culture and the local culture. They were responding to a public denunciation of their regional culture. Their collective response, thus, was not wholly a search for a usable, distinct past, but rather a defensive outpouring of regional propaganda.

Alexander Karanikas envisions the resurgent Nashville circle as part of a larger community of disillusioned American artists, and it is this link that gives their work broader significance. He cites Solomon Fishman’s *The Disinherited of Art*, which suggested that “the key to the cycle of American literature is the term ‘alienation.’” Fishman contends that this consistent impulse incorporates a “whole constellation of attitudes associated with the literary twenties: isolationism, individualism, bohemianism, dissidence, rejection, rebellion, disillusion, pessimism, defeat, decadence, disintegration, escape, exile.” “Alienation in brief,” Fishman asserts, “implies a centrifugal impulse, the detachment of the particle from the mass.”⁸⁴ Unlike many of their more successful fellow writers, the Agrarians chose not to pursue their art in the heady cafés of Paris or the streets of Barcelona, but they were equally political in their commentary on American values. Moreover, their alienation was distinct, for they found themselves at odds not only with the dominant cultural course of the North but also with the southern business developers and southern journalists who, each for his or her own reason, chided the Agrarian system. Why these former Fugitives from the South did not expatriate themselves, as did many of their contemporaries, is a matter of speculation. But their alienation was uniquely personal. Theirs was not a general angst or a universal reaction to the horrors of trench warfare. Nor was it the common anxiety of defining what it means to be American in the twentieth century. Their anger and frustration was harnessed, directed, and executed at an unambiguous target in a futile attempt to gain recognition as political critics, of sorts. “Although the Fugitive-Agrarians never renounced their American citizenship or entertained serious thoughts of expatriation,” insists Karanikas, “*I’ll Take My Stand* did signify a spiritual secession from the national as a whole.”⁸⁵

THE AGRARIAN RECEPTION

The reactions to *I’ll Take My Stand* were mostly damning, although a few supportive voices—mostly from regional reviewers—championed the symposium’s advocacy of traditional southern values as a welcome alternative to industrial progress. An editorial review in the *Leaf Chronicle* of Clarksville, Tennessee,

pinpointed the source of the book's title, the song "Dixie," which includes a line that rings "In Dixie Land, I'll Take My Stand," and waxed philosophical on the practical application of the manifesto's charge. "There is no doubt," the column read, "that the South as it is at present is a better place to live than an industrial South would be."⁸⁶ The *Nashville Tennessean*, which had carried Davidson's book review page, found in *I'll Take My Stand* a resurgence of regional passion. "They are singing it again—Dixie," noted the local paper, "the song that has always brought its wild surge of feeling in Southern hearts. But it is sung in a more thoughtful way." The article further contends that "its strains may not sweep the crowd off its feet but they are sung with the oldtime fervor and love of homeland."⁸⁷ An editorial appearing in the *Advertiser of Montgomery, Alabama*, "A Militant Indictment of Progress," echoed a similar sentiment, though with greater intensity. Signed only with the initials W. J. M. Jr., the piece concluded that *I'll Take My Stand* would touch southern hearts directly. "In it," the author decreed, "he [the southerner] will find expressed a concept that had long flinched, inarticulate, before the scowls of industrialism. It is a militant Agrarianism whose followers need not be ashamed."⁸⁸

In addition to the mostly southern applause, the collection did receive notable nods from Fugitive hero T. S. Eliot, as well as from John Peale Bishop, who appreciated the critical lens focused on the capitalist machine. Writing for the *Criterion*, Eliot remarked that Tate and his fellow authors were inspired by "a sound and right reaction." Bishop wrote Tate specifically and claimed that he agreed with the chief principle of the symposium.⁸⁹ Even William S. Knickerbocker, who had criticized Ransom's *God without Thunder*, admitted in the *Saturday Review of Literature* that *I'll Take My Stand* was a significantly challenging book.⁹⁰ And Harry Hansen's column, "The First Reader," carried by papers such as the *New York Morning World*, actually called the twelve contributors "valiant," with Hansen surmising that "the machine age is making dummies of us all and the exploitation of industrial products has no other object than to heap up use-less profits."⁹¹

But even the few receptive audiences, whether southern sympathizers or anti-industrialists, questioned the practicality of the Agrarian plan. Their efforts were deemed praiseworthy but essentially irrelevant, all charges that led directly to a gnawing sense of inadequacy. James I. Finney echoed this sentiment. Writing for the *Journal of Knoxville, Tennessee*, he chronicled the doom of industrialization, all the while chastising the authors for failing to offer any real solution: "There is no denial of the devastating effect of this materialistic view of life from which we suffer today upon its amenities, upon religion, arts and social relations. But after the reader has been taken to the high peaks and looks down upon a world

seemingly lost to an appreciation of all the cherished ideals of life, he is plunged into the deepest gloom of pessimism. For the writers failed to enumerate the practical and specific measures which we believe must be adopted in order to recover the things that we have sacrificed to this mad, hurried scramble after so-called material rewards.”⁹² The *Chattanooga News* admitted kindly that those who had followed the careers of these poets-turned-polemicists were greatly anticipating the new book. But the ideological crux of the collection, noted the article, was merely a resuscitated point of view that had once belonged to the French Physiocrats, the “economic philosophers who flourished in Eighteenth Century France” and “who put forward a framework of economic organization in sharp contrast to the commercial tone of Adam Smith and the English Manchester school.”⁹³ It is at once a brilliant and devastating remark that gets just right that peculiar note of privileged alienation, characteristic of both the French and the southern elite. Rather than endorse the stance taken by the Twelve Southerners, the review chose only to historicize their argument. Perhaps more memorable, the piece referred to the group as the “Young Confederates,” a title that stuck but that many of the contributors deplored, despite the fact that Tate had actually used the term to refer to his colleagues in his correspondence.

John G. Neihardt of the *Post Dispatch* of St. Louis noted in his column that the debate inherent in *I’ll Take My Stand* was of the utmost importance and insisted that many of his readers “would be sure to be astonished not only at the resultant revelation but at the fascinating character of the inquiry as conducted by 12 brilliant Southerners.” However, regardless of Neihardt’s personal praise for the southern Agrarians, his enthusiasm turned sour when assessing the practical application of the theories hence discussed. “Furthermore, the hope for a triumphant ‘agrarian movement,’” contended Neihardt, “which appeared to be cherished by these 12, is to be regarded as pathetic. If the book’s value were to be judged by the reasonableness of that hope, the work, for all its obvious brilliance and persuasive humanness, could be ignored as practically worthless.”⁹⁴ But for many critics, the pragmatism of the work would be a minor vice among many. Still, it is worth noting that this peculiar tactic of acknowledging the work’s brilliance while insisting on its clear irrelevance to modern life proved to be a large and debilitating thorn in the Agrarians’ sides. Diffidence, inferiority, alienation—all of these self-destructive emotions surface continually throughout the collection.

The negative reviews echoed the criticism of the Scopes Trial fundamentalists, criticism that had initially been the catalyst for the symposium. *Publisher’s Weekly* printed a small notice but poignantly identified the essays as “attacks.”⁹⁵ Moreover, Henry Hazlitt’s review of *I’ll Take My Stand* for the *Nation*, “So Did

King Canute,” regarded the book as wholly reactionary, condemning Ransom for his trepidation toward modernism. If Ransom’s “fear of Progress had always prevailed,” argued Hazlitt, “we should still be in the savage state—assuming that we had at least accepted such technological advancements as flint and the spearhead.”⁹⁶ “This book,” he declared, “is in the main, the rationalization of a nostalgia for ancestral ways rather than a rational approach to real problems.”⁹⁷ Writing for the *New York Times Book Review*, Arthur Krock also argued against the nostalgia that permeated the southern manifesto. To make his point, Krock quoted from the other book examined in his combined review, *The Industrial Revolution in the South* (1930), by Broadus Mitchell and George Mitchell. Reflecting on the Old South, the Mitchells asked, “Why embalm his [the Old South’s] remains and keep his few belongings like relics at the shrine of a saint? We paid him too much honor while he lived, and furthermore sad reminders are all about us in the South this long time afterward: poverty, race hatred, sterile fields, the childish and violent crowd gulled by the demagogue.”⁹⁸ For many of the northern critics, and in fact for several southern journalists as well, it was impossible to separate the Agrarian call for a return to a traditional farm culture from the provincialism that had caused so many regional atrocities.

The *Macon Telegraph* published perhaps the most visceral review of all, mockingly titled “Lee, We Are Here!” “The Neo-Confederates have seen the shadows of the smoke stacks,” it read, “and have become as alarmed as ever did a Kluxer at the sight of a healthy-bodied Negro.” The review drew a clear connection between the reactionary nature of southern fundamentalism and the desperation of the Agrarian plea: “They are as offended by automobiles and radios as the late John Roach Straton was offended by public dance halls and the theater. Their opinion of mill owners would read like William Jennings Bryan’s idea of Charles Darwin. Bryan wanted the supremacy in the community to rest on the heads of the orthodox preacher; the Neo-Confederates want supremacy to rest on the head of a stately old plantation owner with chivalrous intentions.”⁹⁹ For the Agrarians, this was a perilous place to inhabit, and it only got worse. “We marvel,” the paper proclaimed, “that there is such a group in the South today.”¹⁰⁰ Gerald Johnson, who had been considered, even in the Fugitive days, to be a treasonous journalist, decried the ignorance of the twelve contributors in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* (VQR), an act that only added to the perception of him as a traitor. He was incredulous that such educated men would see Agrarianism as an honest and authentic answer to the problems facing the South in the wake of the Great Depression, most notably the 1929 textile strike in Gastonia, North Carolina, which Johnson mentioned directly: “But that the Twelve should turn to agrarianism as a remedy would seem to indicate that their sole knowledge of

the South has been gleaned from the pages of Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page.¹⁰¹

Here, then, was an attack wielding the hard edge of social realism, and it must have pained, even embarrassed, some of them deeply. “Have they never been in the modern South,” he asked, “especially in the sections still completely ruled by agrarianism?” Such willful blindness fueled Johnson’s outrage. “If the things that happen under their noses are unknown to them,” he pronounced, “it is hardly worthwhile to point out that the fine civilization of the ante-bellum South was already falling into ruin in 1860, and was merely given the coup de grace by the Civil War; and that it was falling into ruin because no purely agrarian polity can maintain a fine civilization for any length of time.”¹⁰² The entire premise that the South was being swallowed wholly by industrialism, Johnson insisted, was “a figment of the imagination.” But it was not an unconscious figment of the imaginations of these Fugitives-turned-Agrarians. Regardless of its feasibility, their manifesto, and specifically their choice of the banner of Agrarianism, was deliberate and political, an effort to combat the public criticism that deemed them an inferior breed among their fellow Americans.

Tate had initially worried that the title of the collection would ensure rapid-fire public ridicule, and in a sense he was right. But the group admitted to being taken off guard by the publication of such scathing reviews as Johnson’s in southern journals such as the *VQR*. Stringfellow Barr had assumed editorship of the *VQR* in October 1930, and he was already an acquaintance of Ransom and his colleagues. Barr had authored an article titled “The Uncultured South” in a 1929 issue of the *VQR* that opened with the following question: “Has the South been buffaloing America for half a century into thinking it was a second Athens wrecked by a Northern barbarian democracy, when actually the second Athens drank mint juleps, ate batter-bread, and thought up a moral defense for the institution that made life comfortable?”¹⁰³

What would surely have attracted the attention of the former Fugitives was Barr’s declaration that in order to answer his initial question one could not ask a southerner, for “the South has been on the defensive for so many decades that it has lost the art of self-examination.” Ransom and his fellow southern writers would have obviously wanted to prove Barr’s statement false; they had actually invited Barr to contribute to *I’ll Take My Stand*, an offer that he considered and for which he submitted an outline. His 1929 article, despite its aggressive nature toward southern culture, had faulted the New South campaign for many of the region’s problems. “And since the World War,” Barr declared, “the South has been sold on progress, with the result that under the guidance of its Young Men’s Business Clubs it has deserted its glorious past for a rosy and profitable

future.” Despite a suspected sympathy for the Agrarian cause, the former Fugitives were rejected by Barr because he claimed to be unable to endorse the “Statement of Principles” in the opening pages of the symposium.

Moreover, Barr instead published the essay “Shall Slavery Come South,” which was carried on the front pages of the VQR the same month that he became editor and the same year that *I’ll Take My Stand* reached audiences. The article called for the regulation of industry, rather than whole-scale rejection, and it ridiculed one particular group of southerners called “Traditionalists,” or Neo-Confederates, for their nostalgic ideals. According to historian Edward Shapiro, “Davidson, Ransom and Tate correctly assumed that Barr had them in mind and publicly protested.”¹⁰⁴ Barr’s mockery noted the weakness and inexperience of the traditionalist vision: “The traditionalists, frightened by the lengthening shadow of smokestacks, take refuge in the good old days and in what I have called the apotheosis of the hoe. They make a charming but impotent religion of the past, make idols of the defunct horse and buggy, and mutter impotently at the radio. They themselves no longer think they are going to do anything about it, and this cheapens their veneration for the past.”¹⁰⁵ Perhaps the Agrarians were already conscious of their insincerity or, at least, of their inability to reverse the American trajectory toward progress and industrialism. But they would put up a fight for a bit longer.

The conflict between Barr and the Agrarians sparked great public interest, inciting George Fort Milton of the *Chattanooga News*, as well as the *Richmond Times Dispatch*, to propose a public forum for debate. On November 14, 1930, Ransom and Barr squared off in front of an audience of approximately 3,500 at the Richmond Civic Auditorium to debate the question, “Shall the South Be Industrialized?” Moderated by Sherwood Anderson, the debate was given substantial publicity in newspapers throughout the country.¹⁰⁶ Davidson covered the event for the *Chattanooga News* and quoted Ransom as accusing Barr of fashioning his southern identity “as a gardenia to stick in his buttonhole when he goes traveling in New York.”¹⁰⁷ Barr maintained a moderate position that encouraged the regulation of labor through collective bargaining. Barr’s history with the Agrarian group, particularly his refusal to contribute to *I’ll Take My Stand* and his publication of negative reviews of the book, ensured extreme tension. While Ransom delivered an address that was “carefully organized, sober and persuasive,” Barr “abandoned consecutive argument for a fiery, witty series of abrupt retorts which won the good humor of the audience.”¹⁰⁸

Barr mocked the Agrarians and, as Davidson reported, “warned southerners against encouraging an attitude of mind toward industrialism that resembled

Harriet Beecher Stowe's attitude toward Negro slavery."¹⁰⁹ Such a comparison, equating the Agrarians with the abolitionists, added fuel to the fire. According to Davidson's account, though no victor was declared, Ransom claimed to appreciate the level of discussion and desired to continue expounding his Agrarian beliefs where he thought the southern masses might finally take notice—or perhaps where he might be taken seriously regarding his ideas for the South. He was clearly a man who wanted to be redeemed. He then agreed to a series of three debates: against Barr again, this time at the University of Chattanooga on January 9, 1931; against William S. Knickerbocker, editor of the *Sewanee Review* on December 15, 1930, in New Orleans; and against William D. Anderson, a noted industrialist at Emory University, in Atlanta on February 11, 1931. Davidson would fill in for Ransom for a repeat performance against Knickerbocker in Columbia, Tennessee, on May 21, 1931.

Unlike Ransom's formal presentation—Ransom hoped to quell the criticism that *I'll Take My Stand* offered no pragmatic solutions to the South's problems—Davidson decided to appeal to the raw emotion of the southern audience, a strategy that he confessed in a letter to Tate. "I shall talk about perfectly familiar and immediate things that folks can take to heart," he planned. Despite the best efforts of these "Young Confederates," their attempt to convince the southern masses that the hoe and the plow were superior to the industrial machines, including the creature comforts that such a system could potentially produce, would yield few results, especially as New Deal programs lurked on the horizon—the Tennessee Valley horizon, specifically. Although their efforts gained steam for a brief moment, they failed because the theories they offered were precisely that—theories adopted by poets to respond to the public attacks on their region. There was a political campaign waged against their critics in an effort to compensate for a regional heritage from which they had once been Fugitives. Though it is impossible to assess if there was any authenticity in their personal commitment to southern farmers and to the rural culture that they championed, it is essential to uncover their motivations.

H. L. Mencken reportedly attended the first debate in Richmond, and although he was not quite as hostile as he had been to the fundamentalists of Rhea County, he did not refrain from taking shots at the Agrarians. His initial review of *I'll Take My Stand*, titled "Uprising in the Confederacy," appeared in the *American Mercury* in 1931 and was comparatively tame—for Mencken, that is. The Sage of Baltimore implied that he agreed theoretically with the general premise of Agrarianism but believed a turning back of the clock to be ludicrous. This was yet another version of what they had heard before, and it was equally

debilitating: intelligent minds concocting ludicrous schemes and plans. Howard Odum, sociologist and leader of the Chapel Hill circle that attempted to find practical solutions to the South's problems through social science, had encouraged Mencken to read the book, noting in a letter the romanticism of *I'll Take My Stand*. This romanticism, according to Odum, had become a false reality of sorts for many southern artists,¹¹⁰ and he tried to counter the notion in his book *An American Epoch: Southern Portraiture in the National Picture*.¹¹¹ "What we have to find now," wrote Odum to Mencken, "is the product of what was and what is—as a fact and not as an ideal."¹¹² Mencken replied that he would soon turn his attention to the symposium but that, "obviously, it is absurd to argue that the South should formally abandon industrialism. It would be no more nonsensical to argue that it should abandon heat spells and hail storms."¹¹³ His review would reinforce the absurdity of the real-world application of the Agrarian solution for the South. "The present authors, for all their sincerity," he assured his readers, "show in their own persons most of the worst weaknesses that now afflict their homeland. There is something dreadfully literary and pedagogical about their whole discussion."¹¹⁴ But Mencken was not finished assessing the validity of the twelve southerners' manifesto.

"The South Astir" appeared in the January 1935 issue of the *VQR*, nearly ten years since Mencken's time in Dayton and close to two decades since his initial rebuke of the South in "The Sahara of the Bozart." The publication of Mencken's piece proved to be controversial. Word of its impending arrival in the ten-year anniversary issue of the *VQR* came simultaneously with the news that Davidson's piece, "I'll Take My Stand: A History," was rejected. The rejection was significant because Davidson had intended to correct some of the misperceptions about the book and to answer its critics. Editor Lambert Davis attempted to assuage the Agrarians by including Warren's essay, "John Crowe Ransom: A Study in Irony," to offset Mencken's attack. The gesture, however, could not calm the brewing storm. Mencken accused the twelve contributors of fashioning a utopian South without any regard for the detail of the actual world—a common criticism by that time. Furthermore, Mencken supported and praised the regionalists of the day, referring to the Chapel Hill social scientists, for insisting that "the South should grapple resolutely with its own problems, and try to solve them in accord with its own best interests and its own private taste." And finally, in a move that would incur the wrath of the Fugitives-turned-Agrarians, Mencken singled out Davidson for condemnation. "But when they go on to argue," begins Mencken, "as Mr. Donald Davidson seems to do in a recent article, that it should cut itself off from the rest of the country altogether, then they come close to uttering rubbish."

Mencken's diatribe is relentless, but Davidson had continued in the years since the publication of *I'll Take My Stand* to denounce northern criticism of the South without apology:

Mr. Davidson passes as an advanced thinker—and in many particulars his thought is advanced enough, God knows—, but whenever he observed an eye peeping over the Potomac his reaction is precisely that of the Mayor and City Council of Dayton, Tennessee. That is to say, he simply throws up his hands, and yields to moral indignation. All Northern accounts of Southern folkways are not more to him than libels invented by atheists in New York, “with Europe beyond” to afflict a Christian people whose only offense is that they are “believers in God.” It would be hard to imagine anything more naïve—save it be some of Mr. Davidson's grave retailings of the arcana acquired in *Freshmen History*. He seems to believe in all seriousness that the Bryan obscenity at Dayton was a private matter, on which the rest of the country had no right to an opinion.¹¹⁵

The rhetorical technique used in *I'll Take My Stand*—of distracting the reader from the atrocities of the South by highlighting the atrocities of the North, and, of course, by blaming the North for all southern problems—proved equally persuasive in Mencken's hand. He concluded by promising that “I'll begin to believe in the prophets of Regionalism when I hear that they have ceased to fever themselves over the sins of New York, and applied themselves courageously to clearing the ground of their own Region. Let them begin at home.”¹¹⁶

The reaction of the Agrarian circle to both Mencken's piece and Davidson's rejection signaled a more militant and self-indulgent phase of the campaign. Tate, according to Shapiro, questioned Davis's rebuff of Davidson's chronicle of *I'll Take My Stand*: “I suppose it comes down to this: whether you think the history of our group interesting and important enough to be published at this time.”¹¹⁷ John Gould Fletcher, one of the twelve contributors, immediately contacted Ransom, Davidson, Tate, Warren, and Frank Owsley and called for a boycott of the *VQR*. Fletcher, notes Shapiro, “had long been suspicious of what he saw as the lukewarm support of the *VQR* for the traditional South, and he had urged Ransom for some time to establish a southern literary and political journal modeled on the antebellum *Southern Review*.”¹¹⁸ Warren, Ransom, and Tate considered Fletcher's demands to be unreasonable, subjecting the author and his works to some sort of “loyalty oath.”¹¹⁹ Owsley and Davidson thought an investigation into what Owsley called the “scalawag publication” was more appropriate; their report could then be signed by their fellow southern writers, offering a censure to the “thoroughly vicious institution.”¹²⁰

The project seemed extreme to the former Fugitives and thus never materialized, but the proposals drew invisible boundaries. On his own, Owsley published a rebuttal, “The Pillars of Agrarianism,” to Mencken in the *American Review*. Despite editing out an extensive personal assault on the Baltimore journalist at the encouragement of Ransom and Davidson, who feared the repercussions, Owsley could not resist a brief, but biting, jab: “The most recent, and perhaps, the most violent attack upon the advocates of an Agrarian state is that of H. L. Mencken. While Mencken’s attack is so violent and lacking restraint that it does not fall short of libel, I have no desire to single him out as a critic worthy of answer.”¹²¹ The Agrarians were still consciously trying to shape their image, to counter the benighted South; clearly the old furor had not subsided.

In his account of Davidson’s conservatism, biographer Mark Winchell explains that “although deeply offended by the whole affair, Davidson tried to mend fences with his old Vanderbilt colleagues while calming the apoplectic Fletcher, whom he feared he had inadvertently set off.” Winchell noted that Davidson imagined the entire conflict with the VQR to be a conspiracy of sorts to break up the Agrarian group. Winchell further reveals through a study of Davidson’s correspondence that he wrote both Tate and Fletcher on the same day, May 17, 1935, conceding to Tate that “there must be some almost psychopathic cause in F’s [Fletcher’s] intense rages, as you suggest.”¹²² Davidson then appeased Fletcher by confessing that “even if you or I should intensely dislike all the other ‘Agrarians’ (as we don’t) we couldn’t ‘resign’ because we couldn’t stop being Southerners, ourselves, our fathers’ sons.”¹²³ *I’ll Take My Stand*, the Agrarian movement, and the blistering public criticism that followed would again set these southern writers on a new course.

In the years after *I’ll Take My Stand*, Ransom, Warren, and Tate returned to their roots in the world of literature, choosing to revive their careers by returning to where their careers had originated. Ransom had reached the end of his Agrarian rope, so to speak, while writing a collection of essays espousing his economic theories. He had entitled it *Land!* and had written it on a Guggenheim Fellowship in England in 1931 and 1932. Before heading abroad, Ransom submitted to *Harper’s* one-third of the planned manuscript, under the heading “A Lion in Distress,” which the magazine rejected. His Agrarian plan for rebuilding the South and the country at large received some attention at Rotary clubs and other community meetings that Ransom addressed both at home and in England. The spattering of support encouraged Ransom to submit an additional excerpt, “On Being a Creditor Nation,” to *Scribner’s*, which experienced the same fate as his first attempt.

Ransom persevered, continuing to sharpen his vocabulary as an economist, and tried to make an authentic contribution through his Agrarian philosophies. His chapters, including such titles as “Happy Farmers,” “What Does the South Want,” and “The South Is a Bulwark,” reveal his attempt to reestablish credibility as a southern spokesman. He was temporarily pleased when two additional pieces, “The State and the Land” and “Land! An Answer to the Unemployment Problem,” were accepted by the *New Republic* and *Harper’s*, respectively. However, the book manuscript as a whole, which had been the focus of his creative energy in the somewhat disastrous aftermath of *I’ll Take My Stand*, was rejected by Harcourt; Ransom confessed to Tate that he would not bother with revisions.¹²⁴ Just as quickly as Ransom had embraced Agrarianism, he would discard it.

Warren and Tate each took sharper turns back to poetry and literature in the wake of *I’ll Take My Stand*, with Tate becoming the southern editor of *Hound & Horn* magazine, while Warren headed further south to the department of English at Louisiana State University, where he would ultimately cofound and edit the *Southern Review*—a dream of Davidson’s—in 1935. He worked diligently on a novel, *God’s Own Time*, which was rejected by Harcourt Brace in 1933.¹²⁵ Tate continued to write poetry, publishing his *Poems: 1928–1931* and penning “To the Lacedemonians” for the Confederate military reunion held in Richmond in 1932. His wife, Caroline Gordon, received a Guggenheim, which resulted in his return to France. In collaboration with his friend Herbert Agar, Tate even tinkered with the idea of founding a weekly on southern and midwestern politics. Moreover, just as Ransom tried to salvage his role as a southern intellectual, so too did Tate attempt to reshape his image, publishing the essay “The Profession of Letters in the South” in a 1935 issue of the *VQR*. In the article, Tate proclaims the need for southern presses.

Of all of the contributors to *I’ll Take My Stand*, Davidson proved the most relentless in his effort to resurrect the South as the superior and true American culture. His essays, such as “Criticism Outside of New York,” “Sectionalism in the United States,” and “Still Rebels and Yankees,” belabored his vision. In total, nine essays, all of them recognizably Agrarian, were published in the *American Review*, edited by Seward Collins, including the contentious historical narrative of *I’ll Take My Stand*; and Warren’s reestablished *Southern Review* would carry an additional six essays. Though Davidson’s productivity proved admirable, his relationship with Seward Collins further damaged his reputation. Collins was an active critic of the New Deal—as were Tate and Davidson—but his conservatism in the 1930s grew increasingly entrenched as President Roosevelt’s government programs expanded. In a 1936 interview, Collins confessed both his identity as a self-proclaimed fascist and his support for Mussolini and Hitler.¹²⁶

According to Ian Hamilton, Tate was so desperate to “promote his ‘spiritual’ defence of the Deep South’s traditions” that Tate was “more than ready to overlook the anti-Semitism and pro-Hitlerism of the *American Review*.” Yet Tate himself proclaimed publicly in both the *Marxist Quarterly* and the *New Republic* that he would never write for the *American Review* again, even if it “were the last publication left in America.”¹²⁷ And the following year, Tate insisted to Davidson that he “must become a creative writer once more.”¹²⁸ Nonetheless, Davidson “soldiered on, alone.”¹²⁹ Regardless of their varying commitments to the principles of the Agrarians, the contributors of *I’ll Take My Stand* did reunite for a sequel.

Edited by Tate and Agar, the anthology *Who Owns America?* (1936) was intended, like much of the individual work that each had undertaken in the intervening years, to revise and redeem their position. Tentative early notes describing such a manuscript bear the title “Counter-Revolution: The Sequel to *I’ll Take My Stand*” or “The Agrarian Phalanx: Sequel to *I’ll Take My Stand*.” But many of the contributors wanted to broaden the Agrarian position, specifically to merge with the English Distributists, who promoted a similar philosophy, in an attempt to appear more worldly and to avoid the attacks of 1930. Ransom’s essay “What Does the South Want?” was an elaboration of his essay that had appeared in a 1934 issue of the *American Review*, and the intent of the piece was to backpedal from the idea of one mythical South, by persuading the reader that “there are business men and laborers, equally with farmers, to be defended.”¹³⁰ Despite this disclaimer, Ransom still blamed the loss of southern hegemony on the “insistent penetration of the region by foreign ideas.”¹³¹ In truth, Ransom had already retreated from his previous economic stances, and his primary occupation would be a return to aesthetics. This essay served as his Agrarian curtain call.

Always in tune with philosophy and increasingly interested in politics, Tate’s contribution, “Notes on Liberty and Property,” examined the nature of ownership as redefined by the Civil War—though he does not mention the institution of slavery. Tate’s piece highlighted the concentration of wealth that accompanies capitalism, and he thus privileged the individual ownership of land that Tate believed ensures personal responsibility. Still pushing the Agrarian vision, Tate contrasted the experience for individuals, many of whom felt similarly disillusioned by the corporate machine and the stock market crash. Using his talent and experience as a historian, Warren planned to write a series of short biographies of prominent leaders of the English Agrarian movement, but severe headaches forced him to submit “Literature as a Symptom,” a study of Victorian writers, instead. Only Davidson continued the polemics. His essay “That This Nation May Endure: The Need for Political Regionalism” still referred to

Reconstruction as the period of northern imperialism: the Fourteenth Amendment had been “‘ratified’ at the point of a bayonet.”¹³² He championed the doctrines of self-determination, majoritarianism, and states’ rights, all forecasting the white southern defenses of the civil rights movement. Davidson insisted that “the land and the region belong to the people who dwell there, and that they will be governed only by their own consent.”¹³³

■ The rhetoric associated with Agrarianism and employed by the twelve southern essayists clearly delineated what they perceived to be the wickedness of northern progress and its New South followers from the authentically American, southern agrarian way of life—a rhetoric of good versus evil that again appealed to their white southern audience. The South is depicted as “mature and ‘seasoned,’ an old society and a society good because it is old,” while the North “is dismissed as ‘immature’ and ‘primitive.’”¹³⁴ In this sense, the contributors attempted to disarm public denunciations of the white South by turning the very criticisms with which they were negatively attacked on their attackers, defining each in opposition to southern whiteness. The word “modern” is written “as if it were a term of abuse,” and the terms “industrial” and “cultural” are positioned “as though they were antonyms.”¹³⁵ In retrospect, Davidson would explain the rhetorical devices of the book by admitting the intentions of the Agrarians: “We thought our fellow-Southerners would grasp without laborious explanation the terms of our approach to Southern problems.”¹³⁶ Unfortunately for these southern gentlemen writers, Davidson was wrong.

Locating the exact moment when these Nashville Fugitives officially transformed into the politically driven Agrarians is difficult to determine at best. In truth, Ransom, Warren, Tate, and Davidson each brought to the Agrarian conversation a distinct perspective driven by equally distinct motivations. Ransom’s vision was always shaped by his aesthetic values; Tate seemed desperate, both personally and as an artist, for a structure based on tradition and myth; Warren waded into historical waters in an effort to reconcile and contextualize his southern upbringing in a world hostile to it; and Davidson sought primarily to launch a counterattack against northern and New South criticism—to crown southern culture as superior. However, despite the divergent paths they took in the years after publication of the *Fugitive* ceased, they all stood in 1930 at the same crossroads. And for better or worse, as a collective group they used their talents as artists and cultural critics to defend their regional heritage at odds with American nationalism and to compensate for this heritage of inferiority. In an effort to counter the negative construction of southern white identity, the Agrarians compiled a new list of southern values that expanded the boundaries

of whiteness in the twentieth century. And whether consciously or subconsciously, these Fugitives-turned-Agrarians began to look for a new campaign—one that would not provoke laughter and ridicule but would afford them the national intellectual influence they had desired ever since their Nashville days. But the war had been long, the damage certain. The recognition had not come. This time they would return to their subject of expertise, however, shedding their southern skin, chameleons once more.