

RANSOM AND THE FUGITIVE MOVEMENT: Break and Continuity

Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to put forward the argument that there exists a clear and logical relationship between the Fugitive-Agrarian movements and New Criticism. This relationship is determined by the sum of beliefs and attitudes that the major Agrarians, namely John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson and Allen Tate shared and defended either collectively or individually. In so far as these beliefs express a reaction against the modern world, with at the background the drastic changes that were taking place in the American South in the 1930's, they represent an "ideology". What should therefore emerge from this study is that the joint adventure of these writers finds its essential unity in the dominant theory of Agrarianism. Such an intention invites a consideration of the historical and cultural contexts that made a group of Southern writers become respectively, Fugitive Poets, Southern Agrarians, and, finally, New Critics whose views and multifaceted inquiries constitute an important contribution to the Southern Literary Renaissance.

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Introduction

This paper is concerned with an important phase of the Southern literary Renaissance. It seeks to establish the contributions of the Nashville Fugitive-Agrarian writers to the larger cultural awakening and intellectual production that took place in the South roughly between 1920 and 1950. Because the Fugitive and Agrarian movements permitted the emergence of talented figures such as John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and Donald Davidson, it seems to me important to follow the different steps of their collective and individual careers to show, despite claims to the contrary, essential relationships between their achievements as Fugitive Poets in the 1920's, as Agrarians in the 1930's and finally as New Critics in the next decades.

ملخص

تهدف هذه المقالة إلى البرهنة على وجود علاقة واضحة ومنطقية بين حركات الهاربين-الزراعيين وحركة النقد الجديد. إن ما يحدد هذه العلاقة هو مجموعة الاعتقادات والمواقف التي كان يشترك فيها ويدافع عنها بصفة فردية أو جماعية أهم شخصيات حركة الزراعيين من أمثال جون كراو رانسم ودونالد دافيدسن وآلن تايت. وبما أن هذه الاعتقادات كانت تعبر عن رد فعل ضد العالم المعاصر، وتشكل خلفيتها التغيرات الجذرية التي حدثت في جنوب الولايات المتحدة خلال الثلاثينيات، فهي تمثل "أيديولوجيا" في حد ذاتها.

ولهذا فإن ما تم استنتاجه من خلال هذه الدراسة هو أن هذه المغامرة المشتركة لهؤلاء المؤلفين تستمد أهم وحدتها من نظرية الزراعيين المسيطرة آنذاك. وفي سبيل ذلك وجب اعتبار السياق التاريخي والثقافي اللذان جعلتا مجموعة من كتاب الجنوب يتحولون من شعراء هاربين إلى زراعيين، وفي الأخير إلى نقاد جدد ساهمت آراؤهم وبحوثهم المتعددة الأوجه بصفة هامة في ما عرف بنهضة أدب الجنوب.

The reasons for my focus upon these three writers and on Ransom's leading role are various. Not only did these persons distinguish themselves from the rest of the group by their highly creative achievements in poetry, fiction and criticism, but they also played major roles in another, more controversial group. For in 1930 as Agrarians they adopted a militant defence of a rural way of life in a book of essays entitled *I'll Take My Stand*. Surely the concerns as well as the character of the Fugitive and Agrarian movements should not be merged. Nevertheless it is my belief that despite their distinctness and

the recognition that they had separate accomplishments, they present, with some clarity, permanent characteristics which justify claims of a basic connection between them. To view them as totally independent achievements bearing no relationship whatsoever to one another would simply mean ignoring an important aspect of their development. For although these writers used different vocabularies at different stages of their careers, this should not lead us into positing a total divorce between their literary and social ideas. And it is indeed my belief that their later careers as Agrarians and New critics can best be understood if we do not neglect their Fugitive achievements

The Fugitive Flight and the Pursuit of Poetry

The Agrarians might not have been fully aware of the depth of their involvement with their region when they held their first meeting as Fugitives in Nashville, Tennessee. Their stated concern was the writing of poetry. In the main, these men were fleeing "from something to something" in their vision of the cultural South. As poets their flight took the form of a revolt against the literary standards expressed by their predecessors. Poetry, they felt, should do more than glorify the old days or cry out against times. Their purpose then was to eschew sentimentality; and they made this clear by adopting the term Fugitive for the title of their magazine. In the foreword to the first issue they declared: "The Fugitive flees from nothing faster than from the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South."¹

Other examples of the Fugitives' rejection of the old literary patterns abound in the magazine. A typical case of this rejection can be illustrated by their reaction to Harriet Monroe when the latter invited Southern writers to approach in their art "the soft reminiscent life... of a region so specialised in beauty, so rich in racial tang and prejudice, so jewel-weighted with a heroic past."² The Fugitives were quite annoyed with such patronizing attitude and, speaking through the voice of Donald Davidson, they replied:

"Undoubtedly the Old South is literary material to those who may care to write about it. But many may not... They will create from what is nearest and deepest in experience—whether be old or new, North South East or West—and what business is that of Aunt Harriet?"³

What emerges clearly from this passage is a sense of determination: the determination to assert themselves as writers committed to no restrictive doctrine. In fact, the Fugitives presented a more complex case, for while they liked to think of themselves as members of an international community of art, the poetry that they produced lacked the energy of the forces that were shaping the new American Poetry. In fact, despite their proclaiming in an early number of their magazine that they “were in tune with the times... and self-convinced experimentalists,”⁴ they showed little inclination for “unconventional forms.” The most striking example of their resistance to modern poetry can be illustrated by Ransom’s initially poor reception of *The Waste Land* and his denunciation of Eliot’s work as “one of the most insubordinate poems in the language.”⁵ *The Waste Land*, it must be pointed out, was an occasion for a temporary controversy between Ransom and Tate which, while highlighting differences of opinion on the nature of the poetic medium, provoked a debate which can be regarded as the foundation of the later New Criticism of 1940’s. Indeed, a glance at the contents of their magazine will reveal their early interest in language and its properties. Such essay-titles as “The Future of Poetry”, “Thoughts on the Poetic Discontent”, “Mixed Modes”, “Certain Fallacies in Modern Poetry” and “One escape from the Dilemma” can be cited as the prelude to the critical preoccupations which will find fuller expression with the advent of New Criticism. Though space does not allow for a detailed discussion of Fugitive poetry and poetics, I’ll restrict myself to making a few points to illustrate some of the disparities between their claims and their achievements.

The Fugitives’ declared intention was to write a hard, intellectual poetry, not particularly local or regional, a poetry that would bring about an effective rupture with what had been passing as Southern verse. But despite the boldness of their claims, they did not show any excitement for new ideas or new techniques in poetry... In short, everything in their background, both literary and personal, as well as their training at Vanderbilt University, suggests their attachment to conventional standards. This attachment includes a respect for established forms, a search for a poetic order as well as a growing allegiance to the culture of their region. Allen Tate, the sole member of the group through whom “modernist” ideas entered the Fugitive circle, acknowledged that “Fugitive Poetry turned out to be profoundly sectional in that it was supported by the prejudices, feelings, values into which the poems were born.”⁶

In fact, when we read through the Southern verse of Ransom, Davidson, Tate and quote for the sake of illustration such poems as “Antique Harvesters”, “Old Mansion”, “Dead Boy”(Ransom), “Ode to the Confederate Dead” (Tate), “The Tall Men”(Davidson), we realise the extent to which the South as a region, and, later, Agrarian themes entered the Fugitives’ poetry. Surely none of these poets restricted himself to writing solely on the South or according to any pre-established Agrarian programme. Their verse dealt, indeed, largely with universal themes such as love, death and various other topics. Nevertheless, the vision that their poetry gradually came to offer is that of writers who, at a certain stage of their career, grasped the significance of their region, and established its lineaments for portrayal in their poems. They, just like other writers, drew legitimately upon their inheritance and used their background for much of the imagery, language and settings of their poems. How they differed from their contemporaries though, was in their attitude toward their heritage and their

growing commitment to the tradition of the Old South—a tradition which they undertook to defend when they turned Agrarians in *I'll Take My Stand* (1930). The question that needs raising at this stage is how to interpret their break with “the Brahmins of the Old South”⁷ when their poetry indicates that despite their temporary exposure to national and foreign influences, these writers never really lost the natural affinity that linked them to their region’s culture. In a way, their experiences abroad, despite an early excitement at the idea of leaving home, served to strengthen their loyalty to it. Here again, I’ll argue that though these writers manifested the urge to leave home to escape the restrictions of provincial life, there was never a complete rupture of the bonds that tied them to their region.

A first opportunity to leave home was offered by the United States entry into World War I. Davidson, who was called to join the armed forces, was sent overseas. While he was in France, he read some of the poems by his friend Ransom and found that these had a special effect on him:

When I read those poems in France, by candlelight in some peasant’s house in the Cote D’Or or Yonne, or some ruined village near the Western front, they still blurred my eyes, even though at that distance I could more gratefully recognise in them the Tennessee country I had left.⁸

From the way Davidson portrays this experience, and the particular details he mentions about its setting—“by candlelight in some peasant’s house”—we are made aware of nostalgic feelings aroused in him by his reading of Ransom’s poems. The very fact that he read them away from home seems by itself of special significance. For while at home he felt that Ransom’s poems came to him “dim and distorted”, this time they brought him closer to his native land.

Allen Tate was the first in the group to manifest the urge to leave the South. Expressing his revolt in a letter to Davidson, he declared that the trouble is in “the damnably barbaric Southern mind.”⁹ But as soon as he settled in New York, the sentiment of revolt against his region lost its intensity as he began to feel the need to affirm the values of his culture. Once these writers moved to cosmopolitan areas and experienced a clash of values, they generally reacted in a way that not only betrayed their native idealisation of city life, but also revealed the fears caused by the separation from their rural milieu. The frustration caused by the disparity between what they expected from the city and what they experienced in it is displayed in “The Subway”, a poem written by Tate while he lived in New York. Cast in a somehow Baudelairean mood, this poem conveys a feeling of violence brought about by the poet’s estrangement from place and region:

Dark accurate plunger down the successive knell
Of arch, where ogives burst red
Reverberance of hail upon the dead
Thunder like an exploding crucible
Harshly articulate, musical steel shell
Of angry worship, hurled religiously
Upon your business of humility
Into the iron forestries of hell. 10

The second part of the poem, which continues on the same note of desolation, concludes with a sense of urban soullessness.

But apart from the commentary about urban living conditions and the poet's reaction to them, this poem is interesting on another level. Although it was composed in 1920, that is, before Tate's discovery of Eliot, there is much in its imagery and mood that points to a future affiliation with Eliot. And this did not take long to come about, for in 1922, Hart Crane, who had read Tate's poem in the *Double Dealer*, soon pointed out the resemblance of his verse to Eliot's. This is how Tate relates the event. "He said that my poem showed that I had read Eliot—which I had not done: but soon I did and my difficulties were enormously increased..."¹¹ The contact that Tate was establishing with modern poetry became manifest after his discovery of Eliot. The effects of this discovery began to be felt with Tate's open defence of Eliot's verse upon the publication of *The Waste Land*. Unlike Ransom, who declared, "*Waste Land* does not satisfy me though it is amazing," Tate showed enthusiasm for Eliot's standards, a fact which gradually led him to adopt positions with wider implications: "The *Waste Land* had come out by the time I went back to Nashville in February 1923; I began an impertinent campaign on Eliot's behalf in the South."¹²

In those Fugitive days, the attitudes of these writers toward their heritage were quite ambivalent. In their initial revolt, they expressed discontent with aspects of their heritage, notably its cultural poverty. For them, the South had no proper literary tradition that might inspire their concerns as poets in the modern age. They refused to be identified to a tradition, which, to use their own words, "may be called a tradition only when looked at through the haze of a generous imagination."¹³ The absence of a tradition of ideas in the South was one of the reasons for the Fugitives' temporary support of cosmopolitan culture for their own region, which they viewed as a healthy alternative to the cultural mediocrity that characterised it.

In spite of this and similar declarations, The Fugitives remained on the whole, under the spell of the "region of memory" and though they might not have been aware of it, their regional background betrayed their cosmopolitan claims. Gradually, they came to discover that their verse, which embodied communal subject-matter, revealed more sympathies with the tradition of the South than they thought they had. Having for the most part grown in small towns and villages, these writers, as Rubin explained; "were imbued with the beliefs and habits of a way of life that was predominantly rural. On the other hand, though born in a rural society, they were also part of the change that was affecting their region".¹¹ They witnessed, not without discomfort, the fading character of their society through industrialisation. And it took them a little while before they began to show explicit concern for the problems of their region. If one puts aside all the tensions they recorded as Fugitive Poets, it would be hard to explain their Agrarian stand in the years following the 1929 crash. What is important to assert, given the aspects of their careers I touched upon, is that the Fugitive experience owes as much to external factors as to factors of regional history.

From Fugitives to Agrarians

I have attempted so far to show how the Fugitive experience recorded the tensions that will later on find a more articulate expression in the Agrarian movement. So the questions that need raising now concern the nature of the ideology of Southern

Agrarianism and the way it relates to the Fugitive movement. In other words, is there any meeting point between Fugitive poetry and the arguments developed in the Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*, which derived its significance from its attack on the way of life promoted by industrialism and its faith in secular progress? This time, the Agrarians were united by a common principle—to oppose modernism in order to create the foundation for the restoration of an agrarian-oriented economy for the South. This was clearly announced by Ransom in the introductory chapter of their book of essays:

It was through the good fortune of some deeper agreement that the book was expected to achieve its unity. All articles bear in the same sense upon the book's title-subjects; all tend to support a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way; and all as much as agree that the best terms to represent the distinction are contained in the phrase Agrarian versus Industrial.¹⁴

The publication of the Agrarian symposium in 1930, that is, during the economic chaos engendered by the Great Depression, is particularly significant. *I'll Take My Stand*, on these grounds, can be considered as a reaction by Southerners to the economic strategies of American life, strategies based on a faith in business, trade and industrialisation. To the alleged dehumanisation which resulted from the American adoption of the cash-nexus system, the Agrarians proposed their own alternative. This was a return to a more “natural” way of life through the restoration of an agrarian society for the South. They defined it in the following terms:

An Agrarian society is one in which agriculture is the leading vocation whether for wealth or for prestige—a form of labour that is pursued with intelligence and leisure, and that becomes the model to which other forms approach as well as they may. But an Agrarian regime will be secured where the superfluous industries are not allowed to rise against it. The theory of Agrarianism is that the culture of the soil is the best and most sensitive of all vocations, and that therefore it should have the economic preference and enlist the maximum number of workers.¹⁵

This paragraph is one of the many that tell us about the Agrarians' commitment to a mode of life in which, presumably, labour, unlike under the industrial mode is not separated from leisure. The emphasis on pleasure and leisure is deliberate and serves the Agrarian purpose of equating the work on the soil with what they conceived as the “natural.” By way of contrast, they created an antinomy suggesting that industrialism is “unnatural” and therefore dehumanising. Their solution to the “evils” resulting from the industrial system was restricted to stressing the virtues of a life close to the soil. Ransom sought support for his ideas in the old English tradition and the agrarianism practised by the Anglo-Saxons. He spoke highly of such an economic model and observed that:

The pioneers explored the soil, determined what concessions it might be reasonably expected to make them, housed themselves, developed all the necessary trades, and arrived by painful experiment at a thousand satisfactory recipes by which they might secure their material necessities.¹⁶

He extended his argument and assumed that the descendants of such a culture built their establishment by accepting and protecting the tradition which they inherited and “have consequently enjoyed a leisure, a security and intellectual freedom.”¹⁷

Obviously Ransom did not look ahead to the England of the Industrial Revolution, to her commerce or her Empire. He was content to look at the older England and hope that the South might achieve a similar culture. And when he turned to his region, it was first to declare an ancestral opposition of the culture of the Old South to sheer economic profit: “The South never conceded that the whole duty of man was to increase material production or that the index to the degree of his culture was the volume of his material production.”¹⁸

As can be seen from so short an example, the essence of the Agrarian argument is both economic and cultural. For good or for ill, the Agrarians were not very specific in the formulation of their economic thought, nor did they indicate clearly the steps that would lead to the restoration of An Agrarian society in the South. “The authors of the symposium”, as Karanikas explained, “assumed that the reader understood the basic dichotomy, i.e., industrial versus agrarian.”¹⁹ They declared that their “principles do not intend to be very specific in proposing any practical measures,” avoiding henceforth severe restrictions on the technical aspects of agrarian economics. They preferred to argue in terms of oppositions, always insisting on the deficiencies of the industrial mode to boast the virtues of a life close to the soil. Take for example their account of the farmer, now the symbol of the agrarian ideal (after the disintegration of the plantation system), which contrasts his life with that of the modern factory worker:

He identifies himself with a spot of ground, and this ground carries a good deal of meaning; it defines itself for him as nature. He would till it not too hurriedly and not too mechanically to observe in it the contingency and the infinitude of nature; and so his life acquires its philosophical and even its cosmic consciousness. A man can contemplate and explore, and respect and love, an object as substantial as a farm or a native province. But he cannot contemplate, or explore, respect or love, a mere turnover, such as an assemblage of “natural resources,” a pile of money, a volume of produce, a market or a credit system. It is into precisely these tangibles that industrialism would transform the farmer’s farm. It means the dehumanisation of his life.”²⁰

The Agrarians considered the Southern farmer as the last symbol of the southern soul for the human qualities that he embodied in the face of an invading industrialism. The farmer, they believed, offered great resistance to the cultural uprooting engendered by the gospel of progress because he “refuses to mobilise himself and become a unit in the industrial army, because he does not approve of army life.”²¹

In the main, the Agrarians devoted themselves to unveiling what they considered to be “the evils” of modern industrial conditions, their targets being both economic and cultural, they necessarily pointed to various aspects of life, including, among other things, commentary on industrialism and science, on the arts and the value of tradition, on education and religion and on political and philosophical aspects of the modern world. But although ranging widely in its topics and commentaries, the core of

agrarianism, whether formulated in economic or aesthetic terms, always points to a vision that privileges a balanced order of things. This order begins with a vision of the ideal organic life as represented by the culture of the Old South, of which the legendary image of the Southern gentleman was an incarnation. It soon encompasses other areas of human activity and finally proposes a corrective to the failure of the philosophy of progress. This corrective, it must be pointed out, presumes the rejection of the criteria of performance and efficiency as a premium for the attainment of a culture that will presumably secure the desired synthesis between economic and aesthetic aspects of life.

Dualism in Agrarian thought

I have indicated previously that the Agrarians argued in terms of opposition. In fact, the governing principle of their mode of thought is dualism. In their manifesto, they agreed that the best term for their doctrine was the dualistic formula "Agrarian versus Industrial." But dualism had, in fact, started out during the Fugitive era as a striking attribute of Ransom's poetry before it came to manifest itself in agrarianism. Ransom's alternative to the deficiencies of the scientific mode was dualism. In a letter to Allen Tate, he exclaimed: "give us Dualism or we'll give you no Art,"²² revealing hence the early signs of his future aesthetic theory which sustained among other things, that the defence of the arts was not separable from that of nature (understand by nature the Agrarian vision of the natural). The kinship between art and nature that Ransom discerned in his Fugitive days was useful. For later, when he turned Agrarian, he was able to suggest that the idea of a life close to the soil was the most "natural" way of life. Envisaging that both art and nature were equally threatened by the sword of science, he suggested that they should ally in their defence against the common enemy:

The defenders of poetry would not mind saying that they are prepared to abandon nature, because that would mean the abandonment of metaphor, which in turn would mean the abandonment of poetry, which when they have weighed it, would be a serious abridgement of the range of human experience."²³

In fact, throughout his career Ransom endeavoured to prove that science and poetry were incompatible. In his essay "The Future of Poetry," which appeared in *The Fugitive*, he expressed his discontent with modern scientific intrusion into the field of poetry:

We moderns are impatient and destructive. We forget entirely the enormous difficulty of the poetic art; and we examine the meanings of poems with more and more microscopic analysis; we examine them in fact just as strictly as we examine the meanings of prose which has been composed without any handicap of metrical distractions; and we do not obtain so readily as our fathers the ecstasy which is the total effect of poetry, the sense of miracle before the union of inner meaning and objective form... For no art and no religion is possible until we make allowances, until we manage to keep quiet the enfant terrible of logic that plays havoc with the other faculties."²⁴

Behind the question of poetic technique debated here, there is, I believe, a clear indication of Ransom's fear of the intrusion of scientific rationalism into contemporary culture. This is made quite explicit through his rejection of scientific norms, to which he refers as "microscopic analysis" and "logic," and his preference instead for such attributes as "ecstasy" and the "sense of miracle". By the time he turned Agrarian, Ransom had expressed an open disdain for science—a disdain that he carried over in his literary theory. His two volumes, *God Without Thunder* (1930) and *The World's Body* (1938), constitute, respectively, an attack on science as destructive of the old mystery of God, and a revelation of the failure of science to achieve the body that is in poetry. Between them these two books demonstrate Ransom's determination to prove that the scientific way was resolutely opposed to the aesthetic way. And in attempting to provide an answer to the dichotomies that he depicted both in life and in art, Ransom, as J. L. Stewart rightly observed, "worked out a system of correlatives which summed up all his ideas about art, science, industry, the agrarian society, myth, religion, ritual and the contemporary fragmentation of the mind."²⁵ With Ransom, as with other agrarians, objections to modern culture, criticism of science, defence of religion and the arts, all, in the end, came down to their quest for values associated with the culture of the Old South and absent in contemporary life.

From Agrarianism to the New Criticism

Just as I have attempted to relate the Fugitive movement to the Agrarian movement, I'll now move to suggest their connection to New Criticism. Devoted to close textual analysis rather than historical scholarship, new Criticism which gained fame in the 1940's, had, in fact, its core in the 1920's during the early Fugitive gatherings under their leader John Crowe Ransom. The Fugitives, as I have indicated earlier on, were interested in language and its properties. They formulated their views on poetry and on the writer's craft- in various essays published in *The Fugitive* and other magazines such as *The Kenyon Review* and *The Sewanee Review*. And just as they deplored the deficiencies that generated the chaos of modern industrial life, they sought to achieve in criticism the kind of traditional order which they longed for during their Agrarian days. In other words, transferred to criticism, the conservatism of their social ideas, which included a yearning towards the tradition of the Ante Bellum, generated an aesthetic formalism which Ransom announced in a volume entitled *The New Criticism* (1940). In the main, the members of the New Critical movement, despite individual differences, shared a common outlook. This was to discard the social and physical sciences in their approach to literature and to avoid ideas and terms from these disciplines. And just as they denounced science and industrialism in Agrarianism, they carried over new dualisms in the field of criticism. Their depiction of a dichotomy between poetry and science led them to assume the role of the defenders of literature, and to this end, they devoted their talent and energy to establishing standards according to which they regarded poetry as a form of knowledge distinct from scientific knowledge. In the last essay of his book *The New Criticism*, Ransom announced his programme—the need to establish an "ontological criticism" which would define poetry as a unique mode of apprehending reality:

I suggest that the differentia of poetry as a discourse is an ontological one... It treats an order of existence, a grade of objectivity, which cannot be treated in a scientific discourse... Poetry intends to recover the denser and more refractory original world which we know loosely through our perceptions and memories. By this supposition it is a kind of knowledge which is radically or ontologically distinct.²⁶

From this platform Ransom examined, successively, the limitations of non-ontological forms of criticism as represented by such critics as I. A. Richards, T.S. Eliot and Yvor Winters. What Ransom disliked most in Richards' psychological theory was his distinction between the verifiable truths of science and the pseudo-statements of poetry. And it was not until Richards altered his views and gave poetry preponderance over science by admitting cognition as a central element in the poetic experience that Ransom approved of him as a critic: "I used to abuse Mr. Richards as a critic walking in philosophical darkness... I have written crudely about him in the *World's Body*... I remark now that I think he had done more good than harm."²⁷

In the second chapter, Ransom proceeded to examine Eliot and referred to him as an "historic critic." But this time, as distinct from the Fugitive period, he found in Eliot a defender of a programme already launched by Pound. His reconciliation with Eliot's views and standards came mainly through Tate. And by the time Ransom completed *The World's Body*, he achieved a great ideological affinity with Eliot. Although as a critic he did not share all of his views, he learned from him the value of tradition and saw in him the model of the complete personality in modern times:

A natural affiliation binds together the gentleman, the religious man, and the artist—punctilious characters, all of them, in their formalism. We have seen one distinguished figure in our times pronouncing on behalf of all three in one breath. In politics, royalist; in religion, Anglo-Catholic, in literature, Classical. I am astonished upon how comprehensively this formula covers the kingdom of the aesthetic life as it is organised by the social tradition."²⁸

Drawing on Eliot's programme, Ransom adapted his formula to the Southern Agrarian context. His own version took this form: "I would covet a programme going something like this: in manners, aristocratic; in religion, ritualistic; in art, traditional."²⁹ The other steps that Ransom's criticism took consisted in a redevelopment of his original structure-texture theory. Ransom referred to the poem as a dual composition of a loose logical structure with an irrelevant local texture. While scientific discourse uses structure only, poetry uses structure and texture: "Science deals exclusively in pure symbols, but art deals essentially, though not exclusively in iconic signs".³⁰ The structure of the poem, which consists of "irrelevancies", is that which can not be tamed by logical paraphrase nor contained in statements of argument.

What is important to recognise despite the various technicalities of the New Criticism is its members' belief that analytic criticism is the best method for arriving at an aesthetic assessment of a work of art. And this presumes, as Tate claimed, a belief "in a radical discontinuity between the physical and spiritual realms," adding that "historicism, scientism, psychologism, biologism, in general the confident use of the scientific vocabularies in the spiritual realm, has created, or at any rate is the

expression of a spiritual disorder. That disorder may be briefly described as a dilemma.”³¹ Tate’s thesis here is eminently agrarian. The word dilemma, as a matter of fact, seems to me a variation of the themes that were the concern of the Agrarians before they turned New Critics. These are “the dislocation of the sensibility”, “the loss of tradition”, “the loss of belief” and all the other evils they depicted in modern society.

But no matter the problems, each one demanded an aesthetic solution, and if we are to determine the broadest frame of reference for the New Criticism, following the standards set by Eliot, Ransom, Tate and others, we must acknowledge that a significant part of the Agrarian ideology can be placed within its boundary. In short, when achievements are set against limitations, one could not but be impressed by the variety of their enquiries and the wealth of their individual and collective contributions to the Southern literary renaissance.

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