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Text as Tabernacle: Agrarians, New Critics, and the Tactical Diffusion of Protestant Hermeneutics in the Pre-War South

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TEXT AS TABERNACLE: AGRARIANS, NEW CRITICS, AND THE
TACTICAL DIFFUSION OF PROTESTANT HERMENEUTICS IN
THE PRE-WAR SOUTH

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that the institutionalization of literary studies in post-War American universities began as a constructive theological response to a religious crisis centered in the southeastern United States. Starting with a brief sketch of the distinct academic, literary, and religious scenes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the essay explores the formation and propagation of the New Criticism through an attention to key figures' previously ignored religious motivations. Dissatisfied with the literary and religious scenes within the region, a close-knit group of Nashville aesthetes set about constructing an alternative to the narrow-minded historicism with which one was forced to study both sacred and secular texts. Following failed engagements of fundamentalism and politics, the leaders of John Crowe Ransom's "Criticism, Inc." created an academic field that transformed formalist aesthetics into a workable prosthesis for a Protestant hermeneutic rendered obsolete by the previous century's historicism. In this movement the religious and political concerns of Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, and Cleanth Brooks were not so much abandoned as transferred. By turns explicit and concealed, Ransom's claim that "art is the only true religion and no other is needed" comes to bear upon the institutional roles of literary criticism and university English departments, as well as the curious interplay of religion and aesthetics in American cultural history. Emerging from this study is a reflection on the ambiguous secularity of aesthetic criticism in the United States.

INTRODUCTION

Always a matter of surprise, religion is, I believe, most interesting where it is least obvious Not only do modern and contemporary art, literature, economics, science, and technology pose questions about religion, but the study of religion exposes religious dimensions of ostensibly “secular” culture, which usually remain undetected.

— Mark C. Taylor, *About Religion*¹

This thesis argues that the ascendance of the New Criticism in the United States was an ambiguously secular response to a religious crisis in the early twentieth-century Upland South. For roughly a quarter-century the literary-critical model developed by John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren (*inter alios*) governed the teaching of English within American universities. In the process, the movement preserved—in ostensibly secular form—what was an otherwise defunct Protestant hermeneutic. Yet far from abandoning religious discourse, in institutionalizing formalist literary criticism the Southern New Critics were reacting to two key features of Reconstruction-era Protestantism.

Broadly construed, the first of these was the narrow historicism governing Protestant theology and hermeneutics in the late nineteenth century. While better known today through a widespread enthusiasm for Spencerian religious evolutionism, the tendency to make the sacred a function of the historical saw its most influential manifestation in the so-called Higher Criticism of scripture. For many of the country’s educated Protestants, the displacement of sacred hermeneutics by source and redaction criticism had made *religious* textual studies impossible—so much so, in fact, that by 1909 Jacob Gould Schurman, the president of Cornell University, could conclude that “history and criticism have made the Bible a new book.” With the biblical text irreparably de-sacralized, Schurman spoke for many American Protestants when he warned that “a restless sea of criticism threatens to engulf religion.”² Against this spirit, the Southern New Critics would construct a criticism of a different sort, one that rejected the Higher Critical “historical mill”; treated the literary text as “nothing short of a desperate ontological or metaphysical manœuvre”; and maintained above all else that “*form is meaning*.”³

In this their own metaphysical manœuvre, the New Critics succeeded in both constructing and resurrecting an otherwise defunct Protestant hermeneutic. Before the rise of the Higher Criticism in the United State—before exegetical theologians like Charles Briggs could declare the Bible no more than “paper, print, and binding”—the

¹ Mark C. Taylor, *About Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) 1.

² Quoted in Ferenc Morton Szasz, *The Divided Mind of Protestant America, 1880-1930* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1982) 33.

³ John Crowe Ransom, “Criticism, Inc.,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 13 (1937): 591, 601; Cleanth Brooks, “My Credo’: The Formalist Critics,” *Kenyon Review* 13 (1951): 72.

historicity of scripture was so much a given that affective or aesthetic readings of the text could thrive unencumbered by source criticism or science.⁴ As Hans Frei—whose own hermeneutic, as we will see, derives as much from the New Criticism as from Neo-Orthodoxy—has shown, pre-eighteenth-century biblical realism allowed for allegorical readings of scripture to exist alongside historical ones. Much like the New Critic’s beautiful poem, the “words and sentences” of the sixteenth-century Protestant’s bible “meant what they said, and because they did so they accurately described real events and real truths that were rightly put only in those terms and no others.”⁵ The history transcribed in scripture had no need for higher-critical proof; per Calvin’s dictum, the text contained its own authentication. One was therefore free to practice a “typological” or figurative hermeneutic. With the gap between the historical event and the present situation effectively closed, the status of the text was such that the reader could see her own life represented in ancient language. Indeed, for the seventeenth-century Protestant, figurative reading was entirely consistent with the type of history scripture provided. Before it was defaced by historians, the sacred text was, as Cleanth Brooks would say of the poem, “a simulacrum of reality ... an experience rather than any mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction from experience.”⁶

Equally responsible for the development of the New Criticism in the southeastern United States was the pervasive denigration of the region’s religion involved in social reform movements, itself the applied face of an exclusively historical approach to religious texts and institutions. Unlike the more benign social gospel movement at work in the North, calls for industrialization from such factions as the Southern Liberals and the earlier New South movement, as one contemporary later observed, inevitably involved an assault on the “religious orthodoxy, the Puritanism, the demagoguery, the ramshackle dwellings, the rural conservatism, and other undesirable aspects of the contemporary scene.”⁷ Cast in a more positive light, these were precisely the aspects of the South that first-generation New Critics wanted to preserve. Indeed, such affronts to their regional religious identity came from quarters much closer than the newspaper columnists and social scientists of the New South movement. Edwin Mims, a Vanderbilt University English professor and one of the Southern New Critics’ chief nemeses, made a spirited case for a fusion of scientific modernism and liberal Protestantism in the region.

⁴ Charles A. Briggs, *The Authority of Holy Scripture: An Inaugural Address* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1891), quoted in William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976) 94.

⁵ Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974) 1; on the union of historical, figural, and affective interpretation of the scripture before the Higher Criticism, see *ibid.* 2-12 and 245-266; and Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 376-383.

⁶ Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1947) 213.

⁷ Francis B. Simkins, “The Everlasting South,” *The Journal of Southern History* 13.3 (1947): 311.

A modernized, industrialized South, he predicted, would result in “the New Reformation.”⁸

By the nineteen twenties, dissatisfaction with both of these trends—historicist treatments of scripture and reform-based assaults on religion—had polarized the ecclesiastical environment of the mid-South into modernist (or liberal) and anti-modernist (or fundamentalist) attitudes toward religion in the region. Rather than aligning themselves with either of these two camps, the most influential proponents of what would become the New Criticism promoted a secularized Protestant aesthetic as a solution to the religious crises besetting the region. As their activities moved from poetry to politics to literary criticism, these figures created an academic program that transformed literary studies into the venue for that same sacred hermeneutic rendered obsolete by a century of historicism and social reform.

The religious project of the Southern New Critics has its roots in the literary renaissance launched by Nashville’s Fugitive poets in the nineteen-twenties. This South-centered aesthetic awakening produced a host of poems, essays, and personal correspondence expressing the Fugitives’ theological concerns, as well as their dissatisfaction with the ecclesiastical milieu of the Upland South. Following the regional humiliation of the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial, the Fugitives channeled their religious disaffection into the pastoral restorationism of the Agrarian movement. In this brief and ultimately unsuccessful political program, Agrarian poets-cum-economists attempted to create the grounds for authentic religious experience in the pre-industrial Protestant South. As several prominent Agrarians grew disillusioned with their political activities, they returned to literary pursuits with renewed evangelical zeal. Through their work as critics and professors, the onetime Fugitive-Agrarians brought about the institutionalization of New Critical literary theory in university English departments and little magazines. In the process, their dissatisfaction with the South’s increasingly polarized religious environment brought them to accord literary criticism an importance no longer enjoyed by the study of scripture.

While the religious motivations of writers like John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren appear throughout their published and epistolary writing, a full-fledged account of the theological agenda behind the Southern New Critical oeuvre requires that their work be interpreted in light of the broader religious history in which they wrote. To make good on my somewhat contrarian claim as to the religiosity of this movement, I trace the development of the New Criticism in the American South from its chief expositors’ earliest engagements with the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the nineteen-twenties, through their involvement in a political program meant to spiritualize their region, and finally to its culmination in an immensely influential school of literary theory.

In this latter and more lasting achievement, we find that the central theoretical doctrines of the Southern New Critics came to mirror coeval but disconnected developments in Protestant theology proper. Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of American Neo-Orthodoxy, a fevered (if disparate) movement whose chief proponents were united in their articulation of an anti-historicist sacred hermeneutic. While Barth-

⁸ Edwin Mims, *The Advancing South: Stories of Progress and Reaction*, 5th ed. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1927) 311.

inspired theologians attempted to restore the individual encounter with the Word to its sixteenth-century centrality, the Southern New Critics were engaged in a remarkably similar project with the literary text. In his famous 1942 essay, “The Language of Paradox,” for example, Cleanth Brooks argued that the beautiful poem “is an instance of the doctrine which it asserts; it is both the assertion and the realization of the assertion”—something very near to the Calvinist doctrine of scriptural self-authentication so important to twentieth century Neo-Orthodox theologians.⁹

Despite materializing in ostensibly separate discursive arenas, the correspondence of New Critical theory and Neo-Orthodox hermeneutics is strong enough that second- and third-generation adherents of the latter movement have retroactively seized upon the literary doctrines of the former. In such instances the New Criticism is quickly transformed into a Barthian hermeneutical system. Hans Frei—whose *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974) hinges largely on an appeal to the New Critical concept of textual autonomy—has been especially vocal in this effort. In later writing, for example, he all but labels Barth himself a New Critic, claiming that in “much the same way as the now old-fashioned ‘newer’ literary critics he set forth a textual world which he refused to understand by paraphrase.”¹⁰ Even outside avowedly Neo-Orthodox quarters, Protestant scholars of the nineteen seventies and eighties could be found appropriating the doctrines of New Critical formalism. Formalistic literary criticism, it was argued, was the only viable hermeneutic. As a 1979 essay in *Theology Today* put it, “we can only get back to the Jesus of history through the Jesus of literature.”¹¹

The implications of such correspondence go far beyond the observation of a common lineage, or the suggestion of conceptual complementarity. That the New Criticism squares off so nicely with certain strands of post-liberal Protestant theology demands that we investigate the religious concerns that spurred its development. Understood in the context of American religious history, it appears no accident that the literary theory developed in the early twentieth century mid-South could be so easily adapted to fit the needs of the Protestant hermeneut of the nineteen seventies and eighties.

⁹ Cleanth Brooks, “The Language of Paradox” (1941), in *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1947) 17; the doctrine of self-authentication appears in the first book of the *Institutes*: “Let this point therefore stand: that those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon Scripture, and that Scripture indeed is self-authenticated; hence, it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning.” (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Lib. of Christian Classics 20 [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960] I.vii.5.); for a brief historical account of Barth’s concept of scriptural self-authentication, see Gary Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology: Theology without Weapons* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000) 89-92, 173-177.

¹⁰ Hans W. Frei, afterword, *Karl Barth in Re-View: Posthumous Works Reviewed and Assessed*, ed. H.-Martin Rumscheidt (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1981) 115; for discussion of the conceptual similarities of the New Criticism and Neo-Orthodox hermeneutics, see Lynn M. Poland, “The New Criticism, Neoorthodoxy, and the New Testament,” *The Journal of Religion* 65.4 (1985): 459-477; and Poland, *Literary Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics: A Critique of Formalist Approaches* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1985).

¹¹ Roland Mushat Frye, “Literary Criticism and Gospel Criticism,” *Theology Today* 36 (1979): 219.

This being the case, I argue that the history of the New Criticism constitutes a missing chapter in the history of American Protestant thought.

Historiographical Survey

There is no shortage of book-length histories of the Fugitive, Agrarian, and Southern New Critical movements. Somewhat smaller, though, is the number of studies that give sustained attention to the religious impetus behind the Fugitive and Agrarian movements in light of their advocates' later involvement in the institutionalization of the New Criticism. To give an idea of the relevant historiography, I briefly discuss the treatment of religion in some of the more notable scholarship.

The first scholarly work to address the Fugitive and Agrarian movements at length—or at least the first one not written by the Fugitive-Agrarians themselves—was John Stewart's *The Burden of Time* (1965). While he relied heavily on Louise Cowan's *The Fugitive Group* (1959), Stewart was able to compile a near-exhaustive account of the development of Agrarianism out of the Fugitive literary scene. Somewhat playfully, Stewart suggested that in certain regards the Agrarian movement functioned more as a religious than a social program:

Agrarianism had its Adamitic hero, the yeoman farmer; its lost Garden, the bountiful subsistence of the past; its Satan, the Northern scientist-industrialist; its Hell, the modern city. Implicit everywhere in it was a narrative of fatal knowledge, a fall from grace, a defiance of the supernatural, and after suffering a quest for salvation. There was even a body of the Elect: the Southerners who yet might re-enter the Kingdom.

Judging from the scant treatment of American religion in the rest of *The Burden of Time*, however, it would appear that Stewart's comparison was as tongue-in-cheek as it sounds. He seems to have taken scattered Fugitive-Agrarian disavowals of particular religiosities as tantamount to full apostasy, and fails to address the increasingly religious, if extra-ecclesiastical character of their work. At points, this face-value reading results in the implicit conclusion that Ransom and Tate's attitudes toward religion were but one more heuristic device in a conceptual system, and never objects of primary concern. Indeed, part of the purpose of this essay is to take Stewart's above claim more seriously than he did.¹²

Following Stewart, the habit of downplaying the religious dimensions of the Southern New Critical movement seems to have become a sort of ritual neglect in much of the movement's historiography—though the same cannot be said of the figures themselves. A representative example may be found in Kieran Quinlan's *John Crowe Ransom's Secular Faith* (1989). Focusing exclusively on the biography and writings of the eponymous Southern New Critic, Quinlan narrates Ransom's career as “a well-

¹² John L. Stewart, *The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965) 205; Louise Cowan, *The Fugitive Group: A Literary History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959); see also Stewart 159-163, 295-296.

documented journey in unbelief.”¹³ (Never mind that this would seem an odd thing to say about a man that claimed that “art is the true religion and no other is needed”; short of a heresy trial, one would be hard-pressed to find as spirited a case for someone’s impiety as Quinlan’s.)¹⁴ Like Stewart, Quinlan seems to have taken the Fugitives’ and Agrarians’ critiques of their region’s religion as proof that their work fails to constructively engage American Protestantism. Indeed, part of what makes the argument of *John Crowe Ransom’s Secular Faith* so unsatisfying is the absence of any coherent working definition of religion itself. The same is true of the “secular,” which should come as something of a surprise considering the book’s title.

Nonetheless, Quinlan’s negligence on this count provides the project undertaken here with a certain amount of direction. One need not, for example, conclude that because a figure like Ransom “states over and over again his preference for the tangible reality of a world validated by an empiricist rather than a transcendentalist philosophy,” he cannot be understood as operating within the realm of American religion. Whatever “post-Protestantism” is present among Southern New Critics, I suggest that an investigation of it proceed from James Clifford’s famous dictum: “‘Post-’ is always shadowed by ‘neo-.’”¹⁵

Paul Conkin’s *The Southern Agrarians* (1988) show some evidence of having taken this approach. Far more than Stewart and Quinlan, he attends to the broader historical context of the Agrarian movement. In the process, he goes some length toward giving due emphasis to the religious project of the Southern New Critics. Conkin, who knew several of the Agrarians personally, provides something of a prosopographical antidote to prior studies that relied too heavily on readings of the Agrarians’ published writings. While the attention is not quite sustained, he does make some mention of the centrality of religion in the Agrarian project. Drawing from the minutes of a meeting regarding the Agrarianization of *The American Review*, he notes that “religion was a special concern of Agrarians and should be of the journal. Religion was necessary for the good life, but they should not name the religion.”¹⁶ Yet as we will see, when the Agrarians were transformed into New Critics they grew far more specific in their religious preference than Conkin suggests. Indeed, the failure to clarify what was at times unclear for the Southern New Critics themselves seems to be the one weakness of studies such as Conkin’s. However hazily defined in the early thirties, specifying just what sort of religious restoration the region required became one of the chief ambitions of the Agrarian and New Critical movements.

Mark Malvasi’s *The Unregenerate South* (1997), on the other hand, may have gone a bit too far in the opposite direction. Paying close attention to the religious visions

¹³ Kieran Quinlan, *John Crowe Ransom’s Secular Faith* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) xvi.

¹⁴ John Crowe Ransom, letter to Allen Tate, [Spring 1927], *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, eds. Thomas Daniel Young and George Core (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) 168

¹⁵ Quinlan xv; James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) 277.

¹⁶ Paul K. Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988) 108.

of Ransom, Tate, and Donald Davidson, he over-generalizes the specifics of the program they had in mind, and presents their thought as an appealing precursor to late-twentieth century cultural conservatism. Observing that the Agrarians “sought to establish a basis for piety and faith” in the American South, Malvasi argues that they “exposed as nonsense the idea that political remedies alone could mend its crumbling spiritual foundations.”¹⁷ Malvasi, it should be noted, has contributed a number of essays to the Neo-Confederate journal *Southern Partisan*. And while his emphasis on the spiritual mission of the Agrarian movement is refreshing, his translation of it into contemporary right-wing politics is not. Indeed, the approach has the unintended effect of obscuring the actual religious concerns that motivated the chief figures of the movement.¹⁸

By and large, studies like the above have failed to explain the religious concerns uniting Fugitive poetics, Agrarian politics, and New Critical hermeneutics. Those that have explored such a relationship tend to reduce the matter to class warfare. Of these, Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory* (1983) is perhaps the best known. There, Eagleton argues that the Southern New Critics’ sacralization of the literary text—in which, as he rightly puts it, “[p]oetry was the new religion”—was actually a *counter*-political activity: “Poetry,” for the New Critics at least, “would spur us not to change the world but to reverence it for what it was.” Institutionalizing literary studies, then, was in truth a means of staving off social change in the American South. Eagleton, of course, is approaching religion with a rather reductive Marxism, and, judging from the rest of his scant discussion of the religious dimensions of the New Criticism, seems not to understand the implications of what is really not so hyperbolic a claim. Ultimately, his “religion-as-baptism-of-the-status-quo” approach downplays the remarkably novel way in which the New Criticism secularized an apparently defunct Protestant hermeneutic. Mark Jancovich’s *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* (1993), on the other hand, explicitly rebukes Eagleton’s position vis-à-vis the New Criticism. Still, by showing how Agrarian politics were continued and advanced in literary theory, he fails to account for the persistent religious dimensions of the movements.¹⁹

To the extent that they do recognize a religious project at work in the Fugitive and Agrarian movements, studies like the above decline to discuss the manner by which it was continued through the development of New Critical literary theory. With that in mind, this essay attempts to explain how the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the nineteen twenties brought about the sacralization of literary criticism in the secular academy. The textual-historical approach should add to our understanding of both the movements themselves and the role that institutionalized literary studies has played in American religious history.

¹⁷ Mark G. Malvasi, *The Unregenerate South: The Agrarian Thought of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997) xiv, xv.

¹⁸ Paul Murphy has written a similarly argued study of the social thought of the Agrarians and its relation to later conservative politics, albeit sans the Neo-Confederate ideology. See Paul V. Murphy, *The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

¹⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983) 40; Mark Jancovich, *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Despite scattered intimations of agreement with my argument, existing scholarship on religion and the Fugitive, Agrarian, and New Critical movements has been reluctant to fully investigate their significance within American religious history. It would appear that much of this owes to a reluctance to place ostensibly secular developments under the mantle of religion. In what follows I demonstrate that the New Criticism developed in a sort of peripheral space vis-à-vis American religious and secular history. By giving equal attention to the crises of Protestant modernism and their regionalized expression in the Fugitive, Agrarian and New Critical movements, we can capture American Protestantism passing through the blurry interstices of the religious and the secular. As a snap-shot of their overlapping histories, the narrative undertaken here illuminates the manner by which the latter has been transformed into a venue for the former.

Method & Data

In this essay I take a broadly historical approach. (Readers will find, for example, that the first chapter contains more historical context than the third, a structural choice that, I hope, will be explained by the New Critical narrative itself.) To place the development of the Fugitive, Agrarian, and New Critical movements within American religious history, I position my data alongside its particular historical milieu. Most of all, this requires discussion of the place of literary studies, Biblical criticism, and social reform movements from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries with a view toward their various manifestations in the region of the Southern New Critics. With this background supporting my investigation, I look at how the New Critics themselves responded to the religious situation of their environment.

The data for this essay consists of (1) the writings of the Southern New Critics and (2) secondary-source biographical information that informs my reading of such material. The former includes some of the Southern New Critics' early verse; their literary-critical and literary-theoretical prose; their essays written in support of the Agrarian movement; and their posthumously collected letters, which provide a particularly revealing look at the religious themes occupying them throughout the early twentieth century. Further contextual material is taken from existing biographies and other relevant scholarship.

Since his work had the greatest influence on the three movements taken as a whole, I keep a special focus on the life and writings of John Crowe Ransom. At those points at which discussion of other Fugitives, Agrarians, and New Critics is necessary to appreciate the movements' religious dimensions, I attend equally to them. This means, for instance, that my treatment of the Fugitive period involves the writings of several figures that were only thinly associated with New Criticism; that my discussion of the Agrarian movement gives special attention to Donald Davidson; and that my analysis of New Critical practice concludes with the thought of Cleanth Brooks, who, while not a member of the Fugitive Group and only tangentially involved in the Agrarian movement, did far more than any other figure to institutionalize the new literary hermeneutic. Of these figures, it is nonetheless Ransom that best illuminates the continuity of each movement's religious concerns.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 begins with a discussion of the ecclesiastical and artistic milieu of the mid-South insofar as it affected the development of the Southern New Critics' religious and aesthetic ideas. Of particular importance here is the historicism predominant in both literary and scriptural studies. In light of his religious background, the chapter analyzes John Crowe Ransom's first book of poetry, *Poems about God* (1919). This section looks particularly at the literary and theological concepts that will appear later in the form of New Critical religiosity. Next, I fast-forward to Ransom's involvement with the Fugitive group, where Allen Tate ceased to be his student and became a colleague. In their correspondence as well as their Fugitive pieces, I locate a growing frustration with the religious scene of the mid-South and the historicism dominating the academy. In the second and third decades of the twentieth century, I argue, we find the more prominent Fugitives offering aesthetics as a sort of surrogate religion.

Chapter 2 begins with an investigation of the Fugitives' response to the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial, as it was this event that transformed their literary and religious concerns into the Agrarian political program. Here, I address the Fugitives' frustration with the Southern Liberal social reform movements epitomized by their Vanderbilt colleague and nemesis, Edward Mims. Of particular importance in this period are those essays that testify to the Fugitives' disgust with the regional embarrassment that occurred in Dayton. Of these the most significant appeared in the Fugitive-cum-Agrarians' manifestos, *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) and *Who Owns America?* (1936), all of which reveal Agrarianism as bound up with a defense of the region's religion. As the Agrarian program begins to collapse, several soon-to-be New Critics set to work elevating literary studies to the realm of sacred hermeneutics.

Chapter 3 describes the manner by which Fugitive and Agrarian religious concerns were advanced in secular form through the construction and institutionalization of the New Criticism. Picking up where the previous chapter left off, I take a closer look at the treatment of religion in the literary theory that emerged from pre-War New Critical writing, particularly Ransom's *God without Thunder* (1930). In such corners we find ex-Agrarians constructing a school of literary criticism that self-consciously resembles the hermeneutic rendered impossible by the Higher Criticism. The writings of Cleanth Brooks, which complete this chapter, are seen to give practical application to the Fugitive-Agrarian-New Critical "literary religion." Amidst these efforts, the New Criticism came to function as a sort of literary prosthesis for a far too this-worldly American Protestantism.

CHAPTER ONE

FROM THE HIGHER CRITICISM TO *THE FUGITIVE*, 1865–1925

As for us, we know too much, and are convinced of too little. Our literature is a substitute for religion, and so is our religion.

— T.S. Eliot, “A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry,”²⁰

The rejection of textual historicism for which the New Criticism is known developed out of an abiding spiritual dissatisfaction with the intellectual and religious climate created by late nineteenth-century biblical criticism. With the sacred text irreparably desacralized by the Higher Criticism, John Crowe Ransom and his growing circle of protégés came to believe quite early in their careers that the study of scripture could no longer provide a recovery of “the stern and inscrutable God of Israel.” The religious study of sacred texts being therefore impossible, Ransom and his co-theorists concluded that “poetry,” not scripture, “furnishes the perfect form of experience.”²¹

To explain the New Criticism’s emergence as a response to textual historicism in general and biblical criticism in particular, this chapter briefly discusses the contours of each of these domains in the late nineteenth century. With this background in mind, I explore the religious contexts of the future Southern New Critics’ progressive sacralization of the literary text from their early experiences as students of classics up to their involvement in the Nashville literary society known as the Fugitives. As he was both the oldest and most influential of the interbellum Southern New Critics, Ransom’s experience in this period provides an especially revealing window into the religious motivations of the fast-developing literary theory. Special attention is therefore given to Ransom’s first book of poetry, *Poems about God* (1919); the editorial broadsides in the literary journal, *The Fugitive* (1922–1925); and the memoirs of his colleagues at Vanderbilt University. In these and other corners we find circling around Ransom a group of disaffected Southern Protestants united by a simultaneous condemnation of historicism and a sacralization of the literary text.

Varieties of Textual Historicism in Late Nineteenth Century America

The study of English literature arrived relatively late in American universities. There were, in fact, no independent modern language departments in the country until the last quarter of the nineteenth-century. Prior to the establishment of such programs, vernacular literature was studied much the same as classical texts. “English,” as the

²⁰ *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1932) 32.

²¹ John Crowe Ransom, *God without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy* (1930; Hamden: Archon, 1965) 5; John Crowe Ransom, *The World’s Body* (1938; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968) 260.

popular maxim had it, “should be studied like Greek,” with instructional emphasis confined to etymology, grammar, and memorization.²²

This, indeed, was the scenario in the early academic environment of the elder Southern New Critics, who began their scholarly careers at Vanderbilt University far more proficient in ancient Greek than in English literature. In the undergraduate years of Donald Davidson and John Crowe Ransom, even the major in English required several semesters of Latin, Greek, and Anglo-Saxon, and a minimum two-and-a-half years of biblical literature. This latter stipulation should come as no surprise; for most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such English courses as did exist were often taught by moonlighting Protestant clergymen, a practice particularly common in the South. At the University of North Carolina, for example, no less than three-quarters of the professors appointed to teach English courses between 1819 and 1885 were ordained pastors. For the two percent of eligible American students that did attend one of the numerous “classical colleges” in the period, the study of English literature was never more than ancillary to a Protestant religious education.²³

By the end of the nineteenth-century, many American institutions saw the classical model of literary studies replaced by the competing practices of philology and literary history. The change arrived comparatively late at Vanderbilt—enough so, in fact, that there was a considerable disparity in the undergraduate coursework of several of the first Southern New Critics, although this hardly prevented them from being united in their rejection of literary-historical and philological approaches to literature.²⁴ But well before the obsolescence of classical humanistic learning—before even the importation of the German university system—the groundwork had been laid for the shift from humanistic to scientific and historical models. Indeed, as early as 1835 the New York University professor John William Draper could anticipate the scientific spirit that would characterize American higher education by century’s end: “To what are the great advances of civilization for the last fifty years due,” he once asked a sizeable audience of “literary and professional gentlemen,” “to literature or to science? Which of the two is it that is shaping the thought of the world?”²⁵

²² Wallace Martin, “Criticism and the Academy,” in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, eds. A. Walton Litz, Louis Menand, and Lawrence Rainey, vol. 7 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 280.

²³ Louise Cowan, *The Fugitive Group: A Literary History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959) 33; Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 36-38, 24. The statistic is found in Douglas MacMillan, *English at Chapel Hill: 1795-1969* (Chapel Hill: Department of English, University of North Carolina, n.d.) 53-54.

²⁴ By 1919 Vanderbilt no longer required students to study Latin and Greek, and demanded only that first-year students take courses in English, mathematics and chemistry (Cowan 33); for the Southern New Critics’ mature rejections of textual historicism, see John Crowe Ransom, “Criticism, Inc.,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 13.4 (1937): 598-599; Allen Tate, “Is Literary Criticism Possible?,” *Essays of Four Decades* (1959; Chicago: Swallow Press, 1968) 40-43; and Cleanth Brooks *The Well Wrought Urn* 232-239.

²⁵ John William Draper, *The Indebtedness of the City of New York to its University: An Address to the Alumni of the University of the City of New York at their Twenty-First Anniversary, 28th June, 1835* (New York, 1853) 20-24, quoted in Christopher J. Lucas, *American Higher Education: A History* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994) 135.

Protests within the academy notwithstanding, the establishment of German-modeled research universities (Johns Hopkins being the first, in 1876) made clear what Draper had prophesied forty-odd years before: In the form of source criticism as well as philology, classical education had been supplanted by the science of history. This is not, of course, to say that a uniform methodology characterized all fin-de-siècle departments of English. Yet however rampant, such procedural debates as did occur rarely involved perspectives beyond those voiced by champions of “national” literary history and German-trained philologists. Almost never was the strict historicism of academic literary studies called into question.²⁶

With the institutionalization of various models of textual historicism, the fates of scriptural and vernacular literary studies became increasingly linked. No longer the exclusive province of Protestant ministers, each domain found itself subjected to an all-encompassing historicist critique within the academy. In this sense, seminary hermeneutics and university literary studies had a great deal in common. Indeed, the breed of historicism so anathematic to the early Southern New Critics was no straw man; even William Peterfield Trent, the founder and longtime editor of the *Sewanee Review*—the “little magazine” that did so much to advance the New Criticism in the South—considered himself a professor of history first, and a critic of literature second.²⁷

Yet far more than literary studies, the most dramatic effects of the late nineteenth-century obsession with history came from the so-called Higher Criticism of scripture. Following the example of scholarship begun in eighteenth-century Germany, the Higher Critics sought to determine the veracity of scripture in light of recent philological and archaeological data—all the while turning a blind eye to long-accepted notions of Biblical authorship and chronology. So far-reaching was the influence of the new hermeneutic that by the turn of the century, historical rather than doctrinal studies determined the shape of popular theology for many educated liberal Protestants. As James Turner has observed, “even *partial* acceptance of the higher criticism had radical implications, for its very method of historical criticism presumed that the evidences of Christianity were subject to the same historical processes as other historical truths.”²⁸ By the end of the century, many American Protestants felt the same kind of resignation voiced by an Oxford professor: Whereas the “old theology came to history through doctrine,” A.M. Fairbank explained, “the new comes to doctrine through history; to the one all historical questions were really dogmatic, but to the other all dogmatic questions are formally historical.”²⁹

It was this entrenched historicism that governed scriptural and literary studies in the world in which the Southern New Critics were born. In essence, nineteenth- and

²⁶ For discussion of the clash between philological and literary-historical models, see Graff 100-104.

²⁷ Kermit Vanderbilt, *American Literature and the Academy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986) 6.

²⁸ James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985) 151 (emphasis mine).

²⁹ A.M. Fairbank, *The Place of Christ in Modern Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1894) 3-4.

early twentieth-century Higher Critics were applying to scripture the same sort of anaesthetic, scientific scrutiny with which their colleagues in modern language departments had been approaching literature. For the Southern New Critics, the cumulative effect of such study was demoralizing, to say the least, a sentiment made clear by the speaker in one of John Crowe Ransom's first poems:

To the colleges then and the modern masterpieces?
Not now though I risk the damage of your inference;
Before your explications respect ceases
For the centers lost in so absurd circumference;
You have only betrayed them by your exegesis.³⁰

The exegetical interpretation used to study textual masterpieces—which the poem's original version declined to designate as “modern”—seemed to Ransom and his fellow Fugitives a sort betrayal, a heresy even. In that absurd scholarly circumference no sacred center could hold.

This conflation of literary and scriptural models of interpretation was no flight of poetic fancy. Each of these discursive arenas, we may say, bore the marks of an all-powerful, trans-disciplinary obsession with history. Thus the Higher Criticism may be considered one among several controversial manifestations of academic historicism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³¹ Of these, the intellectual firestorm caused by advances in the natural sciences is perhaps better known. Arguments over geology and evolutionary biology, however, loom rather disproportionately in contemporary understandings of nineteenth-century American religion, an emphasis that borders on historical presentism. For until the 1925 Scopes “Monkey” Trial—which, as we will see, provided the religious impetus for the formation of the Agrarian political program—debates over the age of the earth and the theory of evolution were largely confined to the academic quarters in which such studies originated.³²

The same cannot be said of the historical criticism of Scripture, whose implications had the effect of emasculating the most treasured household object of many American Protestants. Worth recalling is that many among the church-going laity had their first encounter with the Higher Criticism through an 1881 historico-critically

³⁰ John Crowe Ransom, “Prometheus in Straits,” *Selected Poems*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1963) 33; the original version of the poem appeared in *The Fugitive* 3.1 (1924): 21.

³¹ The near-identity of biblical and literary studies in the period provides one of the more salient examples of the manner by which a common methodology (here, historicism) guarantees that otherwise distinct discursive practices produce complementary forms of knowledge. Such agreement is less the result of scientific “advances” than, as Michel Foucault has suggested, “a modification in the rules of formation of statements which are accepted as scientifically true.” By the late nineteenth century, that rule was historicism. (Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” interview with Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow [New York: Pantheon, 1984] 54.)

³² Ferenc Morton Szasz has argued that scholarly treatments of religious controversies over advances in the natural sciences “have restricted their accounts of this period to analyzing the various intellectuals’ responses to Darwinism because that is all the response there was.” (Ferenc Morton Szasz, *The Divided Mind of Protestant America, 1880-1930* [University: University of Alabama Press, 1982] 5.)

inspired revision of the King James Bible. The Revised Version may have failed to outsell its predecessor in the nineteenth century, but the media circus surrounding its release anticipated a crisis that would reach far outside the university and the seminary. While approving of the “deep and earnest desire to have our English translation of the Bible as perfect as possible,” a *New York Times* article noted that “most readers of the Bible cannot hear the book spoken of as a translation . . . and the idea of a revision of the Bible must necessarily give them an impression as if the axis of the earth had become unsettled.”³³ And so it had. By the turn of the century, as Ferenc Szasz has shown, the controversy surrounding the Higher Criticism had become so pervasive that “few educated people could have been unaware of the broad outlines of the issues involved.”³⁴

Among them were the fathers of Cleanth Brooks and John Crowe Ransom, each a minister in the Tennessee Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church, South.³⁵ As a well-educated liberal pastor and former missionary for the American Bible Society, Rev. John James Ransom was more than sympathetic to the Higher Critical hermeneutic. The editor of *Methodist Quarterly Review*, to which both he and his son were occasional contributors, was condemned by a number of fellow ministers for printing so many divisive articles on the subject.³⁶ Matters were no less contentious within the Ransom household, where, in the summer of 1909, John Crowe and his father were known engage in religious discussions “so animated that Mrs. Ransom would caution them to hold their voices down; otherwise, she would say, the ‘neighbors will think you are quarreling.’”³⁷ One can speculate that these conversations involved the same sort of material still being hotly debated within denominational boards and religious periodicals. And while it is true that the controversy surrounding the historical criticism of scripture had begun to subside after its peak in the 1890s, there remained in its wake was a deeply polarized Protestant America—one that would have a distinct role in shaping the thought of the first Southern New Critics.

Before discussing these figures’ early forays into poetry and literary criticism, two features of their academic and religious environments in this period merit restatement:

³³ “The Bible Revision,” *New York Times* 18 May 1879, retrieved online <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=1&res=9402E2DC133EE63BBC4052DFB3668382669FDE>; effects of the Bible revision impinged upon norms and values far beyond the usual purview of theology. As Candy Gunther Brown has shown through a study of nineteenth-century Protestant print culture, the Gilded Age Bible was sacred as both text and commodity. Higher Critical challenges to the veracity that made such commodification possible threatened social existence in several senses, of which the theological is merely the most apparent. See Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

³⁴ Szasz 20.

³⁵ The similarity of Brooks’ and Ransom’s backgrounds did not escape their notice. As the latter would later muse, the two critics were “about as like as two peas from the same pod in respect to our native religion [and] our stock (we were sons of ministers of the same faith, and equally had theology in our blood).” (“Why Critics Don’t Go Mad,” *The Kenyon Review* 14.2 [1952]: 333.)

³⁶ Szasz 20, 39-40.

³⁷ Thomas Daniel Young, *Gentleman in a Dustcoat: A Biography of John Crowe Ransom* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976) 39.

First, as far as educated liberal Protestants like Ransom and Brooks were concerned, the status of any text—be it literary or scriptural—was never more than that of an historical document; textual studies meant contextual studies. Second, from the 1870s through the 1920s, scientific revisions of sacred language had undermined the very core of Protestant piety. With the former called into question, the latter began to appear impossible. This, at least, was how it seemed to a young John Crowe Ransom in 1914, whose favorite extra-curricular topic as a Vanderbilt professor was “the extent to which the higher criticism of the Bible had undermined the elements of Christian faith.”³⁸ Finding that historicization had stripped the sacred text of any shadow of revelation, he and his followers began to construct a form of textual studies immune to the historical menace.

Faiths Aesthetic & Faiths Fugitive

Nearly all of the Southern academics that came to bear the mantle of “New Critic” emerged from the 1920s literary renaissance in Nashville, Tennessee. As the place where their acquaintance was made, Vanderbilt University was the uncontested epicenter of the movement; besides Ransom (1909) and Brooks (1928), it was the alma mater of Donald Davidson (1917), Allen Tate (1923), and Robert Penn Warren (1925), each of whom would have a distinct role in the construction and propagation of the New Critical hermeneutic. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Vanderbilt had the benefit of being situated in the much-vaunted “Athens of the South,” and boasted one of the largest concentrations of institutions of higher education in the region. For an idea of the effect that the university’s literary scene could have on precocious undergraduates, one need only be reminded that none of the above-named critic-poets began his freshman year intending to become a writer.³⁹

By the time most of the future Southern New Critics had completed their undergraduate coursework, Ransom could declare to Tate that “for you and me and the elite whom I know—art is the true religion and no other is needed.”⁴⁰ A number of circumstances allowed for this conclusion (made, no less, by a man then employed as a Vanderbilt professor), prominent among which was a relatively recent change in the university’s religious climate. Though founded at the high-water mark of Reconstruction as an anti-sectional Methodist seminary, during the early twentieth century the Vanderbilt ethos had grown increasingly distant from its denominational origins.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 91; Paul Conkin notes that Ransom’s “doubts about his inherited religion, his inability to believe, did not give him any sense of liberation but rather a sense of loss.” (Paul Conkin, *When All the Gods Trembled: Darwinism, Scopes, and American Intellectuals* [Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998] 155.)

³⁹ John M. Bradbury, *The Fugitives: A Critical Account* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina press, 1958) 10; by the nineteen-forties, the torch had been passed to Louisiana State University. See Thomas W. Cutrer, *Parnassus on the Mississippi: The Southern Review and the Baton Rouge Literary Community, 1935-1942* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984).

⁴⁰ John Crowe Ransom, letter to Allen Tate, [Spring 1927], quoted in *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, eds. Thomas Daniel Young and George Core (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) 168.

For one, the university had not escaped the controversy still surrounding the historical criticism of scripture at century's end, when a number of Biblical studies professors found themselves accused of heresy. Vanderbilt, "the very citadel for the training of preachers," conservative critics claimed, had been "captured by the higher critics and evolutionists." The rhetoric may have been hyperbolic, but the conditions it addressed were real: During his near half-century chancellorship, James H. Kirkland made sure that the university would endorse "a spirit of enlightened patriotism and broad Christianity"—"enlightened" insofar as it eschewed sectionalist leanings and "broad" in that it encouraged a liberal approach to doctrine and hermeneutics. The final nail in the Methodist coffin came in 1914, when Kirkland's Board of Trust won a prolonged legal battle with the Methodist bishops. Ties with the church were promptly severed, and soon enough the school was a safe haven for German-trained Higher Critics and reform-minded Southern Liberals.⁴¹

The future Southern New Critics were far too young to have any substantial involvement in the shifting religious climate of the university. Most were still undergraduate or graduate students; even Ransom, soon the elder statesman of the group, didn't begin his professorship until the split with the Methodist church had been finalized. More important for him, Tate, Davidson, and the other Nashville aesthetes was that the campus atmosphere had grown sufficiently liberal to allow the artistically-inclined scholar to accord secular literary studies an importance no longer enjoyed by sacred hermeneutics. After all, in this institution unimpeded by the demands of Methodist bishops, biblical studies meant philology and source-criticism. Not so with extracurricular literary and philosophical pursuits, which for some curtailed the importance of religious instruction as a whole. As Allen Tate would later recall, at the newly non-affiliated university a "young man furnished by his literary environment with a literary religion could not be concerned with theological salvation."⁴² Safely cloistered within the walls of Southern Athens, the future New Critics soon found that they had landed on an extra-ecclesiastical space in which to fashion a new religious identity.

By providing a hospitable environment for their "literary religion," the Vanderbilt campus also shielded the future New Critics from the more divisive religious controversies of the period. Free from the supervision of their liberal pastors—men that, for Brooks and Ransom, also doubled as their fathers—they could fashion an aesthetic discourse that assumed the roles and characteristics of pre-Higher-Critical Christian theology. For the moment, the young Vanderbilt academic was immune to the competing demands of Protestant Fundamentalism and scientific modernism, the two positions that

⁴¹ Edwin Mims, *The Advancing South: Stories of Progress and Reaction*, 5th ed. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1927) 165; James H. Kirkland, Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Address, 1900, quoted in Mims 162; in addition to the university's secular transformation, the split with the Methodist Church resulted from a substantial amount of intra-denominational infighting. See Paul K. Conkin, *Gone with the Ivy: A Biography of Vanderbilt University* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985) 150-174.

⁴² Allen Tate, *Mere Literature and the Lost Traveller* (Nashville: George Peabody College for Teachers, 1969) n.p.; for the members of the Fugitive Group, a "literary religion" meant literature-qua-religion, rather than, as Arthur Versluis has defined the term for the American Transcendentalists, "religious scriptures divorced from their cultural and ritual context, used piecemeal, and assimilated into essentially literary works." (*American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993] 105.)

had emerged in response to the Higher Critical maelstrom, and which would come to a head in the 1925 Scopes “Monkey” Trial. As Tate and the other future New Critics congregating on the Vanderbilt campus in the first quarter of the twentieth century saw things, the promise of a literary religion—hazy as at this point it was—consisted in the practical capacity to turn a blind eye to the various modernisms and anti-modernisms sweeping across the region.

With the one exception of Brooks, who arrived rather late on the scene, most of these figures were introduced to each other through the Fugitive Group, a society of Nashville literati that published an eponymous journal between 1922 and 1925. The movement began as a series of discussions hosted by Sidney Miron Hirsch, a Jewish enthusiast for all brands of arcane mysticism. Hirsch, as Tate recalled, “was a mystic and I think a Rosicrucian, a great deal of whose doctrine skittered elusively among imaginary etymologies.”⁴³ As early as 1915, the meetings had become regular, invitation-only events. Up until the early nineteen-twenties, when the Fugitives began to focus exclusively on poetry and their journal, the meetings consisted largely of Hirsch’s extemporaneous lectures on metaphysics and philology. Indeed, the environment more closely resembled a Gilded Age theosophical gathering than the early modernist literary society it would soon become.

Within the next two decades members of the Fugitive Group would mount a strident defense of Fundamentalism, stump for a conservative political program, and develop an aesthetic alternative to the liberal Protestantism of their fathers. At this point, though, they were students and professors of classics and literary history, and very much men of their time. When he attended his first Fugitive meeting, Tate, for example, was spending most of his academic hours studying Greek and Sanskrit. Hirsch, however, could pontificate on such matters as if they contained some secret cosmic significance. In no small sense, his performances at these early meetings allowed the Fugitives to imbue their classical and philological educations with the same religious importance that had been purged by nineteenth-century historicism.

Tellingly, most of Hirsch’s fanciful ventures into esoteric philology concluded with the sacralization of verse. For the members of his audience—most of whom had just begun to cut their literary teeth—this was no mere theoretical valorization. The metaphysical musings mounted from Hirsch’s chaise-lounge inevitably served to cloak the group’s aesthetic pursuits in the aura of the sacred. The moderator’s “declaration of the high eminence of poetry,” mused Donald Davidson, “elevated into an almost priestly rite the consideration of the most juvenile and humble of our verses,” short poems that Hirsch insisted on referring to as “offerings.”⁴⁴

Most interesting, though, is what these gatherings seem *not* to have involved. Beyond abstract discussions of dualism, materialism, and Kabala, the recollections of those that participated in this proto-New Critical activity indicate little treatment of the religious controversies then brewing in the region. The rising tides of Fundamentalism and scientific modernism were far removed from this coterie of “Southernized Jews and art-minded Gentiles.” Never, insisted Davidson, were they compelled to wonder if “the

⁴³ Allen Tate, “*The Fugitive 1922-1925*,” *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 3.3 (1942): 76.

⁴⁴ Donald Davidson, *Southern Writers in the Modern World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1958) 13; Allen Tate, “*The Fugitive 1922-1925*” 79.

industrialization of the South, the state of religion, or the state of science was either profitable or dangerous.” Even benighted Nashville was in Tate’s opinion a “bog of Methodism and ante-bellum sentimentality.”⁴⁵ This much, at least, was evident in *Poems about God* (1919), a chapbook of verse that Ransom had written in the early days of the Fugitive Group. By the time the work saw publication, its title alone made clear the direction the group was beginning to take: All the Hirsch-led navel-gazing was being traded for a literary-religious project.

The book’s name somewhat belied the theological trajectory it represented; this was no devotional poetry. As Ransom apologetically explained in a preface, the title originated in an afterthought. Noting that his early poems “made considerable use of the term God,” he gave the matter some thought and “came to the conclusion that this was the most poetic of all terms possible.”

Wishing to make my poems as poetic as possible, I simply likened myself to a diligent apprentice and went to work to treat rather systematically a number of the occasions on which this term was in use with common American men I very quickly ruled that I should consider only those situations as suitable in which I could imagine myself pronouncing the name God sincerely and spontaneously, never by that way of routine which is death to the aesthetic and religious emotions.

To the extent that Ransom styled himself a chronicler of the quotidian in this volume, he did so equally as a theologian. The common situations providing suitable poetic subjects were those in which “the most poetic of all terms” could honestly be uttered; making solidly “poetic poems” meant making one’s own verse as poetically potent as the name of God. The poet’s theology, then, consisted in a delicate relationship between language and experience, one which, when properly struck, could reveal the true nature of the deity.⁴⁶

Still, it was the word “God,” and not quite God, that most occupied Ransom in these early efforts. For him, the former was a semiotic repository for “that ultimate mystery to which all our great experiences reduce.” For the poems’ angry-young-man protagonists, the latter was at all points inscrutable, and occasionally deplorable. “What can one hope of a crazy God,” the speaker asks in “Geometry,” “But lashings from an aimless rod?” The nearest approximation of sincere devotion came from a pleasure-seeking youth in “Noonday Grace”: “I love my father’s piety,” he declares, “But I am not so old as he.” Clearly, we were a long way from the enlightened Methodism of Rev.

⁴⁵ Donald Davidson, *Southern Writers in the Modern World* 3, 13; Allen Tate, letter to Hart Crane, 18 March 1923, quoted in Thomas A. Underwood, *Allen Tate: Orphan of the South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 87.

⁴⁶ John Crowe Ransom, *Poems about God* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1919) vi-vii; Ransom described an unpublished dedicatory preface to his second book of verse, *Grace After Meat* (1924), as a “confession of faith” (John Crowe Ransom, letter to Robert Graves, 31 August 1922, in *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom* 112).

John James Ransom. For reasons that became increasingly apparent, the faith of the fathers would no longer suffice.⁴⁷

In *Poems about God* the routine ritual observances that Ransom thought characteristic of mid-South liberal Protestantism appear as ill suited for poetry as they were for faith. In “Sunset,” the first (though certainly not the best) poem Ransom ever completed, the reader encounters a speaker caught between theologically reductive and aesthetically enlarging uses of Christian theology. Addressing a lover more enamored with God than himself, he surveys the evening and concludes,

To me it is beautiful enough,
I am stirred,
I say grand and wonderful, and grow adjectival,
But to you
It is God.

As the man describes the agrarian scene in the foreground, the woman’s focus is on the sunset, “where the crooked rail-fence gets to the top / Of the yellow hill / And drops out of sight / Into space.” Declaring that her gaze “terrifies” him, the young man resigns himself to waiting until the woman “and her strange eyes / Come home from God.” Whereas she looks skyward for a transcendent God, the speaker sacralizes the experience of the physical body of the world, and it is thus her misuse of “God” that terrifies him.⁴⁸

Kieran Quinlan has described Ransom’s tone in these poems as “indignantly critical either of the deity itself or, more accurately, of those who are foolish enough to worship it.”⁴⁹ But the attitude reads less like an indictment of God than a rebuke of the post-Calvinist optimism that characterized early twentieth-century liberal Protestantism in the United States. Indeed, understood contextually, the completed version of *Poems about God* reflected the religious disenchantment that Ransom had experienced in the First World War. His service in an artillery training school had been brief—as was that of most of the Fugitives who enlisted, among whom only Donald Davidson saw combat—but the war had chastened the sanguine intellectualism that dominated the antebellum Fugitive meetings. While still stationed overseas, Ransom wrote a six-paragraph letter to the Vanderbilt alumni magazine, in which he remarked upon “what a disaster these long and bitter wars can be. I am not speaking here of the loss of life, which is appalling I mean the effect that such war has on the temper, the spirit, the religion, the sanity and health of the whole mobilized population.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ John Crowe Ransom, *Poems about God* vii, 30, 6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 13-14, 15, 16.

⁴⁹ Kieran Quinlan, *John Crowe Ransom’s Secular Faith* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) 17-18.

⁵⁰ John Crowe Ransom, letter to the editor, *Vanderbilt Alumnus* April 1918, quoted in Young, *Gentleman in a Dustcoat* 101; George Core has noted the connection between Ransom’s thought and his experience in First World War: “That experience helped to form the bedrock of realism that runs through everything he wrote, including the most exotic and farfetched of the poems and essays.” (George Core, “John Crowe Ransom and *The World’s Body*,” *The Critics Who Made Us*, ed. George Core [Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993] 215.)

The particular brand of world-weariness evident in this letter and *Poems about God* was of a different sort than that spreading among the region's conservative Evangelicals. After the armistice, many within the latter camp had taken to locating the roots of German militarism in the absence of religious education in the country's schools. Hoping to heed the Kaiser's cautionary tale, Tennessee Evangelicals intensified preexisting campaigns to mandate religious education in the newly compulsory public school system. Many commentators noted the horrors wrought by secularized education, and some went so far as to declare that the Southern church must choose between "educating or vacating her place as a controlling influence of society." Such calls-to-arms, as Charles Israel has shown, did far more than the theory of natural selection to spur the 1925 clash at Dayton.⁵¹

Until this latter point, however, the position of Ransom and the other Fugitives on the region's religion was nearly the opposite of their fellow Protestant Southerners. Chancellor Kirkland's progress-minded, non-affiliated university was the jewel in the Southern-Athenian crown, and they had as little taste for evangelical crusades as they did for comparative philology. Their sentiments were closer to those of Baltimore journalist H.L. Mencken, whose books Tate was known to sport while strolling across the university campus. In his notorious anti-South polemic, "The Sahara of the Bozart" (1917), Mencken had proclaimed that the "most booming sort of piety, in the South, is not incompatible with the theory that lynching is a benign institution." Literary and intellectual development fared no better in Mencken's assessment of postlapsarian Dixie, where "[f]ree inquiry" was "blocked by the idiotic certainties of ignorant men."⁵²

Such barriers were notably absent from the Vanderbilt campus, as well from as the Fugitive meetings, which after the war had turned to focus almost exclusively on the writing of poetry. Both intellectually and religiously, each of the regulars at Hirsch's post-war discussion groups saw himself as an outsider, "a fungus on a decayed magnolia stump"—indeed a fugitive, which was collectively understood to mean "quite simply a Poet: the Wanderer, or even the Wandering Jew, the Outcast, the man who carries the secret wisdom around the world."⁵³ When the first issue of their journal appeared in 1922, the group could all but ignore the cultural and religious situation then surrounding their university, and chastise their region's past rather address its present. "*THE FUGITIVE*," they declared on the opening page, "flees from nothing faster than from the

⁵¹ Lester Weaver, "The Churches Choice—Educate or Evacuate," *Nashville Christian Advocate*, 28 January 1921: 11, quoted in Charles A Israel, *Before Scopes: Evangelicalism, Education, and Evolution in Tennessee, 1870-1925* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004) 97; on the campaigns to require religious instruction in Tennessee public schools, see Israel 108-127.

⁵² Underwood 49; H.L. Mencken, "The Sahara of the Bozart," *The American Scene: A Reader*, ed. Huntington Cairns (New York: Knopf, 1965) 163, 167; on the Fugitives' early enthusiasm and later contempt for Mencken, see Edward S. Shapiro, "The Southern Agrarians, H.L. Mencken, and the Quest for Southern Identity," *American Studies* 13.2 (1972): 75-92.

⁵³ Allen Tate, letter to Hart Crane, 9 April 1923, quoted in Underwood 87; Allen Tate, "*The Fugitive 1922-1925*" 79.

high-caste Brahmins of the Old South,” and the “literary phase known rather euphemistically as Southern literature” was thankfully over.⁵⁴

Within three years Ransom, Tate, Davidson, and a growing number of the like-minded would make a total about-face. Mencken would become the enemy of, rather than the inspiration for their cause. For now, though, his anti-Southern invectives were welcome, as they served to reinforce the Fugitives’ sense of alienation from their region’s religion. One of the first issues even included an explicit nod to Mencken, who had responded favorably to the first issue of the magazine: Alec Brock Stevenson, the son of a Vanderbilt Biblical studies professor, expressed the Fugitives’ gratitude to the “genial critic” that had “noted our first adventuring, ‘wandering in the Sahara of the Bozart,’ while we now with surprise and glee gloat over many a sudden oasis.”⁵⁵

Nevertheless, dismissing their surroundings did not lead the Fugitives to give up on the metaphysical speculation typical of their earliest meetings. Cloaked in the language of literature and aesthetic theory, their religious positions began to grow more apparent and articulate. Most of this activity took the form of verse (of varying quality, to be fair), but a number of editorials in the journal lay bare the Fugitives’ developing literary religion. At these points, it was Ransom that spoke most forcefully. One of his earliest pieces of literary criticism appeared in a review of Robert Graves’s *On English Poetry* (1922). Ransom, who had just begun what would be a lifelong interest in Freud, spoke more for himself when he summarized the book’s argument: Generously paraphrasing Graves, he maintained that poets “contain within themselves the conflicting emotions of different classes of society; in poetry they resolve this conflict, and then men hear a voice which is larger than the voice of any class, and which is the voice of God.”⁵⁶

Ransom argued that the key difference between American and English poetry hinged on the matter of form. The English poet accepts the limitations of meter, thus achieving “a marvelous ease of phrase without committing one substantial heresy.” Matters, though, are rather different across the pond, where “the inroads of sophistication are early, and it is an American gospel to indulge it; the result is that poets throw off the confinements of meter before they have established conclusively that these are or are not habitable.” Here was an early statement of New Critical formalism and its religious dimensions: Playing tennis without a net was a species of sacrilege, one that silenced the “voice of God” that poetry alone made audible.⁵⁷

The religious language was only partly playful. As the decade wore on, the Fugitives were making increasing use of their theological lexicons to discuss aesthetics. “The Future of Poetry” (1924), the second of Ransom’s editorials, took its title as well as

⁵⁴ Forward, *The Fugitive* 1.1 (1922): 2; the Fugitives never quite gave up their antipathy for the regional context of Southern letters. Even as their turn toward the Agrarian political movement was underway, Tate lamented to Davidson that “contemporary Southern poetry which contains any of the Pure Ingredient is incomprehensible in its milieu.” (Allen Tate, letter to Donald Davidson, 1 March 1927, in *The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate*, eds. John Tyree Fain and Thomas Daniel Young [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974] 191.)

⁵⁵ A[lec]. B[rock]. S[tevenon]., editorial, *The Fugitive* 1.4 (1922): 98.

⁵⁶ J[ohn]. C[roWE]. R[ansom]., editorial, *The Fugitive* 1.3 (1922): 67.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 68.

its cue from the famous Arnoldian prophecy—i.e., that poetry would replace religion, a theme to which the Southern New Critics would return throughout their careers. The essay marks the first instance in which Ransom presented the theory of “poetic dualism” for which he would be best known: The job of poetry, he maintains, is to “play a dual role with words: to conduct a logical sequence with their meanings on the one hand, and to realize an objective pattern with their sounds on the other.”⁵⁸ Half a century later, advocates of a coetaneous but disconnected movement known as Neo-Orthodoxy would make this New Critical idea the cornerstone of biblical interpretation. But in 1924 Ransom was as unaware of liberal Protestant restorationists like Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann as they were of him. (Indeed, he wasn’t even attending church—no small slight for a preacher’s kid.) Even a Y.M.C.A.-sponsored keynote by a young Reinhold Niebuhr failed to attract any Fugitive attention. Outside the oasis of the Hirsch circle, religion merely meant mid-South Methodism, Southern Liberal Progressivism or Higher Critical philology.⁵⁹

A clue to the Fugitives’ budding literary religion as well as the later Neo-Orthodox appropriation can be found in Ransom’s discussion of the “dual role” played by verse. Repeating the principle of Sausurrian arbitrariness (apparently unconsciously), Ransom observes that no intrinsic relationship exists between a word’s sound and its definition. That rhyme and meter may line up with meaning is “therefore miraculous, to the mystic.” Yet the previous quarter-century of science has made this miracle impossible to realize. American moderns, Ransom explains,

do not obtain so readily as our fathers the ecstasy which is the total effect of poetry, the sense of miracle between the union of inner meaning and objective form. Our souls are not, in fact, in the enjoyment of full good health. 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.

The stakes were clear: In the alternative prose-situation—represented, for Ransom, by Mencken—religion was impossible; without the mysterious harmony of poetry, miracles would end, and piety wither. “The future of poetry is immense?” Ransom asks Arnold, “One is not so sure in these days, since it has felt the fatal irritant of Modernism.” Inextricably bound, the future of religion now hinged on the future of poetry.⁶⁰

Ransom was not alone on this point. The same inchoate ambivalence toward religion was apparent in a piece by Stanley Johnson published the previous year. Observing that “modern poets have pointed out from time to time that there is no God,” Stanley Johnson cried foul:

⁵⁸ J[ohn]. C[roWE]. R[ansom]., “The Future of Poetry,” *The Fugitive* 3.1 (1924): 2

⁵⁹ On Ransom’s church attendance, which resumed briefly in the early thirties, see Thomas Daniel Young, *Gentleman in a Dustcoat* 271-272; Niebuhr’s apparently unremarkable visit to Vanderbilt is documented in Mark Royden Winchell, *Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996) 30. (Neo-Orthodox use of the New Criticism is discussed in Chapter 3 of this essay.)

⁶⁰ J[ohn]. C[roWE]. R[ansom]., “The Future of Poetry,” 3.

[I]s it not time for one who is neither poet nor modern to suggest again that these young poets have prepared for themselves a freedom which looks tragically like slavery, a courage which smacks of cowardice, and in their creedless night have committed themselves to a creed of spiritual anarchy?⁶¹

Though both poet and modern, Tate echoed Johnson's sentiments. "An individualistic intellectualism is the mood of our age," he lamented, and the modernist poetry bemoaned by Johnson and Ransom could no better meet religious needs than the study of scripture:

There is no common-to-all truth; poetry has no longer back of it, ready for use momentarily, a harmonious firmament of stage-properties and sentiments which it was the pious office of the poets to set up at the dictation of a mysterious *afflatus*—Heaven, Hell, Duty, Olympus, Immortality, as the providential array of "themes": the Modern poet of this generation has had no experience of these things, he has seen nothing even vaguely resembling them.⁶²

Clearly, the early twenties found the Fugitives in a difficult position. On the one hand, casting themselves as outcast aesthetes at a far remove from the religion of their region provided a certain intellectual cachet; on the other, it allied them with what they saw as the worst features of modernity, in which "garbage heaps and dunghills are [the] subject matter of poetry."⁶³

Some alternative way of ordering the aesthetic, regional, and religious modes of existence was needed. Yet whatever form the new piety might take, to the Fugitives it always boiled down to the category of literature. Ransom, for instance, published a review of Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) that scarcely mentioned either work. In his view, poets ("the 'makers' who in their laboratories fashion and dissect the souls of men") have no trouble accepting psychoanalysis "as gospel truth." Soon enough, the science would become "a medieval Gothic cathedral And when the grand edifice is completed, the result will be a complexity and yet a unification of doctrine." The case with psychoanalysis, however, was the same as that with all sciences born in the nineteenth century: It had merely landed on the same project that solid poets had been practicing all along. Freudian theory was nothing new, really, just "the systematic or scientific application of a technique that poets and artists have generally been aware of." So much for psychoanalysis, then, or whatever other science might next become similarly fashionable; at present, the problem with literature was the same as with Christianity: It "emulates the Apostle in attempting to be all things to all men."⁶⁴

⁶¹ S[tanley]. J[ohnson]., editorial, *The Fugitive* 2.1 (1923): 2.

⁶² A[llen]. T[at], "One Escape from the Dilemma," *The Fugitive* 3.2 (1924): 35.

⁶³ J[ohnson]. 2.

⁶⁴ John Crowe Ransom, "Freud and Literature," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 4 October 1924:

In a way, Ransom and the other Fugitives were putting out feelers, testing new aesthetic waters for their religious potential. As their thought developed in the early twenties, the category of literature became the only viable form of enlightened religion. If, as Davidson maintained, the “history of poetry is a history of the destruction of dogmas,” it was also the best possible place for dogmas to be destroyed, since “in contemporary poetry ... innovation and conservatism exist side by side.”⁶⁵

Few at the time would have said the same thing about the religious climate of the mid-South. While the Fugitives were developing their literary theory and editing their journal, a storm was brewing outside the Vanderbilt campus. In 1925, Davidson remembered, the Scopes Trial “broke in upon our literary concerns like a midnight alarm,” and the clashes of fundamentalist crusaders and New South reformers could no longer be ignored.⁶⁶ As the group was formally disbanded, the former Fugitives set about transforming their literary religion into a defense of their region. The Agrarian movement had begun.

⁶⁵ D[onald]. D[avidson]., “Certain Fallacies in Modern Poetry,” *The Fugitive* 3.3 (1924): 68; D[onald]. D[avidson]., “The Future of Poetry,” *The Fugitive* 4.4 (1925): 128.

⁶⁶ Donald Davidson, *Southern Writers in the Modern World* 30.

CHAPTER TWO

REGION AS SURROGATE RELIGION IN THE SOUTHERN AGRARIAN MOVEMENT, 1925-1938

I am well aware of what I risk in bringing this language of religion into what is normally a scientific discussion. I do so because I doubt that we can define our present problems adequately, let alone solve them, without some recourse to our cultural heritage.

— Wendell Berry, “Faustian Economics”⁶⁷

The Southern Agrarian movement marks the middle stage between the collapse of the Fugitive literary religion and the formulation of the New Critical hermeneutic. Pushed into an impossible corner by the religiously polarizing Scopes “Monkey” Trial (1925) in Dayton, Tennessee, the most influential members of the Fugitive Group began to set aside the half-modernist poetry and high-minded theories that had occupied them for the previous decade. No longer were Ransom, Tate, and Davidson oblivious to the cultural campaigns of fundamentalists, Southern Liberals, and Northern industrialists in the mid-South; as the twenties veered toward Black Tuesday, the Fugitives grew increasingly conscious of their region’s religion, and the lofty metaphysics of the Hirsch meetings was exchanged for a more public, more explicit religious and social program. In the same year as the Dayton affair, publication of *The Fugitive* was permanently suspended, and with it went the conflicted attitude toward the South so apparent in the journal’s earliest issues. For the next few years poetry would have to play second fiddle to politics, and the Fugitives’ literary society, as Tate wrote to Ransom, was to be recast as a “Southern Symposium.”⁶⁸

The change of heart, however, was less than total. From the nineteen-teens through the post-War years, religion remained the single unbroken thread in the move from Fugitive poetics to Agrarian politics to New Critical literary theory. And even while the topic was hardly off the table in the Hirsch circle, the former Fugitives came to see a fusion of aesthetic theory and mid-South Protestantism as the last best hope for a region trapped between competing visions of modernity.

In an attempt to account for their apparent about-face, this chapter gauges the Fugitive-Agrarians’ responses to the Scopes Trial from the late twenties through the early thirties, after which their concerns gravitated more and more toward literature. I argue

⁶⁷ Wendell Berry, “Faustian Economics” *Harper’s* May 2008: 39. Berry concludes this essay with the demand that we “remove some of the emphasis we have lately placed on science and technology and have a new look at the arts” (42).

⁶⁸ Allen Tate, letter to John Crowe Ransom, 24 March 1927, quoted in Cowan 246; Paul Conkin notes that while only Ransom, Davidson, Tate, and Warren later became Agrarians, they were the four most active members in each group, and therefore the best indicators of intellectual and religious continuity. See Paul K. Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988) 1-5.

that the Agrarian movement—however much it may look like an ill-advised interlude between part-time poetics and institutionalized literary theory—was, in fact, the point at which Ransom, Tate, Davidson, and a growing circle of like-minded Southerners articulated an aesthetic theory that could stand in for Protestant Christianity in the mid-South. By the time the United States entered the Second World War, the Agrarians would conclude that the Higher Criticism and the Scopes Trial had altered their newly regionalized faith beyond repair, and all but of few of them would abandon the political face of their movement’s pastoral restorationism.⁶⁹

While the Higher Criticism and academic historicism formed the background that both the Fugitive Group and the New Criticism sought to displace, it was the Scopes Trial that provided the impetus for the overtly political Agrarian movement. After the events at Dayton put an end to Fugitive introspection, the reformed Agrarians produced two influential volumes of regionalist essays, *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930) and *Who Owns America* (1936); engaged in a series of public debates on Depression-era economics; and embarked upon a wholesale re-thinking of the relationship between their region and its religion. The collective concerns of the Agrarians emerged in individual projects as well: Davidson wrote his de-centralist manifesto, *The Attack on Leviathan* (1938), and Tate put out two hasty Confederate hagiographies, *Stonewall Jackson: The Good Soldier* (1928) and *Jefferson Davis: His Rise and Fall* (1929). Far more than these or other efforts, though, the religious dimensions of the Agrarian movement appeared in Ransom’s *God without Thunder* (1930), the one explicitly theological work written by a former Fugitive.⁷⁰

As the private venue for Fugitive poetics was transformed into a public argument for Agrarian politics, Ransom, Tate, Davidson, and Warren found themselves increasingly concerned with the Christianity of their region. Tirades against free verse within *The Fugitive* became arguments for the necessity of “traditional religion” within the South. As Davidson remembered, in the late twenties the Agrarians concluded that the “total economy of the poem”—later the chief concern of the Southern New Critics—demanded

⁶⁹ Donald Davidson and Andrew Lytle are the two main exceptions to the Agrarians’ political apostasy and concomitant turn toward literary theory, which is the subject of this third chapter of this thesis; as in this chapter I approach the Agrarians’ political positions as being continuous with their prior and subsequent literary activity, it should be noted that scholarly treatments of the movement significantly outnumber those addressing the history of the Fugitive Group and the New Criticism. Two recent works that buck this trend are Charlotte Beck’s *The Fugitive Legacy: A Critical History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001) and Mark Jancovich’s *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Beck’s work links the Fugitive Group to later developments in Southern literature, and includes a chapter on Cleanth Brooks’s transformation of Fugitive poetics into New Critical pedagogy. Jancovich maintains that the anti-historicist bent of the New Criticism developed out of the “social and political positions” maintained by Ransom, Tate, and Warren in the nineteen-twenties and thirties, and argues that New Critical doctrines like poetic dualism, the intentional fallacy, and close reading were consistent with the political positions they advanced as Agrarians (x).

⁷⁰ As Ransom’s *God without Thunder* speaks more to the aesthetic theology of New Critical reading than to the religious regionalism of the Agrarian movement, I reserve analysis of the text until the third chapter of this essay; peripheral turns toward the Confederacy also include Robert Penn Warren’s *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (New York: Payson & Clarke) 1929; and Andrew Lytle’s *Bedford Forrest and His Critter Company* (New York: Minton, Balch, & Company, 1931).

the support of a tradition based upon a generally diffused belief And since a tradition could not flourish without a society to support it, the natural step was to remember that after all we were Southerners and that the South still possessed at least the remnants, maybe more than the remnants, of a traditional, believing society.⁷¹

Suddenly of like minds on the matter after the Scopes Trial, the future New Critics began mounting a defense of their region that required them to spell out just what was worth defending, and what missing from its religion.

Liberals, Fundamentalists, & Agrarians

As the Fugitives were railing against literary historicism and dismissing seminary philology, a rather different group of anti-modernists had been busy attacking the same sort of biblical criticism that predominated on campuses like Vanderbilt's. Like the Fugitive Group, Protestant fundamentalism had emerged in response to decades of liberal-modernist challenges to the authority of scripture.⁷² Indeed, the cultural criticism that appeared in journals like *The Fundamentals* (1910–1915), which antedated that of the Agrarians by nearly two decades, more often took aim at liberal forms of biblical criticism than the biological theory that would play such a central role in the Scopes Trial. Like the members of the Fugitive Group—though for rather different ends—anti-modernist fundamentalists attacked the Higher Critics for undermining the authority and sacrality of the biblical text. While the late-nineteenth-century origins of pre-War Protestant Fundamentalism span several regions of the country and include a continually redefined body of creeds, the movement is, like Southern Agrarianism, quite accurately understood as an aggressive, periodical-driven revolt against liberal theology—albeit one that began more as an identity than an ideology.⁷³

⁷¹ Donald Davidson, *Southern Writers in the Modern World* 29-30.

⁷² Paul Conkin's "necessarily arbitrary" definition of nineteen-twenties fundamentalism is the one followed in this essay. Pre-War fundamentalism, as Conkin defines it, consisted of a "very defensive coalition of evangelicals (that is, born-again, spiritually-minded, mission-oriented, and morally rigorous Protestants) who affirm a few common and clearly engendered doctrines, who bow before the binding authority of an inerrant Bible and its moral teachings, and who actively crusade in the public arena against their many identified and allegedly liberal and modernist enemies." (Paul K. Conkin, *When All the Gods Trembled: Darwinism, Scopes, and American Intellectuals* [Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998] 56.)

⁷³ On Fundamentalist assaults on the Higher Critics, see Michael Lienesch, *In The Beginning: Fundamentalism, The Scopes Trial, and the Making of the Antievolution Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007) 18-22; George Marsden takes a more familiar approach to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Fundamentalism, though, as Charles Israel has shown, his account of the movement's appeal in the southeastern United States is weakened by the assumption that the acceptance of fundamentalist ideology in the region predated the movement itself. See George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) 103; and Israel, *Before Scopes* 4-10.

The term “fundamentalist” has lately assumed a similar status as “relativist”—something one is called, rather than claims to be—but in the nineteen-twenties it referred to a readily identifiable (if broadly defined) religious and political position. Though they would later realize that the movement’s creeds were quite different from their own, to the Agrarians the fundamentalist backlash proved initially an appealing antidote to a liberal Protestantism whose “progressive component” and “reverently hopeful interpretation of the immanence of God in culture,” as William Hutchison has noted, “had become deeply problematic.”⁷⁴ Transformed into cultural and not just literary critics, the Agrarians felt compelled to denounce both the progressive, social gospel element of interwar liberal Christianity and its easy alliance with progress-minded science.

Fundamentalist writers characterized the liberal interpretation of scripture—with its disavowal of Biblical inerrancy, and its readiness to bend to the latest scientific fashions—as something utterly distinct from revealed religion. The view was most succinctly articulated by J. Gresham Machen, a Princeton professor of New Testament literature that provided the fundamentalist cause with its intellectual leadership. In his *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923) Machen argued that “modern liberalism”—a caricature of which would compose the defense in the Scopes Trial—“not only is a different religion from Christianity but belongs in a totally different class of religions.”⁷⁵ The view was widely shared among those sympathetic to the Fundamentalist cause; long before and well after the Scopes Trial, objections to the modernist spirit of Christian liberalism led to a number of denominational schisms. That Machen’s critique came from a New Jersey seminary, however, was no mere coincidence. Until the early nineteen-twenties, the fundamentalist crusade was centered largely in the North, where the modernizing trends of liberalism presented the greatest threat to older forms of biblical interpretation. The South, on the other hand, seemed to provide the movement with a prelapsarian ideal. Beyond a few liberal oases like Vanderbilt, most of the region’s denominations were controlled by conservative evangelicals—although many of them, like Vanderbilt’s Edwin Mims, were New South boosters as well.

If Southern Protestant churches were largely uninvolved in the fundamentalist-modernist controversies playing out in the North through the earlier twentieth century, this silence was broken by the political mobilization championed by newly-minted fundamentalist groups, of which the World Christian Fundamentals Association was the first.⁷⁶ Following its formal organization in 1919, the WCFA set to work convincing state legislatures in the South to pass various measures opposing biological evolution. Until the early twentieth century, the theory of natural selection was never the lightning

⁷⁴ Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* 256; Peter Huff explores the Agrarians’ confused enthusiasm for pre-War anti-modernist Protestantism in “Donald Davidson and ‘America’s Other Lost Generation,’” *Modern Age* 37 (1995): 226-232. Huff argues that the Agrarians “recognized fundamentalism as a powerful mode of protest against oppressive currents in modern culture,” and that Davidson in particular “borrowed the alien voice of fundamentalism in polemical prose to express his anti-modern social criticism” (226, 227). While I believe that Huff’s reading is accurate, the diversity of the Agrarians’ later religious trajectories suggests that the Agrarian-fundamentalist correspondence was more rhetorical than creedal.

⁷⁵ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: W. Eerdmans, 1923) 7.

⁷⁶ On fundamentalist campaigns in the South, see Lienesch, *In the Beginning* 34-53.

rod that was the Higher Criticism, but nonetheless represented a modernist advance that many liberals had long sought to accommodate. In the early twenties the WCFA was promoted by the populist lawyer and three-time presidential candidate Williams Jennings Bryan. “If the Bible cannot be taught” in public schools, Bryan asked in a 1922 *New York Times* opinion piece, “why should Christian taxpayers permit the teaching of guesses that make the Bible a lie?”⁷⁷ While surely not all Southern politicians considered evolution to be a series of “guesses,” the rhetorical question registered with numerous states legislatures. In little time, the WCFA and other such organizations proved instrumental in securing the passage of anti-evolution statutes in Florida, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Mississippi, Arkansas and, most decisively, Tennessee.

Convinced by Bryan’s 1924 address to the Tennessee General Assembly, Macon County Representative John Washington Butler authored and saw passage of the eponymous act on March 19, 1925. The bill expressly prohibited public schools from teaching “any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals.”⁷⁸ Since modernists had little influence among the Protestant clergy and laity in Tennessee, the measure was met with widespread approval among most Tennesseans. Further responsible for the bill’s agreeable public response was a growing uneasiness among evangelical families regarding the expansion of the public school system. Between 1920 and 1930, as Kenneth Bailey has shown “per capita expenditure on tax-supported elementary and secondary instruction almost doubled [W]ith compulsory attendance laws, and with private institutions seldom available, conservative parents were impelled increasingly to support and patronize public schools.”⁷⁹ Both the Butler Act and the courtroom circus it provoked, then, were in numerous respects more about religion and education than religion and science—a fact that goes some way toward explaining why the more notable responses to it came from universities. Certainly this was how Davidson saw the matter, “the cardinal issue” of which “was the right of the state, through its legislature, to control and administer instruction in its public schools.”⁸⁰

As a means to allay the anxieties of an uneducated generation about to send its children into the government-funded scholastic mill, the Butler Act was but one among many efforts to allow religious adherents in an industrializing region to enter the public square without fear of theological corruption. This likely would have been the end of the story for the next two or three decades, were it not for the interest of the recently formed American Civil Liberties Union in using Tennessee’s anti-evolution statute as a test-case for challenging the constitutionality of such laws throughout the country. Alarmed by the number of state legislatures bowing to fundamentalist demands, the ACLU advertised its legal resources in a number of regional newspapers, should some Tennessee teacher be willing to violate the Butler Act and face prosecution. Not so ironically, perhaps, the

⁷⁷ William Jennings Bryan, “God and Evolution,” *New York Times* 26 February 1922: ii.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Conkin, *When All the Gods Trembled* 82.

⁷⁹ Kenneth K. Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964) 72-73.

⁸⁰ Donald Davidson, *Southern Writers in the Modern World* 40

decisive answer to the ACLU's call-to-arms first came from an enterprising New York transplant living in Dayton, Tennessee.

George Rappleyea, having observed the controversies playing out in his own region, likely knew the degree to which a violation of the Butler Act might serve as an economic boon for Dayton. Seeing little profit from the bankrupt coal properties he managed, Rappleyea convinced a twenty-four-year-old science teacher named John Scopes to be brought to trial on the issue. Soon enough, Rhea County (of which Dayton was the county seat) was transformed by a frenzy of media activity surrounding the ensuing courtroom brouhaha. While the initial legal battle was finished within two weeks in July of 1925, the public circus that surrounded it extended well beyond the actual trial, as Dayton businesses and Northern newspapers sought to milk the sudden influx of media attention for all it was worth.

With William Jennings Bryan and the WCFA leading the prosecution, and Clarence Darrow and the ACLU spearheading the defense, celebrity legal teams fought over numerous disconnected legal and religious issues in the rural courtroom. As both sides had hoped all along, Scopes was in the end found guilty of violating the Butler Act. As punishment, the judge fined him one hundred dollars. Soon thereafter, the case was appealed. While the Tennessee Supreme Court threw out the verdict on a technicality—the jury, rather than the judge, was supposed to decide the amount of the fine—the trial succeeded in couching the fundamentalist-modernist controversy in regional terms. Before long, the initially welcome public obsession with the issues raised by the event would cause religiously disaffected Southern intellectuals to revolt.

Broadly speaking, however, the effects of the Scopes Trial on Southern Protestants had less to do with the issues debated in the courtroom than the manner in which outsider journalists mocked and belittled the entire region. It seemed that in the Scopes trial, a hitherto nonexistent line was drawn: One was either a South-hating modernist that sided with the Darrows and Menckens of the North, or a backwards anti-intellectual that looked to Bryan and the fundamentalists for mindless populist inspiration.

Ex-Fugitives Take the Stand

In light of the mocking caricatures presented at the Dayton trial, the Agrarians found themselves curiously sympathetic with their region's conservative Protestants. Still, as H.L. Mencken was quick to point out, fundamentalist tract-writers proved strange bedfellows for the ex-Fugitives, who at the time were as deeply involved in polemics against University of Chicago humanists as they were troubled by Tennessee liberal theologians. Though long in the making, the Fugitives' response to the Scopes Trial came relatively late—some two years, in fact, after the national media had abandoned Dayton.⁸¹

⁸¹ Cf. H.L. Mencken, "The South Astir," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 11.1 (1935): 57-60; on Agrarian differences with the Neo-Humanists, see Allen Tate, "Poetry and the Absolute," *Sewanee Review* 25 (1927): 41-52; and John Crowe Ransom, "Criticism as Pure Speculation," in *The Intent of the Critic*, ed. Donald A Stauffer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941) 91-124.

In 1927 Davidson vowed to “do something for the South.” Tate, who had been trying unsuccessfully to make it as a writer in New York, agreed: “I’ve attacked the South for the last time,” he wrote to Davidson, “except in so far as it may be necessary to point out that the chief defect of the Old South had was that it in which it produced, through whatever cause, the New South.” As the events at Dayton had made all too clear, the threat to the Agrarians’ religio-aesthetic values was not merely the Northern media. Of far greater concern were those forces within the region—one thinks of George Rappleyea—that sought to change its religion beyond recognition. “Our fight is for survival,” Ransom explained, “and it’s got to be waged not so much against the Yankees as against the exponents of the New South.”⁸²

The threat that spurred the Agrarian movement was progress, and its regional manifestation was the “New South” against which the ex-Fugitives railed in their letters and essays. This Reconstruction-era reform-effort sought to rehabilitate the region through industrialization and liberal accommodation. (Indeed, Dayton, a hamlet buttressed by mills and mining camps, was a prime example of New South visions of development.) Most famously championed by journalists like Henry W. Grady and Walter Hines Page, the movement was part of a broader (and older) trend of applying social-scientific doctrines of progress—Ransom contemptuously called them “the doctrine of newness”—to contemporary religion and society.⁸³

Promoters of the New South found their twentieth-century counterparts among self-styled Southern Liberals, many of whom placed themselves squarely on the side of the defense at the Scopes Trial.⁸⁴ Indeed, the response on the Vanderbilt campus merely echoed the spirit of Southern Liberal social reform movements. Chancellor Kirkland, for instance, declared that the “answer to the episode at Dayton is the building of new laboratories on the Vanderbilt campus for the teaching of science.” The region’s “belligerent fundamentalism” could be quelled by “the establishment on this campus of a school of religion, illustrating in its methods ... the strength of a common faith and the glory of a universal worship.”⁸⁵

Kirkland’s universalism was notably different from that envisioned by the former Fugitives. When a petition condemning the outcome of the trial circled among the Vanderbilt faculty, it emerged without a single Agrarian signature. The positions of Ransom, Tate, and Davidson on the matter were well summed up in an essay by the latter: “Fundamentalism,” Davidson wrote in 1927, while part “belligerent ignorance,” also represented

⁸² Donald Davidson, letter to John Gould Fletcher, 21 March [1927], quoted in Paul V. Murphy, *The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) 16; Allen Tate, letter to Donald Davidson, 4 March 1927, in *The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate* 191; John Crowe Ransom, letter to Allen Tate, [Spring 1927], in *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom* 166.

⁸³ John Crowe Ransom, “The South Defends its Heritage,” *Harpers* June 1929: 115.

⁸⁴ Though the Agrarian movement would never operate under such an explicitly partisan banner, in 1929 Ransom wrote of “Southerners of another school, who might be said to compose an Old South party.” (John Crowe Ransom, “The South Defends its Heritage” 114.)

⁸⁵ Quoted in Mims, *The Advancing South* 158.

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 to the bone and sinew of his nature as they once belonged to Milton, who was both Puritan and Cavalier.⁸⁶

Still smarting from the offense of the Scopes Trial, Davidson and the other Agrarians found that what they valued about literature and religion—and increasingly, literature-qua-religion—was inseparable from their region. The primitive, unenlightened religion represented by fundamentalism seemed a safer bet than the New South liberalism in vogue at Vanderbilt; for “all religions,” Ransom wrote a few months after the initial verdict in the trial, “are a folk product first, and contain sensational and obscene features in plenty: but get themselves taken up by the higher critics, theologians, and Liberals, who try to emasculate them.” Surveying the scene of post-Scopes Southern Protestantism, Ransom lamented to Tate that the region’s religion had lost its teeth: “*now religion is not religion at all but a purely secular experience, like Y.M.C.A. and Boy Scouts.*” Tate, too, saw little religion in contemporary liberal Protestantism, which in his view tended to verge toward the this-worldly reification of religious values as a whole: “if the religious and the human join,” he argued in a 1930 essay, “in the present state of the religious, you are opposing naturalism with opposition, or at best with itself.”⁸⁷ This, indeed, was the situation created by the trial: One could choose a bloodless liberalism, or a baptized-in-blood fundamentalism.

For the latter half of the decade, the fundamentalist bent appealed to the Agrarians much more strongly than garden-variety liberal Protestantism; Neo-Orthodoxy seems to have escaped their notice altogether. Before the publication of their manifesto in 1930, most of their treatments of the ideology represented by the Dayton prosecution oscillated between apology and celebration. Davidson moved most quickly on the matter, writing an attempt at mediation that bore the subtitle, “The Intellectual Evolution in Dixie.” Tennessee, he noted, “contains both Vanderbilt University, with its modern laboratories and independent spirit of culture, and the newly founded Bryan Memorial University,” a school established in the aftermath of the Scopes Trial to advance the values of its namesake.⁸⁸

In “First Fruits of Dayton” Davidson set about defending the South from the charges of philistinism voiced by the Fugitives’ one-time ally, H.L. Mencken, and the call for scientific reform demanded by their employer, Chancellor Kirkland. In certain respects the piece makes an argument similar to that of Vanderbilt evangelical and New South booster Edwin Mims in *The Advancing South* (1926): Sure, the region had its

⁸⁶ Donald Davidson, “The Artist as Southerner,” *Saturday Review of Literature* 2 (15 May 1926): 782-784.

⁸⁷ John Crowe Ransom, letter to Robert Graves, 2 December 1925, in *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom* 148; John Crowe Ransom, letter to Allen Tate, 4 July 1929, in *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom* 181; Allen Tate, “The Fallacy of Humanism,” *Hound and Horn* 3 (1930): 245.

⁸⁸ Donald Davidson, “First Fruits of Dayton,” *Forum* 79 (1928): 897.

problems, but in the Northern media these were all one heard about. But Davidson, like the other Agrarians, differed from Mims in one crucial respect. In a section on “The Value of Fundamentalism,” he declared that “[a]nti-evolution legislation may even be taken as a kind of progress; for it signifies that Fundamentalism has appealed an issue of battle—already lost elsewhere—to law-making bodies.” The particular issue of battle seemed unimportant—as much so, in fact, as evolution had been in pre-Scopes fundamentalist crusades. Davidson’s reasoning here exhibits a trace of the Lost Cause religion that he and the Agrarians temporarily embraced in the thirties. Nonetheless, in the twenties the nostalgia was sustained solely by WCFA-style fundamentalism—for the faith, “whatever its wild extravagances,” evinced a refusal on the part of Protestant Southerners to bow to the latest whims of religious and social reform.⁸⁹

Davidson argued that his co-regionalists would do well to question the value of such progress. The first fruits of Dayton might be “a midnight alarm,” but they were not yet a cautionary tale. Far more than laboratories or sawmills, what the South needed was a clergy that combined the best of fundamentalist fervor and liberal learning, “who could be liberal and yet command the fire and earnestness that the Modernists have left to be monopolized by their narrower-minded brethren.” In another nod to Milton—soon, with Hopkins and Donne, to be the religio-literary cause célèbre among the Southern New Critics—Davidson declared that the problem with Southern Liberals was aesthetic, in the true etymological sense of the word: “liberals fear emotion, much as Satan himself, without realizing that they cannot make reason and the will of God prevail until they instill a little emotion into the process.”⁹⁰

By 1930, there was no shortage of emotion in Agrarian notions of Southern religion. In his “hot & hasty book on religion,” *God without Thunder*, Ransom argued that “the God of Moses and the God of Jesus” worshipped in the South “cannot be identified with a principle of human service.”⁹¹ The same year that Ransom’s theological work appeared, the “Southern Symposium” that Tate had proposed in 1927 finally saw public fruition in the form of *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930). The book’s most noteworthy chapters were written by former Fugitives—Davidson, Ransom, Tate, and Warren, whose relatively progressive piece on segregation temporarily divided the group. That Warren’s article caused some consternation comes as no surprise considering the book’s title; “i’ll take my stand” is a line in the Confederate anthem, “Dixie,” and thus served to invoke both the heritage of the region under threat and the intellectually militant spirit of resistance with which it would be preserved. Two years after Davidson had published his two reactions to the Scopes Trial in *The Saturday Review of Literature* and *Forum*, it was clear that the apologetic, Mims-

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 898.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 906, 904.

⁹¹ John Crowe Ransom, letter to Allen Tate, 4 July 1929, in *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom* 181; John Crowe Ransom, *God without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy* (1930; Hamden: Archon, 1965) 53.

like defense had been transformed into something bordering on bellicose sectionalism, albeit strictly intellectual.⁹²

Authored by “Twelve Southerners,” the essays in the book addressed issues ranging from education to farming to religion. Though hardly unified in thematic terms, a specific notion of the region was behind the arguments in all twelve chapters. As Louis D. Rubin has suggested, the Agrarians’ notion of the Old South “can best be considered as an extended metaphor, of which the image of the agrarian community is the figure, standing for and embodying something else.” Though Rubin and most other historians have been rather reluctant to say so, at bottom that “something else” was religion. In the most prominent Agrarian writing, one observes a general belief that the particular characteristics of the still pre-industrial South constitute the conditions of genuine religious experience. If the former were threatened, as the mocking media-coverage of the Scopes Trial implied they should be, then the latter would be impossible.⁹³

In a sense, the South existed primarily in the various imaginations of the book’s contributors; the same was true of the region’s religion. Indeed, the first thing one notices about *all* the essays in *I’ll Take My Stand* is the near-total absence of any concrete proposals for the preservation or resurrection of the region. (Some semblance of this did appear in the less groundbreaking *Who Owns America?* [1936].) As the essays were being solicited and edited, Ransom wrote to Tate that “Religion is the only effective defense against Progress, & our very vicious economic system.”⁹⁴ The same position was endorsed collectively through Ransom’s unsigned “Statement of Principles” in *I’ll Take My Stand*. In an industrial society, the preface declared, religion “can hardly expect to flourish.” In such conditions,

we receive the illusion of having power over nature, and lose the sense of nature as something mysterious and contingent. The God of nature under these conditions is merely an amiable expression, a superfluity, and the philosophical

⁹² Already close readers, Ransom and Davidson were convinced that the title’s colon would prevent the book from being interpreted as an inflammatory political tract. “Observe that the colon is one of the subtler marks of syntax,” they wrote the Agrarians prior to publication, “that could not possibly occur to a frenzied and uncritical patriot—there is infinite protection for us in that colon.” (Donald Davidson and John Crowe Ransom, letter to the Agrarians, 5 September 1930, quoted in Young, *Gentleman in a Dustcoat* 214.)

⁹³ Louis D. Rubin, introduction, *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, by Twelve Southerners (1962; Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1976) xi; Paul Conkin has argued rather differently that whenever the Agrarians of *I’ll Take My Stand* used the word “South,” it “applied to a very limited South—Anglo-Saxon, formerly Confederate in sympathies, and still agricultural.” (Paul K. Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* 85.); Mark Malvasi’s reading of the Agrarian movement most closely approximates the one undertaken in this essay. The Agrarians’ “original objective,” he argues, “was not only to perpetuate and revitalize the southern tradition but to forge it into a weapon with which to combat the absurdity and meaninglessness of a faithless void.” It should be noted, however, that Malvasi’s rather troubling enthusiasm for late twentieth-century neo-conservatism obscures the religious situation in which the Agrarians operated. (Mark Malvasi, *The Unregenerate South: The Agrarian Thought of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997] 21.)

⁹⁴ John Crowe Ransom, letter to Allen Tate, 4 July 1929, in *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom* 180.

understanding ordinarily carried in the religious experience is not there for us to have.⁹⁵

Ransom had a rather nuanced understanding of Christian theology in these pages, but he was clear on its origins. As he explained to Warren, religion in the Old South was “pure Calvinism, and that had all the essential elements of a great religion in it, except possibly some aesthetic ones.”⁹⁶

That aesthetics provided the missing link in this scenario is rather telling. These were religiously ambivalent poets playing at political regionalism, and it grew increasingly clear in the essays that what the South lacked economically was what it lacked artistically and spiritually. Indeed, critics were quick to point out that the socio-economic components of the agrarian way of life championed in *I'll Take My Stand* were never so fully explained as the aesthetic ones. An agrarian society was simply “one in which agriculture is the leading vocation, whether for wealth, for pleasure, or for prestige.”⁹⁷ Such a slim definition was sufficient for the book’s contributors. In such a perfect order, as they conceived it, religion and the arts could flourish; their “economic conviction” was merely the “secular image of religion.” Provided the culture-paving national industrial hegemon was kept at bay—Tate called it the “all-destroying abstraction, America”—an authentic ground existed for religious experience.⁹⁸

While not all contributors expressed an overtly religious understanding of the project, the book’s origination as a reaction to the period’s religious crises colored all the essays with an implicit theological agenda. Consistent with the combination of anti-modernism and Old South nostalgia of the project, Tate’s essay, “Remarks on the Southern Religion,” proposed a response to contemporary ills through comparison to an imagined regional history. Unlike the other eleven Southerners, however, Tate explains such problems as the logical conclusion of long-standing chinks in the region’s religious armor.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ [John Crowe Ransom], “Introduction: A Statement of Principles,” *I'll Take My Stand* (1930; Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1976) xxiv.

⁹⁶ John Crowe Ransom, letter to Robert Penn Warren, 20 January 1930, quoted in *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom* 191.

⁹⁷ [John Crowe Ransom], “Introduction: A Statement of Principles,” *I'll Take My Stand* xxix; the one sustained treatment of regional economics was Herman Clarence Nixon’s chapter, “Whither Southern Economy?” While praising the diversity of southern agriculture, Nixon blasted New South boosters, and dismissed a journalist’s remark that in the South “cotton is Religion.” (Herman Clarence Nixon, *I'll Take My Stand* 185.)

⁹⁸ Allen Tate, “Remarks on the Southern Religion,” *I'll take My Stand* 168; Allen Tate, “American Poetry Since 1920,” *Bookman* 58 (1929): 508.

⁹⁹ To the displeasure of the book’s other contributors, Tate included a footnote to his essay that expressed his uneasiness with the title. The colon and subtitle notwithstanding, Tate felt that the “general title of this book is not quite true to its aims. It emphasizes the fact of exclusiveness rather than its benefits; it points to a particular house but omits to say that it was the home of a spirit that may also have lived elsewhere and that this mansion, in short, was incidentally made with hands.” His caveat was an attempt to clarify that the “southern religion” meant more “religion in the south,” where, in his view, a localized universal that had come under regional attack. (Allen Tate, *I'll Take My Stand* 175.)

In Tate's view, the contemporary threat to religious institutions and experience in the South was but a recent product of the "inchoate and unorganized" religious conviction that had characterized the region since the colonial period. By looking to New England Puritanism for its religious model, he argued, the South denied itself a regionally appropriate form of religion—for colonial American Christianity was, like all Protestantism, originally "a non-agrarian and trading religion." What the region should have had, Tate believed, was a "feudal religion" that fit its "medieval" society. Cleanth Brooks, who had read *I'll Take My Stand* as a Rhodes Scholar, drove home the point in a letter to Davidson: "A medievalism without religion is—*Hamlet* played solely by hopelessly inadequate Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's," a sort of middle-age medicine show for the modern South. In a sense, Tate was attempting to find a space for an imagined pre-Reformation Christianity, one that was free of the corrupting influences of reason and government. This was not necessarily a Roman Catholic faith (although Tate would convert to Catholicism in 1950), but European Christianity the way it might have looked before its regrettable entwinement with war and politics. It was a Christianity, that is to say, without a WCFA, grounded in a country without an ACLU.¹⁰⁰

As Tate saw things, the South's defeat in the Civil War was the sort of thing that resulted from mismatched religion. Had the region "possessed a sufficient faith in its own kind of God," its cause would not have been lost. "It would not have been defeated, in other words, had it been able to bring out a body of doctrine setting forth its true conviction that the ends of man require more for their realization than politics." Given recent events, however, politics was the only means by which Southern religion could be restored and improved. A month after the publication of *I'll Take My Stand*, Tate explained his position to a fellow contributor: "Since we lack that deep unity of mind which is brought about by centuries of participation in a mythical religion, the sole scheme of principles, the sole standard of truth that we can call upon is a conception of man in his political role." The Southern Agrarian was thus left with a paradoxical task: He would have to use politics—a tool "so unrealistic and pretentious that he cannot believe in it"—to create in the region a space for apolitical religion, to "reestablish," as Tate puts it, "a private, self-contained, and essentially spiritual life."¹⁰¹

However much they might have disagreed with his characterization of "Old South" religion as a form of medieval Christianity, Tate's essay easily captured the religious dimensions of Agrarianism. The movement was, as he remarked with no small amount of misgiving, "trying to make a political creed do the work of religion."¹⁰² In the years after *I'll Take My Stand*, a political program became the unsuccessful link between defenses of the region and its religion.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 168-175; Cleanth Brooks, letter to Donald Davidson, 18 March 1931, quoted in Mark Royden Winchell, *Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996) 64.

¹⁰¹ Allen Tate, letter to John Gould Fletcher, 3 December 1930, quoted in Murphy, *The Rebuke of History* 75; Tate, *I'll Take My Stand* 174-175.

¹⁰² Allen Tate, letter to John Gould Fletcher, 3 December 1930, quoted in Murphy, *The Rebuke of History* 75.

The Decline of Agrarianism & the Return of a Literary Religion

Practical fruits of the book were few. Plans to acquire a regional newspaper for the promotion of Agrarian ideas were quickly scrapped. Outside an intense but short-lived spate of book reviews and magazine articles, the only substantial public discussion of the Agrarian program—at least, as it was envisioned in *I'll Take My Stand*—was that which surrounded five university-held agrarian-industrialist debates. The first of these took place on November 14, 1930, at the University of Richmond. The Agrarian and “Regulated-Industrialist” sides were represented, respectively, by Ransom and Stringfellow “Winkie” Barr, a University of Virginia historian whose contribution to the book Davidson had rejected.

To the more than 3,500 in attendance, Ransom read aloud an hour-long prepared speech on the dangers of industrializing the South. Development and government regulation in the region, he cautioned, would quickly lead to “Russian communism.” Ransom spoke for more than himself in this declaration; Tate and Andrew Lytle, for instance, had considered *Tracts Against Communism* a more fitting title than *I'll Take My Stand*. Though as measured and careful as any of his written work, Ransom’s speech was not without *ad hominem* attacks—Barr he accused of using the Southern tradition “as a gardenia to stick in his button hole when he goes traveling in New York.” Barr’s rebuttal found a more rapt audience, and anticipated the opposition’s objections at the next four debates. Against the economic and social changes that would improve the lives of most Southerners, Barr charged, the Agrarians had set about “creating out of the farm a mystic lost cause.”¹⁰³

In essence this was true. Yet the fact that it came in the form of an accusation showed just how distant the Agrarian cause had grown from its religiously-driven roots—when, as Ransom characterized the authors of *Genesis*, “they did not quite propose to undo history,” and merely “questioned any fresh and sweeping developments.”¹⁰⁴ If anything, the five public debates over the Agrarian project served only to underscore what should have been apparent all along: The movement was most articulate as an account of the relationship between aesthetics and religion in a region that seemed to have lost them both—not the naïve breed of cracker-barrel economics it had become. By the early thirties, Agrarianism, as Warren later mused, was nothing but “a sort of quarreling over the third highball.”¹⁰⁵ So far afield was this from the group’s earlier conceptions of the agrarian way of life—when it served as a means to preserve the possibilities of religious experience in the region—that Ransom and most other members soon found themselves in foreign territory of their own design.

After a hiatus provoked by the Depression and limited public impact of *I'll Take My Stand*, the Agrarian movement saw a brief revival as part of a growing regionalist sensibility throughout the United States. The trend owed in part to social scientists’ new emphasis on the country’s regional differences, and even more so to political attempts to

¹⁰³ Quoted in Young, *Gentlemen in a Dustcoat* 220-221.

¹⁰⁴ John Crowe Ransom, *God without Thunder* 122.

¹⁰⁵ Robert Penn Warren, quoted in *Fugitives’ Reunion: Conversations at Vanderbilt, May 3-5, 1956*, ed. Rob Roy Purdy (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1959) 208-209.

“regionalize” federal policies.¹⁰⁶ Finding themselves in an intellectual environment newly amenable to all manner of radical social projects, a number of the authors of the Agrarian manifesto reconvened.

For Davidson, Tate, and Ransom, much of the mid-thirties were devoted to articulating the practical economic reforms absent in *I'll Take My Stand*, which eventually resulted in the publication of a follow-up volume, *Who Owns America: A New Declaration of Independence* (1936). Davidson reworked many of his writings in the period into his regionalist manifesto, *The Attack on Leviathan* (1938), and Ransom attempted to write a book called *Land!*, all surviving manuscripts of which were apparently consigned to the flames.¹⁰⁷ Missing from these later efforts, however, were the deep religious concerns that had prompted them to write the reactionary text that gave a name to their movement. Whereas initial Agrarian writings profited from the spirited defense of region, religion, and aesthetics, the eventual articulation of practical reforms distanced the project from its origins. In the process, Ransom, Tate, and Warren—though not Davidson and Lytle—began to find their positions as unconvincing as they appeared to the public. As the lofty romanticism of their essays in *I'll Take My Stand* should have made clear, economics for the Agrarians was more avocation than calling.

In short order the political aspect of the Agrarian project was abandoned by all but a handful of its proponents. (Davidson and Andrew Lytle would continue to defend it throughout their careers.) Following Ransom's lead, Tate, Warren, and other Agrarian writers ceased their celebrations of the South, and began to translate their defenses of its religion into an institutionalized model of formalist literary criticism. In this sense, the Agrarian movement was most significant for the future New Critics in light of its practical failures, as it was there that the ex-Fugitives attempted to develop a political, quasi-evangelical program for what had previously been an esoteric, self-contained literary society.

By the time that New Critical touchstones began to be published in the late thirties, region had been all but totally decoupled from a refashioned Fugitive literary religion. Yet as we will see, the enemy remained the same: historicism. Three decades after he had complained of the secularism of Higher Critically hamstrung Southern religion, Ransom would declare that the “secular-seeming ordinary poem plies its rhetoric through common words, but theology pervades them invisibly.” After Agrarian politics had been tried and abandoned, the one-time regional restorationists began a project of theological transposition. Chastened by their Agrarian idle and recast as New Critics, they would not fail again—they were to go, as John Duvall has put it, “not underground but undergraduate.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ On the Agrarians' appeal as political regionalists, see Michael C. Steiner, “Regionalism in the Great Depression,” *Geographical Review* 73.4 (1983): 430-446.

¹⁰⁷ On *Land!*, see Young, *Gentleman in a Dustcoat* 240-241; and Young and Core, *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom* 210-211.

¹⁰⁸ John Crowe Ransom, letter to Allen Tate, 4 July 1929, in *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom* 181; John Crowe Ransom, “Prelude to an Evening: A Poem Revised and Explicated,” *Kenyon Review* 24.1 (1963): 76; John N. Duvall, rev. of *Community, Religion, Literature*, by Cleanth Brooks, *College Literature* 23 (1996): 194.

CHAPTER THREE

A LITERARY PROSTHESIS FOR A LOST RELIGION, 1938–PRESENT

The kind of literary theory which seems to us to emerge the most plausibly from the long history of the debates is far more difficult to orient within any of the Platonic or Gnostic ideal world-views, or within the Manichaeic full dualism and strife of principles, than precisely within the vision of suffering, the optimism, the mystery which are embraced in the religious dogma of the Incarnation.

— William K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History*¹⁰⁹

The formulation and institutionalization of the New Criticism allowed Ransom, Tate, Warren, and Brooks the opportunity to at once continue and transpose the religious concerns that had spurred their prior political and literary activity. Whereas the Fugitive Group had been a closed-door literary society and the Agrarian movement a public campaign for systemic social change, the New Criticism developed within (and as) an institutional space. As Mark Jancovich has observed, the disorganized, amorphous dimension of fugitive poetics and Agrarian politics “only began to formalize itself in an attempt to reorganize the teaching of English in America.”¹¹⁰ In post-War universities newly amenable to the non-sectarian study of poetry, the ex-Agrarians found a welcome audience for the literary theory and practical criticism they had been developing alongside their poems and political essays throughout the twenties and thirties. Indeed, until the nineteen sixties some version of the “close reading” first introduced by Brooks and Warren in their textbook, *Understanding Poetry* (1938), dominated the teaching of English in American universities, as well as the practice of literary criticism in mainstream “little magazines.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York: Knopf, 1957) 746.

¹¹⁰ Mark Jancovich, *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* 3; see also Mark Jancovich, “The Southern New Critics,” *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, eds. A. Walton Litz, Louis Menand, and Lawrence Rainey, vol. 7 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 200-218. Jancovich challenges more familiar post-structuralist and Marxist treatments of the New Criticism, and argues that the literary-critical movement furthered rather than abandoned the critique of industrial capitalism advanced by the Agrarians. While his interpretation is refreshing and not without merit, my contention in this essay has been that the broadly religious rather than strictly political positions of the Fugitive-Agrarian-New Critics provide a more informative thread of conceptual continuity.

¹¹¹ Well after its apparent academic obsolescence, New Critical models of reading have persisted in a sense far beyond the vestigial. Outside liberal Protestant seminaries, this afterlife has existed largely through the A.P. “lit.” exam and courses in freshman composition. As the poet and critic Dana Gioia has observed, the “New Criticism, even if it doesn’t go by that name, remains virtually unchallenged as the method of choice in college classrooms.” (Dana Gioia, letter to Mark Royden Winchell, 6 December 1993, quoted in Winchell, *Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism* 443.)

Yet behind all such efforts lay the same theological agenda that drove Fugitive poetics and Agrarian politics: Whether in the form of historical criticism or industrialization, “science,” they all agreed, had robbed the twentieth-century self of the conceptual and affective dimensions of religion—it had, as Ransom had put it in *I’ll Take My Stand*, obscured “the philosophical understanding ordinarily carried in the religious experience.” Politics, too, would finally find its proper place in the extra-scriptural poetic text. As defined in the book that gave the movement its name, the poem was antebellum Agrarian society writ small, “a democratic state, so to speak, which realizes the ends of a state without sacrificing the personal character of its citizens.”¹¹² Indeed, while the Agrarian apostate might not be able to combat “the spiritual poverty that marks the age of machines” politically, he could at least “draw a careful distinction between the machine-made popular arts of our time and the work of our serious artists.”¹¹³

But poetic statecraft aside, the movement’s key figures could still be found lamenting the state of American religion long after the main New Critical battles had been fought, won, and forgotten within the academy. “[W]hat calls itself religion today in America,” Brooks argued in 1981, concerned itself with little more than

providing counseling in human relations, or improving the circumstances of the poor and oppressed I am not saying that such enterprises are beneath the notice of Christianity, and certainly I am not saying that they are not praiseworthy. I am simply saying that they are not in themselves religious but are finally humanistic.

The argument was a near-perfect echo of Tate’s position in “The Fallacy of Humanism,” and Ransom’s in *God without Thunder: Religion in twentieth-century America* was “fundamentally irreligious, or secular, both in its doctrine and in its works.”¹¹⁴

Against this spirit, the New Criticism developed as an alternative to an irredeemably secular Christianity. In this sense the movement marked the culmination of each previous stage in the thought of Ransom and his peers. Simultaneously conceptual and practicable, aesthetic as well as institutional, the ex-Agrarians’ breed of practical criticism was transformed into a teachable, market-friendly version of the same Fugitive literary religion that had been briefly and aggressively displaced upon the region. With neither economic reform nor institutional Christianity a viable option, some sort of discursive surrogate was again needed to pick up the spiritual slack. Consistent with a

¹¹² [John Crowe Ransom], “Introduction: A Statement of Principles,” *I’ll Take My Stand* xxiv; John Crowe Ransom, *The New Criticism* (1941; Westport: Greenwood Press, 1968) 54.

¹¹³ Quoted from the first draft of the Agrarian “Statement of Principles,” in Virginia Rock, “The Making and Meaning of *I’ll Take My Stand: A Study in Utopian Conservatism, 1925-1939*” (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 1961) 465; Cleanth Brooks, *The Hidden God: Studies in Hemingway, Faulkner, Yates, Eliot, and Warren* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963) 2.

¹¹⁴ Cleanth Brooks, “The Enduring Faith,” *Why the South Will Survive*, by Fifteen Southerners (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981) 200; John Crowe Ransom, *God without Thunder* 5; cf. Allen Tate, “The Fallacy of Humanism” 243-245, 253-255.

movement launched by a man that declared that “art is the only true religion and no other is needed,” that alternative was the study of literature.¹¹⁵

Just why art was a truer religion than religion for the Southern New Critics is the subject of this chapter. I attend therefore to the texts that best speak to the literary-critical movement’s recondite religiosity. Given that Ransom’s aesthetic doctrines were more or less fixed by the early nineteen forties—and that it was his work that most influenced the theory and criticism of Brooks, Warren, and Tate—I begin with an analysis of *God without Thunder* (1930), the one explicitly theological book authored by a Fugitive-Agrarian-New Critic. Ransom’s early treatment of American religion, I contend, best illuminates the aesthetic theology that was continued through and subrogated by the New Criticism. Discussion of the theoretical prose collected in *The World’s Body* (1938) and later essays further demonstrates the connection between the movement’s religious positions and critical applications.

For the sake of clarity as well as brevity, I focus the rest of my analysis on the work of Brooks, whose mature contribution to New Critical prose and pedagogy was rather more substantial than that of Ransom, Tate, or Warren. Brooks’s thought, while derived from Ransom’s and connected to Warren’s and Tate’s, ultimately became the chief point of reference for late twentieth-century attempts to construct a literary-critical model of Protestant hermeneutics. For this reason his work provides an appealing segue into some concluding remarks upon institutional Protestantism’s appropriation of a literary practice meant to displace it.¹¹⁶

In brief, I argue that the New Critical practice of systematically de-historicizing and sacralizing the literary text came to function as a stand-in for the type of sacred hermeneutics and religious experience rendered impossible by the Higher Criticism and social reform movements a half-century before. The Agrarian movement and the Hirsch circle may have ultimately proved stony ground for their spiritual seeds, but the post-War university provided Ransom and his co-critics with an ideal arena in which to construct an alternative to what they deemed a still deficient American Protestantism. Literature became, as it were, a *religio subrogans*.

¹¹⁵ John Crowe Ransom, letter to Allen Tate, [Spring 1927], quoted in *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom* 168; close readers may detect a bit of source contradiction in my use of the language of surrogacy to characterize the theological dimensions of New Critical theory. In a brief 1951 essay titled “My Credo,” Cleanth Brooks, for example, declared that “*literature is not a surrogate for religion*.” While taking Brooks at his word, I have in mind a rather different concept of religious surrogacy than perhaps did he. To be specific, I mean a process of *partial* theological substitution, one that is best described in David Dawson’s similarly argued *Literary Theory* (1995). Focusing exclusively on Paul de Man, Harold Bloom, and Mikhail Bakhtin—figures famous for denouncing the supposedly rigid formalism of the New Critics—Dawson argues that post-War literary critics provided “surrogate theologies” for a more secular age. “All three theorists,” he maintains, “offer accounts of the human condition that rival in scope the interpretive aspirations of Christian theologians.” (Cleanth Brooks, “My Credo: The Formalist Critics,” *Kenyon Review* 13 [1951]: 72; David Dawson, *Literary Theory* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995] 118).

¹¹⁶ While both the process and the aspirations of New Critical interpretive techniques resemble the hermeneutics popularized by second- and third-generation Neo-Orthodox theologians, the New Critics themselves were largely oblivious to such developments in Protestant thought. As my method in this essay is necessarily confined to the historical record, I reserve discussion of all such memetic correspondence for the conclusion.

Ransom: A Prefatory Jeremiad and the Preparations for Criticism

Throughout the late thirties Ransom, Tate, and Warren had grown increasingly distant from the Agrarian movement. The opposite seems to have been the case with Davidson, who with Andrew Lytle (and still later, Wendell Berry) was to defend Agrarianism for the rest of his life. Yet by the end of the decade he found he could no longer watch in silence as his friends began to leave pastoral politics for greener, more literary pastures to the north. The way Davidson saw things, Ransom, Tate, and Warren were fair-weather Agrarians; when the Depression lifted and their literary essays garnered attention, they promptly left the farm. Incensed at the direction things were taking, he admonished Tate for his and Ransom's collective abandonment of the Fugitive and Agrarian "revolutions." Contrary to the spirit of the Hirsch circle and Agrarianism, the

third revolution proposes that poems can be only short poems ... and that "subjectivity" can be escaped & "objectivity" attained by the complicated fictions, the "meant metaphors," etc. described in various essays; and thus the poem becomes a specialized art-work, standing up quite independently and bravely.¹¹⁷

As much as these were the words of a man betrayed, Davidson was correct in his account of the change in Fugitive-Agrarian principles. The region was being traded for an art-work that, properly constructed, could exist independently of history, politics, and institutional religion. As Ransom stated quite plainly in a different context, the "only solution that is possible, since the economic solution is not possible, is the aesthetic one."¹¹⁸

In truth, the third revolution had been developing in tandem with the second. And like the Agrarian movement, it originated in a critique of American religion. One year before the publication of *I'll Take My Stand*, Ransom reported that he had a "hot & hasty book on religion" in the works. It was certainly that; twenty-two years later, one commentator thought the polemic contained in *God without Thunder* so Neo-Orthodox as to demand its republication for "a new audience."¹¹⁹

The original audience of the book was no less broad than that of *I'll Take My Stand*, which appeared the same year. In fact, Ransom's argument in *God without Thunder* was far more personal than in any of his Agrarian pieces. "I do not know of situations much more painful," declared the World War I veteran, "than that of wishing to

¹¹⁷ Donald Davidson, letter to Allen Tate, 23 February 1940, in *The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate* 323.

¹¹⁸ John Crowe Ransom, *The World's Body* (1938; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968) 43.

¹¹⁹ John Crowe Ransom, letter to Allen Tate, 4 July 1929, in *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom* 181; in his 1952 "Note on *God without Thunder*," Ashley Brown suggested that "[n]owadays we are getting some very exciting and hard thinking from theologians in various quarters—Barth and his Crisis Theology, Niebuhr, Maritain I should think it is time for *God Without Thunder* [sic] to be republished," a demand that was finally met in 1965. (Ashley Brown, "A Note on *God without Thunder*, *Shenandoah* 3 (1952): 36, 37.

take part in a religious institution and feeling not quite able to go through with it.”¹²⁰ Though not usually one to shoehorn autobiography into academic writing, he dedicated the book to his father (who was, like Cleanth Brooks, Sr., a Methodist minister in the upland South). What is more, the book’s preface took the form of an open letter to “S.M.H.”—former Fugitive swami Sidney Mtrron Hirsch—and in it Ransom expressed his ambivalence about the track taken in the text. “I am the son of a theologian, and the grandson of another one,” he allowed,

but the gift did not come down to me. When I handle the venerable symbols of an ancient faith, I am well aware that my touch is too heavy, and does some outrage. I will gladly say therefore to the learned and loving scholars who are versed in the mysteries that this work of mine is mere lay work, and meant for laity.¹²¹

It sounded like the gentlemanly false modesty typical of Ransom, who was capable of making the region’s code of manners look more like stilted indifference. But considering his anxiety in the book’s epilogue that no compelling faith remained—that Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists all “secularize themselves more and more every day,” thus making “it hard to give them an endorsement”—in all likelihood his reservations were genuine.¹²²

Certainly they were warranted. The chapters that followed the preface took aim at every imaginable manifestation of philosophical scientism and social-gospel optimism—all in the name of recovering the God *with* thunder that Ransom thought active in the Old Testament and redacted from the New. And even if his work was “meant for laity,” the book’s practical theology appeared through strident attacks on contemporary humanists, nineteenth-century Higher Critics, and scientific industrialists.

In a scathing 1931 review William S. Knickerbocker suggested that “a much better title” for *God without Thunder* “would have been ‘Thunder without God.’”¹²³ While he was right to call attention to the book’s polemical bent—the text contains no shortage of rhetorical storms—the interpretation failed to identify just what Ransom thought worth denouncing in Depression-era American Protestantism. One year shy of his Agrarian apostasy, Ransom became convinced that Christianity in its modern setting lacked both God *and* thunder, “[f]or modernism is skepticism and disillusionment, and ends in despair.”¹²⁴ One can find similar lamentations in Eliot, Crane, and much other modernist verse, but Ransom seems to have thought the situation ironic as well as unfortunate. As far as the Christian religion was concerned, twentieth-century reformers had created a desert and called it progress.

¹²⁰ John Crowe Ransom, *God without Thunder* 90.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* ix.

¹²² *Ibid.* 327.

¹²³ William S. Knickerbocker, “Theological Homebrew,” rev. of *God without Thunder*, by John Crowe Ransom, *Sewanee Review* 39 (1931): 111; Yvor Winters used the same expression in a chapter on Ransom in *The Anatomy of Nonsense* (Norfolk: New Directions, 1943).

¹²⁴ John Crowe Ransom, “Modern with a Southern Accent,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 11.2 (1935): 84.

In Ransom's view, this state of affairs had all but guaranteed the public ridicule of the defense at Dayton. Any such attempt to defend religion from the slings and arrows of scientific modernism was inevitably quixotic, and quite often pathetic. While he, like Davidson, had defended the fundamentalist cause after the Scopes Trial, in *God without Thunder* Ransom expressed his doubts toward the faith's ability to provide an antidote to the watered-down liberal Protestantism then ascendant. Referring (as he did throughout the text) to the essence of historical Christianity as "the myth," Ransom argued that at Dayton Protestant fundamentalists were forced to internalize "a painful contradiction between the natural and the supernatural. The dilemma was the consequence of the antiquity of the myth, which was no longer in harmony with the state of natural knowledge."¹²⁵ Interwar America, it would seem, was long past the point at which the mythical and the natural could be harmonized. And even as he argued for the antebellum South as the ideal environment for religious experience, Ransom couldn't help but confess that the Agrarian crusade had come too late. "The faith," as he observed in the book's epilogue, "is disintegrating from within: it is not only the victim of enemies without."¹²⁶

Responsible for this unfortunate state of affairs were secular science and the liberal Protestantism that so willingly accommodated it. Indeed, drama at Dayton notwithstanding, to Ransom scientific modernism and modernist Christianity seemed to be getting along far too well. Hearing the "bitter words or fratricidal deeds of arms ... taking place between the two camps" was bad enough. Worse still was

the way in which they fraternize with each other, so contrary to the ethics of good soldiers: the way in which their hostilities are becoming a mere formality, while the religionists are coming gradually to a perfect understanding with the anti-religionists in which they are the losers and the anti-religionists are the winners.

Consciously and eagerly, religion was selling its birthright for a measure of scientific respectability. For the last fifty years, historians—textual as well as natural—had trimmed the venerable doctrines of Calvinism from American Christianity. The cult of history, Ransom argued, had "ostentatiously canceled" the faith's core doctrines of "predestination, grace, and election Calvinism is now, to all intents and purposes, dead."¹²⁷ In its place was an insipid religious anthropology—a worldview, he added, that is "pursued exclusively by naturalists, never by poets or by religionists." Indeed, in retrofitting Protestant theology for pre-War modernism, the country's Higher Critics, scientists, and social reformers had traded tragic scripture for an upbeat humanism—and in Ransom's view "[h]umanism in religion means pretending that man is God."¹²⁸

¹²⁵ John Crowe Ransom, *God without Thunder* 101.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* 323.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* 320, 152-153.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* 102; John Crowe Ransom, letter to Allen Tate, 4 July 1929, in *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom* 181.

Humanistic, scientific, and secular, religion had become its own antitheses. Yet not so long ago religion and poetry existed in a sort of consociational harmony. They were, as Ransom put it many years later, “sisters but not twin sisters.” Poetry itself was “a sort of epitome,” one in which “the moral order embraced and governed the whole world I should think,” he understated, that “that is a kind of a cosmic or religious experience.” In pre-Higher Critical Christendom the relationship between religion and poetry was a symbiotic one. As Brooks put it in his own summary of *God without Thunder*, religion proceeded “by clothing [its] principles in the garb of poetry.”¹²⁹ That poetry was religion’s matériel was precisely what contemporary historians, scientists, and for that matter “religionists” misunderstood about sacred literature—for the “religious myths” of scripture, as Ransom summarized his view of things, “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.”¹³⁰

The historian’s point, then, was less incorrect than it was moot: Of course the scriptures are of dubious historicity; the problem is that sacred texts never endeavored to masquerade as historical documents in the first place, a design that seems to have escaped the notice of Protestant liberals no less than fundamentalists. When historians and scientists reject the supernaturalism of scripture, they are, in a sense, “quite within their professional rights, and even within their professional responsibilities,” for these

portions do not constitute a scientific record. The scientists have to take their choice between regarding them simply as false or incompetent, and regarding them as a record whose intention is foreign to their own understanding as scientists. It is not strange if they have generally elected the former of these alternatives. They have assumed that the myths tried to be scientific and failed, or that they pretended to be scientific and lied.¹³¹

Far from a quaint attempt at science, the myths of scripture were a special form of knowledge, one that sought to enlarge rather than restrict individual experience. But Ransom and his similarly disaffected co-critics were still reeling from the one-two punch of scientism and historicism. In such a situation, he concluded, the sacred text could no longer be meaningfully engaged:

There is a real effort required now to enter into [the scriptures] sympathetically even when we consider that metaphysically they are sound. Perhaps we would greatly relish, and indeed it is probable that we are continually on the lookout to see if we will not discover somewhere, a brand-new myth, not shop-worn, not yet

¹²⁹ John Crowe Ransom, ““Religion and Poetry: Sisters But Not Twin Sisters,” (c. 1958) box 4, ts., John Crowe Ransom Papers, Vanderbilt University, Nashville; Cleanth Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939) 91.

¹³⁰ John Crowe Ransom, *God without Thunder* 55.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* 64.

ridiculed, and not unrepresentative of what little taste we may have yet for the enjoyment of myths.¹³²

The brand-new myth, however, was never quite spelled out. Instead, Ransom and the other Southern New Critics elected to set their sights on a rather different canon of scripture.

From the nineteen thirties onward, Ransom, Tate, Brooks, and Warren argued in various forms that poetry and religion each bear witness to a unique form of knowledge, one that science and history can no better uncover than could a magnet detect a feather.¹³³ As Tate noted in the appropriately titled “Literature as Knowledge” (1941), the wisdom afforded by, say, “*Hamlet* is not of the experimental order, but of the experienced order: it is, in short, of the mythical order.” Against the spirit of scientific historicism, “the completeness of poetry ... is a problem less to be solved than, in its full import, preserved.”¹³⁴

Yet as Tate and the other Southern New Critics saw twentieth-century American Protestantism, circumstances were such that institutional religion rarely merited more than a few passing, nostalgic nods in one’s literary-theoretical schema. Indeed, the rationale for the group’s change of discursive venue had already been provided in *God without Thunder*. “If this were an age of orthodoxy,” Ransom explained, one might feel comfortable terming the nascent literary theory a “religious theory of life; but heresy is becoming orthodox and I cannot. I will call it then an *aesthetic* theory of life.”¹³⁵ To call the twin antitheses of science and history “religious,” after all, would be to call them secular or industrial. Thus aesthetics, while no perfect replacement, could function as a workable prosthesis for a religion lost to the dustbin of progress.

Finally, the Fugitive-Agrarians had landed on a convincing alternative to the narrow-minded historicism with which one was forced to read scripture. How all this worked in practical terms was being spelled out by Brooks and Warren, but in the essays collected in *The World’s Body* Ransom laid the theoretical groundwork for American Protestantism’s literary surrogate.¹³⁶ These “preparations for criticism” consisted largely

¹³² *Ibid.* 324.

¹³³ I borrow this expression from the journalist and psychotherapist Gary Greenberg, who uses it in his critique of contemporary neuroscientific epistemologies. See Gary Greenberg, *The Noble Lie: When Scientists Give the Right Answers for the Wrong Reasons* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2008) 210.

¹³⁴ Allen Tate, “Literature as Knowledge” (1941), *Essays of Four Decades* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1959) 104, 105; Ransom stated the doctrine later to be termed poetic autonomy as follows: “It is true that any particular, including the one imitated in the art-work, will illustrate a number of universal laws, but it exists in its own right and not for the sake of illustration. An illustration is just an instance, but an art-object is an individual.” (John Crowe Ransom, *The World’s Body* 204.); cf. Tate in his single published novel: “The meaning of what happens to us is never a phrase but lies rather in its own completeness.” (Allen Tate, *The Fathers and Other Fiction* [1938; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977] 93.)

¹³⁵ John Crowe Ransom, *God without Thunder* 188 (emphasis mine).

¹³⁶ The first edition of Brooks and Warren’s *Understanding Poetry* was published the same year as *The World’s Body*. In a review of the former, Ransom approved of his former students’ pedagogic application of his aesthetic theory, and noted that the book offered “progressive initiation into the rare kind

of systematic discussions of the difference between the near-sacred poetic text and the everyday “heresies” of prose. Criticism and theory are, of course, textual objects of the latter variety, and for this reason Ransom explained that they must be written “in the constant company of the actual poems.” More even than the practice of close reading, this was the “single and coherent poetic doctrine” that defined New Critical writing. As Tate was soon to put it, “We must return to, we must never leave, the poem itself.”¹³⁷

The reason why one had to stick to the poetic text was simple: In a world supplied with an at best unworkable religion (and at worst no religion at all) only the study of poetry could counter the reductive effects of science and historicism. As Brooks noted in an essay on *The Waste Land* (1922), “Christian terminology” was now “a mass of clichés,” and thus the poet’s “method of necessity must be a process of brining them to life again.” Of course, in its social milieu poetry is forever “the act of a fallen mind, since ours too our fallen.”¹³⁸ Yet as Ransom argued in the early fifties, the “little world” set up by poetry “is the imitation of our Earthly Paradise, when we inhabited in innocence.” In the rarefied realm of the beautiful poem, the postlapsarian reader could re-experience an ideal lost to modernity, for

in the poem we have here or there, and in some confused sense all together, nearly every thing we can possibly desire. It is the best of all possible worlds. Of course it is not really possible. But when we settle down into that grim realization, we are beyond the help of any poems at all.¹³⁹

The best of all possible worlds might not be possible—one could not really return to that Earthly Paradise, after all—but with poetry a fallen world was made a livable world.

Of course, this ought to have been the function of religion. But beginning with the Reformation and culminating in the twentieth century, Christianity had abrogated its aesthetic responsibilities. In a discussion of contemporary verse, Ransom lamented that the Protestant reformers had “lopped off from religion the aesthetic properties which simple-hearted devotees and loving artists had given it.” This made the practice of theology rather unappealing, to say the least, for shorn of its aesthetic element the queen of the sciences no longer spoke to sense-experience, particularity, or beauty. Nowadays, Ransom concluded,

of knowledge indicated by the title.” (John Crowe Ransom, “The Teaching of Poetry,” *Kenyon Review* 1 (1939): 82.

¹³⁷ John Crowe Ransom, *The World’s Body* vii, viii; Allen Tate, “Literature as Knowledge” 104-105; in declaring that “there is nothing outside the text,” Derrida—so often credited with unseating the movement from its dominant role in the academy—actually seems to have done the New Critics one better. (Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak [1976; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998] 163.)

¹³⁸ Cleanth Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* 171; John Crowe Ransom, *The World’s Body* viii.

¹³⁹ John Crowe Ransom, “Humanism at Chicago,” *Kenyon Review* 14 (1952): 658.

Theology is purer or more abstract than ever before, but it would seem to belong exclusively to the theologians, and it cannot by itself assemble together all those who once delighted the moral precepts, the music and the pomp, the social communion, and the concrete Godhead, of the synthetic institution which was called religion.¹⁴⁰

It was the job of synthetic poetry to restore these qualities, and Ransom seems to have believed it possible. Writing to the Fitzgerald scholar Arthur Mizener in the late forties, he confessed his “hunch that the critics of literature are going to recover for literature, perhaps incidentally for religion, such sanctions as [individual] human behaviors can boast.”¹⁴¹

Brooks: Prosthetic Theology and the Full Circle Turn

How this recovery was to proceed became the chief labor of Brooks, whose contribution to pedagogy and practical criticism did more than that of any other figure to introduce the group’s aesthetic theology to American undergraduates. Indeed, if “Ransom,” as Thomas Daniel Young sums up the New Criticism’s academic institutionalization, “attempted to convince us that poetry is valuable because it contains truths that are otherwise unavailable, Brooks has demonstrated how these truths may be recognized.”¹⁴² The rationale behind Brooks’s methodology will be examined below, but it is worth restating that the precise nature of those otherwise unavailable truths remained essentially the same—they were, that is to say, religious truths, albeit ones accessible only through a formalistic hermeneutic. For as Brooks understood poetry, the absence of *explicit* theological positions was precisely what allowed literature to communicate religious truth, a situation that was as much the case for the modernist as for the metaphysical. Indeed, if one reads great writers “for the sake of the overt preachments that their works may be felt to make,” then she will “probably miss their significance as Christian artists. For if we cannot apprehend their art, we have lost the element that makes their work significant to us; they might as well be journalists or pamphleteers.” Far more than a linguistic vehicle, art was a precondition for religion—and buried within the form and content of the literary text was a “hidden god.”¹⁴³

Brooks’s thinking on the matter derived from the same dissatisfaction with American Protestantism as had that of Ransom, Davidson, and Tate. Though he later

¹⁴⁰ John Crowe Ransom, *The World’s Body* 65; elsewhere in the book Ransom anticipates the late twentieth-century turn toward studies of lived religion, explaining his “idea that religion is an institution existing for the sake of its ritual, rather than, as I have heard, for the sake of its doctrines, to which there attaches no cogency of magic, and for that matter a very precarious cogency of logic. (*Ibid.* 43.)

¹⁴¹ John Crowe Ransom, letter to Arthur Mizener, 14 March 1949, *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom* 341.

¹⁴² Thomas Daniel Young, “A Little Divergence: The Critical Theories of John Crowe Ransom and Cleanth Brooks,” in *The Possibilities of Order: Cleanth Brooks and His Work*, ed. Lewis P. Simpson (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976) 195.

¹⁴³ Cleanth Brooks, *The Hidden God* 5.

became a committed Anglican, his contribution to the second Agrarian manifesto, “A Plea to the Protestant Churches,” left little room for doubt about the state of the country’s religion in the mid-thirties.¹⁴⁴ Observing that the “war between science and Protestantism is over,” Brooks declared that the faith’s adherents “have been worse than defeated: they have been converted.” While echoing Ransom’s jeremiad in *God without Thunder* and Davidson’s apology in “First Fruits of Dayton,” Brooks was less optimistic about the potential of Protestant fundamentalism to provide an antidote to modern scientism. “The intellectual leaders of Protestantism,” after all, were “not Fundamentalists; and Fundamentalism deprived of leaders, it is safe to predict, will not be able to survive in the present intellectual climate.” Transformed by the Social Gospel into mere ethics and economics, one found “Protestantism secularizing itself out of existence—becoming conformed to this world.”¹⁴⁵

Again, what Protestantism lacked was what art provided. And yet “the qualities which art shares with religion are just those which Liberal Protestantism through its imitation of science has lost.” There was no art, in other words, in American Protestantism—though this hardly meant that art and religion were one and the same. (That, after all, was the error of the previous century’s Romantics, in whose hands “[p]oetry tended to become, more or less consciously, a substitute for religion.”) In an ideal environment, Brooks maintained, “the relationship between religion and poetry is a polar relationship in something of the same sense in which we speak of the poles of an electric battery ... poles that mutually attract each other and thus generate a current of energy.”¹⁴⁶ But for the American modern that found himself unable to locate any recognizable religion for which poetry might be substituted, neither Victorian flights of fancy nor metaphorical currents was a viable option. Indeed, one could not have religion if one did not have art, and yet this was precisely the situation that American “Liberal Protestants” had created: “Religion is obviously more than art,” Brooks allowed, but “a religion which lacks the element of art is hardly a religion at all.” In such an environment even the venerable Protestant sermon “amounts to a lecture. It exposes a religion truncated in the direction of science.”¹⁴⁷

While Brooks would adhere to some form of the argument in “A Plea to the Protestant Churches” for the rest of his career, in the early forties his Protestant polemic took a backseat to literary apology. At the risk of oversimplifying a diverse and sizable oeuvre, Brooks’s literary formalism maintained that poetry is (1) an unbreakable,

¹⁴⁴ Herbert Agar scrapped the essay’s original title, “The Christianity of Modernism,” to ensure that it not appear “too heavily Catholic.” See Mark Royden Winchell, *Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism* 126-128; and Cleanth Brooks, “The Christianity of Modernism,” *American Review* 6 (1936): 435-436.

¹⁴⁵ Cleanth Brooks, “A Plea to the Protestant Churches,” *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence*, eds. Herbert Agar and Allen Tate (1936; Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1970) 323, 331.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 326; the passage continues: “One may also observe the converse: religion is charged with being merely ‘poetry,’ i.e., fairy tales, charming or malignant; or religion tries to purge itself of poetry altogether and becomes ethical philosophy.” (Cleanth Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* 239-240); Cleanth Brooks, “Religion and Literature,” *Sewanee Review* 82 (1974): 96.

¹⁴⁷ Cleanth Brooks, “A Plea to the Protestant Churches” 327;

miraculous union of form and content, and that (2) this union and the knowledge it provides cannot be understood through “mere history” or “paraphrastic heresy.”¹⁴⁸ Brooks’s formalist credo, however, less resembled the similarly labeled Russian or Saussurian varieties than a certain strand of Christian realism—or at least this was the impression of Ransom, who suggested that “Brooks’s particular theologism resembles that of [Duns] Scotus, who preached as all critics know the individuality or *haecceitas* of the well regarded object.” Brooks’s method of close reading, Ransom believed, was “a homiletic one,” in which “the preacher unpacked the whole burden of his theology from a single figurative phrase of Scripture taken out of context.”¹⁴⁹

This indeed was the track taken in *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947), easily the most influential volume of New Critical writing. Less a manual than an exemplar, the book found Brooks demonstrating—poem by poem and line by line—how formalistic criticism could grant the reader aesthetic access to some version of Ransom’s prelapsarian “Earthly Paradise.” And while the book’s representative exegeses were performed on a group of poems that spanned nearly four centuries—an approach intended to demonstrate the ahistorical character of aesthetic truth—nearly all of Brooks’s analyses involved poems that (he believed) harmonized a world falsely divided into religious and secular experience.

This central “paradox” was the *modus operandi* of all great poetry, and its chief value to civilization. As Brooks reads, for example, Donne’s “Canonization,” the poem’s axial conceit allows romantic love and Christian piety to each function as a metaphor for the other; neither is forced to assume ontic or conceptual priority. Similarly, in their beautiful, paradoxical illogic Pope’s “Rape of the Lock” and Yeats’s “Wisdom”—the latter of which was surely a rejoinder “to the conjectures of a nineteenth-century German professor expounding the higher criticism”—are able to address their subjects in simultaneously religious and secular terms without ever having to reduce aesthetic experience to one type or the other. For in the poem one had the world as it was before so many unproductive battles over bibles, apes, and politics. There, as Brooks argued in the seventies, the only meaningful difference between the religious and the literary was a matter of obligation: “A religion makes some ultimate claim on our belief. It demands a commitment. A literary experience, on the other hand, does not.”¹⁵⁰

Nonetheless, in a world where poetry no less than scripture tends to be read as scientific, historical fact, paradox is a bitter pill; “modern man, habituated as he is to an easy yes or no,” needed the closely reading literary critic for precisely this reason. For Brooks, the revelation discovered in poetry consisted not in its thematic or philosophical content, but in its aesthetic, experiential essence. The “nature of good poetry” was simple: “it gives us realized truth, not a truncation of the truth, not a scrap of truth, not a

¹⁴⁸ For the writer’s earliest qualified disavowal of “mere historicism,” see Cleanth Brooks, “Literary History vs. Criticism,” *Kenyon Review* 2 (1940): 403-412; by far the most succinct summary of New Critical formalism may be found in Brooks’s “My Credo: The Formalist Critics,” *Kenyon Review* 13 (1951): 72-81.

¹⁴⁹ John Crowe Ransom, “Why Critics Don’t Go Mad” 333; “I believe the particular fascination of [Brooks’s] view of poetry,” Ransom argued in the same essay, “is due to its being so close to the ancient doctrine of divine inspiration or frenzy.” (*Ibid.* 332.)

¹⁵⁰ Cleanth Brooks, “Religion and Literature” 99, 95.

debased fragment of the whole truth.”¹⁵¹ As Tate had earlier put it, the revelation of the poem was “of the experienced order,” and allowed one to reconstitute an unnecessarily bifurcated religious subjectivity. For where history and science must abstract a single meaning or argument from the text, the poem is self-authenticating and autotelic—“an instance of the doctrine which it asserts ... both the assertion and the realization of the assertion.” This indeed is the heresy inherent in all exegetical paraphrase, wherein “the thing communicated [by the text] is mauled and distorted.”¹⁵² Whether historical, scientific, or philosophical, paraphrase fails to render the poem more coherent. Self-contained and self-authenticating, *the poem is itself that coherence*.

While Brooks was keenly aware that his valorization of poetry bordered on a “graceless bit of tautology,” his argument was not necessarily that the poem was the poem and nothing else. Rather, when properly read, the poem constitutes “a simulacrum of reality ... by *being* an experience rather than any mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction from experience.”¹⁵³ Thus where the historian approached the poem with a “paraphrastic” magnifying glass, the literary critic could lend it a microphone. Through literature one could trade the German Higher Critic for the “sylvan historian” of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Indeed, in contrast to the textual historian,

the “truth” which the sylvan historian gives is the only kind of truth which we are likely to get on this earth, and, furthermore it is the only kind that we *have* to have ... Moreover, mere accumulations of facts—a point our own generation is only beginning to realize—are meaningless. The sylvan historian does better than that: it takes a few details and so orders them that we have not only beauty but insight into essential truth. Its “history,” in short, is a history without footnotes. It has the validity of myth—not myth as pretty but irrelevant make-belief, an idle fancy, but myth as a valid perception of reality.¹⁵⁴

Whatever Keats may have had in mind when writing the last two lines of his poem, for Brooks beauty really was truth, and the best authority on matters metaphysical was therefore the aesthetician.

Of course, Brooks was writing literary criticism, not biblical exegesis. Even if the poetic myth were a valid perception of reality, it would be one derived from Milton, Donne, Keats, and Yeats, not Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Yet when it came to religion and aesthetics, Brooks had like his favorite poets a curious (and not so paradoxical) habit of ignoring discursive boundaries. Ever the guardian of high culture, in the late sixties he gave an address to the Guild of Scholars of the Episcopal Church in which he lamented the debasement of language within consumer culture and the academy. Presumably speaking to the like-minded, Brooks exhorted his audience to “say

¹⁵¹ Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* 11; Cleanth Brooks, “Telling It like It Is in the Tower of Babel,” *Sewanee Review* 79 (1971): 139.

¹⁵² Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* 17, 73.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.* 74, 213.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 164.

to all who will listen to us that *it is impossible to sin against words without sinning against the Word.*"¹⁵⁵ Good language was necessary for good religion, and protecting poetry meant protecting Protestantism.

Not everyone seemed to agree. After giving a talk on religion and literature at Oberlin College, Brooks recalled, his straightforward endorsement of the Nicene Creed appeared to have "puzzled the brighter students":

What shocked them was that I should have given a creedal definition at all. Evidently, they felt that no person with a post in a respectable university could possibly be using "Christianity" except in some derived (and probably metaphorical) sense—some adaptation that purged it of any excessive belief in God.¹⁵⁶

What shocked the Oberlin undergraduates, that is to say, was that one could talk great poetry and doctrinal Christianity in the same breath. Of course, the New Critic had no such problem; his "secular-seeming" hermeneutical system had reestablished the symbiotic relationship between religion and aesthetic experience once lost to the Higher Critical historical mill.

Yet however numerous his successes, Brooks remained concerned about the state of language in post-War America. The battle for poetry might have been won, but Protestantism still seemed to be "secularizing itself out of existence." The greatest threat of all appeared in an eerily familiar form—for as Brooks saw things, the dangers of deconstruction, fundamentalism, and sixties leftism all paled in comparison to continuing revisions of sacred language. Exactly one hundred years after the appearance of the English Revised Version of the New Testament, Brooks watched in horror as the *Book of Common Prayer* suffered a similar fate. In an attempt to provide "faithful, literal translations from the Hebrew," twentieth-century historical critics, he believed, had sucked the life out of the book's language; ultimately, their efforts had served only "to dilute the doctrine." More than liberal theology or female ordination, redactions and revisions of the prayer book evinced Protestantism's "general drift toward secularism."¹⁵⁷

True to form, Brooks approached the religious issue as a literary critic, and posed to the reader the same question that a "man of letters of international stature" had several times asked him: "Why in the hell has your church discarded the one thing it has that could seriously attract people who value language of beauty and power?"¹⁵⁸ A church without beautiful and powerful language was no church at all, Brooks contended, and the results of a 1979 Gallup poll seemed to confirm his sense that others felt similarly. Inferable from the survey was that "opposition to the 1979 Prayer Book was not merely that of a group of disgruntled English professors. The laity lined up solidly with them

¹⁵⁵ Cleanth Brooks, "Telling It like It Is in the Tower of Babel" 155 (emphasis mine); the talk was first delivered in November 1969. See *Ibid.* 136.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 141-142.

¹⁵⁷ Cleanth Brooks, "God, Gallup, and the Episcopalians," *American Scholar* 50 (1981): 318-319, 320.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 314, 316.

against the bishops and the rest of the clergy.”¹⁵⁹ A half century before, the Fugitives and Agrarians had located similar allies among Protestant fundamentalists. But while the bedfellows may have changed, the issue remained the same: Just as Jacob Gould Schurman worried in 1909 that “history and criticism have made the Bible a new book,” Brooks claimed that the textual revision “is properly not a revision at all but in fact constitutes a new book.”¹⁶⁰

Stripped of the political dimension, the New Critic of 1981 had the same “paradoxical task” as the Agrarian of 1930: His “private, self-contained, and essentially spiritual life” required that he use the “secular-seeming” language of literary criticism and aesthetics. Whether in *Paradise Lost* or the *Book of Common Prayer*, those words might appear arbitrary, but, to borrow Ransom’s locution, “theology pervades them invisibly.”¹⁶¹ Change the language of the prayer book or the Bible—treat it like a scrap of history or a call for social justice—and religious texts no longer function as such. New Critical formalism, however, had succeeded in resurrecting an alternative way of engaging the beautiful text. By the nineteen sixties, the former Fugitive-Agrarians could look from their posts at northern universities and see a movement that had begun by abandoning Protestant hermeneutics transformed into the best means of securing textual sacrality.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 323.

¹⁶⁰ Quoted in Ferenc Morton Szasz, *The Divided Mind of Protestant America* 33; Brooks, “God, Gallup, and the Episcopalians” 315.

¹⁶¹ Tate, *I’ll Take My Stand* 174-175; Ransom, “Prelude to an Evening: A Poem Revised and Explicated” 76.

CONCLUSION

Academic Obsolescence and Seminary Appropriation

In a recent study of American enthusiasm for “French Theory” in the last quarter of the twentieth century, François Cusset suggests that the decline of the New Criticism signified less a shift in methodology than a rejection of “modernist” aesthetic values. “By ‘modernism,’” he argues,

the Americans designate in fact their few great writers of the half century, from the right-leaning [Matthew] Arnoldians to the leftist New York intellectuals, all of whom practiced a cult, both tragic and aesthetic, of high culture as an autonomous sphere, and saw in it the last resistance to the dominant conformism of industrial society. From that point of view, the New Criticism is no more.¹⁶²

Wherever one’s sympathies lie, the picture is a grim one indeed: With the obsolescence of New Critical literary formalism went the possibilities of an aesthetic experience already lost to American religion. High culture had given way to consumer culture, and an aesthetic cult had become an aesthetic void.

Cusset, however, can be counted among a rather sizable number of crape-hanging cultural historians, all of whom seem to have missed a conspicuous “literary turn” within Protestant hermeneutics.¹⁶³ As Lynn Poland has shown, this development proceeded largely through an appropriation of New Critical formalism. Narrative theologians’ attempts to apply Barthian and Bultmannian styles of biblical interpretation, Poland argues, were made largely through appeals to New Critical doctrines such as the paraphrastic heresy, textual autonomy, and the intentional fallacy. The various anti-historicist hermeneutical models of Hans Frei, Stanley Hauerwas, John Dominic Crossan, and Dan Otto Via, Jr., for example, make consistent (and occasionally explicit) use of the type of formalism first articulated by Ransom, Brooks, Tate, and Warren.¹⁶⁴

Given the religious preoccupations apparent throughout the Fugitive-Agrarian-New Critical oeuvre, the use of their work by “post-liberal” Protestant thinkers seems not so striking. For by constructing an ostensibly secular alternative to pre-War social Christianity and hermeneutical historicism, the New Critics had altered the very

¹⁶² François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) 50.

¹⁶³ Representative narratives of the New Critical decline may be found in Eagleton, *Literary Theory*; Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); and Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

¹⁶⁴ On “post-liberal” Protestant theologians’ appropriation of New Critical formalism, see Poland, *Literary Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics* 107-148; examples of the technique in practice may be found in Dan Otto Via, Jr., *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967); and Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); and Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

American religion they began by rejecting. Indeed, nearly half a century after Ransom declared the chief “excellence” of the biblical text to be its “unhistorical” character, a writer in *Theology Today* suggested that literary formalism be given a privileged status within Protestant hermeneutics: Gospel criticism, it was argued, is impossible if one relies exclusively on the method of history, for “we can only get back to the Jesus of history through the Jesus of literature.”¹⁶⁵ Without quite naming the messiah, this was what Ransom and his followers had been arguing ever since their Fugitive days. In a more than procedural sense, the “hidden god” uncovered through literary criticism was, they believed, superior to that sought via historiography.

Yet hermeneutical options in the heyday of the Fugitive Group were considerably more limited than in the nineteen seventies and eighties. The situation was closer to that which Ransom dramatized in “Prometheus in Straits”: To the historically minded steward of art and religion, the Fugitives could not help but declare, “You have only betrayed them by your exegesis.”¹⁶⁶ Seeing a Protestant America weighed down with historicism, scientism, and social activism, the Hirsch Circle gave Ransom, Tate, Warren, and Davidson a space to flesh out some semblance of an alternative religious sensibility. Still, the Fugitives’ esoteric and elitist “literary religion” proved at best a temporary fix. In retrospect, the limitations of this activity seem to have been apparent to all parties involved. By 1925 they found that the discovery of some set-aside space in which to enact an aesthetic self-actualization didn’t quite quell their religious frustrations. And even if the Scopes Trial was merely the bullet that killed the Fugitive Archduke, Ransom, Tate, Davidson, and Warren soon found that their concerns lay in the very social milieu from which they had been attempting to flee.

Yet the Agrarian antidote to secularism, industrialism, and Social Gospel Protestantism proved as unsuccessful an alternative as the Fugitive Group. Attempts to restore their region to an antebellum, golden-age religiosity met with predictable failure—though this was hardly the case with the literary theory and criticism they had been writing all the while. Indeed, viewed in light of the transition to New Critical institutionalization, the collapse of the Agrarian movement appears not so pathetic. “On the contrary,” argues Mark Jancovich, “by establishing the New Criticism as the dominant mode of literary study within the academy, the New Critics hoped to disseminate their critique of modern America, a critique that was fundamentally embedded in their literary theory”—and, as we have seen, a critique that was fundamentally and consistently religious.¹⁶⁷ As Ransom left for Kenyon, Tate for Princeton, Brooks and Warren for L.S.U., and Davidson altogether, the former Agrarians found themselves far more successful as public aestheticians than as politicians.

While this seems to have been their forte all along, the religious motivations for the development of the New Critical aesthetic only grew more articulate in the act of transposition. A backlash against the Higher Criticism became a polemic against literary historicism; valorization of the agrarian life became a celebration of metaphysical poetry;

¹⁶⁵ Roland Mushat Frye, “Literary Criticism and Gospel Criticism,” *Theology Today* 36 (1979): 219.

¹⁶⁶ Ransom, *Selected Poems* 33.

¹⁶⁷ Jancovich, “The Southern New Critics” 213.

and an uneasiness with the secular scientism of public education occasioned a flurry of practical criticism and textbook-writing. Behind all of these efforts lay a driving concern with the special knowledge derivable only from the beautiful text, be it biblical or literary. Thus by the time that Brooks worried that public schools were failing on precisely those counts with which the New Critics had charged them, the ex-Agrarian could suggest a change of venue that brought the movement full circle. “In view of the current record of the public school system in teaching reading and writing,” he offered, “some help from the Church ought to be welcome.”¹⁶⁸

As New Critical formalism gave way to deconstruction and the New Historicism, some within the secular academy began to mourn the decline of a unified hermeneutic. “Why can’t our MLA be like the church and have a council and put together a creed?” asked one professor in a 1984 issue of *PMLA*, “We borrowed hermeneutics. How about homiletics?”¹⁶⁹ Yet a mere two decades before, post-liberal Protestant theologians had begun to appropriate a literary model that was fast becoming a dinosaur in its original milieu. At the risk of prophesying a separate study, I think it fair to suggest that the likes of Crossan, Frei, Via, and Hauerwas were behind the times with respect not to literary theory, but to their own tradition. Understood in light of the narrative provided here, their efforts to construct a literary-critical model of sacred hermeneutics imply that American Protestantism had finally got wind of a development that had been proceeding under its radar for the last half century. Fugitive Group, Agrarianism, New Criticism—in its many guises this movement begun as a departure from an irredeemably secular Christianity had, in effect, reformed American Protestantism from without.

¹⁶⁸ Brooks, “God, Gallup, and the Episcopalians” 318.

¹⁶⁹ Frank G. Ryder, “The Study and Teaching of Foreign Languages,” *PMLA* 99 (1984): 989.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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