

Editor's Introduction

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H. L. Mencken's proverbial castigation of the American South as the "Desert of the Beaux Arts" still carries a sting. Although the Fugitive poets were too high-minded to bother with mere journalism, their magazine, anthology, and the later careers of at least three of the group provides a response. The Fugitives rose to a modest prominence in the 1920s, at Vanderbilt in Nashville, Tennessee, adopting a stance that was regionalist, traditionalist, and classicist. The nature of these categories can certainly be contested, and was by them. Some of them may have believed with W. C. Williams that the local is the only universal, and thumbing through the familiar poems of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren confirms this possibility. Even Tate, the most deliberately cosmopolitan of the group, recurs with some regularity to southern history, the southern climate, and his Kentucky boyhood.

Finally, there is no doubt that these three writers were born and bred Southerners who wrote a distinctively southern poetry, even if all three of them eventually left the South. Their regionalism was certainly not of the "moonlight and magnolia" sort, for which they all maintained a healthy disdain. Nor was it of the "dead mule" variety, a category mentioned and even practiced a few times in the pages that follow. (The live snakes adduced by James Applewhite and Robert Morgan appear to be from a different genre, perhaps the lineal descendents of the "gentle serpent" in the mulberry bush that concludes Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead.") It proves to be difficult, if not impossible, to generalize on the nature of Fugitive regionalism, and one may be driven to the unsatisfactory conclusion that it is an historical and geographic accident rather than an aesthetic decision. After all, Frost often writes about the hill farms of northern New England – he lived on them. The fact remains that few seem inclined to talk of a northeastern poetry, whereas talk of a southern poetry has been wide-spread for generations.

To ask what southern poetry is may have for some all the temerity of a question about the obvious. The country-simple answer is "the poetry written by various Southerners." Its various "southernness" is one result among many. A number of contributors to this volume no longer live in the South, but they identify themselves as Southerners and as southern poets. There are also writers not of southern origin but usually of southern residence who are happy to think of themselves as southern poets.

On the other hand, there are writers of southern origin – and even residence – who do not so identify; theirs is the contrary, and for this issue of *The Southern Quarterly*, the silent case. It is also possible to deny that there is any such thing as a South or a southern poetry, or not any longer,

and the spectre of this denial haunts these pages. A strongly marked regional culture has been relentlessly infiltrated by thousands of miles of strip mall, goes this line of thinking, and a focus upon rural upbringings before or parallel to this infiltration will be noted in what follows.

Another line of thinking is that the very category itself is somehow suspect. An old friend who would probably prefer not to be cited by name calls southern poetry “our version of the Celtic Twilight – one unicorn, and no virgins.” The apposite case of an Irish poetry raised in this dismissal will remind readers not only of the triumphs of a Yeats or a Heaney, but of that version of Irish poetry derided by Yeats as of the “harp and shamrock” school. The southern American version certainly exists, although not in this volume. The example set by Ransom, Tate, and Warren, and born out here, is of an acutely critical regionalism, defined by an awareness of a nuanced history and a complicated present of privilege, oppression, negotiations, meliorations, back-slidings, and stalemates. The not-unrelated and sometimes mirror image of small domesticities supplies an only apparently benign register upon which to enact the same history. It will bear saying again that this history is one of the utter unviability of a racist, classist, and sexist old order which nonetheless retains some of its old power – how much? It exercises a kind of gravitational pull, as does a ruin when one is in the neighborhood. The ruin might be of a share-cropper’s shot-gun or of the Big House, but the Big House has long exercised a more baneful influence, an uneven reciprocal interchange that this volume tries to assess. The strong core of this writing has sometimes arrived from some place else altogether, and I leave readers to discover that by themselves.

I must mention that a portion of this material emerged from the 2007 meeting of the Associated Writing Programs in Atlanta, and I want to thank all who were there with me, in particular those in these pages. None of this would be possible without the tireless skill and patience of Ann Branton, the managing editor. I especially want to thank my editorial assistant Will Wright for his cheerful, ingenious, and ever-ready help.

I conclude with a pleasing gesture recently obligatory to the editorship of *The Southern Quarterly*: the quotation of a few lines of poetry. I have chosen Ransom’s densely ironic elegy to an American South which barely ever existed, but whose dubious reality has inhabited our collective imagination for so long that it must be reckoned with. I refer, of course, to Ransom’s “Old Mansion”:

It was a Southern manor. One need hardly imagine  
Towers, white monoliths, or even ivied walls;  
But sufficient state if its peacock *was* a pigeon;  
Where no courts held, but grave rites and funerals.