Rereading the New Criticism

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Transition and the Individual Talent

In May of 1939, Allen Tate sent an awkward letter to his long-time friend and colleague, Donald Davidson. “Alas, it is not a rumour,” Tate opens, “I have accepted the Princeton offer” (Fain and Young, 319). As he delivers this difficult message, Tate struggles throughout his letter to convince Davidson that his reasons for taking the new, higher-profile job have nothing to do with Princeton’s prestige, its northeastern location, or the more generous salary he will be earning. Instead, he focuses on the working conditions available at the Ivy League institution. The Princeton job will be in the creative arts program, rather than the regular English department, and the position has been specifically designed for “the writer as writer” (320). It is an opportunity Tate cannot refuse. He tells Davidson that he has always seen himself as a “special man in the academic system” and that at Princeton he will, at last, be “used in (his) special capacity” (320).

Although, then as now, most academics would likely consider Tate’s move to Princeton as a step up the professional ladder from his former teaching position at the Women’s College of North Carolina in Greensboro, Tate knows the timing of his decision will trigger a political firestorm in the tightly knit community of Southern arts and letters that he and his friends helped to establish and expand in the 1920s. He tells Davidson that he can already
“hear the gossip” accusing him of “selling out” to “Yankee Money” and that he is well aware that his individual choice to leave the South will be seen as part of a much larger, more troubling pattern of intellectual outmigration, a 1930s Southern brain-drain, during which many of the leading literary artists and scholars left the region behind to further their careers in other places (320). Robert Penn Warren, the youngest key contributor to Vanderbilt’s celebrated literary journal The Fugitive, left Nashville immediately after his graduation and followed his studies from Berkeley to Yale before accepting a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford in 1930. He returned to Nashville in 1931 for a brief but disastrous limited-term teaching appointment in the Vanderbilt English Department, then left the city for good in 1934. More dramatically, John Crowe Ransom (Tate and Warren’s creative mentor and their most influential professor at Vanderbilt) terminated his twenty-three year tenure at the school in 1937 and made his infamous move to Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. Just months before Tate delivered his news, Lyle Lanier, another of the important contributors to the Agrarian manifesto, I’ll Take My Stand (1930), announced that he too was leaving Vanderbilt to take a better paying job as the chair of the Department of Psychology at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. Although Tate is certainly aware of all these departures, and of his own shifting status within his home region, he feels compelled to restate his passionate support for the South even as he leaves it behind. “I would rather be at Chapel Hill than Princeton,” he tells Davidson, and “[i]f a southern institution ever makes me a similar proposition, even with less money, I will take the first train South” (320).

As this letter demonstrates, there is an obvious tension developing during this phase of Tate’s career between his desire to project and protect a “special” status for his literary work and his complex, often confused feelings of loyalty toward Davidson, the Fugitive-Agrarian movement, and the South as a whole. Like his friends, Ransom and Warren, Tate struggled throughout his writing life to reconcile his divergent intellectual commitments, and all three men wrestled with a range of often contradictory personal, political, and aesthetic concerns. Caught between the history of their home region and the future of literary criticism, Ransom, Warren, and Tate were forced continually to weigh and rebalance their regionalist convictions and their theoretical ambitions. As their reputations expanded through local, national, and international circles, they faced many of the same challenging questions that continue to circulate in regionalist literary criticism today: Was it possible, or preferable, to be a thoughtful literary scholar while simultaneously maintaining an authentic regional identity? How (or where) did cultural geography and literary theory intersect? Could any worthwhile critic ever be fully com-
mitted to “literary” and “regional” values at the same time? Where did these
two terms meet? How did they come together? What would a true “Southern
Intellectual” look like or do?
These familiar but conflicted classifications—the literary and the
regional—have provided generations of scholars with a useful shorthand
to describe two different historical phases in the theoretical development of
Ransom, Warren and Tate, as well as two very large, but very different bib-
liographies of critical work that have developed in response to the group’s
contributions in each of these areas. For one set of scholars, Ransom, War-
ren, and Tate are read as canonical figures of mid-twentieth-century liter-
ary theory and criticism, best known for the widely influential and often
controversial aesthetic arguments they advanced primarily in the years after
they moved away from Nashville. When most experts address the relative
strengths or weaknesses of “The New Critics” and evaluate the signature
pedagogical methodologies of this school, they are usually referring, at least
in part, to this trio of thinkers and to works they published after 1941, the
year that Ransom’s volume, *The New Criticism,* officially gave the movement
its name.¹
At the other extreme, a second collection of scholars, interested in South-
ern regionalism and the historical development of the Southern literary
canon, interpret Ransom, Warren, and Tate in a different way. Although this
group is smaller than the former group, its members have been more prolific,
and, revealingly, the essays, reviews, and critical volumes they have produced
mention the New Criticism only tangentially and rarely devote significant
attention to works Ransom, Warren, and Tate published after 1941. Instead,
they expand the famed trio into a quartet and normally include Davidson in
discussion of the work the group produced between 1922 and 1939.² For
them, The New Critics are not nearly as interesting as “The Fugitives,” or
“The Southern Agrarians,” and though all three groups—The Fugitives, The
Agrarians, and The New Critics—were dominated by the same key mem-
ers, for those committed to regionalist analyses, Ransom, Warren, Tate, and
Davidson are celebrated more for the roles they played in ushering in “The
Southern Renaissance” than for the national and international revolution in
literary criticism they effected in their later lives.³
In this essay, I bring these two streams of critical dialogue into closer
contact with each other. Specifically, I focus on the key period before the
Agrarian movement ended and the New Criticism began—when the oppos-
ing intellectual commitments of Ransom, Warren, Tate, and Davidson were
held in a temporary interdependence and the group actively dedicated itself
to the production of a new model for regionalist literary theory that might
somehow blend the core strengths of these two traditionally separate discursive positions. Although several commentators have already paid considerable attention to this shift from Agrarianism to the New Criticism, the reasons and motivations behind the transition remain difficult to identify, and we continue to lack a satisfying critical narrative that might explain exactly how and why Ransom, Warren, and Tate moved so quickly from the messy, overtly political, social, and cultural arguments they endorsed in *I'll Take My Stand* in 1930 to become, only ten years later, the key members of a literary movement which, according to some scholars, “eschewed sociology and politics altogether” in an effort to isolate the literary work from any contaminating contact with the real world (Spikes, 7). This drastic swing from one form of extreme social and political engagement to another equally extreme form of separation certainly re-charted the course of literary theory in mid-twentieth-century North American literature—and it unquestionably contributed to the dominant misreadings of the New Criticism which continue to circulate in the academy today. As I hope to demonstrate, however, the pure literary ambitions of the New Critics and the messy political regionalist loyalties of the Agrarians were never quite so easy to separate.

The Fugitive-Agrarians’ quest for an alternative version of regionalist discourse—a new, more theoretically advanced model that might better understand, interrogate, and articulate the complex relationship between a literary work and the real-world social spaces it both creates and represents—pushed this group of friends to their social and intellectual limits. The search opened bitter divisions which would never completely close between Davidson and his former colleagues, and it ignited several long-burning personal feuds within the group. Although the death of Agrarianism may not have led directly to the near simultaneous birth of the New Criticism, the end of one movement and the beginning of the other were not unrelated; and the transition from aggressive political action to contemplative literary criticism can be traced back to the group’s passionate and seemingly irresolvable debates over the true nature, purpose, and possibilities of regionalist theory. In the 1920s and 1930s, Ransom, Warren, Tate, and Davidson wrestled with the same questions that continue to haunt regionalist criticism today: Was literary regionalism simply a form of patriotism in disguise? Did it demand and require a blind loyalty to the home place? Were Southern critics expected or forced to appreciate Southern writing simply because both came from the same place? Or could regionalism be theorized in different ways? Rather than simply replicating a stable social reality and mimetically representing a fixed geographical place, was it possible that regionalist discourse might be pow-
ered by a different kind of motivation and that, instead of reproducing particular places, it might actively explore the broader social, political, and cultural forces that combined to produce any type of social space?

If we follow the key exchanges of this debate through selected essays, letters and reviews produced by Ransom, Warren, Tate, and Davidson during this period, we can begin to appreciate how advanced their version of regionalist discourse actually was and thus better understand the daunting challenge it presented within the group. The subtlety of the New Critics’ old regionalism has never received the attention it merits because the group’s brief commitment in this area is sandwiched between the more fervently patriotic work of their collective Agrarian pasts and the fame of their New Critical futures. Caught in a destabilized cultural geography where different politically charged readings of literature, history, economics and sociology were all actively competing to redefine the South, Ransom, Warren and Tate grappled with difficult arguments relating to the discursive flexibility of social space that were far ahead of their time, and they anticipated some of the key insights that currently enliven cutting-edge, twenty-first-century debates on the spatialization of critical theory. Though they seem like strange bedfellows and improbable allies, it turns out that the conservative, anti-industrial arguments Ransom and his colleagues developed as Agrarians in the 1930s share much with some of today’s most widely read analyses of North America’s postindustrial (and even postmodern) cultural geography.

Patriots vs. Theorists: The Struggle for a Philosophical Regionalism

Anyone familiar with the early careers of Ransom, Warren, Tate, and Davidson will know that this group never felt completely comfortable locating their work within the restrictive confines of traditional Southern culture. It was, in fact, a collective hostility toward the Romantic stereotypes of Southern identity that had brought them together in the first place, initially for their informal discussion soirées at Sidney Mittron Hirsch’s apartment and later for their more formalized work as the editors and recurring contributors to The Fugitive from 1922 to 1925. The early anti-regionalist sentiments of the group were easy to identify, not only from the escapist title they chose for their journal, but also in the aggressive editorial foreword which ran in the first issue in April 1922. Readers coming to The Fugitive for the first time quickly learned that this was a magazine on the run from “the high-caste
Brahmins of the Old South” and that its contributors strongly believed that “the literary phase known rather euphemistically as Southern literature (had) expired” (Cowan, 48).

The Fugitive’s highly stylized flight from the old South was, of course, also a journey toward an alternative set of modern European influences, and it is important to note that the literary inspiration which helped usher in the Southern Renaissance originated not in the South itself, but in literary sources far beyond the rather narrow borders of the region. Even at those earliest stages—Warren and Tate were only undergraduate teenagers during their first Fugitive years—it was clear that the relationship between the region they inhabited and the type of literature the Fugitives produced and promoted could never be adequately explained by the mechanistic sociology of environmental determinism and its axiom that “the place makes the poet.” As the very public squabbles between Ransom and Tate clearly demonstrated, the Fugitives of the mid 1920s were anything but traditional regionalists: these scholars were more interested in passionately debating the merits and weaknesses of T. S. Eliot’s newly published poem, The Waste Land, than they were in mimetically capturing an image of the “real” South (O’Gorman, 289).

During the key years of The Fugitive, Ransom, Warren, Tate, and Davidson were so focused on their literary activities that it took the infamous 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial in Dayton, Tennessee—and the controversy that swirled around that courtroom—to drag them away from their elevated aesthetic pursuits and back down to the earthy, blood-feud battles of sectionalist politics. With newspapers across the country and around the world running stories about the intellectually backwards South, its crippled civilization, corrupt history, inescapable racism and blinkered, anti-evolutionary Christian fundamentalism, the Fugitives felt an acute need to strike back against this portrayal and promote their own alternative reading of their home place. Years earlier, H. L Mencken’s widely read 1917 New York Evening Mail essay, “The Sahara of the Bozart” had mocked even the South’s capacity to pronounce the words “Beaux Arts” and described the former confederacy as a “stupendous region of worn-out farms, shoddy cities and paralyzed cerebrums” (157). Mencken even comically suggested that in the early twentieth century, a true Southern poet would be as hard to find as “an oboe player, a dry-point etcher or a metaphysician” and proposed that contemplating the vast intellectual “vacuity” of the South forced one to think of “interstellar spaces” and the “colossal reaches of the now mythical ether” (157). For the Fugitives, a group that so openly prided themselves on their refined tastes and their elite appreciations, such insults were particularly irritating and demanded some kind of response.
In a letter to Davidson, written in March of 1927, Tate formally cast off the disinterested persona of the literary critic and initiated the group’s regionalist resurgence: “I’ve attacked the South for the last time,” he declared (Fain and Young, 191). Davidson enthusiastically encouraged Tate’s rising patriotic passion, and both felt the need to re-contextualize their intellectual work and rededicate themselves to the Southern cause. Davidson had always been the most vitriolic partisan and the most conservative traditionalist in the group, and in later years the dangerous racist and paternalistic underpinnings of his thought would emerge and eventually come to dominate his readings of regionalist discourse. His arguments, some of them collected in his 1957 volume, *Still Rebels, Still Yankees*, re-entrenched the most essentialist patriotic readings of regionalism and served almost as the unavoidable antithesis of the more nuanced theoretical work that Ransom, Warren, and Tate were trying to produce. Throughout his career, Davidson was undoubtedly the most polarizing figure in the group; and in some ways, Ransom, Warren, and Tate’s migrations away from Nashville in the 1930s can be interpreted as symptomatic of their more fundamental intellectual movement away from Davidson’s way of thinking about regionalist discourse.

In 1927, however, before the gaping divisions within the group became impossible to ignore, there was still enough common ground for the friends to share, and though they bickered continuously amongst themselves, it was easy enough for the Fugitives to direct passionate anger outward against a common foe. In responding to Tate in May of 1927, Davidson fumed that the “progressive” politics of journals like *The New South* made him “sick with black vomit and malignant agues,” and that he was “too mad to die just yet, and ichin’ for a fight” (Fain and Young, 201). Even the normally more reserved Ransom, the self-appointed philosopher of the group and the most theoretically focused member of both the Fugitive and the Agrarian movements, was caught up in this wave of patriotic fervor and openly wondered how his introductory “Statement of Principles” for *I’ll Take My Stand* might “properly indoctrinate” enough writers to make the Agrarian project a success (Young and Core, 189). In less than one year, the group quickly disavowed their once passionate attacks on the old-fashioned romantic values of the South and distanced themselves from their former roles as moderately avant-garde Fugitive poet/critics. The newly minted Agrarians emerged as a militantly conservative group of pseudo-social theorists committed to a defense of the South’s traditional plantation economy, a critique of Yankee arrogance and influence, and, most importantly, an all-out assault on modern America’s infatuation with scientific positivism and industrial progress. As Agrarians, the Fugitives abandoned their former aversion to Southern
stereotypes and instead took full rhetorical advantage of the regionalist clichés they once mocked. The Agrarians’ first symposium took its controversial title from the lyrics of “Dixie,” the near-national anthem of the confederacy, and when *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* appeared in 1930, its contributors identified themselves not as individual authors but rather as a solid patriotic collective of “Twelve Southerners.”

Though the quality of writing in *I’ll Take My Stand* wavers dramatically, and the longed-for Agrarian revolution ended ultimately in failure, the symposium itself has been recognized as one of the most important texts in the cultural and political history of the South (Grammer, 127). As John Shelton Reed observes, “whatever else it may be, *I’ll Take My Stand* is a very southern book” (43). Freely intermingling aesthetic, sociological, religious, historical, and economic concerns, the Agrarians argued that a clear, regional distinction could be drawn between “a Southern way of life” and the scientific abstraction that characterized the “American or prevailing way” of life (xxxvii). In almost every essay, the Twelve Southerners criticized the abstracting tendencies of positivist philosophy and they stormed against the “Cult of Science” and the “uncritical” dominance of “industrial logic” in American life (xxxix–xl). Rather than endorsing the bland nationalist generalizations that promised a single coherent but conformist American identity stretching from sea to sea, the Agrarians, explicitly locating their claims always in the Southern context, argued for a more diverse understanding of the country’s cultural geography and suggested that such a diversity needed to be protected from the homogenizing forces of the “American industrial ideal” (xxxviii).

Despite its perceptive critique of industrialism, *I’ll Take My Stand* is still a product of its time and should be interpreted as a deeply flawed text, scarred by the divisive politics and the systemic prejudice of a troubled period in the history of the South. For Warren in particular, the symposium—dominated by its conservative “backward” look, racism, paternalistic antebellum nostalgia, and near mystical embrace of the Southern landscape—was problematic from its very inception and, as the book moved toward completion, he became increasingly aware of the chasm that was opening up between his Southern loyalties and his broader literary consciousness. He detested the title “I’ll Take My Stand” and tried to suppress it, and he struggled to produce his contribution for the symposium, a controversial segregationist essay entitled “The Briar Patch” (Blotner, 113). When Davidson (the true, but often unacknowledged editor of the symposium) first read Warren’s essay, he was so angry he almost refused to publish the piece because he felt that the “‘progressive’ implications” of Warren’s work might “irritate and dismay the very Southern people to whom we are appealing” (Fain and Young, 251). In
later decades, as *I’ll Take My Stand*’s influence expanded and generations of Southern scholars organized special anniversary events to commemorate the volume’s publication, Warren, who later became a strong advocate for desegregation and the Civil Rights movement, insisted that he be recognized only as a contributor to the symposium rather than as a true member of the Agrarian movement (Blotner, 301–2, 344).

Though *I’ll Take My Stand* raises many undeniable challenges and most contemporary critics would likely want to avoid any direct association with the symposium’s social or political arguments, the text should still be read as an essential document in North American literary history, especially for scholars interested in literary regionalism, socio-spatial theory and cultural geography. The volume’s introductory “Statement of Principles” is particularly significant because even as the essay seems to officially initiate the Agrarian movement, it also provides a fascinating glimpse into Ransom’s thinking during this key interval and reveals the latent irresolvable theoretical tensions in his work that would eventually overwhelm his Agrarian politics and make his migration into the New Criticism almost unavoidable. At the time of its original publication, the “Statement of Principles” appeared as an anonymous text designed by Ransom to function as a manifesto for the Agrarian movement, “a test of faith” that would demand each of the Twelve Southerners be “committed equally to the cause” (Young and Core, 189). Today, however, with the benefit of hindsight, it seems obvious that even in 1929 and 1930, Ransom’s broader theoretical ambitions were already making themselves felt in his political writings, making it difficult for him to endorse one-dimensionally patriotic readings of the South (189).

The “Statement of Principles”—like so much of the regionalist criticism Ransom produced later and like so much of the regionalist work that continues to be produced today—struggles to reconcile the most brutal materialist conventions of traditional environmental determinist doctrines with a more fluid idealist reading of Southern cultural discourse. Ransom seems unsure if the “South” he is defending should be considered as a thing or an idea: an inert and objective “natural” geography that can be mimetically reproduced; or a discursively active ensemble of historical, political and socio- logical forces. Even as he ploughs through his Agrarian call to arms, Ransom can never settle the issue and never comfortably rely on the stable naturalized option on which so much traditional regionalism is based. Though the “Statement” is designed as a political defense of Southern culture and though such a defense would normally require an appeal to nature and an argument in favor of a direct connection between that Southern culture, its Agrarian economy and its natural environment, Ransom never once suggests that
such a linkage even exists. Instead his version of Agrarianism is framed very clearly as a set of principles, a discursive construction that actually has very little to do with the natural environment. His defense of the South’s right to live its own kind of life is based not on environmental determinism, but on his long-held belief in the ontological specificity of this particular social space and the clear ontological differences he sees between different types of American cultural geography. The “Statement” is essentially comparative and, at its most fundamental level, its defense of Agrarianism is also an explicit critique of Industrialism. For Ransom, this is a clear question of choice: Agrarianism and Industrialism are read as two different discursive models of American cultural geography that create two dramatically different ontological experiences of social space. Because *I’ll Take My Stand* is designed as an antagonistic document, these two positions are never far from each other, and Ransom’s passionate argument in favor of Agrarianism functions simultaneously as one of the most explicit and aggressive anti-industrial statements ever recorded in early-twentieth-century American literature.

In his influential chapter devoted to Ransom’s transition from his Fugitive past to his New Critical future, “The Critical Theory of Defensive Reaction,” John Fekete argues that the rise of the New Criticism should be interpreted as a kind of scholarly surrender or capitulation to the forces of industrial capitalism which forced the marginalized Southern critics to shed their former regional commitments before they could move into “a new social location as part of the new professional (academic) intelligentsia” (46). Fekete suggests that Ransom eventually reconciled his “escapist” Fugitive tendencies and his failed “Agrarian protest” into the “cultural apology” of the New Criticism (47). In a dense but fascinating analysis of Ransom’s intellectual migration through these three phases, Fekete observes:

> The important point is that through his concerns with a traditional ontology slipping away from him in the social economic, cultural and religious spheres, and through his search for a new ontology, Ransom is able to develop out of the internal dialectic of his own historical position outside and somewhat distanced from the society as a whole, the adequate cultural ideology for a social formation itself in transition of social ontology, of the basic forms of its life, of the production, reproduction, and communication of its world. (47)

Although many critics have suggested, following Fekete’s example, that Ransom’s regionalist writings (as well as his later New Critical formulations) were essentially and even primarily concerned with this conservative idea
of preserving a lost tradition that was “slipping away,” the essays he actually produced during this period suggest instead that Ransom’s version of regionalist theory shared very little with traditional models of the discourse—as well as that his emphasis on shifting socio-spatial ontologies was actually far ahead of its time. In contemporary scholarship, for example, many influential voices associated with the “spatial turn” in critical theory—including thinkers as diverse as Edward Soja, David Harvey, Derek Gregory, Gillian Rose, and Doreen Massey—have argued that most of the readings of place on which we rely today need radically to reconsider exactly the type of “spatialized ontology” Ransom first recognized in the 1920s and 1930s (Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, 118). Soja, in particular, drawing much of his inspiration from Henri Lefebvre, has argued convincingly that the simultaneously “real-and-imagined” qualities of cultural geography have never been adequately theorized and that scholars in all fields of humanities research need to re-examine carefully their most basic assumptions about “the ontological priority” of social space and the “essential connection between spatiality and being” (*Postmodern Geographies*, 119).

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Ransom’s essays on regionalism were consistently focused on these kinds of questions; and his work continually drew connections between social space and ontology and interpreted the South as a discursive, intellectual construction. Throughout “Statement of Principles,” Ransom argues that if the South wishes to lay claim to its own unique experience of place, then the same, equally unique linkages between human cultures and the physical geographies they produce and inhabit must exist elsewhere throughout the country and around the world. Ransom routinely equates “The South” with other “minority communities opposed to industrialism” and argues that since the “proper living” Agrarianism endorses “does not depend on the local climate or geography” and is “capable of a definition that is general and not Southern at all,” the Southern Agrarian movement must “seek alliances with sympathetic communities everywhere” (xxxix). As far as Ransom is concerned, if Agrarian economic principles are to be endorsed as the potential savior of a unique Southern culture, those principles must be intellectually defensible on a broader scale, and any patriotic defense of the home place must rest on a solid theoretical foundation.

**From Place to Poem: Regional and Textual Ontologies**

The challenging relationship between Ransom’s theory and his politics which was only beginning to emerge in “Statement of Principles” becomes the
primary focus and later an irreconcilable conflict as his work progresses. Although his early commitment to the Agrarian cause had been strong and sincere, by the mid-1930s the signs of strain were evident, and it is clear that Ransom’s writing was moving away from a defense of the South and toward a broader engagement with aesthetic theory. In one very important year, 1934, Ransom produced his two most explicit statements on regionalist discourse—“The Aesthetic of Regionalism” and “Regionalism in the South”—as well as his most explicit statement thus far on New Critical doctrine—“Poetry: A Note on Ontology.” In retrospect, this twelve-month period seems a critical crossroads in his intellectual development. Both regionalist essays are directed by wider theoretical ambitions, and by 1938—a year after Ransom made his move to Kenyon and formally disassociated himself from the cause of regionalism—the true significance of “Poetry: A Note on Ontology” would be confirmed by its republication as the concluding chapter of The World’s Body.

Although these three texts seem to be speaking to very different constituencies and addressing very different topics, there are startling structural similarities among them. Both regionalist texts were produced after a summer trip Ransom made to an academic conference in New Mexico in 1933, and in both essays Ransom’s reflections on regionalism seem very different from his 1929 work. In “The Aesthetic of Regionalism” and “Regionalism in the South,” Ransom’s vision expands; he reflects on general principles of regionalist thought and continually portrays himself as a “philosophical regionalist” trying to elevate the discourse out of its marginalized and paralyzing local status (“Aesthetic,” 45). Despite its title, there is nothing patriotic about “Regionalism in the South,” and the text does not even offer a particularly positive analysis of Southern writing. Throughout the essay, Ransom struggles with his own terms and strains for clarity. In one revealing moment of frustration, he even mocks the entire critical category of Southern Regionalism. He notes:

> It is just as difficult in the South as it is elsewhere to tell precisely in what the regionalism consists. We hear it said here that the South has some characteristic arts, or a characteristic culture, or an economy, or a philosophy, or a “way of life,” that sets the region apart from other regions, and we hear it asserted that pains must be taken to make this differentiation persist. But how shall it be defined? (108)

Traces of Ransom’s earlier Fugitive-era skepticism toward romanticist stereotypes resurface in “Regionalism in the South,” and he resists the easy
temptation to ally his new model of regionalist discourse with its traditionally naturalized predecessors. The question, “But how shall it be defined?” is an obstacle he cannot easily overcome; he returns to it again and again. “What shall the Southern apologist name as the sacred essence?” he asks:

Is it the magnolias, the banjoes, and pickaninnies? I cannot but sympathize with the gentlemen of the *New Republic* in detesting these pretty properties as the way of salvation. Is it the drawl of the Southern speech, and the ritardato of labor? Or is it fundamentalism, agrarianism, classicism, the Democratic party, or some other variety of abstract doctrine? It is probably a great many things at once. (108)

The tone is important here. Ransom, in an essay ostensibly devoted to regionalism in the South, openly criticizes the most basic (and often the most beloved) tenets of environmental and/or cultural determinism. In his new formulation, it obviously cannot be the magnolias, banjoes or “pickaninnies,” nor the accents, the fundamentalism nor, very interestingly, not even the Agrarianism, which make or unmake the regionalism of the South. Instead, Ransom’s argument moves away from such one-dimensional essentialisms and embraces a more textured model which recognizes the simultaneous and continual re-combination of all these physical and imaginary elements; he argues that “there cannot be a regionalism at one place without there being a general philosophy of regionalism, and a number of distinct examples” (“Regionalism in the South,” 109).

Just as Ransom struggled to articulate the core insights of his general philosophy of regionalism, contemporary scholars descend into a similarly tongue-tied state whenever they attempt to explain the relationship between a located subjectivity and the seemingly objective conditions of social space. The same seventy-five-year-old question (“How shall it be defined?”) remains a common refrain in most scholarship today: for nearly a century, regionalist criticism has been at a loss for words, unable to locate, define, or precisely identify even its own object of study. As Michael Kowalewski observes, regionalism has been “condescended to by critics or simply ignored as a category because many of them simply lack a vocabulary with which to ask engaging philosophical, psychological, or aesthetic questions about what it means to dwell in a place whether actually or imaginatively” (174). David Jordan outlines the problem in a similar way when he observes that scholars who rely on terms such as the “the mystery of place” or the “indefinable air” of regionalism only “hint at the limitations of empirical observation, but they do little to clarify exactly what it is that the regionalist author is try-
As Ransom discovered decades earlier, the lack of a sufficiently sophisticated critical vocabulary has been the single most influential factor in regionalism’s arrested development.

In “The Aesthetic of Regionalism,” Ransom embarks on his most ambitious and sustained effort to test his localized philosophy of regionalism against a foreign cultural landscape and establish a new working critical vocabulary for regionalist criticism. Though the climate, the history, the economy and the landscape change as Ransom moves across the continental United States into New Mexico, the formal structure of his argument remains consistent, and he sees many analogous socio-spatial forces at work in both the South and the Southwest. In “The Aesthetic,” he returns to his high religious rhetoric—the essay was originally presented as a public lecture in Baton Rouge—and the document captures perhaps the last gasp of his near fanatical faith in the discourse. Rather than view region as an intellectual construct that comments only on where people live—their physical location against an inert and stable objective reality—Ransom uses the term to describe how people live, how they interrelate with the economic, aesthetic cultural and historical processes that both produce and are produced by any particular place. He argues that “regionalism is as reasonable as non-regionalism” and that “cosmopolitanism, progressivism, industrialism, free trade, interregionalism, eclecticism, liberal education, the federation of the world, or simple rootlessness” should be considered only as equivalent alternatives, rather than superior theoretical models to describe the relationship between the self and social space (47). For Ransom, regionalism produces a better local economy and a better local society, as well as a better local art, because it encourages an understanding of social space that is more intimately materialized and “less abstract” than the economic logic of “big business” (48). He believes that regionalism encourages an aesthetic potential that is unavailable in an over-rationalized industrial system and that “the machine economy, carried to the limit with the object of ‘maximum efficiency,’ is the enemy of regionalism” (54). In his formulation, the whole history of capitalism in the United States is seen as an unrelenting attack on regionalist values. Ransom claims that Americans suffer from a “mortal infatuation” with progressive philosophy and are consciously or unconsciously destroying the various regional identities that once made up the country (54). With obvious envy, he points to the ecological balanced existence of aboriginal communities of New Mexico and argues that, unlike the rest of “white America”—for whom regionalism “is so little an experience that it is often obliged to be a theory”—the cultural lives of the natives are so completely interwoven with their physical landscape that they “do not have to formulate the philosophy
of regionalism” (48). As one of the few American cultures that continue to exist outside the industrial economy, the “noble” aboriginal community of 1933, at least as Ransom imagines it from his seat in a passing railway car, seems able to isolate and insulate itself from the homogenizing effects of the mass market (55).

The spiritual component of Ransom’s argument here cannot be denied. In his rapturous appreciation for the aboriginal community and the nearly impossible to articulate linkages it forges between subjects and the social space they inhabit and create, he characterizes the interdependence of this relationship as “the birth of a natural piety: a transformation which may be ascribed to man’s intuitive philosophy” and “to the operation of a transcendental spirit which is God (“Aesthetic,” 49). For Ransom, at this stage of his development, a true region with a true regionalist culture is interpreted as a sacred site where a miraculous transubstantiation perfectly counterbalances the strict geographical materialism of nature with the more fluid cultural idealism of the local custom. “(R)egionalism is a compound effect with two causes,” he writes; it is a discursive construct, formed by the dialectical engagement which results when “the physical nature of the region” interacts with “genius of human ‘culture’” (49). Ransom sees this carefully balanced relationship between nature and culture, materialism and idealism, things and ideas, as the true achievement of any regionalist art and calls it “the best gift that is bestowed on the human species” (49). This is the core assertion that dominated his engagement with regionalist discourse from the very beginning. In his mind, regionalism captures a completely different type of social space, a different order of ontological being in comparison with the positivist options promised by the abstracting idealism of industrialism. Just as his embrace of Agrarianism was essentially defensive, Ransom sees the fragile ontological specificity of the distinct cultural geographies of America as the only alternatives to the mindless positivist aggression of industrialism.

In Mark Jancovich’s seminal rereading of this phase in Ransom’s career, he rightly identifies the shift from Agrarianism to the New Criticism as an “active tactical manoeuvre” that allowed Ransom, Warren and Tate to adapt and extend their economic and political criticisms into the aesthetic realm (12). According to Jancovich, “[t]he appeal of this cultural criticism was not that it failed to challenge capitalist relations or that it submitted to capitalist rationality”—as Fekete and many others have argued—“but that it argued for the need to reorganize aspects of society and culture” (13–14). For Jancovich, Ransom’s regionalist and New Critical projects are directly linked by their common hostility toward the intellectual abstractions of positivism and their common defense of complex cultural ontologies. “Poetry: A Note on
Ontology” (1934) changes the object of study from the region to the poem, but in many ways Ransom’s oft-cited literary essay replays and reappeals the arguments from his almost forgotten regionalist work. Much as “The Aesthetic” argued that regionalism was a compound effect with two causes, created by the dialectical tension which results when the physical nature of the region interacts with the genius of human culture, the “Note on Ontology” rejects both the overly materialist tendencies of Physical poetry (“too realistic”) as well as the rarefied abstractions of Platonic poetry (“too idealistic”) to argue in favor of the dialectical tension which exists in an integrated metaphysical poetry (92). Both essays map out ontological differences between types of regions and types of texts, and both essays defend the fragile metaphysically balanced sites they prefer against what Ransom sees as the homogenizing effects of positivist discourse. In the regionalist debate, positivism is represented obviously by an industrializing economy that sweeps across the landscape leveling all difference into one blandly conformist cultural geography; and in the literary debate, the same kind of positivism is represented by an equally bland and one-dimensionally utilitarian type of writing or socio-historical scholarship that cannot or purposely does not recognize the unique ontological status and possibilities of the literary text. Much as a region cannot be defined entirely by a materialist analysis of its physical landscape, nor by a completely idealist analysis of its cultural discourse, the literary text, in Ransom’s infamous formulation, is more than just a thing or an idea.

With so many common methodological parallels between the two arguments, it shouldn’t be surprising that the same religious rhetoric Ransom employed when describing the compound effect in “The Aesthetic of Regionalism” returns in “Poetry: A Note on Ontology,” and we see the unique recombination of materialist and idealist components in metaphysical poetry described as a kind of supernatural “miraculism” (87). For Ransom, the metaphysical literary text, like an authentic regionalism, possesses a different, and clearly sacred, ontological status. He claims that the “little secular enterprises of poetry” have a similar ontological status to religions and that, in an interesting interdependence, “[r]eligion depends for its ontological validity upon a literary understanding” (91). At the close of the essay, the metaphor of transubstantiation returns, and Ransom suggests that the type of poetry he favors functions very much like religion and crosses over that materialist/idealist divide to provide readers with “a God who has his being in the physical world as well as in the world of principles and abstractions” (92).

Most of the structures, metaphors, and methodologies that Ransom references in these three 1934 essays on regionalism and poetry can be traced
back to the mysterious, failed critical manuscript he abandoned and eventually burned in 1927. Provisionally titled *The Third Moment*, this book would have been Ransom’s first real contribution to criticism; and though no copy of the text exists, the core of its argument can be reconstructed from a letter Ransom wrote to Tate in 1926. Here, Ransom once again moves through his three phases or “moments” of literary experience, and he breaks these up into a first moment of purely materialist perception, a second moment of purely intellectual conception and a third moment of reconciliation, “a mixed world” and a “very advanced state” where art can be “conscious of the scene as we might have conceptualized it, and at the same time of the scene as we actually do persist in intuiting it” (Young and Core, 156). Although Ransom abandoned *The Third Moment* before even the Agrarian cause demanded his attention, it is clear that this structural and methodological template remained almost as a kind of default intellectual framing device for much of his subsequent work.

Although I do not wish to overstate this point, the tripartite structuring of Ransom’s literary and regionalist analysis anticipates almost exactly the kind of “Thirding-as-Othering” advocated by Soja in his landmark 1995 text, *Thirdspace* (60). Ransom’s early regionalist discourse and Soja’s contemporary readings of spatialized cultural geography are not identical, but the similarities between Ransom’s Third Moment and Soja’s Thirddspace are nevertheless quite remarkable. As Ransom called for a passage through his First and Second moments, before the “advanced” possibilities of his “mixed world” could be achieved, Soja’s contemporary analysis of social space rejects both the materialist assumptions of Firstspace analyses and the idealist assumptions of Secondspace analyses and calls instead for a similar “ontological restructuring” of the way we read and understand cultural geography (*Thirdspace*, 81). Like Ransom’s Third Moment, Soja’s Thirddspace “draws upon the material and mental spaces of the traditional dualism” but also “extends well beyond them in scope, substance and meaning” (*Thirdspace*, 11). A detailed comparison of these two arguments would extend well beyond the scope of this paper, but it is clear that in their shared rejection of exclusively materialist or exclusively idealist readings of social space, as well as their shared endorsement of “mixed,” “ontologically restructured” interpretations of place, Ransom and Soja’s work suggest that a conservative, anti-positivist, anti-industrial regionalist critic from the Agrarian South of the 1930s and a Marxist, postmodern, postindustrial critic from the L.A. School of contemporary cultural geography might actually have more in common than we might assume or anticipate.
History tells us that Ransom’s efforts to redefine regionalist discourse and to extend the theoretical foundations for Agrarianism beyond the immediate confines of the South were ultimately unsuccessful. *I’ll Take My Stand* never attracted the national audience its leading contributors sought to address and in the end, the fragile, more fluid and complex model of regionalism Ransom advocated in his later essays could never escape the overpowering influence of Southern politics. The challenges of regionalist theory were more daunting than the Agrarians first realized; and eventually, Ransom, Warren and Tate grew more and more frustrated with the patriotic demands of the discourse.

In a letter to Tate in 1936, Ransom announced his formal shift away from regionalist questions and his new desire to pursue the New Critical possibility of “an objective literary standard” (Young and Core, 217). As he sets out to establish his *American Academy of Letters*—even going so far as to include a rough canonical list of twenty-five poets who be welcomed into his elite institution—Ransom stresses that his quest for a new, more standardized evaluation of literary work will share nothing with the fool’s errand of his regionalist past. He tells Tate that this purer form of literary criticism will be strategically free from political influence and that it will “counteract the Agrarian-Distributionist Movement in (their) minds” (217). It is clear that Ransom is leaving regionalism behind because the social implications of defending the South have had negative effects on his national reputation and his literary work. “Patriotism has nearly eaten me up,” he writes, “and I’ve got to get out of it” (217). Though he admits that it will be “hard to reject the brethren and sistren,” Ransom is fully committed to the break and wants Tate to understand that his new Academy will never be “confused with a Fugitive or Agrarian organization” (219).

As we have seen, many different personal, professional, and theoretical influences combined to trigger the end of Fugitive-Agrarian movement and the beginning of the New Criticism. By 1940, one year after Tate’s controversial move to Princeton and still one year before the publication of Ransom’s famous text, Davidson was the only one of the key Agarians still living in Nashville and still committed to his traditional definitions of the old regionalist cause. He had been intellectually abandoned by his friends; and in a letter written to Tate in February, Davidson churns through an emotional mix of sadness and scholarly outrage. Although the letter overflows with self-pity and anger, Davidson’s diagnosis of his own position within the group is correct, and his descriptions capture the unique tensions of regionalist criticism.
and map out the exact point at which the literary ambitions of the New Critics finally overwhelmed their patriotic loyalties to their old friends and their home region. “We are too far apart on these matters,” Davidson tells Tate: “[w]e have not understood each other” (Fain and Young, 322). In one particularly revealing moment, he admits:

I am decidedly grieved by being isolated from my friends. I don’t mean physical isolation, deplorable though that is. I mean that I find myself suddenly at a disagreeable intellectual distance for reasons that I do not in the least understand. . . . It is this intellectual isolation, this lack of communion, which I feel the most. And it began before any of you left these parts. Why, is a mystery I can’t solve. What fault was I guilty of? Did I just fail to keep up with the pattern of your thinking, and, though once worthy, thus become unworthy? I felt, more than once, that there was a cloud between me on one side and you, J. C. R., and perhaps more on the other side. We were all apparently as good friends as ever, yet there was this cloud. I am not speaking, of course, of mere differences of personal opinion, about this or that, at any given time, but of something more impalpable. . . . I have been almost forced into isolation by my own friends. (323–24)

It is difficult not to feel sympathy for Davidson during this period of loss. But apart from his frustration and his isolation from the group, his overview of the Agrarian movement’s last days is accurate, and it provides contemporary scholars with an insightful analysis of both how and why the New Critics left their old regionalism behind. Although Davidson does not want to admit it, it is simply true that he did not “keep up with” his friends’ thinking; while they persistently tried to steer regionalist thought away from Southern politics and the objectifying pretensions of pure mimetic representation, he stubbornly refused to dilute his most troubling and offensive political commitments. The “cloud” that descended over the group was one of mutual frustration. Ransom, Warren, and Tate could not accept the limitations of a regionalism exclusively tied to the South, and Davidson was unwilling to support a more theoretical model of the discourse that explicitly abandoned its connection with these cultural and political indices.

Though this position will run counter to much critical opinion, I would maintain that many North American scholars have ignored regionalism’s continuing relevance in twenty-first-century criticism not because the discourse is simplistic, too conservative, or old-fashioned, but because it represents too much of a theoretical challenge. The highly charged personal and public arguments which tore the Agrarian movement apart in the late 1930s
continue to be replayed in contemporary regionalist debates; and the same disagreeable intellectual distance between patriots and theorists that once separated Davidson from his friends remains “in place,” as it were, today. Even the briefest survey of recent regionalist criticism will show that in the twenty-first century most of the criticism written about Southern, Western, Midwestern, Eastern, Prairie, or Maritime literature of North America continues to be published by journals or university presses from within these same geographical areas and that broader, general examinations of regionalist theory are still very rare and difficult to find. Rather than returning to Ransom’s failed quest and re-attempting the important but arduous work of constructing an entirely new critical vocabulary for regionalist discourse, and rather than rethinking the many fertile connections that might exist between literary regionalism and the expanding fields of contemporary spatial theory, most contemporary scholars have gone back to Davidson’s methodology and relied too heavily on the problematic critical inheritance of most traditional nineteenth-century versions of the regionalist discourse. Before we can even begin to evaluate regionalism’s role in a contemporary postindustrial North America that is so obviously dominated by shifting social spaces and by a cultural geography that is at least as imaginary as it is real, scholars first have to find a way to talk about regionalism’s function, and to explain exactly what it is that the regionalist text is exploring. The experience of the Fugitive-Agrarians in the 1920s and 1930s reveals this as a difficult task. But as Kowalewski accurately observes, “not knowing what kind of link can be established between self and environment is clearly not the same as denying that there is nothing to be known”; and moreover that “[h]aving doubts about the possibility of adequately defining regional identity is not the same as asserting that it does not exist” (175).

Notes

1. Every undergraduate textbook on literary theory contains a reference to the New Criticism and a historical description of the role it played in helping to define the study of literature within the North American academy in the postwar period. For the most influential contemporary scholarly characterizations of the movement, see Lentricchia, Fekete, Eagleton, and Selden and Widdowson.

2. Southern literary scholarship is a broad and multifaceted field that cannot be quickly defined or summarized. Working from a wide variety of different positions, Southern academics have moved through many of the most challenging and controversial regionalist debates in North American literary criticism. See Gray, Beck, Bradbury, Conkin, Cowan, Kreyling, and O’Gorman.
3. Though they were closely related and shared their four most famous members, the Fugitives and the Agrarians were two separate groups. Beyond Ransom, Warren, Tate, and Davidson, the Fugitive group included Merrill Moore, Laura Riding, Jesse Wils, Alec B. Stevenson, Walter Clyde Curry, Stanley Johnson, Sidney Hirsch, James Frank, William Yandell Elliot, William Frierson, Ridley Wills, and Alfred Starr. The eight others of the titular Twelve Southerners who contributed essays to *I’ll Take My Stand* were Andrew Lytle, Stark Young, John Gould Fletcher, Frank Lawrence Owsley, Lyle Lanier, Herman Nixon, John Donald Wade, and Henry Blue Kline. For more on the founding of *The Fugitive* and its membership, see Cowan. For biographies on the Agrarians, see Virginia Rock’s “The Twelve Southerners: Biographical Essays,” an appendix to the 1962 edition of *I’ll Take My Stand*. For a more detailed account of the relationship between the two groups, see John L. Stewart’s *The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians*.

4. The best analyses of this transition are found in Fekete, Jancovich, O’Kane, Gray, and O’Gorman.

5. For a good overview of the spatialization of contemporary critical theory, see the essay collections edited by Keith and Pile and Dear and Flusty.

6. For a contemporary reappraisal of “The Aesthetic of Regionalism,” see Wyile.

**Bibliography**


