

***Reinventing  
the South***

# ***Reinventing the South***

*Versions of a Literary Region*



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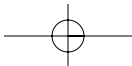
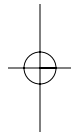
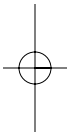
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*For Walter Sullivan*



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## Preface

In one sense, what follows is a random selection of essays written over the past twenty years or so. In the midst of this seeming randomness, however, there is an implicit pattern, which says much about the phenomenon we choose to call modern southern literature. By now, the myth of the Southern Renaissance has become numbingly familiar. Prior to the War between the States, the South had had a flourishing culture—if not equal in total output to that of New England, then at least competitive and certainly distinctive in character. Then, in the fallow decades after Appomattox, the southern people devoted almost all their energies to keeping body and soul together. Former aristocrats were impoverished by Emancipation and Reconstruction, while poor whites and freed blacks tended to do even worse. The leisure provided for some by a slave economy was gone, and with it the arts had seemed to disappear.

As late as 1920, H. L. Mencken could say of Dixie:

In that gargantuan paradise of the fourth-rate there is not a single picture gallery worth going into, or a single orchestra capable of playing the nine symphonies of Beethoven, or a single opera house, or a single theater devoted to decent plays. . . . Once you have counted Robert Loveman (an Ohioan by birth) and John McClure (an Oklahoman) you will not find a single southern poet above the rank of a neighborhood rhymester. Once you have counted James Branch Cabell (a lingering survivor of the *ancien regime*: a scarlet dragonfly imbedded in opaque amber) you will not find a single southern prose writer who can actually write. And once you have—but when you come to critics, musical composers, painters, sculptors, architects and the like, you will have to give it up, for there is not even a bad one between the Potomac mud-flats and the Gulf. Nor an historian. Nor a sociologist. Nor a philosopher. Nor a the-

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ologian. Nor a scientist. In all these fields the south is an awe-inspiring blank—a brother to Portugal, Serbia and Esthonia [*sic*].<sup>1</sup>

Although many southern intellectuals would eventually take issue with Mencken, most of them tended to agree with him in the immediate aftermath of World War I.

By 1930, the situation had changed dramatically. For the first time in nearly a century, some of America's most distinguished writers hailed from below the Mason-Dixon line. Even if the Northeast and the heartland each continued to produce more of the nation's major literary figures, those regions did so from positions of cultural strength. If the southern writer was not exactly a contradiction in terms, he (and a growing number of shes) seemed like nothing so much as an idiot savant, a freak of nature from a locale where apparently anything could happen. What was even more scandalous was the fact that a disproportionate number of these gifted southern writers seemed to come from the most socially reactionary elements of the region. Because the phenomenon was too widespread to be a mere hoax played on solemn but gullible Yankee critics, there had to be an explanation for why all these rubes were suddenly so articulate.

One of the most widely held explanations is what Walter Sullivan calls the Götterdämmerung theory of southern literature, first advanced by Allen Tate in his essay "The New Provincialism" (1945). According to Tate: "With the war of 1914-1918, the South reentered the world—but gave a backward glance as it stepped over the border: that backward glance gave us the Southern renaissance, a literature conscious of the past in the present."<sup>2</sup> In other words, the insular subculture that had been the traditional South was in the process of being assimilated into the mainstream of American life. It is precisely at this moment of transition when we are able to see a culture most clearly. (Previous generations had either taken it for granted or spent their energies trying to preserve it through rhetoric or strength of arms.) As it was ceasing to be, the Old South became an object most worthy of aesthetic contemplation, and those doing the contemplating were possessed of the proper ironic temperament. It also

1. Mencken, *Prejudices*, 2d ser. (New York: Knopf, 1920), 138-39.

2. Tate, *Essays of Four Decades* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1999), 545.

probably helped that the South had lost its own war for independence. If nothing succeeds in life like success, nothing succeeds in literature like failure. The winners may get to write the histories, but the losers, more often than not, have the literature of a given time and place all to themselves.

There were enough gifted writers who exemplified Tate's thesis and enough like-minded critics in positions of cultural power that the South was reinvented as a literary region. It was readily apparent, however, that not all of the talented writers in the southern United States were composing ironic and elegiac tributes to a past way of life. There was, for example, a continuing tradition of southern Gothicism that seemed to exploit the most vulgar and sensational elements of southern life. Because the Gothicists tended to bridge the gap between high and popular literature, they were far better known than the more aristocratic Agrarians. (If Carson McCullers and Truman Capote are the most obvious Gothicists, the most memorable works of Tennessee Williams and a good deal of the writing of William Faulkner also fall into this category.) There were also neoromantics such as Thomas Wolfe and James Agee, who regarded the strictures of the New Criticism as a kind of aesthetic straitjacket. Political liberals such as Erskine Caldwell and Lillian Hellman offered a critique of the traditional South on behalf of the economically disadvantaged and socially marginalized. This was also true of any number of African American writers, who were not part of any "renaissance" that the Nashville brethren would have easily recognized. And what is one to make of unabashedly popular writers such as Margaret Mitchell and Hervey Allen? The list could go on, but these few examples are surely adequate to make my point.

By the 1950s, it had become apparent even to neo-Agrarians that the Southern Renaissance, as defined by Tate, had pretty much run its course. At the same time, southern writers who fell outside the parameters of the Renaissance were making important contributions to American literature. It was only a matter of time before revisionist critics, who were motivated in part by their opposition to the social vision of the Agrarians, began to question whether the Renaissance (and perhaps even the South itself) had ever really existed except in the imagination of the Vanderbilt literary mafia. Unfortunately, whatever corrective value might have been served by these revisionists was seriously compromised by their polemical

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excess. Clearly, what was needed was a more pluralistic and even-handed understanding of the variety of literature produced in the modern South. Although not comprehensive enough to be such a study, this book offers preliminary thoughts on a handful of writers both inside and outside the Agrarian canon.

I have chosen to call the first section of this book “The Nashville Renaissance” for reasons that should be obvious. While the works of the Fugitives, Agrarians, and New Critics do not constitute the totality of important southern literature written in the twentieth century, they do represent a valuable touchstone against which to measure such literature. No other group tried harder or more effectively to define what it meant to be a southern writer in the modern world. If they were not wholly successful in that effort, their very failure enables us to see the achievement of others in a clearer light.

We begin with what many might consider the most problematic aspect of the renaissance—the political views of the Agrarians and their relevance to the world of the twenty-first century. We then look at the enigmatic John Gould Fletcher, who is a case study in southern modernism by virtue of being the only individual to have participated in the imagist, Fugitive, and Agrarian movements. The essay “Renaissance Man” considers some of the roots of the Nashville tradition by examining the influence of William Shakespeare on Robert Penn Warren. The fourth and fifth essays concern Monroe K. Spears and Walter Sullivan—two men who represented the best of the tradition in its long afterglow. We then bring the section to a close by responding to a quarter century of charges leveled against the Fugitives, Agrarians, and New Critics.

By calling Part Two “The Lower South,” I mean primarily a geographical location south of Nashville. Nevertheless, the writers considered in this part of the book also aimed at an audience less high-brow than any the Nashvillians would have acknowledged. We begin, appropriately enough, with the position of William Faulkner in the struggle to define modern southern culture. (As the title “The Faulkner Wars” suggests, the legacy of the region’s only Nobel laureate is claimed with considerable passion and plausibility by Agrarians and anti-Agrarians alike.) We then join the fray with a reading of the Mississippian’s last great novel—*Go Down, Moses*. If the Agrarians thought that Faulkner was well worth claiming, they just as insistently shunned Tennessee Williams, whose myth of the

South was radically different from theirs and at least as powerful. In *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, he gave us original treatments of enduring American archetypes.

While southern literature did not begin with William Faulkner or end with Tennessee Williams, the work of these two men historically spans the period of the renaissance. Consequently, the last two figures we consider, William Humphrey and Cormac McCarthy, are post-Renaissance (and perhaps even postsouthern) writers. At the beginning of their careers, critics identified both men with the South. Later, they came to seem more western than southern. Perhaps they represent that point in our mythic geography where the South becomes the West.

Most of the following selections have had a previous existence in various forms. "This Land Is Your Land" was originally published in the July 14, 2003, issue of the *American Conservative*. Parts of "Arkansas Traveler" first saw the light of day in the fall 1991 and summer 1998 issues of the *Sewanee Review*. A slightly different version of "Renaissance Man" appeared in Philip C. Kolin's *Shakespeare and Southern Writers: A Study in Influence* (University Press of Mississippi, 1985). "Incarnate Words" includes some material from an essay published in the *Hollins Critic* in February 1990, and part of "What They Have to Say about Us" comes from the winter 2002 issue of the *University Bookman*. The original version of "The Faulkner Wars" was published in the spring 2000 issue of the *Sewanee Review*. "Why *Streetcar* Keeps Running" first appeared in Philip C. Kolin's *Confronting Streetcar* (Greenwood, 1992), and "Come Back to the Locker Room Ag'in, Brick Honey!" was originally published in the fall 1995 issue of the *Mississippi Quarterly*. A slightly longer version of "The Achievement of William Humphrey" appeared in 1992 as a monograph in the Boise State University Western Writer's Series. Finally, "Scum of the Earth" was first published in the *Southern Review* in spring 1990. "The Legacy of Monroe K. Spears" and "Family Values in *Go Down, Moses*" appear here for the first time.

I thank Lloyd Davis and the late Ruel Foster of West Virginia University for introducing me to the Vanderbilt literary tradition and to the late Thomas Daniel Young for helping to guide my studies at Vanderbilt. George Core has been a faithful friend and editor for the past quarter century. I am also indebted to Beverly Jarrett and her

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staff at the University of Missouri Press for believing in my work and helping to bring it before the reading public. As always, my wife, Donna, and my sons, Jonathan and Matthew, have been constant sources of support and encouragement.



Neither this book nor the larger body of work of which it is a part would have been possible without the example of the man to whom it is dedicated. It seems to me that Walter Sullivan has never gotten his due as either a novelist or a critic. But his legacy endures, if only because the written word is the closest that any of us can come to immortality short of the Resurrection itself. As a teacher, I am glad to say, Walter has always been recognized for his extraordinary presence and dedication. Having taught at Vanderbilt for fifty-two years, he was the very embodiment of that school's literary tradition. I once heard a student tell a classmate that "Mr. Sullivan is a good teacher but *kind of set in his ways*." (Whether intended or not, this was a double compliment.) If, at the end of my career, the same can be said of me, it will be due in no small part to the inspiration of this remarkable man.

***Reinventing  
the South***

*Part One*

***The Nashville  
Renaissance***



 **1** 

## This Land Is Your Land

On October 30 and 31, 1980, a group of scholars and other interested persons gathered on the campus of Vanderbilt University to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of an unusual book. *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* had been published by Harper and Brothers in November 1930. The driving forces behind this volume were four poets who had been associated with each other at Vanderbilt a decade earlier and had been instrumental in publishing the *Fugitive: A Magazine of Poetry* from 1923 to 1925. Up until 1925, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, and Robert Penn Warren had been primarily interested in literature and largely indifferent to economic and social issues.

During the second half of the 1920s, however, they became increasingly conscious of their identity as southerners and their social responsibility as southern intellectuals. Although the reasons for this growing regional consciousness were as diverse as the men themselves, the great external catalyst was undoubtedly the scorn heaped upon the South as a result of the Scopes Monkey Trial in the summer of 1925. Thinking southerners either had to agree with the characterization of traditional southern culture as backward and unenlightened or had to formulate a philosophically cogent defense of that culture. The New South liberals of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and elsewhere chose apology and assimilation. Ransom, Tate, Davidson, and Warren chose explanation and defense.

In addition to the four major Fugitive poets, eight other like-minded southerners contributed to *I'll Take My Stand*. In opposing modernity, especially industrialization, these twelve appeared defiantly out of step with their age. In the best of times, they would have

## Arkansas Traveler

If one were to write a historical novel about Anglo-American poetry during the first third of the twentieth century, the ideal narrator would be someone who was at the important places and knew the important people, while remaining something of a peripheral figure in his own right. Perhaps what is needed is not so much a Marlow or Nick Carraway as a high-modernist version of Charlie Schuyler, the observer whom Gore Vidal uses as a guide through American political history from the age of Washington to that of U. S. Grant (a “progression” that Henry Adams claims disproved Darwin). During his troubled life and protean literary career, John Gould Fletcher came close to being such a figure. For that reason, literary scholars have always had trouble distinguishing Fletcher the poet and critic from Fletcher the paradigm.

A century after his birth, the University of Arkansas Press posed that dilemma for us once again when it began a decadelong project, which included the publication of Lucas Carpenter’s critical study of Fletcher, Ben F. Johnson III’s biography of the poet, and a selection of Fletcher’s correspondence, along with the reissue of four of his most important books. The impulse to promote Fletcher as Arkansas’s most distinguished poet is understandable, especially when one considers that his closest rival is probably Maya Angelou. There are two problems with this effort, however. One is the uneven nature of Fletcher’s work. The other is summed up nicely in the first sentence of Johnson’s biography: “John Gould Fletcher was a difficult individual to know and regard kindly.”<sup>1</sup>

If Fletcher was a man whom not even a biographer could love, he was also eventually estranged from friends and family. Although he idolized his distant and forbidding father, Fletcher detested his

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mother, and he regarded his sisters as little more than sources of needed cash. He began his romance with his first wife, Daisy, at a time when she was married to another man. After persuading her to divorce her husband, he gradually tired of her and her children and freed himself from them with a financial settlement from his annuity. (Cleanth Brooks once told me that his chief reason for disliking Fletcher was the savage way in which he depicted Daisy in his autobiography.) When his literary benefactress, Amy Lowell, died, Fletcher wrote to another sometime friend John Cournos: "I felt curiously relieved—as if something for which I was partially responsible, and did not care to be responsible for, had vanished at last."<sup>2</sup>

By the mid-1930s, Fletcher had alienated all of his fellow Agrarians except for Donald Davidson, and he was pointedly excluded from the second Agrarian manifesto *Who Owns America?* He embarrassed even Davidson by picking a fight with Lambert Davis, editor of the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, over his rejection of an article by Davidson. Fletcher publicly attacked Davis at a literary conference in Baton Rouge in the spring of 1935. (Ford Madox Ford, who also spoke at the conference, recalled "the figure of Mr. John Gould Fletcher from Little Rock, Arkansas, prowling at the back of the audience asking them why they do not lynch me.") Three years later, after Robert Penn Warren had rejected several of his poetry submissions to the *Southern Review*, Fletcher wrote a letter of protest to the magazine's nominal editor, Charles W. Pipkin. "The 'Southern Review,'" he fumed, ". . . is being run in the interests of a clique—engaged in proving that Donne was a better poet than Shakespeare!—and that T. S. Eliot and his imitators are the only modern poets worth reading!" Eliot was another early friend and patron with whom Fletcher had broken.<sup>3</sup>

Almost everything that has been written about Fletcher has focused on him as either imagist or Fugitive-Agrarian, although he was at the center of neither movement. Even his autobiography, which was published in 1937, stops a full decade and a half before his death. Prior to Johnson's biography, the only published record of Fletcher's final years was the fictionalized one in *Johnswood*, a novel by his second wife, Charlie May Simon. With the exception of winning a totally unexpected Pulitzer Prize for his *Selected Poems* in 1938, those final years were ones of obscurity and despair. If Fletcher did not become a more likable figure before his death, he

became a more pitiable one. He saw his literary stock plummet even as he became increasingly unable to produce new work. His last book was a moderately interesting history of Arkansas, and much of his waning literary energy was devoted to collecting Ozark folklore. (Several years after his death, his friend and colleague Vance Randolph told an interviewer that Fletcher “was a goddamn fool, but I thought he was a great man somehow.”) The relative tranquility of his second marriage was not sufficient to bring rest to his perturbed spirit. In the summer of 1944, he even contemplated divorce because Charlie May was becoming too much of a “modern woman.” Fletcher changed his mind, however, when he was stricken with dysentery later that year. “As the doctor bills mounted up,” he wrote to a friend, “I discovered that after all, my love for Charlie May amounted to more than I thought.”<sup>4</sup>

The last sentence of Fletcher’s autobiography reads: “I have not so far lived my life, that I need ever fear death.” A dozen years later he was dead by his own hand. In discussing the incidence of mental illness and suicide among southern writers, Bertram Wyatt-Brown notes the influence of cold and domineering fathers. He also cites the “late nineteenth-century transition from a primitive planter culture to a more modern and secular style.”<sup>5</sup> If this sense of historical discontinuity was particularly acute in the South, it was hardly unique to the region. Fletcher’s friend Van Wyck Brooks had much the same experience as a New Englander. He too went insane and even tried to commit suicide by eating pieces from the broken crystal of his watch. Brooks solved his dilemma by retreating into an arcadian past in a series of best-selling books on antebellum New England. Fletcher’s Agrarianism represented a similar impulse with less profitable results.

Fletcher’s autobiography (originally published in 1937 under the maudlin and misleading title *Life Is My Song*) can be read as a kind of Agrarian parable. Born in 1886, the son of a former Confederate officer and successful businessman, Fletcher grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas, where he lived in the historic house of Albert Pike, one of the state’s most prominent early citizens and its first poet of note. In 1903, he left Little Rock for Harvard, where (in the familiar rite of passage of sensitive youth everywhere) he lost his religious faith but acquired a priestly dedication to art. He read Nietzsche, the French

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of intellect in poetry. And they probably agreed with Ben Jonson that Shakespeare should have blotted many more lines than he did. Nevertheless, they were not willing to give logic the sort of primacy that Ransom insisted upon. For them, what was all important was not the poem's paraphrasable prose content but its psychological coherence. Because they saw *all poems* as minidramas, they were more willing than Ransom to accept illogic in poetry *as long as it was contextually appropriate*. Brooks and Warren extended to lyric poetry the sort of indulgence Ransom showed toward Macbeth's speech. Moreover, in their critical writing, they were constantly referring to passages in Shakespeare's plays as *poems*. This was true not only of Brooks's famous essay on *Macbeth* in *The Well-Wrought Urn* but also of the discussion of a crucial speech from act 5, scene 2 of *Antony and Cleopatra* in Brooks and Warren's classic textbook anthology *Understanding Poetry*.

The critics begin by reminding their reader of the circumstances in which the speech is delivered. With Antony recently dead, Cleopatra is now at the mercy of the conquering Octavius. As Octavius's emissary Dolabella seeks to arrange the terms of Cleopatra's surrender, the Egyptian queen remembers the days of her former happiness with Antony. "I dreamed there was an Emperor Antony," she begins, and her entire speech is couched in dream imagery that paints a picture of Antony "in shocking contrast to what any human being might be."

Brooks and Warren continue:

Cleopatra starts with a comparison so extreme as to break any ordinary logic—Antony's face as the very heavens, with eyes like sun and moon lighting the little earth. But the violation of logic is an index to the force of feeling that now breaks out. We feel a dramatic grounding for the violence and elevation of the utterance—with its sense of dreamlike release and apocalyptic grandeur—which is not like the language of, say, the Book of Revelations, another attempt to utter the unutterable.

In the second section of her speech, Cleopatra appears to be attempting a systematic description of Antony. But, as Brooks and Warren point out, "this systematic description breaks into a series of images which have no consistent relation to the main image with which the passage begins."<sup>4</sup> Far from finding this lack of systematic

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relationship of the lovers is compared to that of a conquered people and a benevolent despot, two suns, and iron and a magnet, whereas their misfortune calls to mind the fate of “blockhead masons” who tear down ancient monuments to build their hovels, a “wastrel bankrupt,” victims of an infectious disease, and a “pest-bit whore.”

As Stewart has indicated, Warren’s fondness for images of rotting flesh is also vintage Shakespeare. Consider, for example, the following lines:

But we have seen the fungus eyes  
Of misery spore in the night,  
And marked, of friends, the malices  
That stain, like smoke, the day’s fond light,  
And marked how ripe injustice flows,  
How ulcerous, how acid, then  
How flesh on the sounder grows  
Till rot engross the estate of men;  
  
And marked within, the inward sore  
Of self that cankers at the bone.<sup>16</sup>

During the eleven-year period in which he published no short poetry, Warren produced two novels, two volumes of short stories, and—in 1953—*Brother to Dragons*, a book-length “tale in verse and voices.” Regarded by some critics as his poetic masterpiece, *Brother to Dragons* clearly marks a departure from the Fugitive verse of Warren’s early career. Moreover, from both a thematic and a technical standpoint, it reveals aspects of Shakespearean influence found nowhere else in Warren’s poetry. The story Warren tells is based loosely on a grotesque incident in the lives of Thomas Jefferson’s nephews Lilburn and Isham Lewis. “On the night of December 15, 1811,” Warren explains in his foreword, “—the night when the New Madrid earthquake first struck the Mississippi Valley—Lilburn, with the assistance of Isham and in the presence of his Negroes, butchered a slave named George, whose offense had been to break a pitcher prized by [Lilburn’s dead mother, Lucy Jefferson Lewis].”<sup>17</sup> Because there is no historical record of Jefferson’s reaction to his nephews’ brutality, Warren has created an imaginative one in a poetic dialogue, which transpires at “No place” and in “Any time.”

In a discussion of the use of history in Warren’s fiction, L. Hugh