

James E. Person, Jr.

Fierce Faith Undying

The Fugitive Poets:

Modern Southern Poetry in Perspective

Edited by William Pratt.

Nashville: J. S. Sanders & Company, 1991.

Reflecting upon the current state of contemporary American poetry, what with "craftsmen" filling the nation's little magazines with ideologically driven chopped prose and calling it verse, it is hard to imagine that there was a time in this century when the American Republic produced giants of poetry. Consider, for example, Eliot, Frost, Pound, and Hart Crane. We may never see their like again.

Earlier in the century, the dominant school in American poetry was the Fugitives, a group of university faculty and students at Vanderbilt who met periodically during the 1910s and '20s to discuss poetry and read works in-progress to each other for enjoyment and criticism. Eventually they founded a magazine of poetry and criticism, *The Fugitive*, which was one of the key matrices from which sprang the Southern Literary Renaissance.

The Fugitives, among them figures such as John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Donald Davidson, have been called many things by their critics; but they were far too intelligent and subtle to be narrowly pigeonholed—except by the uninformed and the misguided. They were in fact sixteen friends, most of them Southern by birth, and heirs of the Great Tradition in American letters, though deeply influenced by the Modernists. Their work, especially

that published in *The Fugitive* (1922-25), was at once a final, Modernist-influenced backward glance at the world of their fathers and a confident stride into the uncertain modern age. It represents, fascinatingly, a rejection of both Southern Brahmin sentimentality and the overly narrow regionalism propounded by critics North and South. It employs Modernist techniques, rejecting "the pretentious frumpiness of chaste meters" (as Tate wrote in the April 1924 *Fugitive*) while embracing the best elements of the usable past as represented by the Great Tradition.

Given this, then, what a pleasure it is to commend *The Fugitive Poets: Modern Southern Poetry in Perspective*, wherein Dr. William Pratt has gathered an admirable representative sampling of poetry by both the Fugitives proper and other key contributors to their periodical (This is a revised and updated edition of a collection originally edited by Pratt and published in 1965). While some of the poetry by the core group selected for inclusion here was published after the demise of *The Fugitive*, all of the selections by other contributors appeared first in the magazine. Included among the latter are poems by Hart Crane, Andrew

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Lytle, Robert Graves, and John Gould Fletcher.

Among the poems by the central group is Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead," the central achievement of twentieth-century Southern poetry and a work that blends the spirit of Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" with Eliot's early works—and concludes with a stanza reminiscent of Poe's "The Conqueror Worm." Viewed in another way, Tate's poem resembles Eliot's "East Coker" in tone and setting—but without the hope that glows in Eliot's poem.

Having read an early version of the "Ode," Davidson was right when he wrote, in a letter to Tate, "Your *Elegy* is not for the Confederate dead, but for your own dead emotion. . . ." (It is intriguing and perhaps only fair to consider



JOHN CROWE RANSOM

(Photo taken by Donald Davidson)

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Tate's reply: "Was Keats' Nightingale Ode about Nightingales? And does he not, somewhere in the poem, assert his doubt of being able to utter all he feels about the nice bird? . . . [If] I have a living emotion about a dead one (assuming it for the moment to be dead), isn't that enough for a poem? It has been enough for many poems.") For his part, editor Pratt has perceptively described the "Ode" as a Southern version of *The Waste Land*, one that "shows a man trapped in time, honoring the past but unable to live by it, a victim of his own self-consciousness, tempted like Narcissus to embrace his own image and drown, but too stoic to give in to the despair he feels in the presence of evil and death."

Given that "Ode to the Confederate Dead" is perhaps the best-known work included here, the reader would be mistaken to assume that the Fugitives crafted poems that are primarily laments for what was lost at Appomattox—or, as Davidson wrote in "Lee in the Mountains," "The hurt of all that was and cannot be." There are, though, occasional calls by Davidson (the Fugitive most often given to distinctly Southern themes among these poets) and others to "look gently home."

Consider, for example, Ransom's "Antique Harvesters," a quiet ode to agrarian life and its goodness. And here I must offer a *distinguo* to a point made in Dr. Pratt's introduction as it relates to the images of age and death that are present in "Antique Harvesters"

and other place-centered poems in the collection. Dr. Pratt considers these images "evidence of the obsolescence of Southern culture, and proof that the poets were much aware of its transience and fragility." It is this "obsolescence" that must be properly understood, for the Southern culture reflected upon by the Fugitives possessed not the transient, fragile qualities of, say, those stubborn souls who believe that the Army of Northern Virginia could have *and should have* fought on to final victory in April 1865—and that today's Southerners should save their Confederate money. This is a belief in something that never was, never could be, and never can be: an exercise in futility, recognized as such and rejected by

the Fugitives. If Southern culture was (and probably is) obsolescent, it is the "obsolescence" of indifference and belittlement visited upon such elements of the permanent things as duty, courage, honor, chivalry, and regional loyalty in an increasingly neoteric world which worships utilitarianism and holds by moral relativism.

As for "Antique Harvesters" as an example of one of the Fugitives' chief "Southern" poems, Thornton H. Parsons addressed well the issue of obsolescence years ago when he wrote that, in the poem, "Young men are called upon to appreciate a stability that has been earned from harsh experience and that is appropriate for a life involved with death, a life that necessitates a constant falling off, a sad diminution. Like Robert Frost in 'The Oven Bird,' Ransom is walking a precarious line to avoid both a false heroics toward staving off despair and a grim resignation to inevitable decline and destruction. The great achievement of the poem is its tone of quiet courage without bravado, its elusive spirit of patriotism without overstatement."

Just so. All of Ransom's poems collected in this volume evidence the poet at his best, with the influence of Eliot (due to Tate's urging) especially at the fore. He is thus "erudite and sardonic, with a liking for the tart and a rare virtuosity of technique," as Babette Deutsch described him in 1927. Deutsch's assessment holds notably true for the often-anthologized "Janet Waking," which combines Modernist technique with that melding of matter-of-fact humor and

pathos so often a feature of the Southern mind.

Donald Davidson is represented by such poems as the superb "Lee in the Mountains," an interior monologue capturing the agony and hope of Robert E. Lee while President of Washington College during the last years of his life; and "Randall, My Son," a plea for the speaker's son to remember and value his heritage. Robert Penn Warren, the nation's first poet laureate, is

represented by eleven poems, chief among them the long, near-classic work, "The Ballad of Billie Potts." Another Warren selection, "Bearded Oaks," can be read as a postlude to Tate's "Ode." Dr. Pratt has also selected several poems by the only woman among the Fugitives, Laura Riding: "Dimensions," "The Only Daughter," "Sum-

mary for Alastor," "The Poet's Corner," "Starved," and the strongest of her lot, "Virgin of the Hills."

The book also features poems by several of the other Fugitives: selections of verse by Jessie Wills, Alec Brock Stevenson, Stanley Johnson, Merrill Moore, and the Lytton Strachey-esque Sidney Mtttron Hirsch, who presided at Fugitive gatherings while reclining on a couch and delivering magisterial opinions. Also included, as noted above, are poems by several contributors to *The Fugitive* who were not of the central group. Each of these is strong and memorable, with perhaps Graves's "A Valentine" and Crane's



DONALD DAVIDSON

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"Stark Major"—a poem that improves with each reading—being of special note; though Lytle's "Edward Graves" is a most worthy accomplishment as well.

In assembling this collection, Dr. Pratt faced an enormous task in selecting what to include and what to leave behind for future editions of Fugitive poetry. Thus, he had to bypass a number of noteworthy poems from *The Fugitive*, such as Ransom's "Blackberry Winter," Davidson's "Voice of the Dust," Tate's "These Deathly Leaves," Warren's "Sonnets of Two Summers," and the contributions of Witter Bynner and William Alexander Percy, author of *Lanterns on the Levee*. He did, however, append full and helpful bibliographies of primary and secondary sources to the collection. Dr. Pratt has thus edited an altogether well-selected, well-introduced, and well-supplemented collection, an enviable accomplishment.

As their name implies, the Fugitives were individuals in flight, keepers of hermetic

insights such as are granted to poets; in formulating their poetry they fled from the "moonlight and magnolia" school of Southern poetry on one hand, and the desire of Harriet Monroe, H. L. Mencken, and other critics to regionally compartmentalize their poetry on the other. This latter, according to Davidson, would have inevitably involved the Fugitives's repudiating their culture according to the dictates of those critics who see the postbellum South as Tobacco Road writ large. Under these critics' lash, the Nashville poets would have faced "the dilemma of the modern artist who in one act must both deny himself and express himself." This the Fugitives avoided by their Inklings-like discussions, the poetry they produced, the magazine they conducted, and the influence they effected. And in all this they played a significant part in converting "the Sahara of the Bozart" (in Mencken's jeering phrase) into a garden of literature recognized as such by readers nationwide.



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