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Introduction

From Renaissance to Reformation

> We must look forward to a golden age that we may surely help to bring about, not back to one that never was.
>
> Walter Hines Page, 1926[1]

> [T]he writers who are already established in the North and West are not likely to show any important new developments; their orbits are fixed, their worth and height are known, whereas, on the contrary, most of the important southerners are still in a process of development. One may argue that the South is the literary land of promise today.
>
> Howard Mumford Jones, 1930[2]

1926 Edwin Mims sought to set the record straight. The South, still reeling from the adverse national exposure brought by the Scopes Trial, seemed hopelessly captive to outspoken religious fundamentalists and belligerent reactionaries. Yet these recent victories, the Vanderbilt literature professor maintained, were mere illusions. A reformist impulse was reshaping every quarter of the South: the factories and the farms; the southern press and the universities; gender relations and the "race problem." Indeed, all signs portended "the coming of … the New Reformation." Mims documented these current trends in a survey, published as *The Advancing South*, in order "to reveal and interpret the individuals, institutions, and organizations that are now carrying on a veritable war of liberation in the Southern States." For Mims, no more important work was taking place than the efforts of these liberal reformers who fought against "the conservatism, the sensitiveness to criticism, the lack of freedom that have too long impeded Southern progress." Mims did not stop there, however.

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This war of liberation did not occur in isolation. With reform came "intellectual renascence."[3]

Literary and social critics alike gravitated to Mims' hopeful message of southern reform, for it offered a counterpoint to the long-standing popular characterizations of the region, which typically included political demagoguery, racial violence, profound poverty, and cultural stagnation.[4] Few were more enthusiastic than Harlem Renaissance poet Alain Locke, who understood at once the profound implications of Mims's study. In writing a strongly favorable review of *The Advancing South* for *Opportunity*, the journal published by the National Urban League, Locke elaborated on the twin impulses of cultural rebirth and social reformation at work during the 1920s. In so doing, he emphasized the interconnectedness of the two cultural efforts, namely the Southern Renaissance and the Harlem Renaissance and their attendant social reform movements. According to Locke, the New Negro and the New South shared common loyalties, objectives, and ideals. "Each seeks an emancipation from the old obsessions of the southern traditions – a revolution of mind and social attitude sought as a necessary preliminary to any really vital reform." Along with the demands for new leadership, new programs, and new policies came the "free-flowing and creative expression" of a stagnant yet still fertile "folk tradition." Locke knew that his linking of the New South with the New Negro seemed odd, perhaps even heretical, and he readily admitted that his contemporaries might not yet recognize "the common creed and common spirit" that linked these two movements. "History," however, "will see them as definitely the products of the same social forces of our time, and as inevitable collaborators in the new social order. Success for one," he asserted, "means success for the other."[5]

Locke overestimated the degree to which his colleagues would resist this reading of contemporary events. Indeed, his fellow authors, critics, and commentators were more likely to accept the logic of his argument than were later generations of academics, who tended to focus either on aesthetics or on the politics of literary movements and canon formation and not those of social and political reform. For Locke, the Harlem Renaissance did not merely coincide with the Southern Literary Renaissance. Neither was the relationship between the twin renaissances to larger reform efforts simply one of correlation. For Locke, reform perforce required and fostered renaissance.

Yet few scholars have located the Southern Literary Renaissance's origins as part of an indigenous reform movement encouraged by a similar effort in Harlem and aided by an expanding book industry that both

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manufactured and catered to a reading public hungry for literature about the exotic. Beginning with development of the modern publishing industry, publishers ensured that Harlem and the South were in vogue. The New York houses' lists demonstrated their interest in encouraging and promoting both artistic movements. For a time, William Faulkner and Jean Toomer shared a publisher, for example. So too did the Agrarians and Richard Wright, although nearly a decade separated the appearance of *I'll Take My Stand* and Wright's first collection of short stories, *Uncle Tom's Children*. Macmillan published Arna Bontemps's proletarian novel about a slave uprising in the same year it published Margaret Mitchell's paean to the Confederacy, *Gone with the Wind*. The major reviewing outlets carried ads for new titles in the twin renaissances, often on the same page, and the book columns and supplements ran reviews, frequently side by side. Indeed, the near simultaneous release of Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* and the first volume in Chapel Hill sociologist Howard Odum's Black Ulysses trilogy invited many critics to pen comparative reviews.

There were tensions, to be sure.[6] But those tensions need not forestall exploration of the works and reception of southern white authors who held more in common with Jessie Fauset than they did with Joel Chandler Harris or of southern African American authors whose writings more closely resembled works of William Faulkner than of W. E. B. Du Bois. Because problems of race and region influenced national development during the interwar years, the cultural work of the Harlem and Southern Renaissances invited pronouncement on more than just aesthetics. National critics often – not always, but often – evaluated a literary work on whether it signaled progress. Sometimes, a break from literary convention sufficed. Such was the case with critics' warm reception of Julia Peterkin's *Scarlet Sister Mary* and Jean Toomer's *Cane*. Other times, reviewers looked for an explicit reformist message. They found it in Mims but not with the Agrarians. Critics raved when they came across a single text that carried out the work of the renaissance and of the reformation simultaneously, as did Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* and Robert Rylee's *Deep Dark River*. Yet all of these works, critics believed, held clues about whether the nation could solve its most vexing "problems," each intertwined and born out of America's – and especially the South's – long and troubled history.

Despite these intertwined readings at the time, the role of the literary marketplace in fostering both renaissance and reform has been largely overlooked. Instead, the more familiar story goes something like

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this: Outraged by H. L. Mencken's indictment of southern cultural poverty in his 1917 essay, "The Sahara of the Bozart," a group of young white writers responded with a vigorous outpouring of literary achievements. And so the Southern Renaissance was born.[7] Over the next three decades, it was carried on the shoulders of novelists Thomas Wolfe, Julia Peterkin, Erskine Caldwell, and Caroline Gordon and by the Fugitive Poets and their essayistic Agrarian brethren. It culminated with Robert Penn Warren's Pulitzer Prize in 1947 and William Faulkner's Nobel Prize for Literature in 1949.

Collectively, these writers broke with every literary convention that had defined southern writing since Reconstruction. No longer exclusively defensive and nostalgic, they assumed a critical and distancing perspective on their homeland. They challenged the sentimentalist stories of Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris, the moonlight and magnolia romance about the Old South, but they also rejected the explicit racism of Thomas Dixon, whose turn-of-the-century novels *The Leopard Spots* and *The Klansman* advocated white supremacy and the rule of the Darwinian elite in the "New South."

Subject matter changed too. Renaissance writers ventured out beyond the plantation big house and into the seamy underbelly of the cotton mills or into "Niggertown." They wrote about the rapaciousness of white bosses who sexually abused their female African American workers. They wrote about native-born union organizers who threatened to overturn the industrial-capitalist order that had kept workers mired in poverty. They wrote about the lynchings of African American men wrongly accused of crimes. And they wrote about the insuperable odds faced by sharecroppers and tenant farmers who struggled to eke out the barest of existences.

Yet more than subjectivity and subject changed. Southern Renaissance writers experimented with form as well, adopting modernist literary techniques and approaches. Some blurred the lines between genres, mixing poetry and prose, reportage and folklore – sometimes in the same piece. Others engaged in stream of consciousness writing of Joycean proclivities. In both cases, writers sought to erase the distance between reader and character and encourage the reader to participate rather than merely observe. In rejecting the old ways, these writers re-created an image of the South for the twentieth century.

This has been the established narrative of the region's literary rebirth. In recent decades, however, the tendency has shifted to view this cultural rise as an invention (not a creation) of literary professionals who had a vested interest in presenting *an* image of the South – one

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that was politically and racially conservative and that stood as a bulwark against the encroachments of modernity – as *the* South. Michael Kreyling has argued that the process began with the Fugitive Poets/Nashville Agrarians, a group of twelve southern writers trained in formalism and centered at Vanderbilt University. In late 1930, the group published its symposium, *I'll Take My Stand*, which decried the social and cultural changes wrought by industrialization and urbanization. At a time when the nation was beginning to suffer from the Great Depression, the symposium purported to diagnose the country's economic and spiritual ills and pointed to "traditional" southern culture as the antidote. These men knew what they were doing, Kreyling insisted: "The Agrarian project was and must be seen as a willed campaign on the part of one elite to establish and control 'the South' in a period of cultural maneuvering. The principal organizers of *I'll Take My Stand* knew full well there were other 'Souths' than the one they touted; they deliberately presented a fabricated South as the one and only real thing."[8] Carried on by a later generation of academic critics, Kreyling contended, the Agrarian project had legs well into the third quarter of the twentieth century and established the canon of southern writers.

Yet this interpretation of the Southern Renaissance, like the Mencken mythology, is limited.[9] Beyond its almost exclusive focus on the Agrarians, it treats only what they wrote about the South and assumes that their words defined the image. Renaissance writers, Agrarians especially, knew better. If the Agrarian Project had triumphed by mid-century, its victory was still very much in doubt a decade earlier. The books, poems, and essays of the Southern Renaissance were not simply produced by the thoughtful literati. Rather, they were written and published by an industry that actively marketed, disseminated, and reviewed their contents for the benefit of the reading consumer. Just as influential as the writers, in the minds of the readers, were the national book reviewers who wrote for the intellectual weeklies, the Sunday book supplements, and the New York dailies. The construction of the Southern Renaissance began *in media res* – not after the fact. In short, it occurred because book reviewers told their readers it was occurring. Southern letters, they proclaimed, had become worthy of attention. And, as Alain Locke's review of Mims's survey suggests, the South was far more capacious than outsiders had imagined and certainly more diverse than the Agrarians had wanted. Thus, reviewers, in dialogue with the writers, defined the image of the modern South.

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Reviewing the South considers the critics' role in making the Southern Renaissance. Reviewers played the part they did because American readers read their judgments voraciously during the 1920s and 1930s. This process is easy to miss if one looks at the literary world merely as the stage onto which masterpieces occasionally and triumphantly entered. The focus on book reviewing shifts attention away from the authors at the center and analyzes the contributions of those on the periphery, where "intellectual chatter," personal rivalries, and marketing strategies informed the public presentation of a book, often at odds with authorial meaning and intent. Every book, big novels as well as soon-to-be-forgotten works, that was reviewed experienced this process and was part of an ongoing conversation. The publication of a book is, after all, not just an effect (of the author's genius or of some creative ferment in his or her milieu), but also a cause; it results in book reviews being written, which in turn provokes letters to the editor, rejoinders, hard feelings, counterattacks, and, finally, more books. To focus attention on the process of "making literature" in this fashion provides a new perspective on what has been pointed out before, that an "imaginary," literary South coexisted alongside a tangible one, shaped by geography, institutions, and social and political structures. This occurred as the South received increased scrutiny from national commentators in the wake of World War I.[10] This attention stemmed from efforts by both northerners and southerners to understand and explain the region during a period when its problems magnified those of the nation more broadly and when its literature and music emerged to give the Jazz Age its name and American letters new international purchase and resonance. In many ways, the movement of southerners, black and white, out of the South further encouraged Americans to become "South watchers," to borrow a phrase from Fred Hobson. So too did the national resurgence of the Klan, racial violence following the World War I, the Scopes Trial, and then the Great Depression. The drivers of the publishing industry ensured that those hungry for material about the South had much on which to feed.

Indeed, this period of intensified scrutiny coincided with the birth of the modern commercial press, with new firms, such as Knopf, Random House, Viking, and Farrar and Rinehart, quickly becoming powerhouses in the business. The growth of the publishing industry in turn encouraged newspapers to pay greater attention to the world of books. Beginning in the 1920s, a proliferation of daily book columns and separate Sunday book supplements reflected the growing audience of educated readers with disposable income and an appetite for books and reviews. The *Saturday*

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Review of Literature and the *New York Herald Tribune Books* were both founded in 1924, for example. So too was Simon & Schuster. Books "became news" at a time when Southern writers began to turn inward and interrogate long-held customs and assumptions. Simultaneously, northern journalists and editors found material in the South – oftentimes exotic – worthy of national coverage.[11] This confluence of interests created the perfect milieu in which reviews of southern literature took on heightened relevance. Without this dynamic, there would not have been a Southern Renaissance.

The critical and popular reception of southern writing was remarkably expansive during this period. Reviewers and readers found room for sentimentalists and realists, for traditionalists and modernists, and for writers of various political stripes and persuasions. That said, positive reviews of proletarian literature were more likely to find their way into some journals than others. Journals and newspapers offered their readers particular views of the world, and reviews, no less than articles and editorials, constituted an integral part of this view shaping.[12]

These worldviews were pronounced. The two liberal weeklies, the *Nation* and the *New Republic*, coupled with the monthly *Partisan Review*, all leaned to the left and published much of the nation's most trenchant social criticism of the period. Their reviewers tended to favor social realists and, for the most part, grew increasingly impatient with and hostile toward sentimentalists and traditionalists. The *Bookman*, known for its conservative politics and literary standards, stood at the opposite end of the political and aesthetic spectra and became an important vehicle for the more traditional humanists. While the *New Republic*, the *Nation*, and *Partisan Review* nurtured a generation of Marxist literary critics, such as Edmund Wilson, Malcolm Cowley, and James T. Farrell, the *Bookman* gave voice to Irving Babbitt, Norman Foerester, and Paul Elmer More. The *Saturday Review of Literature*, founded by Yale literature professor Henry Seidel Canby in 1924, appealed to middle-class readers and generally refrained from engaging in the literary culture wars waged by the liberal weeklies and the *Bookman*. Genteel in its approach, Canby's magazine attracted those readers who wished to stay current, who might even flirt with writers such as William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway, but who were not mortally offended by the likes of a Thornton Wilder, as were the readers of the *New Republic* and *Partisan Review*.[13]

Founded by Harold Ross in 1925, the *New Yorker* appealed to the smart set, those who poked fun at the earnestness of Canby's readers. As Ross quipped in the magazine's prospectus, the *New Yorker* would not

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be "edited for the old lady in Dubuque. … This is not meant in disrespect," he continued, "but *The New Yorker* is a magazine avowedly published for a metropolitan audience and thereby will escape an influence which hampers most national publications."[14] Its reviews, especially after New York native and former Simon & Schuster editor Clifton Fadiman took over the books department in the early 1930s, reflected the magazine's urbane and sophisticated wit and often took a critical, if not mocking, look at provincials.

Politics mattered, too, at the New York newspapers. The *New York Times* was liberal in its editorial stance, but its *Book Review*, managed by J. Donald Adams, was fairly conservative in its literary politics and aesthetics. Its appeal more closely tracked with the *Saturday Review of Literature* than with the *New Yorker* or the liberal weeklies. For the most part, its readers found safe, tempered criticism. The *Times*, however, boasted the greatest reach of any of the publications under consideration here. Book publishers courted the paper heavily, expending advertising dollars and sidling up to its editors even as they complained that its reviews were stolid and its politics retrograde. The *Times'* daily book column did not suffer the same reputation, for it more closely followed the paper's editorial stance and employed some of the most highly sought after liberal critics in the country.

The rival *New York Herald Tribune*, Republican in outlook, was considered the "writer's newspaper."[15] The *Herald Tribune*'s Sunday supplement, *Books*, enjoyed a similar reputation, especially after Irita Van Doren took over the editorship in 1926.[16] Never content to let the *Times* sit atop the reviewing world, Van Doren executed creative and aggressive campaigns to extend *Books*' reach and to siphon off publishers' advertising dollars. The *Herald-Tribune's* daily book column, written by Lewis Gannett and Isabel Paterson, was among the most respected in the business. Of the three remaining New York newspapers that took book reviewing seriously, the *New York Evening Post* maintained the most liberal stance; the *New York Sun*, training ground for southern journalists and editors, was the most politically conservative, and the once liberal *New York World-Telegram* became increasingly conservative as the twentieth century wore on.

To varying degrees, a publication's editorial stance influenced its coverage of the South. Some papers and periodicals engaged in a kind of open warfare against the region, condemning the South's laws, customs, and mores at every turn. Others proved much more sympathetic. It is important, then, to consider the location of book reviews alongside journalistic

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content published in the papers. Reviews of Erskine Caldwell's novels of "Georgia crackers" appeared in tandem with journalistic pieces on poor white southern tenant farmers. Reviews of Grace Lumpkin's and Olive Dargan's novels about southern mill workers were published in periodicals that covered the labor wars in Gastonia, North Carolina; Marion, Virginia; and Elizabethton, Tennessee. Reviews of Walter White's *The Fire and the Flint* and Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* ran next to editorials on lynchings and other forms of racial violence in the South.

Reviewers did not write their reviews in a vacuum. And readers did not encounter these reviews independently of the contexts in which they were published. By and large, readers expected that reviews support the editorial tenor of the magazines and newspapers to which they subscribed. When reviewers challenged such expectations, readers often protested, registering their dismay through letters to editors and publishers as well as to the reviewers. Although editors professed the independence of their critics, they nevertheless assigned reviews with the intent to meet the anticipations of their consumers.

This book argues for the significance of book review culture. The first two chapters examine the business of professional book reviewing, providing the technical framework for what follows. Together, they elucidate the inner workings of the book industry and its attempt to shape the relationship between cultural production and audience reception. The first illuminates the ways in which critics and managing editors, through the practice of their craft, staked claims to cultural leadership during the interwar years; the second examines ways in which the industry connected with its consumers. Both publishers and literary editors sought to develop "book-consciousness" among the public, to foster book-buying (and not merely book reading), and to encourage loyal and repeated patronage. At the center of each of these efforts were the reviewers. Because of the cultural influence they wielded, their comments transcended the world of books and had far-reaching implications for American society.

Following this introductory overview of the commercial book industry comes the analysis of how these processes informed the literature of the Southern Renaissance. Necessarily, then, the concentration is on the critical reception of novels and popular nonfiction. These are the genres that had the greatest public resonance. The poetry of Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren, the dramatic plays of Tennessee Williams and Paul Green, and the sociological investigations of Howard Odum and his students all contributed to the national discussion on the contemporary "southern question," but such works did not have the same traction with critics or

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their public. Book reviewing was a concomitant of the commercial market and, accordingly, notices were written to appeal to a broad audience of general readers. Fiction and nonscholarly prose were the bread and butter. Limited runs of verse, weighty academic tomes aimed at specialists, and plays targeted to New York theatergoers generally did not fit the bill.

Chapters 3 and 4 take up the literature of race in the Jim Crow South. Authors, critics, and readers all perceived the subject as fundamental in the move away from the nineteenth century, genteel tradition in southern letters. Many of the works, especially those penned in the 1920s, owed a debt to the pioneering investigations of race conducted by early twentieth-century anthropologists and sociologists, a connection not missed by critics, who often noted that some novels read like field reports. Many of the most popular were by whites, but African American writers gained increasing visibility as well. DuBose Heyward's *Porgy* (1925) and Julia Peterkin's *Scarlet Sister* (1928) both examined African Americans in situ, living largely removed from white America but observed and noted for their distinct habits and culture. An even more obvious convergence is seen in the sociologist Howard Odum's fictional-folklore account *Rainbow Round My Shoulder* (1928), leading some critics to question the intrusiveness of the "scientific method" in the field of fiction. They harbored a similar reservation about Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) even as they praised her effort at cultural recovery.

Other books, especially those written in the 1930s, engaged explicitly the politics of Jim Crow, a development that began in the 1920s but increasingly resonated in Depression-era America. The South's repressive violence had long persuaded northerners that the region stood apart from the rest of the nation and that racial oppression was a southern phenomenon. Yet the critical response to these works, including T. S. Stribling's *Birthright* (1922), Walter White's *Fire in the Flint* (1924), Arna Bontemps' *Black Thunder* (1936), and Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), suggested to readers that fissures threatened Jim Crow's foundation.

If issues of race resonated with American readers during the interwar years, so too did issues of class. As southern poverty came under intensified scrutiny during the early years of the Great Depression, critics turned attention toward works of southern fiction and prose about the region's poor in order to gauge the South's prospects for economic rehabilitation. As Chapters Five and Six demonstrate, reviewers faced diverse and often contradictory images of those poor. Chapter 5 examines critical

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