The Archives

The Fugitive Issue

Montgomery Bell Academy’s Literary Magazine

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Fugitive House on Whitland Avenue

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It may come as a surprise to the outside observer to think that at one time Nashville, Tennessee was a thriving center of intellectual and stylistic advances in the literary and, more specifically, poetic world; furthermore, to consider that the atmosphere exuded by this southern capital, with its epicenter at the Vanderbilt University campus, engendered not only a significant group or “school” of modern writers and critics, but, in many ways, the school, especially in America, of such innovations, is equally astonishing. Such was the case during the second decade of the twentieth century, when a group of young intellectuals met regularly in Nashville to read and to discuss their work. While many literary figures associated with the American South have been limited and, perhaps, stifled by what H. L. Mencken saw as an oppressive environment, the fact that these individuals were able to express distinctly southern sentiments, while simultaneously maintaining a universal, cosmopolitan sense of the times, further attests to their significance on the world stage. This group, self-dubbed “The Fugitives,” has been for various reasons criticized and overlooked by those who would write off their accomplishments as mere accident in the tapestry of American literature. It is the wish of Archives to make known the Fugitives’ many literary achievements, while, at the same time, emphasizing their connections to the Nashville area, Vanderbilt University, and Montgomery Bell Academy, by providing a brief account of their history, purpose, and continued international prestige.

Beginning as little more than amateurs interested in the sharing of common ideas, a group of young scholars and teachers from Vanderbilt began meeting under the leadership of Sidney Hirsch in 1915. Although he had almost no formal education, Hirsch was a widely-traveled, well-read patron of the arts, whose Greek pageant “The Fire Regained” expressed his desire to establish Nashville as the “Athens of the South.” During this period, the group often met at the home of Hirsch’s brother-in-law James Frank. This gathering-place, complete with a historical marker acknowledging the Fugitives’ presence, still stands today on Whitland Avenue, a short distance from the MBA campus. Under this roof, the Rhodes scholar John Crowe Ransom, the classically-trained Donald Davidson, and several others, engaged in vivacious intellectual discussion and argument, often of a philosophical and linguistic nature. The introduction of Chaucerian scholar Walter Clyde Curry further augmented the group. After a brief hiatus during the First World War, the group entered their next phase with a renewed sense of historical significance.

1921 marked an important year in the evolution of the group and of modern literature in general. As the group sought to convey more complex modern ideas and concerns, poetry became their chosen medium of expression. This decision was based partly on the fact that Ransom had already achieved success with his 1919 publication *Poems About God*, a work highly praised by Robert Frost. It was in 1921 that Allen Tate, a senior at Vanderbilt, was admitted into Ransom’s philosophy club. Tate’s fresh, energetic view of the modern world proved to be the impetus needed to advance the ideas established by Ransom. Tate entered the group with the most developed understanding of modern poetry, and often engaged with the other members in disputes and passionate discussions about the intricacies of poetic style. It was with this renewed energy that Sidney Hirsch coined the term “Fugitive” to describe the southerner’s alienation from modern civilization. With this new identity, the group decided in 1922 to begin their own literary magazine, *The Fugitive*.

The year of the first issue of *The Fugitive* is, as any reader moderately acquainted with the evolution of literature will concede, a red-letter date in modern literary style and consciousness. It was in 1922 that T.S. Eliot poured all of the emotions, concerns, and terrors of the disillusioned post-war generation onto paper in the form of *The Waste Land*. James Joyce posed universal truths on an individual level in his groundbreaking novel *Ulysses*. In short, this year served as the crowning glory of the High-modernists, in the movement so carefully planned out by Ezra Pound and the Imagists. That the Fugitives chose this year to step onto the literary scene attests to their great sense of the spirit of the age, the *Zeitgeist*. Indeed, the Fugitives, as a literary school, transcended the boundaries of the South to obtain an international reputation challenging that of the Imagists. That having been said, it is important to
understand the Fugitives as a force complementary to the Imagists, rather than as an extension of Imagist-style modernism. The Fugitives were classicists and traditionalists who, more than anything, chafed against the onslaught of modern industrial society. While they more or less expressed sentiments similar to those seen in the works of writers like Eliot, they consciously conformed to traditional style and technique in order to assert a return to the agrarian, Southern lifestyle of the past. Far from reactionary, far from condoning every aspect of the Old South, they attempted, through their critical analysis and poetry, to project the virtues of a bygone era into the future.

The Fugitive represented a careful balance between conventional poetic form and the suffocating plight of the modern southerner, trapped between an unsavory past and a deteriorating future. Donald Davidson, in a poignantly elucidating statement, once said, “The strangest thing in contemporary poetry is that innovation and conservatism exist side by side.” In this way, the name “Fugitive” is an apt description of what the group, located in the relatively unsung city of Nashville, sought to achieve. In the first two issues of The Fugitive, the group even went so far as to express its sense of intellectual alienation in modern society by each member’s assuming a pseudonym. Readers saw poems written by such authors as Roger Prim, Robin Gallivant, L. Oafer, Feathertop, and Dendric. It is no wonder that Vanderbilt and the city of Nashville were excited about the arrival of these new poets.

The Fugitive continued to achieve great success after its initial publication, and, in many ways, became a forum of the most important southern literature and critique. Ransom enjoyed some of his greatest accomplishments by publishing well-known poems such as the hauntingly romantic “Philomela,” “Bells for John Whiteside’s Daughter,” “Blue Girls,” and “Piazza Piece,” all of which exude Ransom’s unique style and love of witty, satirical, and intellectual verse, reminiscent of John Donne’s metaphysical poetry. Another Fugitive and MBA graduate, Merrill Moore, achieved success in his own right, and, during the course of his career, composed more sonnets than anyone else in literary history, with an estimated 50,000 poems. The Fugitive is also credited with the discovery of future poet laureate and Pulitzer-Prize winning author of All the King’s Men, Robert Penn Warren, who was published in the magazine while he was a sophomore at Vanderbilt in 1923. Warren would also go on to become a major participant of the post-Fugitive Agrarian movement. The magazine also served as a forum of intellectual debate where Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom presented a discussion of “the present state of poetry,” with Ransom defending the traditionalist side and Tate asserting the importance of Symbolism. The Fugitive magazine ran its course by December 1925, when the poets announced a suspension in its publication. With the magazine at the height of its success, and its writers still churning out meaningful verse, the magazine’s end was brought about neither by pecuniary loss nor by creative drought, but because its writers were too busily engaged in their independent careers to find time to continue its publication. In consideration of the magazine’s influence on modern literature, it is important to realize that its authors did not act under any influence or organization higher than their own desires to explain the world independently through poetry. The poets did not associate with Vanderbilt or with any other institution, nor did they seek inspiration outside of their own common ideals and experiences, and that independence forms a major part of the Fugitive legacy today.

Much of the Fugitives’ energy flowed from the young Allen Tate who, as the most cosmopolitan member of the group, helped to evolve the literary sensitivities of the Fugitive school. An example of his critical eye was displayed when he stepped forward as one of the first to praise T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land, and to maintain its importance in the face of John Crowe Ransom’s scathing dismissal of the work; furthermore, Tate’s position on the international stage is firmly established in his associations with such well-known poets as Robert Lowell and Hart Crane, as well as in his extensive correspondence with Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot (some of which is represented in this magazine). It is largely through the efforts of Tate that the Fugitives have been able to maintain international prestige to this day. Tate saw the Fugitives in the context of time, past and present, and he considered their experience linked with that of the Southern Gothic tradition of Edgar Allen Poe, as he points out in his essay, “Our Cousin, Mr. Poe.” During the Fugitive years, Tate was able to summarize the sentiments of the group, and he spoke most loudly for the school as a whole in his poem “The Mediterranean”:

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Where we went in the black hull no light moved
But a gull white-winged along the feckless wave,
The breeze, unseen but fierce as a body loved,
That boat drove onward like a willing slave:

Where we went in the small ship the seaweed
Parted and gave to us the murmuring shore
And we made feast and in our secret need
Devoured the very plates Aeneas bore

Likewise, Tate summarized the plight of southern existence in his most famous poem, “Ode to the Confederate Dead,” published in 1928. The last stanza represents an almost Horatian worldview, as the narrator reaches an epiphany concerning the over-idealized Southern past and his place in a society that has long forgotten the grandeur of the antebellum South, “that orient of the thick and fast” as Tate calls it. The narrator concedes the transience of life and wonders at his own futile existence:

Leave now
The shut gate and the decomposing wall:
The gentle serpent, green in the mulberry bush,
Riots with his tongue through the hush--
Sentinel of the grave who counts us all!

After his Fugitive years, Tate spent time in New York City where he became associated with Hart Crane. After marrying the Kentucky novelist Caroline Gordon, Tate lived with her in their home in Clarksville, Tennessee, where the couple entertained some of the most prominent literary figures of the time, including F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, T.S. Eliot, and Ford Madox Ford. Until 1942 Tate was poet in residence at Princeton University where he founded the creative writing program, and, in 1943-44, he served as Poet Laureate of the United States. Tate also worked to transform the Sewanee Review into one of the most prestigious literary magazines in the country. Additionally, he was regarded as one of the foremost literary critics of his time. In 1966, while teaching at the University of Minnesota, Tate met Helen Heinz, the woman with whom he would spend the rest of his life. After moving back to Nashville, Tate died in 1979. Allen Tate’s sons John and Ben are both MBA graduates. Among the many other Fugitive connections to MBA is Ridley Wills, former chairman of the board of directors and son of Fugitive Poet Jesse Wills. Current MBA science teacher Gordon Chenery is the cousin of Allen Tate’s former wife Caroline Gordon. MBA English teacher Haywood Moxley is the neighbor and friend of Allen Tate’s widow, Helen Tate.

Because of the literary accomplishments of the Fugitive poets and their influence in American literary criticism, Archives felt it appropriate to celebrate their association with the Nashville area. Archives hopes that this commemorative issue will achieve its goal of increasing public knowledge and interest in the Fugitive group, especially within the Nashville community.
Fugitive Reunion, 1956
(from left): Tate, Moore, Warren, Ransom, Davidson
Interview with Helen Tate
By Thomas Moore

While a teacher at the University of Minnesota, Allen Tate met Helen Heinz, the woman whom he would marry in 1966 and with whom he would spend the rest of his life. Shortly after their marriage, the couple moved to Sewanee, Tennessee, and, later, to Nashville. Since Allen Tate’s death in 1979, Mrs. Tate has lived in her home in Nashville, with her sons John and Ben both graduating from MBA. Earlier this spring, Archives had the opportunity of interviewing Mrs. Tate to ask her about her perspectives concerning the Fugitive Group, Allen Tate, New Criticism and the state of literature in general. Archives would like to extend its appreciation to Mrs. Tate for her time and the generosity she showed in helping to elucidate the finer points of her husband’s work.

Archives: In 1915, a group of southern intellectuals under the leadership of John Crowe Ransom began meeting to discuss their ideas. Later, of course, people like Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren joined the group. How does one explain why and how a group like this was able to come together when and where they did, seemingly by chance, to accomplish what they did? How did this happen especially within the historical context of the early 20th century?

Helen Tate: Well, it really started as a local discussion, and people began to bring up things they had read; then people began to critique each other’s work. I think that, at the time, there was a lot of discontent with the Northern perspective of the South, and the Fugitives set out to prove that there was valuable literature coming from the South. After World War I, they focused on their intent to write and to express themselves through intellectual poetry. The encouragement they received from one another was also an important factor. If John Crowe Ransom hadn’t been there, I don’t know if they would have blossomed.

A: What do you see as the catalyst that enabled these Southern writers to write as they did?

HT: I don’t know if they consciously set out to prove anything other than Southern intellectualism. Were they motivated by self-expression, or by the need to find an audience? I don’t know. As writers, they were extremely motivated, and not content just to sit in the back room. The established publishing environment in Nashville at the time, seen especially in the religious publishing companies, also gave them a fitting background to start their magazine. Allen [Tate] was a huge admirer of T.S. Eliot. Whereas Eliot found his grounding when he became an Anglican, Southern intellectualism was very important for Allen. He found a steady grounding in the Old South, the good manners, the traditions, the leisure time.

A: How important is the Fugitive legacy today, both in terms of their literature and the way they made people look at literature?

HT: I do think there was a tremendous influence. They became extremely well-known, even in the North. The early influence they exerted was a key factor. Their early determination and motivation helped them to spread their ideas. When Robert Penn Warren published All the
King’s Men, their legacy was further ensured. But they achieved great early recognition, and that led to their success.

A: Why are the Fugitives not recognized more today, especially in the South? It seems they get more recognition in the North.

HT: The English department at Vanderbilt certainly drifted away from the Fugitive legacy. The study of their poetry hasn’t really been encouraged lately. Vanderbilt really rode on the Fugitives’ reputations for a while, but not now. I think today’s changing times have a lot to do with it as well. Their poetry is very complicated, especially within the context of today’s different times. They continue to be popular in the North, though, and even in places like London. People know about the Fugitives there.

A: Allen Tate was able to assume a less provincial and more cosmopolitan view of literature, as his connections to people like Eliot, Pound, Hart Crane, and Ford Madox Ford indicate. What is the significance of this, and what drove him to escape the bonds of Southern culture, and to be able to comment on it from a removed position?

HT: The friends he made were the greatest influences on him. His living in New York for a while served as a springboard as well. The expatriate writers in particular always fascinated him. This fascination allowed him to establish friends throughout the literary world. He had a keen interest in the world’s literature, although he was never keen on Robert Frost. I remember he had to give a paper once on Robert Frost, and he dreaded it. But he wasn’t shy about meeting people, and his work with different small literary magazines also helped cultivate his friendships. He also had a keen interest in Civil War history, and the others really didn’t keep that connection alive.

A: What, to you, makes Allen Tate’s poetry stand out among the rest?

HT: Well, I don’t know if it all stands out. Of course his poem “Ode to the Confederate Dead” is always in the collections. Robert Penn Warren’s poetry collection Audubon is always very popular. So does Allen’s poetry really stand out? I don’t know. He visited so many universities, lectured at so many places, that I suppose he might be more well-known because of that.

A: What would Allen Tate think of the present state of poetry, and of literature in general?

HT: It depends. There’s some good poetry around. In the Sewanee Review, for example, there are some good poets. But I don’t think Allen would ever go towards confessional poetry. He would probably just say, “No thanks, I’m not interested.” He wouldn’t even bother to comment on most of it.

A: How do you see the future of literature developing in the modern era, complete with all of the modern distractions?
**HT:** Well, first of all, newspapers will become a thing of the past. They’re already meeting their demise. I could never stand to read off of the little screens on the Kindles. Is the written word going to become obsolete? People today just don’t have the commitment to be intellectually stimulated by reading. I don’t think books will completely disappear. Publishers like Princeton University Press will survive, because they’re committed to publishing works of research. People will continue to buy well-researched books from these University presses, because there’s no other outlet.

**A:** What do you think of New Criticism, and how big of a role did Allen Tate play in its development?

**HT:** It was a much bigger movement than the Fugitives, but they were so interested in form and expression that they played a large role. Allen was particularly interested in the metaphysical poetry of John Donne, and that interest was reflected by the New Critics. But New Criticism was a wide ranging movement. When you fail to give an opinion about something, it has lost its importance, and the New Critics believed that you shouldn’t read something into a work of literature that’s not really there. You can form opinions, but when you look at a picture, you must see it for what it is.

**A:** Besides his poetry, what role did literary criticism play in Allen Tate’s life?

**HT:** He was such an avid reader, and read works with such great understanding, it was amazing. He could encompass so much in such a sort time. Robert Penn Warren never published a poem that Allen didn’t read first. Was that opinion or criticism? I mean it gets very interwoven. When he saw something “trashy,” he wouldn’t even give his opinion.

**A:** What is your opinion about the recent NPT documentary on the Fugitives?

**HT:** I thought it was good. I thought Wyatt Prunty was good. Michael Kreyling was good, but I thought there was an edge in what he said. He didn’t want to be too complimentary. I give them credit for pursuing it though. I wish they had gone further than the Fugitive period though. The racial thing is there, of course. You can’t deny it. People always judge things out of context; they judge it by today’s standards. Was it necessary to bring *I’ll Take my Stand* up? No, it wasn’t. I think it was off-course. But it was what it was. But they did go on to say these writers went on to other things. I applaud them for that.

**A:** What is your favorite Allen Tate poem?

**HT:** I’ve always liked “The Mediterranean,” “The Swimmers,” and “Seasons of the Soul.”

**A:** Do you have any special anecdotes about Allen Tate that you would like to share?

**HT:** I remember one time Allen was giving a reading to a ladies’ club in South Carolina. He was reading “Ode to the Confederate Dead.” After he finished, all the women stood up and
started clapping. Allen told them that there was no need for them to stand for him, and they said, “No, we’re standing for the Confederate dead.”
Letters of Correspondence and Other Documents

First Document: Allen Tate cemented his international reputation through his associations with the great writers of his time. Archives has included several letters of correspondence between Allen Tate, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound. Tate and Eliot maintained a voluminous correspondence, often of a literary nature, as can been seen in the first document.

Second Document: After Ezra Pound’s controversial endorsement of the Italian Fascist regime, many prominent writers were concerned about the expatriate’s perception of American democracy. The following letter from Tate to Pound demonstrates the tight literary network that conversed on such subjects. Pound’s reply is scrawled in his own hand: “Total lie - did not see press - wrote two sentences correctly quoted in Wash. Post. I hv. not betrayed anyone - inaccurate statements at press very tiring.”

Third Document: As the Pound controversy mounted, his close friends and literary admirers sought to restore his reputation by arguing for the value of his work. In this document, several writers, including the Fugitives Tate and Ransom, present their argument for the exoneration of Pound.

Letters and documents on pages 11 through 17 are published by special arrangement with Princeton University Library, Allen Tate Papers, Manuscript Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections.
My dear Mrs. Pound:

Today a friend gave me a clipping from Walter Winchell's column in which Mr. Pound is quoted as saying, when he was informed of the Bollingen Prize, "Democracy is more stupid than ever I said it was." I cannot believe that Mr. Pound said this; and I write to ask you whether you know who could have misrepresented your husband, or betrayed his confidence, to a person like Winchell. Perhaps some action should be taken if the source can be traced.

Sincerely yours,

[Signature]

Mrs. Ezra Pound
Allen Tate Esqre,
Route 8,
C Larkasville,
Tennessee,
U. S. A.

Dear Tate,

Thank you for your letter of the 6th. I am sorry to hear that your symposium has had to be deferred, but the postponement does leave open the possibility of my being able to contribute which I could certainly not have done at this time.

I wish that I had any poetry on hand to offer you, but there isn’t a scrap. The only thing I have been working on is some verse for a sort of pageant, which I should not be at liberty to release beforehand, and it would hardly be suitable anyway. You might possibly get some copy from Ezra Pound, without whom, certainly, the collection would be very incomplete. I think you ought also to try Marianne Moore.

Yours ever,

T.S. Eliot
NEWS FROM NEW DIRECTIONS

for immediate release

Ezra Pound's complete CANTOS to date are being published in one volume on July 30th. The publisher of New Directions feels that this is an event of major literary significance -- not merely because of the extent of Pound's influence on modern poetry, but particularly because the obvious poetic value of the CANTOS has lately been confused with the political issue of Pound's past.

To allow this confusion to continue is merely to do serious disservice to Pound's art, and, if the precedent is established, to all art. And in an attempt at clarification and dispassionate evaluation, the following statements have been assembled.

Allen Tate: "Whether Pound was guilty of treason I do not know: he could not be brought to trial, and to be indicted is not to be convicted. Let us assume, for the moment, that he was guilty. It would be a guilt of moral and religious conviction publicly expressed, not a secret betrayal of his country. Call it, if you will, a political mistake, though I do not know what, for a poet, a political mistake is, unless it is a failure to distinguish between the imaginative and historical orders. Pound has always failed at this distinction, and it was his misfortune to get a hearing on the Italian air. Other poets failed equally in distinguishing imagination from history, but they had the good fortune to be on the "right" side in their confusion, and the mistake was applauded. If this distinction is not borne clearly in mind, great injustice will continue to be done to Pound's poetry. One of the Popes had Dante's works burned because he had supported the cause of the Emperor. Who cares about Dante's politics today? I will continue to read Pound's verse with as much pleasure and profit as if he had no "political" views at all."

T. S. Eliot: "To those who have read the previous Cantos, THE PISAN CANTOS will present little difficulty. In my opinion, they are superior to some of those which precede them; and, in the place for which they are intended in the whole work, they will hold their own with any. I find in them the same technical mastery, and a new poignancy of personal speech. Such an achievement is all the more worthy of admiration, because of their having been written under conditions which, for most men, would have stifled inspiration; and which, if they had not stifled inspiration, would certainly have prevented the author from bringing his work to completion."

Conrad Aiken: "Ezra Pound was a poet, perhaps a great one, long before he became a fascist. He is still that poet, and one of the great creative influences of our time, and we must not let these facts, nor his work, be forgotten. Let me add that this is the opinion of one who has many times in the past thirty years opposed Pound on particular issues, and been bitterly opposed by him. This does not affect my judgment of his work. Some of the most beautiful of it is in the CANTOS -- which is to say that it is amongst the most beautiful that we have."

John Crowe Ransom: "Pound's CANTOS is a modern classic that everybody has to know. No poet ever had greater purity of phrase. I don't know whether the Cantos are poem, but they are certainly poetry."
Sonnet to My Wife and Son

Archives would like to present several versions of a sonnet composed by Allen Tate in his later career. By observing the careful corrections and revisions made by Tate during composition, one can gain an insight into the active writing process of the poet.

SONNET TO MY WIFE AND SON

Could I be sure that I shall see the day
When of the love in this young woman’s eyes
And of the love of him whose youth decries
My age, I might a hundredth part repay;
Or could interior time, that might delay
The chronic sentence of the last assize,
Start running backwards with its timely tail
I might have time to live the love I say:

Or almost time enough to learn the glyph
Which the mind’s eye strikes on my study wa
Con it to know how God me favor’d, if
You have the favor to know God at all.

Who let me love you two? Have I done wrong
To love you well who cannot love me long?
Could I be sure that I shall see the day
When of the love in this young woman's eyes
And of the love of him whose youth decrees
My age, I might a hundredth part repay;
Or would interior time, that could delay
The sentence chronic with the last assay,
Start running back wards with its timely lies,
I might have time to live the love I say:

Or almost time enough to read the glyph
That the mind's eye strikes on my study well—
Con it to know how God me favored, if
I have the favor to know God at all.
Who let me love you two? Have I done wrong
To love you well who cannot love me long?

G. T.
SONITUS

Uxor miue quae aetatem honam habet et
filio nostri cui situs est.

Could I be sure that I shall see the day
When of the love in this young woman’s eyes
And of the love of him whose youth decrees
My age, I might a hundredth part repay;
Or would interior time, that could delay
The sentence chronic with the last assize,
Start running backwards with its timely lies,
I might have time to live the love I say;
Or almost time enough to read the glyph
That the mind’s eye strikes on my mind’s way.

Can it to know how God favored, if
I have the favor to know Him at all.
Who let me love you two? Have I been wrong
To love you well who cannot love me long?

Allen Tate
SONITUS

UXORI DEAE SUAE AETERNE DONAM HABET
FILIO NOSTRID QUI BINUS EST

Could I be sure that I shall see the day
When of the love in this young woman's eyes
And of the love of him whose youth deceives
My age, I might a hundredth part repay;
Or would interior time, that could delay
The sentence chronic with the last assize,
Start running backwards with its timely lies,
I might have time to live the love I say:

Or almost time enough to see the glyph
That the mind's eye strikes on my shadowy wall
Read it to learn how me God favored, if
I have the favor to know Him at all.
Who let me love you two? Have I been wrong
To love you well who cannot love me long?
Archives staff from left Thomas Moore, Matt Moynihan, Dalton Fouts, Daniel Smith, Chris Goodrich, Alvin Kim

Colophon
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