CHAPTER 5
THE LOST TRADITION

Ransom and his fellow Fugitives possessed a "shared structure of belief,"¹ which made them take pride in the cultural heritage of the South. But to their dismay, they found that this region had become a

gray city, blinded, spoiled and kicked
By fat blind fools²

of commerciality. This failure of the South to perpetuate a "tradition based on classical conceptions of authority, value, and the aristocratic principle of intelligence, now posed anew against the competitive, aggressive, and experimental standards of the North"³ prompted the Fugitives to commit themselves to a defence of the region through a preservation of its sacred traditions which alone could "create a feeling of stability and permanence in the flux of an ever-changing world."⁴

Realizing that "they were blessed with somewhat superior powers of description," the Fugitives under the inspiring leadership of Ransom "were able to recreate the life around them" in an "historic perspective" which "translated what they saw in terms of what had been as well as what now was."⁵ This historical perspective
recognized the need to preserve rituals and ceremonies the South was otherwise rich in as this was the only way through which the people of this exhausted region could defend themselves against the rapacity of Industrial materialism.

A true Southerner, Ransom stressed that the South must remain "southern in the pure traditional, even sectional sense." He believed that myths and rituals could shape the destiny of any worthwhile civilization and it is through these enduring monuments of faith that one can form a picture of man "in right relationship to Nature." Poems like "Antique Harvesters," "Philomela," and "Old Mansion," use the framework of traditional mores to "recapture the fullness and completeness of actual experience" which sadly is one of failure.

The South is not merely a geographical entity, but in its devalued state it becomes an objectification of the fragmented mind of man. In his craze to benefit materially, man has turned his back upon Religion, which is the key to a proper understanding of myths and rituals. Religion is rich in ceremony and ritual. But when these ceremonies and rituals are renounced, one sees man writhe like an antique piece of bronze unable to live or die in peace. Religion is the "only effective defense against progress." Unfortunately, man's disavowal of
"the best of its myths" has resulted in his "poverty of mind and unhappiness of life." Lacking the will to 'fathom or perform his nature,' ("Man without Sense of Direction") he is forced to exchange his 'bleak despairs' like the lovers in "Eclogue." Incidentally, even the blissfulness of man's married life suffers. Marriage minus faith will only create such situations as the one in "Two in August," where a couple is seen attacking each other 'with silences and words / Like catapulted stones and arrowed knives,' or as that of the unnamed lovers in the lovely poem "The Equilibrists," who 'stupurate' and 'rend each other when they kiss.' The lovers' agony never ends and as they twirl about their respective torturous orbits burning 'with fierce love always to come near' they 'unto the vast diverge' ("Good Ships").

Ransom saw the South as an epitome of all traditional values. It was to him what New England was to Frost, Gardiner to Robinson, Dublin to James Joyce and Ireland to Yeats. Only "by remaining faithful to the regional nature, and to the economic and moral patterns" and guided by "the chivalric virtues of loyalty and courtesy and a hierarchial social code" which "shaped a demeanour ranging from stoic self-denial to bountiful generosity," can it recover its lost prestige. But unfortunately, his hopes of seeing his beloved region adhering to the values
of faith and life\textsuperscript{13} are so distant that he is forced to capture its cultural loss in several poems.

"Persistent Explorer," treats the theme of cultural disintegration caused by a lack of faith. Man in his search for the Essence is seen floundering in the frothy waves of abstractions. Water is a dominant image in the poem. It symbolizes those values he has abandoned as 'insipid'. The failure on his part to honour what is cherished make the 'deep thickets of his mind' spawn 'fierce fauns and timid tenants' forcing him to wander in the labyrinths of unreality, occasionally 'blinking through the cracked ribs at the void' ("Address to the Scholars of New England"), only to find himself bound by the sense of his painful fragmentation. The South is personified as 'Minnie' in "Moments of Minnie." She had her days of glory, but now

\begin{quote}
... an evil star
Had thralled so lazy and beautiful a creature
And scarred and misshapen her most tender feature.
\end{quote}

The only hope is to 'reconstitute the trees / And the bridegroom scarlet bird of April crying / To his brown one embowered,' and in this way make the South's 'secret wells abundant.' The trees and the birds are symbolic of the values which sustain an ordered way of life, but man's disregard for them makes the 'pain' of loss all the more
'hideous' compelling the poet to 'wash' his 'mind of those old memories.'

One notices in Ransom's poetry, his ability to fuse the traditional elements of ritual and ceremony. "Antique Harvesters," "Philomela," and "Old Mansion" incorporate the Southern insistence on correctness, regularity and decorum and this accounts for the "heraldic quality" of these poems. In "Antique Harvesters," as he introduces the young men who have inherited the land from the old heroes Ransom exhorts the new masters to adhere to the values which in the past sustained the South:

Here come the hunters, keepers of a rite;
The horn, the hounds, the lank mares coursing by
Straddled with archetypes of chivalry;
And the fox, lovely ritualist, in flight
Offering his unearthly ghost to quarry;
And the fields, themselves to harry.

The poem is rich in images of hunting which the poet regards as 'archetypes of chivalry.' The hunters with their horns, hounds, and foxes symbolize the Southern heritage, something the ancient men were proud of. These men were the worthy 'keepers of a rite,' and they always revelled in their chases. Victories were celebrated and defeats only spurred them to accomplish greater feats. They regarded these chases to be a part of the customary myths and beliefs and zealously honoured them till they become conscious of a displacement. Realizing
that they can no longer perform the propitiatory rites which once enriched their land, they persuade those who have come to take their places never to forsake the 'Proud Lady' who stands for all that endures. But a question now arises—are the inheritors able to keep their promises or not? The rapid strides made by Science and technology have impoverished the once glorious South. In order to keep pace with these new advances, the South had to expatriate its worthy sons and accommodate those who have only purloined its prosperity. Refusing to accept the South in its present state, the poet consoles himself by hoping that the resilience of the region can alone save it from sinking into oblivion.

"Philomela" and "Old Mansion," are redolent of the South's vanished glory. "Philomela," reveals Ransom's facility in transmuting the famous legend into an 'untranslatable refrain' of the fall of a prosperous region. Customs and traditions which were once the bedrock of the region's prosperity have now been travestied as its people had taken recourse to more immediate and practical measures to sustain themselves. The South, thus, can only passively witness its gradual disintegration. An 'inordinate race' is now reciting a once 'improbable tale' of the Southern demise in infelicitous numbers which do not move as 'liquidly' as the 'classical numbers of the nightingale.' The story of the nightingale reminds man of
his distancing himself from the repositories of faith thereby ruining his chances of attaining a unity of being. This is exemplified in the fall of a land where sacred values have been crushed under the roller-wheels of industrialization. Unless she revives the traditional way of living, the South cannot hope of a probable return to prosperity.

The diuturnity was still.

"Old Mansion," is a startling reminder of the present state of the South. Taking on the guise of a detached historian, the poet calmly records the fall of a once prosperous region. What now remains of its vaunted prosperity is brilliantly expressed as a 'honesuckle on its intricate stalk.' The metaphor of the honeysuckle is so evocative that it conveys the pitiable state into which the region has sunk. The 'grave rites and funerals' which the Southerners religiously practised have now been abandoned. 'Stability' has been replaced by 'decay'. Like a 'feather curled on the languid air' the South fades 'into some unseemlier world'. Commenting on the fall of the region, the poet asserts with an air of finality:

... your mansion, long and richly inhabited
Its porches and bowers suiting the children of men,
Will not for ever be thus, O man, exhibited,
And one had best hurry to enter it if one can.
Behind the haste shown by the poet to warrant his assertion is a powerful irony which provokes man to ponder over his indiscretions. The South may continue to exist, but decay and dilapidation stand out in the backdrop of a once honoured culture.

In "Address to the Scholars of New England," Ransom reminds the Harvardians of their 'New England's honor' symbolized by 'the British tea infusing the bay's water,' but unfortunately the fascination for the 'rare metaphysic' Puritanism, has tethered them to the 'steeple' of abstractions which have only left them like 'stiff heroes abashed / With their frozen fingers and unearthly honor.'

The South epitomizes a centre, which is cemented by an adherence to traditional values celebrated in the numerous myths and rituals of the region. At the height of its prosperity, it resembled the 'majesty of Heaven' ("Address to the Scholars of New England"). The 'old order of chivalry' was conscientious enough in perpetuating the rites and ceremonies symbolized as a 'harvest' in "Antique Harvesters." Despite her 'declension' the South has 'not drooped.' Ransom fervently believes that she can be rehabilitated by sustaining all that was precious to her. The 'treasure is full bronze' but before the 'grey' of decay 'will quench it shortly' the new order must 'pluck
the spindling ears and gather the corn' and prove that they are 'worthy of / What these [antique harvesters] have done in love.' In "First Travels of Max," the boy's fascination for folklore leads him to an encounter with the 'Red Witch' in 'Fool's Forest,' despite the severe strictures of his nurse. To Max

. . . nothing chilled him more
Than the company kept him by the witch's laugh
And the witch's song, . . . .

Max finds himself 'firmly domicilated' in the salubrious environment of legends which 'for several generations'

. . . a green slope
South to the sun do the great ones inhabit.

The consequences of the deviation from this centre of faith are reflected in the ills of the region, which in turn accounts for the precariousness of its men and women. The insatiable desire on the part of man to better his prospects at any cost has forced him to forsake all those values which would have otherwise proved to be beneficial to him and go after material prosperity. One can see in the poems several characters who cannot accomplish themselves. The friar of "Necrological," because of the severity of his vocation cannot comprehend the realities of life depicted in the form of the spoils of a battle. The sight of the dead warriors is not enough to impress upon him the finality of death nor does the sight of the
'leman' mourning her beloved soldier make him realize the meaning of love. Miriam Tazewell's and Margaret's plights stem from their strange ideas of morality. By remaining as spinsters they are only wasting their lives. Had they behaved in a normal manner, they could have enjoyed the joys of a purposeful womanhood. Ransom attributes this failure on the part of all these characters to integrate themselves into a desirable totality of being to a lack of faith. The friar and the spinsters only reflect the problems man is plagued with. In his craziness to benefit materialistically, he has alienated from belief which, indeed, is the bulwark against blatant commercialism. It was precisely to counter this absence of faith in man that the Fugitives sought to undertake "a genuine and powerful revival" of the South. Only a perpetuation of its myths and rituals could instil in him a "sublime and religious feeling," which is required to resist all attempts made by the "novelties of progress and service" to destroy the culture of a "traditional believing society."

Ransom reiterates in "Antique Harvesters," "Philomela," and "Old Mansion" the sense of commitment that is necessary to restore the South to its original glory by conforming to the ideals of individualism and self-sufficiency. In "Antique Harvesters," the lines
'pluck fast, dreamers; . . . bare the arms . . . bend the knees' ring with this sense of purpose so that the South, personified as the 'Lady' is nursed back to health. But sadly enough, the modern Southerner imbued with a scientific spirit has failed to commit himself to the renascence of the region and this has impaired his chances of attaining respectability as a man. His fragmentation has deprived him of a life of love as is seen in poems like "Eclogue," "Spectral Lovers," and "The Equilibrists" and this has blurred his vision of death and change which is so nicely put across in "Janet Waking." To add to his problems, he cannot communicate even his normal feelings and this inability to articulate his aspirations is concealed in an ironic language which in fact becomes a foolish posture of self-defence, deliberately contrived by the poet to assist him in distracting one from the pain of his total failure.

Ransom realized that man has denounced faith and in order to lessen the problems he has to face tried to revive a dying South which he (Ransom) hoped would in the form of its myths and rituals serve as an alternative to Religion. But this sincere attempt ended in a disaster as opposing forces of communal well-being and Industrial progress contend against each other, resulting in the extinction of an erstwhile prosperous land. This feeling
of deprivation is certainly gnawing at man. Thinking that the 'proper gods have disinherited him' ("Birthday of an Ageing Seer"), man finally succumbs to the powerful forces of time and change, never to rise again as an honourable being.
NOTES


2 The lines quoted are from a poem entitled "The Tall Men," by Donald Davidson.


4 Thomas Daniel Young, "The Fugitive: Ransom, Davidson and Tate," The History of Southern Literature, eds. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., et al. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1985) 323.


6 God Without Thunder x.


8 Ransom's letter to Tate, 5 Sept. 1926.

9 Ransom to Tate, 4 July 1929.

10 John Crowe Ransom, God Without Thunder x.


12 Louisie Cowan, The Southern Critics 7.

14 The "ability to translate experience into something which is half myth, half philosophic fable, and in doing that . . . chill and clarify it" is what Edwin Muir calls the "heraldic quality." See "English Poets, and Others," Saturday Review of Literature 1 (6 June 1925) 807.

15 Thomas Daniel Young, Gentleman in a Dustcoat 186.

The "I'll Take My Stand" Movement of the thirties devoted its energies towards this end. The aim of the movement, according to Donald Davidson was "to seek the image of the South which we (Ransom, Tate, Lytle and himself) cherish with high conviction and to give it wherever we could, the finality of art in those forms, fictional, poetic, or dramatic, that have the character of myth and therefore, resting on belief, secure belief in others and . . . are in themselves fulfilled and complete." See Southern Writers in the Modern World (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1958) 60. But the movement failed. It could not "rally Southerners or other sympathizers to any kind of mobilization against a menacing technocracy" (Louisie Cowan, The Southern Critics 13). "The threat of Industrialism to a beloved region" made the defendants of the Movement aware of the universal plight of modern man and his homelessness (Cowan 16).
17 Young 203-204.
18 Young 204.
19 Donald Davidson 29-30.