To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Clarence Alan Jackson entitled "'A Certain Essence of the Sun': Byron Herbert Reece and the Southern Poetry Tradition." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Robert Drake, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:

Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of The Graduate School

"A CERTAIN ESSENCE OF THE SUN": BYRON HERBERT REECE AND THE SOUTHERN POETRY TRADITION

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Clarence Alan Jackson
December 1999

DEDICATION

To my family

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I have been blessed with lots of encouragement from many people I respect and admire while completing this project. I want to thank Carl Griffin and Lamar York, who taught me much about Southern literature and who urged me to pursue this project on Byron Herbert Reece. Also, I need to express my great debt to dear friends: Ray Wallace who inspires me to work hard; Bill Fields who invokes my better angels; and Judy Slagle who shows me what a real scholar should be. Above all, I thank Robert Drake, the greatest "encourager" I know, whose unwavering faith in me and consummate professionalism bolstered me throughout the development and realization of this project.

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ABSTRACT

This study of Byron Herbert Reece (1917-1958) seeks to provide a broad look at his life, his work, his reputation, and his contributions to poetry. The record of his life is largely contained in a biography, *The Mountain Singer*, by Raymond Cook and in several published remembrances. These remembrances often conform to a common assumption, promoted by Atlanta newspapers and others, that Reece was a mountain-man poet. The accuracy of that image is challenged in this book and shown to be more an attempt to simplify Reece's character than to explore his complex nature or examine his unique poetic vision. Little serious criticism of his poetry has been written since his death, so part of the book describes the major forms, themes, and ideas present in the four volumes of poetry he published. In addition, the book considers Reece in context with other Southern poets of his time, notably the Fugitives, by comparing his life and work to theirs. Finally, the book argues that Reece was an original poet who should be recognized for several contributions to poetry, notably his use of ballads to express intimate thoughts and his focus on the "insuperable separateness of the individual."

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Like most people, my introduction to Byron Herbert Reece came word-of-mouth, not from any course or anthology. Quite by accident, I perused an essay by Mildred Greear, one of Reece's closest friends, in the Spring 1993 issue of *The Chattahoochee Review*. Shortly thereafter, my friend and colleague Carl Griffin gave me a short course in his office on the life and work of Byron Reece, including a flawless recitation of Reece's poem "The Shaggy Hills of Hughley." Inspired to learn more, I read Raymond Cook's biography *The Mountain Singer*, which offers a large selection of Reece's poetry.

Although Reece has a modest following in Georgia, little has been written about him and most of that biographical. I admire Reece's nature poems, but much of the critical commentary about Reece emphasizes his "mountain man" and "farmer-poet" reputation, which interests me not at all; instead, I became fascinated by Reece's tortured characters—a jilted husband intent upon murder; a betrayed lover with suicide in his heart; a murderous young man confessing to his mother—and by the

traditional forms through which he presented such desperate souls. Reece, I soon realized, was far more than a local color poet.

Meanwhile, like a magnet, I was drawn towards Southern literature. Lamar York, Editor of *The Chattahoochee Review*, befriended me and brought me onto his editorial staff, where I encountered a host of gifted writers. One of those writers, Robert Drake, added a different perspective to my understanding of Southern literature. Before long, under the tutelage of Carl Griffin, Lamar York, and Robert Drake, and through the extraordinary experience of working on *The Chattahoochee Review*, I became intrigued with those Southern authors who created remarkable literature but received minimal critical attention.

Naturally, I thought about Byron Reece a great deal. This project is a result of my desire to understand Reece, his work, and his place in Southern poetry. It is just a beginning, for Reece left only his poetry and his novels to speak for him—no statement of his artistic vision, no literary criticism about himself or others. Aside from a few letters and an occasional comment in interviews, his ideas on literature must be gleaned from his art. Though

it makes my job more difficult, there is something refreshing about a writer who leaves criticism to the reviewers, theory to the scholars, and meaning to the reader. My hope is that this book will ignite serious discussion and study of Reece and will be only one of many books devoted to this unique Southern writer.

As I prepared for this project, the poem "A Certain Essence of the Sun" struck me as the closest expression of my search for the enigmatic man and poet.

A certain essence of the sun,
Its autumn aspect in the trees,
Suddenly shot my sight beyond
What simple vision sees,

And I was looking at despair.
It had no shape, it kept no form,
It was like judgement altered air
Renders of coming storm.

Yet doubtless; and I stared it through
And saw the mountains west of night
Founded in a changeless view

In my perishing sight

That form their granite stay,
Like shot against a stone,
On terror's tangent flashed away
Into the dark unknown.

Like the opening stanza, to understand Reece one must look at him from a different angle than other Southern poets. His life and career took an unconventional path for a writer, and if one looks with more than "simple vision," Reece's unique literary legacy becomes clear. The poem also features despair and though no single essence defines Reece's work, one cannot help but be struck that despair, both the despair expressed by many of his characters and the despair that led to his suicide, haunts his poetry and his life. And finally, one can easily recognize that like so many Southern writers, much more can be found in Reece's work than scholars have supplied. Only when one gets past his biography and past his reputation will one see that Reece's poetry can transmit beauty and transcend "into the dark unknown."

During his career, Byron Herbert Reece was hailed as a great lyric poet and a master of the ballad. He received Guggenheim Fellowships and held Writer-in-Residence positions at several colleges, notably Emory University and University of California at Los Angeles. He even was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. All the while, he tended the family farm and cared for his parents, both of whom died of tuberculosis. When he died at his own hands, Reece had published four books of poetry and two novels (all with Dutton), survived his own case of tuberculosis, and left a legacy that still endures in his home state of Georgia.

Yet, with his death, critical study of his work also ceased. Only one biography, *Mountain Singer* by Raymond Cook, has been written and one documentary, *The Bitter Berry,* produced. A few articles have been published, most of which are biographical. But not a single study of his work or his place in literature has emerged. The oversight is remarkable given Reece's praise and promise during his life.

This study of Reece will consider his place in Southern literature both in terms of his relationship to its tradition and to other poets, as well as the artistic legacy he left. I will draw from his four books of poetry—

Ballad of the Bones (1945), *Bow Down in Jericho* (1950), *A Song of Joy* (1952), and *The Season of Flesh* (1955)—, his other public writings, his correspondence, and reviews of his work to explore these matters. To understand his place in Southern literature, one must examine the cultural, economic, class, and artistic differences that have left Reece, as well as many lesser-known and lesser-connected writers, outside our common idea of the Southern Poetic Tradition. In this evaluation, I will present both the major works on Southern poetry by influential critics, such as Donald Davidson, Louis Rubin, and Cleanth Brooks, who have shaped our common notion and the works of scholars reconsidering the reality of *THE* Southern literature, such as Michael Kreyling and Richard King.

In approaching this project, five central questions needed to be addressed: Who is Byron Herbert Reece? What are his poetic themes and forms? Why is he often regarded as a local colorist? Where does Reece's poetry fit in relationship to twentieth-century Southern poetry? How should one perceive Reece's legacy?

The difficulty with learning about Byron Herbert Reece's life is that the few facts are not in question, but those facts offer limited insight into his life. We know

that Byron Herbert Reece (1917-1958) spent his early life of poverty near Blood Mountain in Georgia; showed early signs of a literary talent; lived nearly all his life on the farm, except when his literary career carried him away for short periods; and experienced many changes to his family and suffered from health problems that led to his suicide at age forty. So much of the writings about Reece have focused on his life, from the special section devoted to him in the *Georgia Review* upon his death (1958) to Raymond Cook's short biography (1980) to a short video produced by Georgia Humanities Council (1992) to a sugar-coated play about his life produced the past five summers in North Georgia (first in Hiawassee, currently in Young Harris), called "The Reach of Song." In each of these representations of Reece, the artist is submerged for the sake of nostalgia and charm.

While his life seemed difficult, his career enjoyed real success. The critical reception to Reece's poetry compared him favorably to Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, and A.E. Housman, among others; however, these comparisons eventually alarmed Reece about his critical reception as his originality within traditional forms were overshadowed by implications that his work was derivative.

We also know that Reece was brought into the debate over the direction of poetry. Though mute on the subject, in 1949-50 Reece became part of the stir over the awarding of the 1948 Bollingen and Library of Congress Prizes for the best American poetry to Ezra Pound. Led by Robert Hillyer, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and president of the American Poetry Society, a major battle was waged against the "cult of Eliot," of which Pound was declared a member. Hillyer used Reece as a model of the greatness possible in American poetry by saying of his second book, *Bow Down in Jericho*, "we are aware of a true lyric achievement."

Because Reece's work has not been reconsidered in many years, a discussion of his poetry—its themes, forms, and artistry—is necessary. I was surprised that many reviewers incorrectly identified Reece's influences, often citing English pastoral poetry, even though Reece claimed, "I am casually familiar with the whole body of English poetry." Certainly, Housman and Frost influenced him, but of greater influence was the *Bible* and the oral traditions of his Appalachian heritage, including the heritage of ballads, not to mention his own artistic vision. One can learn much about what Reece offers in such poems as "Ballad of the Rider," "Ballad of the Weaver," and "Ballad of the Bones,"

in which Reece disproves our contemporary view of the ballad as simple and musical by offering instead dark images of loneliness, vengefulness, and apocalypse. The ballad found in Reece's work is used to convey a story of human frailty, not merely to evoke some charming tale from the hills.

Though often praised for his ballads, Reece produced a whole range of poems on his central themes of nature, love, death, and religion. Reece's poetic world is not a simple, happy one, but is complex and disturbing. For example, Reece uses common religious images to present spiritual doubt; he portrays love as cruel and lovers as obsessed and self-destructive.

Since his death, the Southern literary elite has ignored Reece, but a worse fate may be his mischaracterization as a local colorist. Perhaps the most harm was done inadvertently by Ralph McGill, publisher of the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* and a strong supporter and friend of Reece. McGill was an old-style publisher who often took on causes to improve the social and cultural life of Georgia. While McGill brought attention to Reece through his newspaper, he often presented the poet in quaint and charming ways that rarely served to elevate the

artist and seemed to miss the unsettling psychological aspects in most of the poems.

Molding Reece into a local color writer would be fine if his work suggested as much, but Reece's poetry does not fit well into this category. Aside from his nature poems, his work does not offer local color or simple regional values and often mixes sex and conventions and violence and religion in a complicated, and perhaps shocking, way, and illustrates Reece's poetic gifts.

Perhaps, the most curious aspect about Reece is his relationship (or lack thereof) to the tradition of Southern poetics. Though the Fugitives dominated Southern poetry during Reece's career, he owes little to their modernist traditions. Reece himself seemed to have no quarrel with modernism, and modernist and Southerner John Gould Fletcher admired Reece's work; however, Southern literary critics expected modernism from Southern poets and Reece did not deliver. In some ways, Reece was too traditional even for the tradition champions of Southern culture.

The truth is that Reece is separated from the Fugitives and other Southern poets by class, academics, politics, and history. Reece comes from a region of the South quite unlike the major Southern poets. North Georgia

is a mountainous area that, during Reece's time, shared much of the culture of Appalachia: it sided with the Union in the Civil War; it enjoyed few of the economic and medical improvements of the South in the early twentieth century, nor felt the impact of the Depression because it remained impoverished. And, the character of the people did not match that of much of the industrialized, historicized South. So, unlike the Fugitives, Reece's work shows little interest in politics, in social planning, and in history because those things never really changed his world. Plus, because Reece never really entered the academic world or regional literary groups, he never benefited as the Fugitives did from the close-knit, insular literary world they created.

After all is said and done, I hope to make sense of Reece's place in Southern literature. As a Southern poet, Reece may not qualify in what Michael Kreyling has called the "invention" of Southern literature, since he does not address the issues of the region's time and place as defined by the Fugitives and their literary children; however, like most artists, his goal was not so much for his work to fit into a category, but in the end for his poems to be "intelligible and vigorous." Reece may be

better understood if one dwells less on his Southern-ness and more on how well he presents the human condition. On this account, he has earned a place of honor.

CHAPTER TWO

THE LIFE AND WORK OF BYRON HERBERT REECE

The cabin where he was born now lies beneath the waters of Vogel Lake. The office where he took his life has been long ago demolished. Even the national praise that accompanied publication of his four books of poetry has disappeared. Byron Herbert Reece seems to have become elusive in nearly every way; however, his poetry remains and it provides us with the most valuable clues to understanding the man and his place in the Southern poetry tradition.

Born near Blood Mountain in the North Georgia Mountains on September 14, 1917, Byron Herbert Reece entered a family that had a long connection to the rural mountain world. Reeces had lived in the area since the early-1800s and were firmly rooted in the culture. That culture was not like the rest of the state where history and cotton were everywhere; instead, the mountains served as a barrier that protected its people from the Civil War and from industrialization, two of the defining factors of twentieth-century Southerness. The geography created a

culture different from the rest of Georgia and most of the South, which meant a different way of looking at the world:

> He was a student of legend and folklore, but oblivious to history; he lived almost comfortably off the land, but he had no concept of progress; he knew that some families had good blood and rich land and that some families were "trash," but he had no concept of class; he knew that some people lived in cities, but his imagination, which was fertile in comprehending the natural and supernatural worlds, could not conceive of an urban life. (Watkins and Watkins 5)

Young Byron, nicknamed "Hub," showed his talents early. By the first grade, he had read the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress*, texts that would influence his writing. By fifteen, he was publishing poems in the local Blairsville newspaper. With all this promise, one would think Byron would consider venturing from his home into the wide world to realize his potential, but Reece did not seem, then or ever, inclined to take leave of North Georgia. Instead, he arranged to attend nearby Young Harris College, a small, private two-year school, where he

found a coterie of friends who encouraged his poetic development.

Reece's first try at college was short-lived because of his need to devote his time to farming. By 1936, Byron found himself without the necessary funds and the oldest male child in the family—his brother was in the military—and therefore the one responsible for working the family farm. Finally, after a three-year hiatus, Reece was able to return with a scholarship and permission to alternate each quarter between farm work and schoolwork.

The next few years proved valuable to Reece. The education was valuable, of course, but he had been an avid reader since childhood. The most meaningful experience was The Quill Club, a literary group Reece joined that produced three anthologies during his time at Young Harris. The most obvious advantage of The Quill Club was the opportunity to publish his poems. Of the 144 poems published in the group's anthologies during those three years, 31 came from Reece (Cook 19); many of those later appeared in his first volume of poetry, *The Ballad of the Bones*.

What mattered most to Reece were the people he encountered and the support they gave him. As a teenager,

Byron's shyness led him to slip his poems under his teachers' doors rather than face them. Yet, in The Quill Club, he participated fully with opinions far more insightful and "penetrating" than the other students. In many ways, Reece had a more fully developed literary background and certainly a more heightened sense of taste and skill than his contemporaries; nonetheless, he seemed to enjoy the experience thoroughly and relished the chance to spend time with fellow writers in an informal setting.

From The Quill Club, three important relationships emerged that would play an important part in Reece's life. The first was Professor Willis Lufkin (W.L.) Dance, the advisor to the club. Dance "gave Byron the release he needed so that his infinitely fine mind could range at will and pour itself out" in poetry. He also introduced Reece to Ralph McGill, the publisher of *The Atlanta Constitution* who became a friend and advocate of Reece's work. Another relationship was developed with Philip Greear, a member of The Quill Club and Reece's roommate in 1938-39. Greear, who after Young Harris stayed in North Georgia as a professor of English at Shorter College, remained a close friend the rest of Reece's life. Philip Greear also brought his wife Mildred into Reece's small circle of

friends. Mildred, a poet herself, became Reece's closest friend and has provided much of the biographical information available to us about Reece.

Reece never finished his two-year degree, after refusing to take French because "the studying of French in college was motivated by a kind of snobbishness and affectation which were distasteful to him" (Cook 23). Plus, near the end of his slow progression to a degree, his friends had all left and he no longer enjoyed college as much: Dance took a position elsewhere and the Greears went to Biloxi, Mississippi, while Philip served in the military. World War II was upon the nation, but Reece did not serve. When he was first eligible at eighteen, he was exempted because of family obligations; later, his extreme thinness and a family history of tuberculosis brought a second deferment.

By age twenty-six, Reece had little of the freedom to explore his art that most poets know. Though many of his contemporaries had wives and families and many others entered the war effort, Reece was not without his own set of responsibilities. The most obvious responsibility was the family farm, which he worked with mule and plow. And his efforts allowed his sisters to attend Young Harris

College. While Reece had a different set of priorities and duties, he was uneasy about being different—no wife, a deferment he did not seek, and a talent he had yet to fulfill (Cook 34). Loneliness was a constant battle for Reece and one he never overcame. With his close friends away and his siblings entering their own lives, one suspects Reece became especially frustrated with his life.

In 1943, Byron's poetic endeavors took a major step forward when Jesse Stuart, the great poet from Kentucky, "discovered" Reece. "Lest the Lonesome Bird" appeared in the *Prairie Schooner* and Stuart became intrigued by the ballad skills of the young poet. Stuart contacted Reece for more poems and persuaded his publisher E.P. Dutton to publish the young Georgian's work. In 1945, *Ballad of the Bones and Other Poems* appeared to critical praise.

The next ten years proved fruitful for Reece and his art. While *Ballad of the Bones* attracted national attention, *Bow Down in Jericho* (1950) established Reece as an important American poet. This book of poems received a nomination for the Pulitzer Prize. And all the critical attention and talk of a mountain poet attracted even *Newsweek*, which featured him in the January 1, 1951 issue.

1950 also brought to the public the first of Reece's two novels, *Better a Dinner of Herbs.* This book and *The Hawk and the Sun* (1955) constitute all of Reece's fictional production. These novels gained more acclaim for Reece and broadened the number of admirers among the literati, but these books were vastly different from his poetry. *Better a Dinner of Herbs* held close to Reece's poetic themes and his narrative style was "tersely poetic." The story is a simple one: Enid, who has worked the family farm all his adult life, leaves the mountain to change his life and find love. He meets Mary, a married woman, and becomes her lover. Later, he becomes overseer of her husband's farm. The story ultimately returns to its beginning with Enid again leaving a farm and a family. Hugh Ruppersburg found Reece's "story in a style distinctly reminiscent" of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* because Reece "narrates through the thoughts and emotions of the important characters." Ruppersburg also recognized that Reece did not set the novel in North Georgia or in any particular place, "in keeping with the nonspecific, folk quality of his language" (6-8).

Though much of *Better a Dinner of Herbs* seemed compatible with Reece's poetic vision, *The Hawk and the Sun*

strayed from those central concerns. This novel addressed social, racial, and sexual issues that Reece had only hinted at in his poetry. This second novel tells the story of Dandelion, a disabled black man in a small Southern town that had driven all other black residents away. The focus on a lynching, sex, and homoeroticism disturbed some readers and critics; however, others were reminded of *Our Town* or *Winesburg, Ohio* in its presentation of small towns (Ruppersburg x-xi). Though the novel fit into the growing depiction of the racist South and earned praise from *The Saturday Review* and *The New York Herald*, and a favorable review by novelist William Goyen in the *New York Times Book-Review*, it brought the harshest criticism to Reece's work. *The New Yorker* "dismissed" the novel and one reviewer urged Reece to "continue writing from his own distinctive poetic vision and leave the sensationalism to lesser talents" (Cook 119).

Like most artists, Reece needed a tough skin to handle the criticism. Of course, critics must toughen that skin. For Reece, the critics found his first three efforts—two books of poetry and one novel—worthy of praise and even a Pulitzer Prize nomination; however, as with the second

novel, critics offered less admiration of his final two books of poetry.

A Song of Joy (1952) received a good deal of positive criticism and echoed reviews from his previous works by mentioning his skills. But, sharp criticism came as well. One critic called the book "a repeat performance, on a minor scale" (Scarbrough), but Reece dealt well with this marginal review because Scarbrough was an associate. The one review that evoked Reece's wrath came in the *Saturday Review*. In it, his poetry is called "candidly derivative."

Though his final book of verse, *The Season of Flesh*, returned him to critical praise, he had little interest in the critics, as a letter (dated October 1, 1954) to friend E.V. Griffith indicates: "I suppose I'd be inclined to look with a cynical eye on their approval now."

As successful as those years were for Reece the writer, it proved painful for Reece the man. Because his older brother had married and moved to North Carolina and his father's tuberculosis (first diagnosed in 1936) progressed more rapidly, Byron found himself central to the survival of the 150-acre farm. On many days, he worked eighteen hours in the fields; in fact, the day his first copies of *Ballad of the Bones* arrived, he shortly returned

to mow hay—no time for celebration. In 1947, crops were bad from a drought and caused serious financial worries for him, so much so that the Greears noticed Reece began to drink, a habit never before witnessed by them (Cook 53-54). And by 1953, though Reece had published four books, his income from writing could not prevent the further decline of the farm that left only a few livestock.

The financial woes never ended for Reece. Not only did the farm bills demand that he seek outside employment, but his sister Eva Mae lost her teaching job and returned home. So Reece did the one thing he could—he taught school. In some cases, the experience was pleasant. At UCLA (1950) and Emory (1957), he earned his money as a poet-in-residence, though neither brought him enough to lighten his burden. His time at UCLA has remained a bit mysterious, with only his letters to friends as clues to his thinking. While the months in southern California seemed enjoyable—enough that he returned to California on his own to improve his health and to write—he never felt at ease so far from home.

Yet, his time at Emory University proved frustrating as his tuberculosis recurred. Emory could have been ideal for Reece as it brought him nearer his literary friends,

such as Ralph McGill, and offered the promise of a more socially active life than he knew on the farm. But he lasted only one semester before returning home to devote his energies to treating his disease.

At Young Harris College, the experience was less pleasant, but teaching at Young Harris allowed him to stay near home so he could keep an eye on things. Some confusion has arisen about how Reece felt about teaching. One view is that he disliked the classroom, finding it oppressive. The other is that he liked his students and enjoyed the interaction. Clearly, Reece liked his students and especially enjoyed teaching writing courses, and his work ethic insured that he would fulfill his duties, but teaching was not his chosen profession but a financial necessity that only distracted him from his writing and reminded him of the failing farm. But teaching at Young Harris must have been hard, given that his mentor, W.L. Dance shot himself in his office in January 1946. The blow, amid the blush of praise for his first book of verse, of which many poems came from The Quill Club days, devastated him.

Above all, the personal crisis for Reece was tuberculosis. His father, diagnosed with it in 1936, often

could not help his son with farm work. His mother suffered greatly from tuberculosis and died in 1955. Byron, who nursed both during their most severe outbreaks, entered Battey Sanitarium in 1954 with the disease and relapsed again in 1955. Then, in early 1957, he terminated his stay at Emory because the disease made it impossible to interact with the public.

Tuberculosis, more than the poverty, discouraged Reece from looking for a wife, though finding a spouse with the same intellectual interests would have been difficult in such a remote area. His fear of spreading the disease—remember he got the disease from his parents—was palpable. Mildred Greear says that at the end of his visits to dinner, which only came when Reece was in remission, he always insisted that the dishes and silverware be sterilized.

Perhaps, Reece's greatest burden during this period of professional success and private struggle was a true and genuine talent that competed with concerns over his health, finances, and future. While his books received favorable reviews in major newspapers, his books sold poorly and brought him little money. While his reputation attracted attention from UCLA and Emory, local book clubs and writing

groups wanted him to speak as a local writer, which usually meant no honorarium. Reece was a Pulitzer Prize nominee who, as Fred Chappell describes a farmer's plight, was "smothered by mule farts" in order to survive.

The hardness of his life overtook the happiness on June 3, 1958 when Reece took his own life. Colleagues reported that he had been drinking, and two of his students feared the depression he exhibited that day. They found him in his office, the same office where W.L. Dance committed suicide, with Mozart playing on the record player and his final set of papers graded and neatly stacked in the desk drawer. The .32 automatic bullet ripped through his chest. Whether he aimed for the tuberculosis that cursed his life, we will never know. But suicide, a common theme in his poetry, seemed a common idea even to his friends, as Mildred Greear noted: "That possibility was always there" (Kelly 1H).

His death caused quite a stir both locally and nationally. Spring graduation at Young Harris went on the next day, but under the pall of his suicide. On June 5, *The New York Times* carried the United Press notice of his death. And the *Georgia Review* devoted most of its Winter 1958 issue to reminiscences of Reece. The attention

befitted a respected author, but it proved to be the last attention he would get outside of his home state.

Since 1958, Byron Herbert Reece has gone almost unnoticed. In 1980, Raymond Cook's biography, the only one of the author, *Mountain Singer: The Life and Legacy of Byron Herbert Reece,* was published. Then in 1985, Cherokee Press reprinted all four of Reece's books of poetry. (By 1998, they too were out of print.) The final wave of notoriety came in 1988-1989: first came "The Bitter Berry," a half-hour documentary on Reece, with a script designed from his poetry and letters, and a book by the same name, which serves as a guide to the documentary; then came "The Reach of Song," an outdoor drama about Reece's life that is still performed in the North Georgia mountains.

Essays on Reece have appeared from time to time, nearly all remembrances by friends. His life has sparked much interest, mostly the typical, undocumented rumors and speculation about the life of any artist whose life was lived outside the public record and whose death came at his own hands. Questions remained that seemed to have no clear answers: Why did Reece stay at home when his talent could be fulfilled elsewhere? Why did his family seem to urge him to carry the burden of the family farm and not pursue

his literary promise to its utmost? That Reece is nearly always described as handsome and shy seems to open his life for all sorts of speculation. Why didn't he marry? Hearsay about Reece's sexual life became so rampant that friend Mildred Greear declared, "I'll laugh in the face of the next person who asks me if he was a homosexual" (Patureau M3). Greear and her husband Philip have been the most vocal defenders of Reece's life and legacy by contributing personal recollections as his close friends.

To me, the greatest mystery is not Reece's private life, but his family life. Oddly, during his struggles, his family did not encourage him to take on the academic life full-time, so that his talent could be fully realized. Though never stated as such, it seems that Byron was left behind to care for tubercular parents, to work the family farm, and to insure everyone else's security (i.e., his reluctant return to teaching after sister Eva Mae lost her teaching job).

Yet, after his death, his family made little effort to protect Byron's image and cast little light on his life. His sister Eva Mae added to the personal speculation with remarks about a romance with a married woman and an Emory coed who visited him on occasion (Kelly 7H). And his

brother T.J. and sister Jean seemed unwilling to get the facts straight or even comment on misconceptions of their brother; in fact, although they attended a "read-in" on Reece on May 20, 1989, the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* reporter noted that they "declined to speak" (Patureau M3)

* * * *

This focus on biography has distracted from the primary reason that Byron Herbert Reece should be a topic of discussion, his poetry. Remarkably, no major study of his work has been published, despite the widely positive response his books received upon publication, and nearly all critical commentary on Reece's poetry came prior to his death.

Beginning with the publication of *Ballad of the Bones*, critics heard echoes in Reece's poetry of much older traditions than American poetry. Jesse Stuart said in the introduction to *Ballad of the Bones*, "He had written poetry akin to the sixteenth and seventeenth century English and the early Irish poets." William Rose Benet thought Reece a poetic brother of A.E. Housman: "This young poet is as truly part of our Southern hills as that great poet was of his domain in England" (book jacket of 3rd printing). Amid these connections to older, English

poets came the most curious comparison of Reece from John Gould Fletcher, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and Southern representative of the imagist movement who remarked of Reece's book that it "recalls both the simple folksingers of the Southern Appalachians and the more sophisticated poetry of T.S. Eliot" (7.24).

Of course, some critics made the inevitable connection between Reece and those giants of the early-twentieth century, Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Frost. A reviewer (only identified as Y.W.V.) of the first book in the Hartford, Connecticut *Courant* newspaper said of Reece's poetry that it "reminds one of the best of Edwin Arlington Robinson or of Robert Frost." Naturally, any American poet who combines traditional forms and images of nature would be compared to Frost. Another critic, Edward Case, went so far as to declare that "with the exception of Robert Frost, Reece is our greatest living poet, and even Frost is not so pure a lyricist, nor as strong and lonely a voice" (Cook 114).

While any poet would appreciate literary association to the great English poets or Housman or Eliot or Robinson and Frost and would gladly accept the attention such associations bring, such praise can imply that the poet

owns no original artistic vision, but merely produces imitations of great poetry. Reece was especially stung by such implication and expressed his anger in a letter to the *Saturday Review* in response to Sara Henderson Hay's review of his third book, *A Song of Joy*. In her review, Hay identifies Edna St. Vincent Millay, Christina Rossetti, and William Blake, among others, as well as Frost and Housman, as Reece's literary influences. For Reece, this review was not praise but "perilously close to malicious." He goes on to challenge her assumption that because one poet's work has a relationship to another poet's work, the poetry must be derivative. Reece rejects the idea that he cannot write a certain way about death or nature because others have done so before. In what one suspects would be the reaction of many poets to such twisted praise, Reece says, "The effect of Miss Hay's review of my book is to mutilate my integrity as a writer."

As I have indicated, Reece enjoyed plenty of good reviews and even Ms. Hay, who called Reece "the arranger of themes, the virtuoso rather than the creative artist," proclaimed, "Mr. Reece's poetic gifts are so considerable" (29). Yet, one does see that critics saw him more as influenced than influential, more a natural poet than an

artist. For example, in choosing to review Reece's fourth book, *Season of the Flesh*, instead of a recent book by W.H. Auden, Edward M. Case, who always favored Reece, noted, "Auden is, of course, a great 'influence' on poetry; but Reece is a Poet born."

Although Reece never gained the widespread reputation as an "important" or "influential" poet, his name did figure in an interesting conflict in American Poetry. In 1948, Ezra Pound—acclaimed poet, expatriate, traitor, madman—was awarded the joint Bollingen-Library of Congress Prize. The reaction, led in part by Robert Hillyer, Pulitzer-Prize winning poet, Harvard professor, and president of the American Poetry Society, reflected the conflict over the direction of American poetry. On one hand, Pound represented the decadence of Modernism and the loss of tradition in poetry. His work had little in common with the traditions of American poetry as he called upon Eastern myth and an extreme estheticism to build much of his poetry and the book for which the award was granted, *Pisan Cantos*, was not designed, composed, and focused on American culture.

On the other hand, Pound was a man whose actions in supporting Mussolini and in broadcasting anti-American

messages during World War II had, in the eyes of many who felt he gained protection from a long jail term as a traitor because of his poetic friends, not been fully punished. Here was Pound—a traitor, an expatriate, a madman—being hailed as the best American Poetry had to offer.

Though mute on the subject, Reece became part of the campaign Hillyer conducted. The campaign lasted several years, with Reece's name entering the fray in late 1950 when Hillyer offered Reece's second book, *Bow Down in Jericho*, as a model to counterbalance "the cult of Eliot" that had dominated American literature. Of Reece's book, Hillyer said, "we are aware of a true lyric achievement" (7.18) Obviously, Hillyer saw in Reece a return to the traditional themes and forms of American poetry and wanted to find champions to promote, but one also may assume that Hillyer saw in Reece a man who could represent a conservative personal and political image contrary to the image of expatriates like Pound.

Hillyer's attempt to alter the direction of American poetry failed. And after 1950, Byron Herbert Reece found no new audience for his poetry, though readers and critics continued to admire his work. Without a national following

to herald his work, or the moniker of "influential" to trumpet his poetry, or a body of work in concert with prevailing literary movements to carry his banner, Reece's death brought an end to his acclaim. Like his birthplace, his art has been lost to the progress of contemporary culture.

CHAPTER THREE

THE POETRY OF REECE

John Donne. Christina Rosetti. W.H. Davies. Edna St. Vincent Millay. Gerard Manley Hopkins. William Blake. A.E. Housman. T.S. Eliot. John Greenleaf Whittier. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Robert Frost. Edwin Arlington Robinson. Sidney Lanier. English balladeers. The Psalmists. Byron Herbert Reece has been associated with these poets by one critic or another.

After reading the reviews on Reece's work, one may well think that critics reflect the school of thought that writers are merely inheritors of a tradition and owe most of their work to those who came before. No wonder Reece became so disillusioned with critics who placed him alongside a number of writers with whom he had little in common or with whom he had only a casual awareness. If Reece possessed discernible elements of all the aforementioned poets, his poetry would be a bizarre, hideous creation.

Perhaps more to the point, the Emersonian notion that "every text is a reconstruction of some previous texts of work" (Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* 17) has its limits if

applied too broadly. A writer becomes not an artist but akin to a radio broadcasting scraps of ideas and random words. Should a critic, in reading Reece's poetry, catch a glimpse of another poet's idea or language, it does not necessarily mean that Reece borrowed those things; instead, it merely reflects that writers share the same craft, that the materials of language and experience used by distinctly different poets to create a poem will, on occasion, leave similar marks. After all, not all poets who write a poem about trees are beholden to Joyce Kilmer. Aside from the loss of respect for the individual artist, this approach by necessity must dwell on similarities, not differences. As practiced, a critic isolates the similarity of a current writer to canonical writers, then explains how the current writer falls short, rather than discusses the differences that prove the originality of the current author.

Of course, Eliot, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," carried the Emersonian concept further when he wrote of an artist: "You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead" (4). While such an approach may prove valuable when academics ponder the canon, the rush to judge "the living" with "the dead" deprives "the living" of a genuine consideration of

his or her work. Though Eliot may not have intended this result, critics who adhere to this approach seek to contrast and compare one writer to others before they seek to understand and appreciate the work at hand. Reece in his letter to the editor of *Saturday Review*, in which he responded to Sarah Henderson Hay's criticism of his work as derivative, wondered about the worth of this approach: "what is a book review for if not to give the reader some clue as to what the book is about?"

As noted earlier, Reece could not be derivative of all the poets to which critics connected him. While I recognize that four poets seem to merit some consideration in discussing Reece's literary heritage—Robert Frost because of his exploration of common folk; Edwin Arlington Robinson because of his dark vision of mankind; A.E. Housman because of his dark vision and traditional style; and Jesse Stuart because of his southern Appalachian background—, the differences should dismiss any serious presumption that Reece is merely an imitator.

The favorable comparison of Reece to Frost rested primarily on their lyric poetry and secondarily on their themes of nature and rural life. Any reader of Reece and Frost would find the similarities obvious and would agree

that both are skilled at lyric poetry and both feature rural themes. However, these commonalties do not go to the heart of either poet's gifts.

While it is true that Frost wrote beautiful lyric poetry, his use of "customary speech" as the language of much of his poetry established his reputation. As Louis Untermeyer observed about Frost's shift from traditional lyric poetry in his first volume to the incorporation of customary speech in the poetry of his second, "*A Boy's Will* is poetry that sings; *North of Boston* is poetry that talks" (9). And Mark Van Doren said that Frost's greatness arose because "[w]hether in dialogue or in lyric, his poems are people talking" (Untermeyer 9). According to Poirier, "There is scarcely a single poem which does not ask the reader to imagine a human character equivalent to the movement of voice" (*Robert Frost*, 146). Reece, however, remained committed to traditional forms and never tried to imitate Frost. In fact, Reece found little in common with Frost: "a lot of people [who compare Reece to Frost] have either read Frost wrong or me wrong or neither of us at all" (Cook 96). Reece's distinctive contribution was his restoration of the traditional ballad form, rather than

follow the path of most poets to introduce common speech into poetry.

As regards common themes, both did describe nature and its effect on man, though any poet from the country uses nature as a background. The important difference, as any reader will recognize, arises because whereas Frost wrote of those with common rural lives—husbands and wives, hired hands, neighbors—, Reece devoted much of his work to man alone in love, in nature, in despair.

Naturally, the theme of man alone draws one to compare Reece with Robinson. As James Dickey wrote, "No poet ever understood loneliness or separateness better than Robinson or knew the self-consuming furnace that the brain can become in isolation, the suicide hellishness of it, doomed as it is to feed on itself in answerless frustration" (63). Reece had much of this quality in his work, as well, which critics recognized when comparing his work to Robinson's early work, not the later Arthurian poems. And Reece himself wrote to his friend E.V. Griffith that Robinson "reminds me of me in some ways" (January 30, 1952), though he does not elaborate. However, while Robinson is said to write about "the bleak comedy of the human condition" (John Lucas 142), Reece offers the tragic view of human

experience. While Robinson depicts Miniver Cheevy, Richard Cory, and Ebenezer Flood as men passively suffering through their emotional torment, Reece's characters are violently decisive in ending their pain through the murder of another or more often through suicide.

Perhaps the poet closest to Reece is Housman. Reece makes reference to Housman in several letters to E.V. Griffith, which suggests that Housman influenced Reece in some way. Like Reece, Housman's work is lyric and dark, often with suicide the outcome of despair, and presented with traditional language and images. The similarity in style may come because of the common influences on both men, as John Bayley notes, Housman "had been influenced, he said, by hymns and Heine, the Border Ballads and Shakespeare's songs" (8). With this blend of religious imagery and English ballads, both Reece and Housman produced poetry intended to cause more of a physical (Housman wanted the hair on the back of the reader's neck to stand) than an intellectual response.

Yet, Housman, despite his influences, did not publish any ballads nor publish any religious poetry as Reece did. As with other poets to whom he is compared, Reece's ballads and overt religious themes set him apart, for whatever his

religious views, he knew that religion was part of his tradition. Another key difference appears in the tone of the poems. When writing of lost love, Reece is less cynical than Housman and does not "train for ill" but allows his poems to expose the anguish of loss; Housman's poems have the veneer of the cynic that protects one from the anguish, while Reece's work leaves the wound exposed.

* * * *

Reece offered little of his artistic theory in essays or even letters. He wrote E.V. Griffith that he would one day "write my views on the creative process as it applies to literature" but only after he loses the "urge to do original work" (April 28, 1950). That time never came, so one is left to judge Byron Herbert Reece and his poetry without his direction because, as he also remarked to Griffith, he didn't want "to sound like a literary figure" (October 20, 1950). To understand Reece's poetry, one needs to look first at the forms of the ballad and the lyric with which he worked; then consider the major themes of love, religion, and nature that drove his poetic vision.

The foundation of Reece's poetry is the lyric form, including an occasional sonnet or elegy. In these poems, one can see the discipline of Reece as each poem maintains

a precise ballad-like rhythm, yet reads with an easy flow. A good illustration is "The Shaggy Hills of Hughley":

> The Shaggy hills of Hughley
> That look on Pindar Lake
> Cast no cool reflection
> When the water is awake
> But when the water's sleeping
> And steady is the sky
> Then all the hills of Hughley
> Deep in the water lie.

This short poem, in the tradition of lyrics as oral and musical, demands to be read aloud, even though one can appreciate its form and image on the page.

Orality in literature seems to come in three ways: stylized speech of the common man employed to tell a story, as one finds in Frost's "The Hired Man"; idiomatic speech of a person intended to communicate in the most natural manner, such as Gregory Corso's "Marriage"; ritualized speech of the balladeer designed to carry shared stories and values, as in the folk ballad "John Henry."

Clearly, Reece follows the latter. As Walter J. Ong says:

> the public oral performer typically is speaking for everyone to everyone about what every adult already knows . . . . [A]nd although the language is generally . . . not quite normal speech but a special variant of the vernacular . . . The voice speaking in the formal oral narrative is not so distinct from the voice of the ordinary villager. (278)

While lyric poetry is his foundation, the ballad is Reece's centerpiece. Yet, Reece did not develop the ballad in his earliest writing, even though, as he writes, "I grew up under the influence of some of the oldest folk songs in America" (Griffith, January 4, 1948). Only after hearing a lecture at Young Harris College in 1939 by University of Georgia professor Roosevelt Walker who discussed the history and value of the ballad did Reece decide to devote serious attention to the form (Cook 21). It seemed to come naturally and as he later confided to Griffith: "Ballads are easy, almost too easy, for me to write" (January 4, 1948).

As with lyric poems, Reece faithfully followed the traditional form of the ballad. One aspect of that tradition calls for ballads "to impress by the vivid representation of a single event" (Henderson 8), which Reece adheres to in his religious ballads, especially "Bow Down in Jericho," a retelling of Elijah's winning of the mantle (II Book of Kings), and his ballads about the relationship of Jonathan and David (both books of Samuel). And in "Ballad of the Bones" and "As Mary Was Awalking," he uses the ballad to depict an extra-biblical event consistent with biblical language and biblical tenets.

However, in his other ballads, most of which are about lost love, he does not follow that tradition of recollecting a particular event with particular characters. "The Ballad of the Weaver" and "The Ballad of the Rider" offer stock character names and no geographic reference. These ballads are about the individual alone in the world, alone with his own suffering.

Reece was an anomaly of his time. Instead of experimenting with forms, Reece chose to "pour the new wine of poetry into the old bottles" (Griffith, January 29, 1951); in essence, by using common poetic forms, he wanted to focus attention on the poem's feeling. Unfortunately,

Reece wrote in an age where experiments in form were often tied to emotional expression (not only Frost and cummings, but also confessional poets, Beats, and others), so his use of traditional forms became, in his time, a *cause celebre* to some (Hillyer) and a sign of an old tradition to others. By 1945 when Reece's first book appeared, William Carlos Williams had made the variable foot, his "reply" to Elizabethan poetry, a major principle on which twentieth-century American poetry is based. With Walt Whitman as the father of the literary revolution to break from Europe and Wallace Stevens among the children, American poetry had moved far from the traditional forms we inherited from the English.

Nonetheless, the plan to use common forms is a good one. Experimental forms draw attention to themselves and away from the ideas, language, and feeling of the poem. A good example of this is e.e. cummings who is best known for his form, not his ideas—commentary on his poetry always favors form over feeling. Cummings did intend for his form to offer something special to a poem, which it obviously does, but one is often at a loss to recognize the deeper meaning of that poem when distracted by the expressionistic form. Even Frost's efforts to construct poems with common

folk speech encourage one to consider the form first and the ideas of the poem second.

If form is removed as a consideration, the reader is left to explore the possibilities of a poem's meaning. Such is the case with "Bitter Berry," a short poem from his first volume. At twelve lines in three modest stanzas, the poem seems simple enough; yet, it offers more than a simple message that dying young is bitter. In the first stanza, the image of water running over a stone creates both the sight of a mountain stream but also the sound of "the voice of the water/ Crying." So, too, it sets the scene of Helmer's daughter, near death, lying next to the stone, perhaps on the stone from a fall, as the voice speaks to her.

The second stanza is the voice of the stone offering the simple truth, by using the metaphor of ripened and unripened berries, that death of an old person is accepted more readily than death of a young person. But Reece does not offer that truth directly to the reader, but puts it into the voice of the water who tells the lesson to the young girl. What Reece has created is an intimate moment between the water and the girl, a moment between two symbols of life—water and youth. The irony, of course, is

that the water cannot restore the girl, only convey the sad truth of her death. And notice that the water does not describe death as evil; rather it suggests that when death comes, for it will come, it is distasteful for the young.

In the final stanza, the narrator returns as if to confirm Helmer's daughter's death to the reader. Still, the narrator sustains the private quality of the poem by telling us that the girl will taste the berry "as bitter as gall," and makes no comment upon the loss to the family and the community.

One need not assume Reece is denying the relevance of the girl's death to others, anymore than one assumes John Donne's "For Whom the Bell Tolls" sermon denies the pain of the individual; instead, Reece focuses the poem on the individual, as a reminder of the personal nature of death. This pattern of using a communal form such as lyric poetry or the ballad to convey ideas about the individual marks much of Reece's work. The form is a ritual one, not a personal one, and is designed to illuminate others, and it frees Reece to express private ideas and feelings with the assurance that readers have the familiarity with the mode of expression to understand the poem.

Just as traditional forms are the ideal way to transmit traditional poetic themes of nature, love, and death, they also are the perfect vehicle for Reece to communicate his ideas of individual experience. Since Reece wanted his poetry to be "vigorous and intelligible," he needed the traditional form; had he chosen experimental forms, Reece would have made his poems confessional, and Reece is no confessional poet. Of course, the temptation to connect artistic expression with biographical experience is always present, and one certainly can succumb to the temptation when discussing the enigmatic Reece, but Reece's choice of the most common forms should deter critics from that temptation; after all, if he wanted to unveil a highly personal poetry, he would write overtly about himself in a more idiosyncratic form.

This pattern comes, in part, from the folk gatherings he attended while growing up. Folk songs and ballads, as well as stories and ghost tales, allowed people to share the human experience through songs and ballads on tragic deaths, lost loves, and Christian salvation. The familiar rhythm and language of the songs and ballads were favored over less traditional ones. At the same time, books, though scarce, often were romance novels or urban

potboilers, which told of intimate lives that did not reflect the customs of North Georgians (Watkins 107-112).

One can see how modern poetry, distributed in print not in performance, would be well served by a blending of the communal quality of folk ballads with the intimate quality of print. The reader, secure that the traditional form is only the vessel and not designed to have meaning, can analyze each idea and each metaphor carefully. For Reece, who sought to put "the new wine of poetry" into those old bottles, the communal lyric and ballad forms meant to reach a wide audience mixed with the intensely private experience of reading afforded him the chance to transmit the ideas and feelings unique in a poet through the medium common to all.

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Like most poets, Reece wrote on a myriad of topics. Unlike most writers, Reece's work remained unchanged in his four volumes. One would expect him over time to experiment with style and language or embrace new ideas, but his poetic forms, his themes, and his point-of-view seem to have been fully formed by age twenty. Of course, for a man who began very early to read and to write poetry, one

should not be too surprised that he also arrived earlier than most to a poetic vision.

Nearly all of Byron Herbert Reece's poetry falls under four themes—nature, death, love, and religion. In these poems and others, Reece keeps a narrow focus on the solitary individual's relationship to nature or death or love or religion. Nothing in his poetry suggests that he wants to express communal experiences or universal knowledge, though one can argue that his scrutiny of the individual mind and experience in his poem is shared with us all. The individual, whether looking at nature, death, love, or religion, removes the veil of community to see with his eyes alone; the narrator is not a farmer or a mountaineer or a poet, just a private man alone to face the world, a world that can be beautiful and horrific.

Reece wrote few poems about farming; however, he published an assortment of poems on nature, from ones on seasons to ones on time to ones on animals. His poems of nature are descriptive and direct, and only occasionally seem to offer any commentary on man and nature. The result is poems that present nature as pleasant and simple and dependable.

Among his poems on nature are "The Dark and the Light" and "Seasonal," both of which express a general observation of nature. The former poem presents the reality that "Each thing woken into light/ Is of darkness"; "Yet the sun has shaped the rose." But Reece adds a final twist to the image of a rose born in darkness and shaped in light by describing the origin of the rose as "where all creation shines," which further heightens the interaction of dark and light.

"Seasonal" reminds the reader that "Earth's seasons are all of a kind." To know spring means one "must witness the bough translate the blooming" through "the falling of apples." To know a season means one must know all the seasons.

Other nature poems depict the visual splendor of nature. In "Autumn Mood," Reece writes: "And in the curve of heaven now/ The wild geese tread the dawn." Perhaps the best example is "Now Autumn Passes," which includes several distinctive visual descriptions: fall leaves "seared the eyeballs like the flame of grief"; "amber acorns rattle from the oak"; "apples redder than the fires of Troy/ Flaring like flambeaux through October's smoke"; and pumpkins "Bright as day's eyeball in its rounded socket."

One of Reece's most intriguing visual images appears in "The Dawn Came Down," in which "The round day was a circus tent/ Across whose top the sun/ Crawled like a fly on fiery legs."

Another curious visual image is of nature as "Our Lady of Inconstancy" who in the first stanza is "dressed/ In robes that graced her form like smoke" and the fields "Under her faring foot awoke"; in the second stanza wears "cloths of green"; and in the final stanza is "a gleaner bent/ To fill her skirts with fruit as dapple/ As sun on autumn leaves, and mint/ Perfumed her breath, and scent of apples." In most of Reece's nature poems, autumn is favored over other seasons with its richly colored leaves, and in this poem, the fall also offers a bounty of sensations with the sound of acorns, the sight of ripened apples, and the smell of mint and apples.

Though the visual effect is his strongest in nature poems, Reece did feature the sounds of nature. As noted earlier, "the voice of the water" spoke in "Bitter Berry," and in "Year's Ending," Reece writes that "the voice of winter/ Is loud in the garden/ Where dead flowers enter/ The earth and harden" and later the voice of winter "Is loud in the heart/ Where no love blooms/ And no dreams

start." In both poems, a voice in nature speaks to one in despair; yet, unlike the voice of the water, which is saddened by the death of Helmer's daughter and tells her about death in youth, the voice of winter possesses no human sympathy with its loud call of winter, which is "cold to the brow," to the loveless heart.

A more conventional use of sound can be found in "The Haying," in which "the iron machine" and a snake battle in the field. The snake "hisses so it wakes the hives/ Of anger in the sickle's knives" and leads the two to "war, and make/ Sounds like scissors and a snake."

Animals in nature, like the snake, become subjects for his poetry when they encounter man. In "Boy and Deer," the "Kindred two" watch each other "with mild surprise" and "with wonder in his eyes." Though the deer is not harmed, Reece seems concerned that man will harm animals, as in "Prayer Against Hunters," in which he prays that "the harried creatures" will escape the bullets and dogs of men to be left "in peace."

Reece's love poems fall into two basic categories: the highly private and painful feeling that love creates, which give meaning to the inner life, and the superficial and common view of love, which shows the ritualistic aspect of

love. Interestingly, love is linked to death in many of his poems of private feeling: "Lest the Lonesome Bird" tells of a young man who, upon seeing his beloved kissing another man, kills both of them and hides their bodies, and "My True-Love" compares love to Christ's sacrifice upon the cross. On the other hand, love is frivolous in poems such as "Pretty Polly" whose red dress and "laughing lips" forever intrigues a suitor, and "The End of Love" where he declares "The least of love is error" and "The most of love is terror."

In "End of Love," Reece brings two common images of sadness, the mourning dove and night, into play in this poem about a happy end to romance. (Nature plays a role in poems on love and death, as well.) In it, he tells the mourning dove to "change your tune" and declares that he has "foreshortened night" because of the narrator's end of love. Hints of Reece's view that love is painful appear as well, when he comments:

> The least of love is error,
> To watch by a single door;
> The most of love is terror—
> But now I love no more.

This vision of a happy circumstance for the end of love does not coincide with Reece's darker, more brutal image of lost love.

Perhaps the best use of nature in a love poem is "My Love is Fairer," in which the lover describes his love in rich floral images:

> My love is fairer than a plum in bloom
> Amid dun thickets of the upland sorrel;
> Fairer she is than bluets in the broom,
> Fairer than waxen trumpets of the laurel.
> Fairer my love is than the burdened rose,
> Fairer than bluebells in the lily's shadow;
> Fairer indeed than anything that grows
> After the spring has wakened field and meadow.

The sonnet goes on to argue the inevitable pain for one who seeks love: "Against its stem of life has scored his hand." The lush imagery in the first two quatrains intensifies the remarkable quality of the narrator's love, but in the tradition of love sonnets, the final lines serve to lament the impermanence and pain felt by a lover.

Not all pursuits of love are so high-minded. The lover in the ballad "Pretty Polly" is obsessed with the woman who "goes dressed in red" and has "laughing lips," but "would not set me a table to dine/ On the food of my heart's desire." Though warned by his father to "*shun the lass in a skirt of folly,*" the lover dismisses his father's counsel because "who'd give a hang for a love that's true/ If he could win pretty Polly?" And, later when he marries a girl "kind of heart, and she's plump and jolly" who "has caused me no grief since ever we wed," she is not enough to diminish his obsession, "she is not pretty Polly." Yet, with a lifetime of "folly" in failed pursuit, the lover will always "long for pretty Polly."

Most of Reece's death poems stress the close relationship of life and death. For Reece, burial is significant because it occurs in the earth, the same place he called "where all creation shines" in "The Dark and the Light." Two poems reflect this importance. In "As I Lie Down," earth becomes the final resting-place for a love that seems to have no other outlet. The lonely narrator determines to "give my love to earth to keep," because he can join his love "with earth above/ When I lie down to sleep." Death is not feared—not even mentioned directly—

and is described only as a "longer, deeper sleep." For the narrator of "Elegy," a dead friend's "being one with the ground" gives his heart "Cause now to love earth the more." Once again, earth is an ideal repository for love, no doubt because both earth and love are filled with life, yet so often what they create soon perishes.

"Mountain Fiddler" reflects the mystical tradition of death as an extension of life. The fiddler plays at "a hill in the middle/ Of Paradise" and angels gather to listen. They complain that the fiddle is "rude" and far from the glory of their afterlife:

> "With purest gold
> Are robed and shod,
> And we behold
> The face of God.

Yet, they also confess the power of the fiddle, the power of life, so "'If you but play/ Then we must dance!'" Amid the wonders of Paradise, the same base temptations of life cannot be résisted.

Though he wrote most of his poems in traditional forms with these four traditional themes, Reece's body of work contains some curious qualities. One curious quality is that, despite living nearly all his life in North Georgia, Reece does not offer a sense of place in his work—no poems about Blood Mountain or other local sites; place names are seldom used, but when they are, the names are not identifiable with North Georgia alone. Also, his nature poems are not bound to his home region—no homages to pine trees or mountain finches; his nature is spectacular but not unknown to the rest of us. And his narratives have few details that suggest the people are from his mountain home—no local stories are recounted, not even the story about his great-grandfather, a Methodist preacher, who was murdered in 1888 because of his opposition to whiskey stills. As noted before, Reece's poetry strips away the particulars of community in order to feature the private thoughts and emotions of the individual.

The focus on the individual is important because it does separate Reece from most poets who blend man and society and history. What Reece understood is that suffering is the only thing one carries alone. We can share love and hate, faith and doubt, but our suffering

belongs only to us and only we can know the depth of the anguish and despair it brings.

A poem that mixes two traditional conceits to illustrate the enormous suffering that love brings to lovers is "My True-Love." In the first two stanzas, Reece uses Elizabethan conceits to elevate the beloved whose hair is "Blacker than night"; "brow is bonny"; "lips are ruby and fair"; throat is "Whiter than milk"; and voice is "airy and solemn." Then, in the third stanza, the tone shifts from adoration to fear. At first reading, one might think the stanza has violent overtones, especially in the lines that say her "five of fingers are fiercer than brands/ And total a ten of terror," but the violence is the emotional consequence of a beloved's touch, which permanently brands the lover.

This shift also leads to the second major conceit, the crucifixion, not usually associated with romantic love. However, the point about love that Reece makes again and again is that true love is deep and abiding, which fits well with the love exhibited by Christ on the cross. This blend of Eros and agape creates the extraordinary analogy of the beloved as Christ and the lover as the apostle: "I

taste of the Wine from my True-Love's lips,/ The Bread is my True-Love's body."

The image of the True-Love as Christ is a different view of a beloved. Instead of putting the beloved on a pedestal, the beloved is put upon a cross; love is not adoration, it is sacrifice. So too, the lover is not the long-suffering admirer of the Petrarchan tradition, but a willing participant ("the vinegar waits at my fingertips") who understands that his love places his beloved on the cross.

The poem is not another way of saying that love hurts; rather, it emphasizes that true love carries both the sentiment of adoration and the burden of sacrifice. Reece seems to suggest that the fulfillment of genuine love leads to suffering; whereas simple want, such as that expressed in the opening lines by conventional conceits, is shallow.

The most striking quality of Reece's love poems is the raw, private emotions he puts in full view of the reader. One of the best examples of this is "Ballad of the Rider," in which Reece presents few narrative details and offers only Helmer, a folk name he frequently uses, as a central character. The ballad is stripped to the most primitive, basic anguish over a departed lover—no reason is given for

why she left, no story of their time together is recounted—and tells only of Helmer's single determination to kill the woman he loves.

Further evidence that Reece wishes to focus on the private misery is that he makes no mention of the alternatives most men would consider, such as begging her to come home or forcing her to return with him. His purpose, to kill the woman who left him, is simple yet horrifying, and entirely a private matter, for Helmer tells no one of his plot. Instead, he expresses his other feelings for his beloved. When asked by the people he meets on his quest, "How shall we know her as/ The One you seek?", he describes her in the most adoring terms.

> "Her laugh is free, her step is light,
> Her eyes outflame the dawn,
> Her lips are wine of a strange delight,"

Helmer's words are genuine; he does see her as brighter than the dawn. That is the problem: the reason he cannot simply follow a common course to bring her home is that she is uncommon and his devotion to her is uncommon, which creates in him an anguish and a despair over her departure

that drives him to respond with violence. Simply put, she is his life, which he wants to end, and when her life is gone, he is left with only one recourse—to pursue her after death.

The same anguish over a lover's departure is seen in "Marry the Moon." This narrative tells of a traditional man, building his marriage house, who hears news of his beloved's infidelity. Like Helmer, he makes no effort to come down from the mountain to change her mind, nor does he recover to move on with his life (the common more-fish-in-the-sea philosophy); rather, he abandons his work and sets about to harm his beloved. But this broken-hearted man chooses to "cause her pain" by letting her know that his pending suicide (as he "marries the moon") is her fault. The community is far away, both physically and spiritually, from the jilted man and he seeks no contact with the community to ease his suffering or placate his anguish. His task to build the marriage house proves that he alone feels the deep love that marriage represents and it serves as a reminder that man's private emotions exist apart from the community. And, in this case, his death will be a private one and he only invites those "missing me" to find him dead.

A further illustration that Reece values the private emotions over public ones can be found in his humorous poem of young love, "I'll Do As Much For My True-Love." In this poem, the young man wants to abide by the traditional grieving period of "twelve-month and a day," but soon learns that his love for the "clay-cold form" is not strong. By the fourth day, his tears dry on his cheek and his mind has determined to pursue another maid. His affection was not deep and abiding, as one finds in Helmer and in the man who marries the moon, which reminds one that the young man's love was not genuine and more a matter of his public and social life, not his inner life.

Reece finds an example of this deeply private love in the Bible with the story of Jonathan and David (I Samuel). Though their love is not described generally as homosexual, Reece's rendition of the Biblical tale and a contemporary reader's view suggests that this poem is a story of two loving men. Neither the Biblical version or Reece's ever indicates that the love is realized in a sexual way, but both depict an intense private love.

In the Bible, David marries Jonathan's sister, Michal who, like Jonathan, professes her complete devotion to David. Curiously, David does not respond with the same

affection for her, though he seems committed to his marriage; however, he lets Jonathan know of his love. Though the son of Saul and inheritor of the throne, Jonathan agrees to surrender his claim to David, to submit all to David. And until his death in battle, Jonathan's love is unshaken, while David mourns Jonathan, of whom he says: "thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women" (2 Samuel: 1.26). On the other hand, Michal fails to sustain her professed love and opposes David as the story unfolds.

In "The Larks at the Meeting of David and Jonathan," Reece emphasizes this difference in status and, more than the Biblical account, the private nature of the two men's love for one another. Only the larks know of their love, which remains deep, abiding, and spiritual. Unlike many of Reece's love affairs, the love of David and Jonathan survives intact. Whether this represents an idealized love for Reece or whether this indicates his fidelity to the Biblical story, I cannot be certain, but this love affair possesses a similar intensity of private feeling found in other Reece lovers.

Most of Reece's religious poems closely follow a story in the Bible, especially from the Old Testament. In these

poems, one recognizes that Reece fully understands the Biblical story and the sentiments of Christianity, but they seem more a retelling of the stories than a personal expression of faith. These poems seem almost historical, as if the stories are true, but any declaration that God, in fact, intervened is absent—almost as if he is retelling a cultural myth, rather than expressing belief in a divinity.

Reece expressed doubts about the certainty of God and heaven to his friends and one of his early poems, written as a student at Young Harris College, hints at this. In "Whose Eye Is on the Sparrow," the sight of a dead sparrow with a narrow wing lying in the grass prompts speculation about the frailty of life and the suddenness of death. The tradition is that God keeps his eye on the sparrow, which lets us know that he watches mankind as well; but Reece notes that "Whose eye on the sparrow/ Shifted,—and it fell," which calls into question the omnipotence and omnipresence of the Christian god.

The doubt of heaven is more explicit in "Earthly Evidence," a poem that contends that man because "he has the need/ For time extended past his mortal range" has created heaven. Man, called a "traveler," has no clear

directions to heaven, nor any theology to insure it, so he finds in seeds the hope of eternity—if seeds recreate the plant after its death, then man might recreate himself after death as well. It is a pitiable traveler that he depicts, but one for whom he has great empathy.

Standing apart from Reece's Bible poems and his poems of doubt is "Hear Me, Father, It is I," a poem that works both in the voice of Jesus as he walks toward Calvary and in the voice of a human traveling toward his or her own destiny. In one reading, the "I" is Jesus, weighted with the cross and with the sins of man, who looks at the approaching storm from his hunched position as he walks the road toward Gethsemene. This reading portrays Jesus as willing to surrender the mantle of Son of God should the storm be God's anger. But, the answer he finds is that God is not angry at him or man, which enables Jesus to accept his destiny, and assures him that he has the power to "bear upon my back" any burden.

An alternative reading of the poem establishes an everyman as the first-person narrator who bears the "weary load" of human life. In this reading, the doubt expressed in lines 5-6 is not whether God is the father, but whether God exists at all; it is a call for proof that the storm is

more than a storm. The answer seems to be that God is not present in that storm and that this knowledge—God is not omnipresent—lightens the pack because God and the responsibilities of Christian duty are no longer part of the everyman's burden. If God is not omnipresent, then moral teachings, faith, guilt, and commandments are unnecessary restrictions for men to bear upon their backs.

The first reading is spiritually true to the Bible as one would expect from a religious poem from Reece, but the second reading also represents a common trait in Reece's poetry, the private person suffering from the failed promise of his culture. And, given the philosophy expressed in "Earthly Evidence," it is a plausible interpretation. Regardless, both readings reflect the private doubts and inner answers each of us confronts alone.

Whatever biographers may say about his life, whatever critics may say about his work, whatever scholars may say about his influences, a writer's work always stands alone, time and time again, for judgment. Reece is no different. For me, he stands apart because he often depicts suffering at its most private and most painful and most disturbing,

all the while delivering the anguish and despair in beautiful rhythms and familiar forms.

CHAPTER FOUR

REECE AND LOCAL-COLOR LITERATURE

Mountain Singer. Mountain Poet. Mountain Man. Hill Country Genius. Farmer-Poet. Singer of Songs. When one considers these epithets applied to Byron Herbert Reece, it is no wonder he and his poetry have been misunderstood or misrepresented. For many minor writers who fall outside the conventions of the canon, either because they are too experimental, too popular, out-of-fashion, or political outsiders, their fate is to be forgotten; perhaps a worse fate is to be remembered as a local colorist.

At one time, local color was an esteemed quality for writers, such as Sarah Orne Jewett, Joel Chandler Harris, Edward Eggleston, and George Washington Cable, because they brought art from the particular place that surrounded them. As Alfred Kazin says, "The enduring sense of place such writers created fills American writing with the sight and fury of a hundred different American settlements" (8). The local colorist invited readers to discover a time and a place, to meet people like them yet altered by geography, without leaving home. Yet, we seem to have lost that value: "Within the academy, however, a deep-seated, almost

unconscious prejudice exists against the local in literature" (Parini A60). According to Parini, part of the reason for this change results from New Criticism, which "had a strong bias toward universality." Ironically, New Criticism bloomed from Southerners who knew the importance of place and the differences inherent in geography.

To some extent, local color has become the territory of sentimental and quaint literature; poems about outhouses that one finds at Cracker Barrel or folk tale collections sold at tourist souvenir shops. Taste has been obliterated in conversations about local color and faux folk art. Robert Penn Warren's fear about "touristic regionalism" has been realized.

No one denies that Ernest Hemingway, raised in Illinois, wrote brilliantly about Europe and Cuba. Hart Crane, also a Midwesterner, created his masterpiece, "The Bridge," as a newcomer to the city. And other writers, such as William Shakespeare and John Milton, produced great literature about people and places foreign to them. Unfortunately, one's childhood home can become a central part of many minor writers' identification, especially if that home place is held in low esteem.

Appalachia is such a place. Critic Frederick A. Birmingham said of Jesse Stuart: "[he is] a mutation, a natural-born writer, produced as by a miracle out of the illiterates of backwoods Kentucky" (Blair 247). The exuberance for Stuart's work belied the disdain Birmingham shared with many others for the rural South, as if Stuart was an *idiot savant* who rose from a place of idiots. Literacy was not nearly as rare as many assumed, nor was illiteracy a sign of backwardness as much as a sign that reading and writing were not necessities.

The image of Appalachia as the country of bumpkins has been displaced to some extent by another limiting version of life—the downtrodden. This image arises primarily from the political and labor struggles of miners in West Virginia and Kentucky. North Georgia is seldom represented in these images, largely because the North Georgia mountains were not settled by European immigrants until after 1800 and possess no major coal deposits. Unfortunately, the most compelling popular image of North Georgians is found in James Dickey's novel *Deliverance*, and featured in the successful movie version, in which natives are featured as banjo-playing freaks and murderous sodomites.

In recent years, Appalachian literature has become the subject of numerous anthologies, books, and academic programs. Ironically, as scholars have begun to construct cultural and literary traditions, the region has been transformed, first by the labor movement in coal towns, and later by tourism and suburban expansion.

Though often seen, even by experts, as a homogeneous culture that had been arbitrarily divided by state borders, Appalachia is not a monolithic region. Of course, geography matters. The mountains protected the Anglo-Saxon tradition established by its settlers from railroads and highways, from battlefields, from industrialism—all of which altered other Southern regions more rapidly and more dramatically. Yet, history matters as well, and not all of Appalachia knew the same history: Virginia was settled early, but North Georgia after 1800; while General Lee sought to take refuge in the Shenandoah Mountains, East Tennessee and North Georgia sided with the Union in the Civil War; West Virginia and Kentucky held vast coal deposits and therefore faced labor issues that did not exist in North Georgia.

North Georgia has, it seems, a different literary history as well. Time after time, essay after essay, the

focus of Appalachian literature lights on writers in Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and North Carolina, and rarely on North Georgians. In two major anthologies of Appalachian literature—*Voices From the Hills* (1975) and *A Southern Appalachian Reader* (1989)—only one Georgian, Sidney Lanier, is included, and only in *Voices From the Hills*. Lanier, raised in Macon, not in North Georgia, only knew the mountains from visits to his grandfather's estate in East Tennessee; yet, he set the novel *Tiger Lilies* in the Tennessee mountains. Chapter two of the novel is included in the anthology, along with a dialect poem, "Thar's More in the Man Than Thar Is in the Land"; both illustrate Lanier's idealized view of mountain life. That a nineteenth-century writer from middle Georgia provides the sole literary contribution to these Appalachian anthologies suggests that North Georgia writers, for whatever reason, have not attracted the interest of Appalachian scholars.

Reece's "Mountain Fiddler" does appear in the comprehensive *Appalachia Inside Out* (1995), a two-volume anthology that includes some literature amid the essays on Appalachian culture. Once again, contributions about North Georgia are rare, while representations of Tennessee, North

Carolina, and Kentucky dominate the text, and therefore define the entire region.

Whether the absence of Georgia writers in these Appalachian anthologies is the result of little worthwhile literature from North Georgians or of inattention by Appalachian scholars to North Georgia writers, I cannot say. As for Reece, his exclusion is understandable, given that his work does not emphasize the culture, people, and scenery of his home while the anthologies feature work *about* Appalachia, rather than work by its residents (which explains Sidney Lanier's selection over Reece). Certainly, if Reece fit into local color literature, he would have been more evident in Appalachian anthologies. After all, he published four books of poetry and two novels, received a Pulitzer Prize nomination and several statewide awards, and enjoyed good reviews of his books in major national media. The truth is: Byron Herbert Reece did not produce poetry that fit neatly into the standards of Appalachian local color—tall tales, folk themes, idealized mountain folk, dialect, and above all, an explicit identity as Appalachian.

If one sought to learn about the people, the culture, even the environs of North Georgia, the poetry of Reece

would be a poor choice. Reece offers few poems about the mountain folk who settled the area or about local rituals and customs; instead, he dwells on the private obsessions, joys, and suffering of individuals. And even his nature poetry, inspired by the beauty of the mountains, focuses on the individual images of nature—blooming peach buds, a rose bush, autumn leaves—rather than panoramas of peaks and valleys.

At the same time that Reece began to attract local interest in his work, Ralph McGill had established himself as a major force in the political and social life of Georgia. McGill, one of the last in the tradition of crusading publishers and winner of a Pulitzer Prize in 1959 for his editorial work, used his *Atlanta Constitution,* and later added the *Atlanta Journal,* to advance any number of causes in state politics, civil rights, and cultural development. He wielded a good deal of power and was willing to use his own skills as a communicator to put himself in the forefront of the major issues of the day. One of his cultural causes was the literary career of Byron Reece.

McGill met Reece in 1939, long before *Ballad of the Bones* appeared. Obviously, McGill was impressed by the

young poet, who he said "had the looks of the young Lincoln" (*Georgia Review*, 372), and kept his eye on Reece's development, but beyond that he committed himself and his media enterprise to the promotion of Reece's reputation among his fellow Georgians.

Unquestionably, McGill's efforts paid off for Reece, as the young poet was featured in several newspaper and magazine articles and was invited to speak at many statewide literary gatherings. Also, Reece was a frequent contributor to McGill's newspapers. The campaign was a success in drawing the attention of literary supporters and acolytes—the people who media moguls can influence—, but it failed to reach the important people in literature, academics and critics, who are less inclined to follow popular causes. Ultimately, McGill grew frustrated that he had not propelled Reece to literary prominence, as a 1955 column in the *Atlanta Constitution* illustrates: "[Reece] is beyond any argument one of the great poets of our day, and it is high time a lot of people—especially those in his home state—find it out." Of course, McGill, like most of us, was fighting a losing battle to create a mass audience for any poet in the second half of the twentieth century.

Ironically, McGill's good intentions created a distorted view of Reece and of his work that may have done more harm than good in defining Reece's reputation, particularly after his death. The tricks of journalism that hype a story often gloss over inconsistencies or ignore rough edges in order to lay before the reader an attractive subject, in essence, to make the "mountain singer" like the bank executive—solid, earnest, dependable, and if possible from humble beginnings. The result is a caricature of a human life and of a human endeavor, a caricature that often works in journalism but not in art. McGill knew, as he said, that one cannot "get too far ahead of the audience" or the journalist will lose them (*Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* 220).

The "hook" to lure readers used by Reece advocates seems to have been his mountain background. As noted earlier, the common notion of most mountain folk is that they are primitive and anyone who produces art is thought rare. Of course, places like Chicago and New York are not much more successful per capita at nurturing artists than other communities. Perhaps that is due to Donald Davidson's belief that "the person who is born of a traditional society, if he is not corrupted, will act a

whole person in all his acts, including his literary acts" (176). So, by emphasizing his background, his supporters hoped to elevate his art. The problem, unfortunately, was that they made him seem an exception among mountain folk, rather than an exceptional poet.

Ralph McGill attributed Reece's personal qualities to his background, largely because McGill's own home place in Soddy, Tennessee (just north of Chattanooga) brought him contact with mountain folk all his life. (Though I must point out that, while McGill may have known people like Reece, he was educated at MaCallie Preparatory High School in Chattanooga, then at Vanderbilt University, which suggests he sprang from a very different social class.) In recalling his first meeting, he refers to Reece's "old mountain reticence" and in explaining Reece's sudden departure from Battey Sanitarium in May 1954, he says that Reece "had the mountain man's reticence, pride and an independence almost unreasonable in its assertion" (Cook 108). While this reticence and pride may be a characteristic of mountain folk, it is hardly an unusual human characteristic and leaves those readers to assume that Reece's personality is derived from his mountain home

and not from his literary gifts (or even his individual upbringing).

In commenting upon Reece's suicide, McGill reiterated his image of the stoic mountaineer:

> "What fires of resentment at his fate burned in his brain none of us ever knew. But that he was a Prometheus bound to the harsh rocks of tuberculosis, with the vultures of a cruel fate pecking at his liver, was undoubtedly true" (*Georgia Review*, 375).

As moving as his words are and as genuine as his despair for the loss of a friend, they do not jibe with Mildred Greear's comment that she was not surprised by Reece's suicide, nor her belief that loneliness more than tuberculosis brought about his decision to kill himself. But we are more likely to accept suicide because one suffers from a grave illness than because one suffers from a lack of intellectual and personal interaction.

Elsewhere, McGill wrote of "the folk rhythms, folk themes, the nuances of life, the feeling for old forms and the language of poetry" that Reece possessed (Cook 115). *Folk*, as McGill uses the word, represents those poetic

qualities that are not urban, not academic, not elitist—qualities that most of McGill's readers would find impenetrable. Yet, while Reece uses the ballad and clearly has a feel for it, much of his poetry does not show folk themes and certainly he exhibits no rhythmic patterns unusual in other lyric poets.

Perhaps the most curious contribution by McGill and his publications to the stereotype of Reece as a mountain poet are the photographs that appeared over the years. One photograph depicts Reece and his family in their cabin before the fireplace—Reece, pen in hand, looking up at his father; his father, pipe in hand, standing above the seated son and mother; his mother, knitting in hand and book in lap, sitting beside her son. Others show Reece at work: one with him standing beside a mower; one (plate 1) with him in a flowered shirt, pen and pad in hand, sitting on a rock on a stream bank; and another (plate 2) with him holding an axe (young Lincoln?).

The strangest of these photographs (plate 3) that appeared in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* newspapers is of Reece, in a flowered shirt, behind a plow, which is not harnessed to a horse. The shot looks up toward Reece with the sky big in the background—reminiscent of romantic

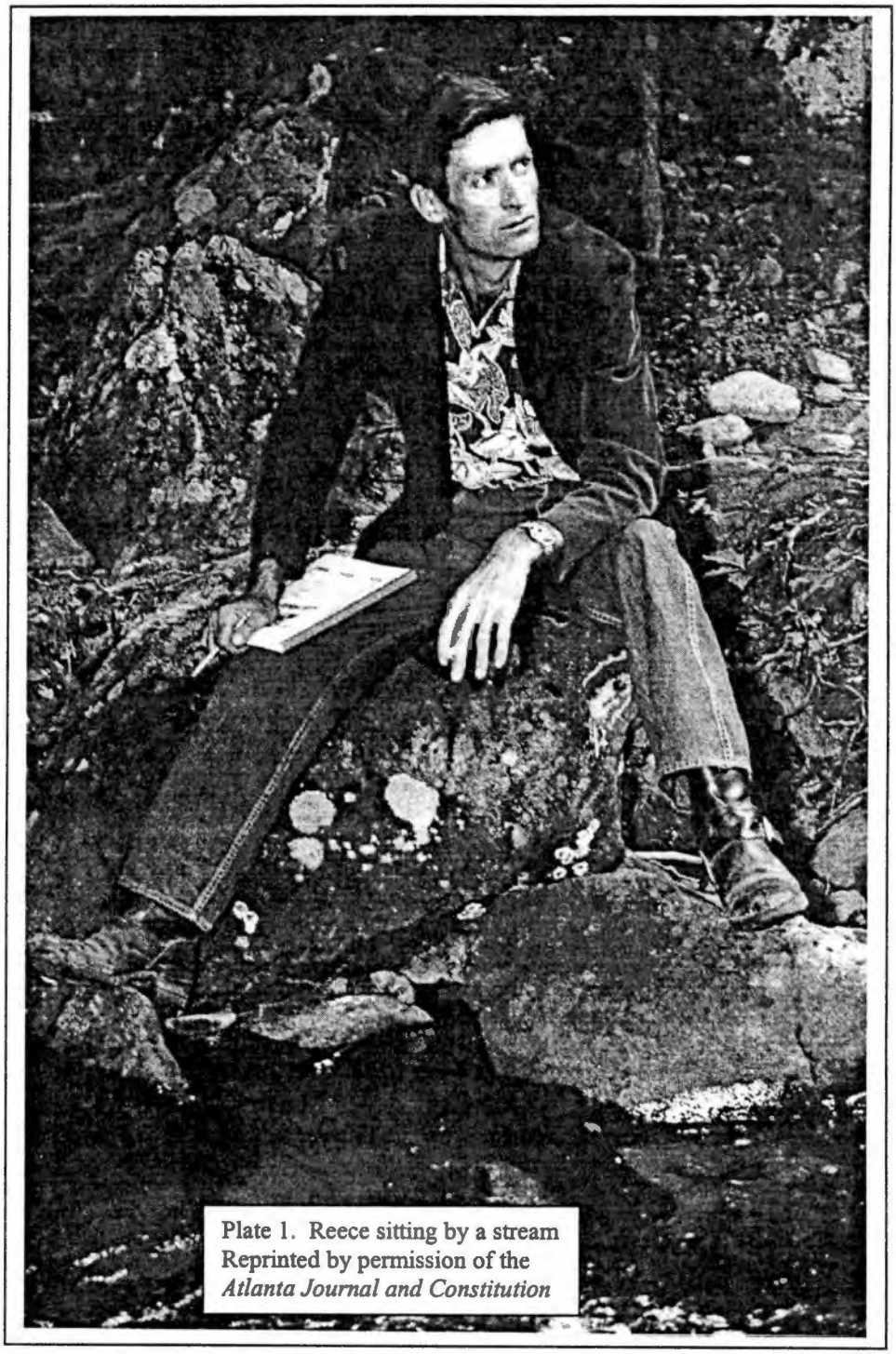

Plate 1. Reece sitting by a stream
Reprinted by permission of the
Atlanta Journal and Constitution

Plate 2. Reece leaning on an axe handle
Reprinted by permission of the
Atlanta Journal and Constitution

Plate 3: Reece behind a plow
Reprinted by permission of the
Atlanta Journal and Constitution

photos by Walker Evans and Margaret Bourke-White that became so influential in attracting attention to the plight of the poor Southern farmer. Yet, the photograph is more absurd than romantic, more cartoonish than realistic.

All these efforts made Reece a known figure in Georgia, but it seemed to accomplish little in building sales of his poetry books or in gaining Reece an image suited to his complex character, which should surprise no one since poetry sales continued to decline after 1945 and since many newspaper readers, of whom McGill did not want to get too far ahead, were inclined to find the airy heights of poetry not easy to comprehend. And for college professors, the quaint image of a local mountain man poet who is promoted in the newspaper and not in academic venues was not likely to pique their scholarly interests. Sadly, McGill could forge for his friend Byron Reece neither readers in his life nor respect for his legacy.

I should note that Ralph McGill's newspaper was not the only publication in the state joining in the idealized characterization of Reece as a mountain poet. In 1946, Mrs. Sam Hampton wrote in *The Atlanta Journal*:

> Like a clean wind blown down from the Georgia hills comes the discovery of Byron Herbert Reece, whose poetry falls as simple and natural as sunlight across the fields, upon the inner recesses of the mind. (Cook 42)

Nine years later, Randall Couch in reviewing *The Season of Flesh* for *The Augusta Chronicle*, claimed that Reece's poems "doubtless constitute the most moving and truly lyric writings Georgia has offered the world since Sidney Lanier" (Cook 115).

Even Raymond Cook, in his invaluable biography of Reece, ends with these words:

> But whenever men retreat to quiet vales of the mind to seek a lifting of the heart in friendship, a warm joy in simple things, and a catching of the breath at supernal beauty, there the lovely, questing spirit of Byron Herbert Reece will have found a haven, and his haunting, flute-like music will be heard. (143)

In each case, the critics oversimplify Reece's poetry, in order to fit the mountain poet image. "The Ballad of

the Rider" and other poems of emotional suffering do not fall simply or naturally "upon the inner recesses of the mind," as Hampton suggests. Nor does Reece, aside from the state of his birth, have much in common with Lanier—one is from modest beginnings in the North Georgia mountains, the other from privilege in Georgia's midlands. Both poets were famous, but Couch is mistaken in connecting the work of one, grounded in realism and the individual, with the work of the other, grounded in romanticism and culture. Both wrote beautiful lyric poems (though Lanier, in my mind, is far inferior to Reece), but Reece's "questing spirit" was not always lovely and often sought to understand the darkness of the human heart, not its joy.

A part of this struggle with local color for Reece is part of the legacy of many Georgia writers. Sidney Lanier died young after writing many romantic poems and a novel, as well as musical compositions. As mentioned above, Lanier's work has been identified with Appalachia, though he had no strong connection to the region; and Lanier spent most of his adult life abroad or in Baltimore.

Caroline Miller won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1934, the first Georgian to do so, for *Lamb in His Bosom*. While the novel was reprinted in 1993, she remains an

obscure author, both inside and outside the state and inside and outside the academy, largely because she published only one other book—a romance novel, *Lebanon*, about the Georgia lowlands.

Of course, the most bizarre legacy is that of Margaret Mitchell. She too won a Pulitzer, for *Gone With the Wind*; yet the novel and her work have only rarely drawn the attention of literary scholars. Unlike the other Georgia authors above, her novel sold, and still sells, in great numbers and the movie version ranks among the classics of American cinema. But her popularity and acclaim never seemed to push her reputation beyond that of a "popular" writer. Even efforts to preserve one of her homes in Atlanta only succeeded after decades of fundraising, years of conflict over whether she deserved recognition for what some viewed (foolishly) as a racist novel, and numerous arsons.

Perhaps H.L. Mencken's attack upon Georgia as the worst state in the South in his famous (or infamous) essay "The Sahara of the Bozart" played a role in the fight for legitimacy from critics and scholars these writers face. Somehow for writers in the state, national recognition is fleeting; major awards that elevate the careers of others

are preludes to obscurity; and mass appeal becomes an albatross. In all likelihood, these problems stem from the absence of a great university English department in the state (Tennessee has Vanderbilt, North Carolina has Chapel Hill, Virginia has "the" university), the absence of an influential writer in the early years of the Southern Renaissance (Mississippi had Faulkner, Texas had Porter, Tennessee had the Fugitives, North Carolina had Thomas Wolfe, and the lack of an influential literary journal or literary press.

Since his death, Reece has been in this sad predicament: a writer with artistic credentials and a man whose legacy has been shaped by commerce and regional stereotypes. In some ways, Reece's poetry does echo his mountain homeland, but much of it describes emotions too raw for the mountain poet image. And, Reece's life does not always support the romanticized image of him as devoted to the mountains and to the farm.

The desire to identify Reece as a mountain poet has led some to create his public image by selective use of Reece's own words. By doing so, they present Reece as a one-dimensional person, when he was quite complex and not always the mountain man of the public image. While much of

the public image is true, it does not represent the whole man. Byron Herbert Reece should be understood more fully, not merely seen as a shy, folksy, homebody who wrote pretty poems.

Much is made of Reece's shyness. As noted earlier, Ralph McGill often described Reece as reticent and shy, and many others remarked that Reece seemed more reserved than most. Reece himself expressed a reluctance to read his work in public. For example, in a letter to the Atlanta Writers Club in 1940, he responded to their request for him to read his poems by saying, "I hope you will read what poems I bring. I simply refuse to butcher poetry by reading it aloud" (Cook 26). Perhaps, the reluctance to read his poetry before the Atlanta Writers Club by the twenty-three year old Reece, whose first book of poetry would not appear for five years, came not from acute shyness but from a reluctance due to inexperience. In the end, he did not make the meeting. (At times, I wonder if Reece's reluctance is more a coy way to avoid local writers' groups when he would rather not attend, than real fear of public speaking.) Whatever his reasons then, Reece could be found a willing participant in the public eye throughout his life: Reece began to preach lay sermons in

church at eighteen; he read his work widely (and well) to numerous groups, and only refused when farm responsibilities or his health prevented it; and he taught classes, first at an elementary school in 1940, and later at UCLA, Emory University, and Young Harris College.

Another trait ascribed to Reece is his mountain folk quality—he grew up in a cabin and loved to walk in the mountains alone with nature; and he never finished college and seemed uneasy around academics. It is all true. But Reece found nothing valuable about that cabin, so he built his parents a modern one. His walks in nature have as much to do with his loneliness and despair from no friends with whom to discuss art and ideas. To most people, walks in nature correlate with solitude, but for Reece, whose environment was nature, the quiet may not have been peaceful. And his feelings about academics came from his disappointment in the mediocrity of education and educators he encountered at Young Harris College and at UCLA, about which he said: "the measure of failure in such institutions is often the measure of the smallness of the men in them" (Griffith, October 20, 1950). Of course, Reece did teach at three colleges and his love of literature and classical music suggest he shared some values with colleagues, so his

complaints arose from the university's failure to achieve elitist ideals, not their elitism.

Reece spent most of his life in North Georgia and no doubt loved his home. In a letter to Pratt Dickson written during his second visit to southern California, Reece commented that "This is not my climate really. I think I'll have to get back on the ground, North Georgia and vicinity, before I can do much on the novel" (July 14, 1956). And no one can deny, from reading his poems, the natural beauty Reece found in his homeland. Certainly, Reece always returned home from trips elsewhere. However, where else could he go? Reece complained that the pay he received as a teacher from UCLA, Emory, and Young Harris was only enough to pay expenses, and without a college degree or a prestigious literary standing, his options in the academic world, the rare place where poets are hired, was limited.

And Reece's remarks to Dickson may illustrate a writer's need to be surrounded by the place he writes about because, though he complained to E.V. Griffith that he disliked his trip to UCLA in 1950 (August 29, 1950), he willingly returned there five years later. Yet, Reece chose to stay at home and live in the mountains, but he

also remarked in a letter to E.V. Griffith that he "found no satisfactory communication with other people here" and that he might like to live in New York City someday (October 20, 1950). This conflict likely derives from the inner conflict Reece felt: on one hand, he wanted an intellectual life, which he did not find in the North Georgia mountain community; on the other hand, he felt a responsibility to his family to care for them, since they seemed so dependent upon him. I doubt, given the powerful hold his family had over him, Reece would have left North Georgia for long.

The tactic to elevate Reece by stereotyping him, which McGill began with his belief that one cannot "get too ahead of the audience," continues to this day. In forming the image of Byron Herbert Reece, nearly every writer mentions that he was born beneath Blood Mountain near Choestoe, which in Cherokee means "the place of the dancing rabbits." The charming place names continue: Frogtown Gap, Wolf Creek, and Place of the Morning Star. Of course, these are charming names that prompt nostalgia for the old days in our age, but they did not make the person who lived near them charming and nostalgic, and more importantly, Reece finds little use for them in his poetry, choosing instead

his own literary geography.

In 1988, the Georgia Humanities Council produced "The Bitter Berry: The Life and Work of Byron Herbert Reece," a half-hour documentary constructed from Reece's own words. An actor narrated scenes of Reece as he walked through the mountains and then reenacted scenes of the poet as he talked to students. Though charming, the film projects only a limited view of Reece, the view of the mountain poet. Four years after the film, a study guide book was published with the same title, written by poet Bette Sellers, that does offer some useful comments on Reece's life and poetry.

In 1989, the curse of touristic regionalism struck again with the creation of "The Reach of Song," an outdoor drama about Reece. (The outdoor drama should not be confused with the Georgia State Poetry Society's annual anthologies, named from the same Reece lines, that promote the honorable goal of encouraging the writing of poetry in Georgia.) The drama was born from the same commercial motives to transform North Georgia into a tourist haven, not from a serious desire to resurrect Reece's literary reputation, and not surprisingly, delivers a simplistic, sugar-coated image of the mountain poet.

In the end, Byron Herbert Reece is not a local colorist: his poetry does not focus on his life as a farmer or the culture of the North Georgia mountains; his poetry is not acknowledged as local literature by Appalachian scholars; and his reputation, cultivated by Ralph McGill and others, has been built on folk themes and images that distort Reece's personal and literary life. To understand Reece, one must search elsewhere for answers.

CHAPTER FIVE

REECE AND SOUTHERN POETRY

Robert Frost. Edwin Arlington Robinson. Robinson Jeffers. Wallace Stevens. Marianne Moore. Richard Wilbur. All of these American writers won acclaim for their poetry and all devoted themselves to poetry as the sole means of literary expression. The South is not represented in such a list because not one major Southern poet devoted himself or herself to verse alone; instead, the principal Fugitives, the major Appalachian figures Jesse Stuart and James Still, and even more contemporary Southern poets such as James Dickey and Fred Chappell produced an extensive body of literary criticism and/or fiction.

Southern Literature is built on fiction: when one speaks of the Renaissance, Faulkner, Welty, O'Connor, and Porter are always mentioned. After all, Southern fiction writers dominated the Pulitzer Prize for fiction—five recipients from 1929 to 1939 and seven more recipients from 1955-1968, plus other recipients scattered throughout the award's history—, and those same writers stand as the measure of nearly every short fiction writer or novelist since. During the same periods, only John Gould Fletcher

(1939) and Robert Penn Warren, who also won the fiction prize in 1947, received the Pulitzer for poetry (1958).

Perhaps the dominance of fiction in the South comes from the storytelling tradition proclaimed by nearly every Southern scholar and writer. This tradition demands not just a good tale with interesting characters, but also a distinctive narrator. Narration and characterization of the kind born from the oral story tradition have a style and form that many writers have easily adapted to the written page with a first-person narrator, and even the more formal narration allows for dialogue to bring forth the oral rhythms. More importantly, the major fiction writers have sustained the Southern aspect of place, of culture, and of history. Conversely, "poetry in the South tended to reflect the impact of modernism as much as it celebrated its regionalism" (Justus 535); both Modernists and Fugitives wanted to break from the literature of the past and create a "new" literature and to do so, they had to leave the romantic, regional topics behind.

Michael Kreyling makes the compelling argument that Southern literature was "invented" through a series of acts based upon the same false premise: "it could not have happened any other way" (xiii). In fact, as Kreyling

shows, the events--beginning with the formulation of *I'll Take My Stand*, continuing through the promotion of New Criticism as a superior method to investigate literary texts by Cleanth Brooks, Warren, and others, and Richard Weaver's ideas on Southern culture and literature, followed by Louis Rubin melding literature with history, all the while, anthologies supported the recently invented canon of Southern literature—almost fell apart at several points. Nonetheless, this invented concept of Southern literature held sway over the literary and academic world because these scholars maintained their standing as important critics.

Yet, as enlightening as *Inventing Southern Literature* is, it focuses on fiction and literary theory. So does nearly every major Southern literary work. Even *The History of Southern Literature* devotes nearly all of its chapters to fiction writers, and offers only generalized chapters on poetry. In addition, while most publishers provide reprints of Southern fiction (i.e., LSU Press's "Voices of the South" series and University of Georgia Press's "Brown Thrasher" series), few reprint or assemble poetry collections. And as noted above, anthologies reinforced a canon that was deemed valuable by the very

people writing the literature. Perhaps as the Southern Renaissance is reconsidered by scholars not of that time, a different perspective will emerge; until then, we are left with a limited canon of Southern poetry.

The genesis of modern Southern poetry is found with the gathering in Nashville of young poets and the publication of a poetry journal, *The Fugitive*, in 1922. The Fugitives went on to establish careers as poets, novelists, critics, and editors, which enabled them to influence the spectacular rise of Southern letters and its new canon. However, poetry held the day for only a short while before the most influential Fugitives became the Agrarians—poetry fell to politics.

As poets, the Fugitives offered a variety of perspectives, which bode well that a broad definition for Southern poetry would emerge in the 1920s from their efforts. While Allen Tate found great promise in the poetry of Eliot and Pound, John Crowe Ransom remained suspicious of modernism, though John Stewart notes that Ransom "was regarded as the true leader of the modernist faction" (36). Meanwhile, Donald Davidson's work, especially *The Outland Piper* (1924), suggested romantic

strains. The work during this period by these three Fugitives, generally recognized as the most influential poets of the group, showed promise that Southern poetry would be changed from the sentimental and ornamental style the Fugitives opposed into a modern and diverse demonstration of the potential of poetry.

Unfortunately, that promise never was realized. Not only did the Fugitives divert much of their interest and energy to political and cultural matters, they also became contentious towards each other's poetry. The conflicts, notably between Davidson and Tate, were painful, as their letters indicate, and led to a permanent intellectual and artistic (and personal) separation. (To read Donald Davidson's letters to Allen Tate is wrenching, especially because Davidson seems more hurt than challenged by the comments of his old friend.) While Davidson remained at Vanderbilt, Tate moved on, including a period as editor of *The Sewanee Review*. Ransom quit publishing poetry altogether for two decades and devoted himself to establishing *The Kenyon Review* as a major literary journal.

The Fugitives had a curious relationship to Regionalism. On one hand, they rejected Southern writers

who came before them as sentimental and ornamental. On the other hand, they sought to make Southern literature identifiable as great literature. Yet, most Fugitives (Donald Davidson is the notable exception) identified themselves as "men of the world, members of an international community of letters" first and Southerners second (Stewart 39).

Evidence of this curious view of regionalism is illustrated in Allen Tate's essay "A Southern Mode of the Imagination." Tate is quick to savage the Old South and its literature: he says his contemporaries "avoided [Confederate Prose] more assiduously than sin"; he says Augustus Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes* "is in no sense folk literature" and "verges upon myth"; and he contends that Renaissance is an inaccurate name for the rise of Southern literature because it "was more precisely a birth, not a rebirth." He is also quick to dismiss Northern literature, which he claims "has become the stepsister of American fiction."

Though Tate is contemptuous of earlier Southern literature and current non-Southern literature, he compares the new Southern literature to Elizabethan literature. The implication that Southern literature is the national

literature, which Tate does by naming only Southerners and not any Northerners whose work has been influenced by Southerners, is contrary to his insistence—"I do not insist upon this"—that Southern literature does not need to be the "center of American literature."

In a sense, regionalism for the Fugitives/Agrarians meant the South that they had birthed and reared—a South with a revised history which features a culturally unique people wanting only to live their lives separate from the encroaching and oppressive North, while aware of the genuine but overstated corruption of the Old South; a favorable identity which places farming, tradition, religion, and humanity above the corrupting influences of industrialism; and a newly created literature which illustrates the intellect, awareness, and talent of the modern Southern writer who is capable of changing the literary landscape of the nation and the world.

When the Fugitives took their poetry beyond the group with publication of the first issue of *The Fugitive* in 1922, Appomattox was carried in the minds of their fathers and their grandfathers. Now, as I look back to the Fugitives from 1999, the distance to their Nashville meetings in the 1920s is a generation longer than they were

then from the Civil War; nonetheless, they remain remarkably dominant in any discussion of Southern literature.

Over the years, the principal Fugitives became identified as Tate, Ransom, Davidson, and Warren, and most books on the Fugitives devote most or all pages to those four writers. During the ten years of the Fugitives before they became the Agrarians and all but Davidson scattered from Vanderbilt, Tate published two collections of poetry, Ransom four, Davidson two, and Warren did not publish his first volume until 1935. In subsequent years, Ransom and Davidson published little poetry, while Tate continued his steady output and Warren's poetry flourished.

Ransom (*The Kenyon Review*), Tate (*The Sewanee Review*), and Warren (*The Southern Review*) became editors of the most influential journals of their time and dedicated themselves to advancing like-minded writers. But, as Louis Rubin notes, "Davidson must have expressed his strong disapproval of what Brooks and Warren were doing with the *Southern Review*, seeing the magazine's inclusiveness as a betrayal of Agrarian objectives" (259). And one can presume Davidson felt the same toward Tate for not favoring Southern literary matters over Modernism and toward Ransom for

advancing New Criticism over Southern literature in his journal.

Joining these three were others associated with, though not part of the original Fugitive group, such as Andrew Lytle who also edited *The Sewanee Review* and Cleanth Brooks (not one of the poetry writers but part of the larger literary group) who co-edited *The Southern Review*. Though writers could find many outlets for their work in other journals, these former Fugitives defined Southern literature.

The Fugitives learned early on the power of a literary journal editor, as Stewart noted:

> As the Fugitives found to their cost, the editors of any magazine that lasted more than a few months were soon overwhelmed with unsolicited manuscripts, and often the only way to get into print was to have a friend on the staff or start a magazine of one's own, which could be done for a few dollars. (363)

So it is no surprise that they eagerly pursued editing opportunities and they proved talented at those endeavors. Part of their success came because Southern literature was

exploding and part because, as Tate later said, "[T]here are always persons of real talent, doing something new and distinguished, who can't get a hearing in the established magazines" (Stewart 363). The commitment to innovation made their journals among the most important of their time and exposed readers to many new writers.

Literary journals were not the only domain in which the former Fugitives held sway; anthologies and textbooks edited by these men reinforced their literary principles and their canon. As Kreyling points out, "Some anthologies establish communities where none had been perceived; others nourish underfed constituencies. All foster the impression that the voices housed in any given anthology consciously talk to one another" (56). Brooks and Warren produced three oft-reprinted volumes early on—*An Approach to Literature* (1936), *Understanding Poetry* (1938) and *Understanding Fiction* (1943); then continued the onslaught, first with books on modern rhetoric (1949 and 1950), then on short fiction (1953 and 1960), and finally with *American Literature: The Makers and The Making* (1973). This thirty-seven-year partnership shaped the literary world by shaping the very teaching of literature in colleges; nearly every living college professor of English has encountered, or

perhaps taught, at least one of these books. And Brooks and Warren produced other volumes apart, though all held constant to the principles of New Criticism.

Though no other Fugitive, in fact no other scholar of the century, can match the influence of Brooks and Warren, the other Fugitives did edit anthologies and textbooks, as well. Most notable of all, perhaps, is Allen Tate's *The House of Fiction: An Anthology of the Short Story* (with Caroline Gordon). Though Donald Davidson did not match the success of *The House of Fiction*, like Warren and Brooks, he lent his talent to three valuable textbooks: *American Composition and Rhetoric* (which was used for years at Vanderbilt and elsewhere, and is still superior to most contemporary composition textbooks) in 1938, *Readings for Composition from Prose Models* in 1942, and *Twenty Lessons in Reading and Writing Prose* in 1955.

John Crowe Ransom did not enter the world of anthologies and textbooks, but he did lead the others in writing important books on literature and culture. His three books—*God Without Thunder* (1930), *The World's Body* (1938), and *The New Criticism* (1941)—along with *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) cleared the path for the Fugitives to carry their ideas beyond poetry and to project their vision of

Southern literature, identity, and culture into the halls of academia and art.

They did so with great intensity. Tate wrote several volumes of essays, often linking Modernism with the new Southern literature, but always illustrating the intellectual breadth of the new Southern man of letters. He also wrote essays about a wide assortment of issues (such as religion, poetry, fiction, the profession of letters) and writers (including Keats, Dickinson, Yeats, Hardy, and Crane), as well a book on T.S. Eliot.

The most enduring work about the culture and literature of the South came from Cleanth Brooks and Donald Davidson. *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939) and especially *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947) established Brooks as a scholar of great insight. Later, he gained acclaim for his books on Faulkner. This combined with his journal editorship and his mammoth production of anthologies, textbooks, and other theoretical studies, made him the supreme literary critic of the century.

Davidson is far less prolific and less acclaimed, yet his books served as a reminder that one Fugitive had not left home. Though *The Attack on the Leviathan* (1938) and *Southern Writers in the Modern World* (1958) are twenty

years apart, they reflect a man whose ideas changed little over time, and whose commitment to his native region, unlike the rest of the Fugitives, did not waver. This resistance to change resulted not only in Davidson's separation from the rest of the group, it left him alone to fight the New York Intellectuals and others who continued to pelt the region with images of "the barbarism of the South" (Davidson 255).

These esteemed men of letters who began as a group of young poets in Nashville had conquered the literary world. Their brilliance, talent, and energy cannot be challenged, but the consequences of their efforts have not always redounded to the good of Southern literature.

One consequence of the influence of these important writers is a narrow perspective on Southern literature. After all, except for Cleanth Brooks, they submitted their poetry and fiction as creative writers, while they selected the poetry and fiction of others as journal editors, while they defined poetry and fiction as literary theorists, while they elevated poetry and fiction of a few as canon makers. To suggest that these politically and artistically driven men did not mix their particular view of literature and their career interests is absurd. To suggest that

their advocacy of Modernism and New Criticism in their roles as editors, critics, and anthologists did not favor like-minded writers is preposterous. While their efforts brought many fine writers to prominence, many other Southern writers have been left outside the mainstream of Southern literature because the mainstream has been so narrowly defined. After all, they sought to define Southern literature by their terms and standards, not by the diversity of Southern writers. Some of this narrowness is the result of a Modernist habit to canonize writers in the midst of their careers, as evidenced with the early acclaim for Eliot, rather than towards the end. (Allen Tate actually complained in 1931 that Eliot was not getting as much attention as he had, as if Eliot's "anointing" had already been determined and critics must proclaim it forever and ever. Even the Roman Catholic Church wisely requires decades to pass before granting any such elevation.)

Another consequence has been the subornation of Southern literature into Modernism. As Thomas McHaney points out, "the attempt to isolate the so-called Southern Renascence from the Modern Movement gives a false sense of distinctly regional achievement to southern writing"

(Castille and Osborne 46). Modernism is an import into the South and the attempt to export much of Southern literature, a literature stripped of its place and regional identity, as more than Modernism is ultimately futile--more and more, scholars notice that the allegiance of Southerners to Modernism had more drawbacks for the Southerner than Modernism.

What began as a gathering of poets in a house in Nashville became a literary and cultural movement that defined Southern literature for the entire century; but instead of creating a new regional identity for all Southern writers or reinventing Modernism through the prism of Southern culture, the group created a literary tribalism.

To be a Southerner who wrote fiction and/or poetry was not sufficient to attract the attention of their criticism; the Fugitives sought to determine, not describe, the boundaries of Southern literature. Despite the close ties the Fugitives had to Vanderbilt University, even the study of literature there did not lead to any inclusion in the group. For example, James Still earned a Master's degree from Vanderbilt in 1930, "but made no special impression on the members of the Fugitive group who were still there"

(Bryant 121). Jesse Stuart arrived shortly after Still and "found out the Fugitives was a closed corporation. A stranger and an ambitious unknown couldn't just go to Vanderbilt and join them" (LeMaster and Clarke 20).

Stuart's case is an interesting one and hints at the change the group underwent from creators of a new Southern literature in the 1920s to heralds of Modernism into Southern letters in the 1930s and 1940s. One would have thought a farmer-poet with Stuart's agrarian background and artistic ambition would exemplify the Agrarian ideal and would have benefited at Vanderbilt among the followers of the Fugitive/Agrarians and later in his writing career. He did not; though he had a long and successful career, he remained identified as a Southern Robert Burns and a regionalist from Appalachia, not as a mainstream Southern writer. Yet, at Vanderbilt, and for years after, he enjoyed the support and praise of Donald Davidson, which is telling. Though many writers who came from Vanderbilt mention Davidson as an influential teacher, his influence beyond the university was limited, in part because he was not a journal editor nor an anthologist. Davidson remained largely an unregenerate Southerner to both Industrialism

and Modernism, which placed him outside of the dominant trends advanced by his former associates.

On the other hand, to be a student of another Fugitive might gain one early attention in important literary circles. The most extraordinary example of this is Peter Taylor. Taylor studied with Allen Tate at Southwestern University (now Rhodes College in Memphis) in 1936, with John Crowe Ransom at Vanderbilt in 1937 and at Kenyon College in 1938-40, and briefly with Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks at Louisiana State University. If his talent and his contacts had not already won entry into the inner circle of Southern literature, Warren's introduction to Taylor's first book, *The Long Fourth and Other Stories* (1948) announced his admittance.

Peter Taylor is also of interest because he was born the same year as Byron Reece, but in a much different class. Taylor, like most of the Fugitives and unlike Reece, came from a professional family—his father was a lawyer, state attorney general, and insurance company president. Unlike Reece, he grew up in different places—Trenton, Tennessee, Nashville, St. Louis, and Memphis--and he enjoyed the academic and financial background to enter and move from one private college to another.

This issue of class is a sensitive one, but painfully true. After all, when Taylor and Reece entered college in the late 1930s, the South was still marked by poverty from Reconstruction and still emerging from the national depression. In such circumstances when money is less available, status becomes more valuable; i.e., Cleanth Brooks's father may have earned only a modest income as a Methodist minister, but he was a respected professional man whose standing carried great sway, and even greater sway in a struggling economy. Children with intelligence and talent from families with a tradition of education and some status in certain communities could gain entrance into private high schools and elite universities; whereas children with intelligence and talent from families without a tradition of education and status would be fortunate to reach any college.

When Peter Taylor and other young men with similar backgrounds met the older Fugitives, they would have shared an understanding of the world that a poor farmer's son would not have. They would have also found Modernism's universality and themes of alienation more palatable than someone who had yet to travel or enter an alienating culture. And in their writings, they would have shared

literary settings, themes, and characters that one from a different class with different social and cultural experiences may not create. I am not suggesting the Fugitives defined Southern literature by class or even by a narrow set of values; I am suggesting that in their efforts to redefine, rather than describe, Southern literature they may have been more inclined to encourage writers who shared their image of the South.

Of course, the Fugitives hailed the works of writers who emerged outside of their circle, writers such as Faulkner, Welty, and Porter, which for some readers might be proof that my label of literary tribalism is false. But, Faulkner demanded attention as a major Southern and Modern novelist by winning acclaim before the Fugitives had taken their places as important critics. Otherwise, one finds some relationship to the Fugitives. Welty's first collection included many stories published by *The Southern Review* edited by Brooks and Warren. Porter wrote most of her best work before she encountered the Fugitives; nonetheless, she married Albert Erskine, *The Southern Review*'s business manager, in 1938, and was friends with Fugitives Andrew Lytle and Allen Tate and with Tate's wife Caroline Gordon, among others.

This tribalism is not the Fugitives selecting students from their classes and elevating them into mainstream literature, nor the Fugitives simply making arbitrary choices. The writers promoted by the Fugitives possessed great talents and deserved recognition for their work. And the enterprise of Southern literature, especially the Southern Renaissance, enjoyed wide acclaim because the Fugitives devoted themselves so enthusiastically and so persuasively to the proliferation of Southern literature to readers and scholars.

Still, one is struck when reading a list of writers mentioned in essays by the Fugitives and their followers that mainstream Southern literature is akin to the Book of Numbers, where "the names of the men that shall stand with you" are listed under each tribe: Of Zebulun; Eliab the son of Helon. Of Warren; Taylor the son of Ransom.

Perhaps the final act by the Fugitives to further codify their influence upon Southern literature was the establishment in 1987 of the Fellowship of Southern Writers. The Fellowship, according to Louis Rubin, was the idea of Cleanth Brooks, and the organizing committee included the only other living Fugitive/Agrarians Andrew

Lytle and Robert Penn Warren, as well as sons of Fugitives such as Peter Taylor, and Walter Sullivan.

Though Rubin describes the organizing committee's goal in the 1997 Fellowship of Southern Writers program: "We wanted to encourage and stimulate good writing in the South, without confining ourselves to any particular emphasis, allegiance, bias, school or approach," a look at the list of Fellows suggests at least a couple of leanings. First, one notices that most Fellows have ties to a Fugitive or Louis Rubin and to Vanderbilt, North Carolina at Chapel Hill, or Duke. Also, one finds many respected authors with no academic post—Larry Brown, Terry Kay, Josephine Humphries, and Richard Ford—not in the club. Of course, this is a problem with such an organization; it excludes too many Southern writers.

The Fugitives needed examples to prove their contention that the South could make good literature. Through their own creative energies and their support of many fine writers, they have left twentieth-century Southern literature with an abundance of literary artifacts, and they certainly improved the climate for many other Southern writers; however, as critics and editors, they should have advanced the literary efforts of *all*

Southern writers, not just the ones that fit their particular vision for Southern literature.

Though Southern literature dominated American literature for much of this century, its strength lies in fiction, not poetry. Ironically, the Fugitive poets contributed greatly to the development and recognition of the Southern Renaissance, but failed to elevate poetry to the same heights as fiction. Even *The History of Southern Literature*, which devotes nineteen chapters to its section on the Southern Renaissance (which it denotes as 1920-1950), offers only two chapters on poetry of the period: one discusses Ransom, Davidson, and Tate; the other catalogues everyone else.

One likely reason for the failure of Southern poetry to achieve wide acclaim was its allegiance to Modernism. Modernists had a duty "to go ahead of their own age and transform it" because "[e]verything needed to change" (Bradbury 3). Introducing Modernism into the South seems strange. Though the South is traditional and many of its traditions survived into the 1920s, it hardly was a region without change. In fact, change was the South's constant companion for sixty years: loss of a civil war, occupation,

reconstruction, economic confusion, social turmoil, and political upheaval.

With poetry's diminishing readership throughout the century—which Davidson attributed partly to the new poets: "But they have not created a new audience. On the contrary, they have lost most of the audience that existed for poetry a hundred years ago" (6)—, change would come much more slowly, so a Modernist would naturally devote more energy to the making and promotion of fiction. Besides, the South is a storytelling society, and its writers learned from childhood the many ways of telling a good story, as well as the rhythms of speech; whereas poetry was reserved for more formal occasions, if used at all.

Southern poetry faced another problem: Modernism's leading poets, who stood in the forefront of the movement, were not Southern. With T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound as towering figures of Modernism and with the Fugitives bringing Modernism late to Southern letters, one needed to look no further to find living examples of what a poet and a poem should be; though as brilliant as Eliot and Pound may have been, they did not own the narrative impulse that drives much of Southern literature. Furthermore, Tate

argues that "our trouble is a fundamental problem of education," which makes readers passive and too ill-informed to understand the modern poet. Tate's solution, of sorts, is that "we had better begin, young, to read the classical languages, and a little later the philosophers" (128). But with American education moving towards more democratic and more open enrollment institutions, any hope of the elite education that Tate called for would soon vanish.

Of course, it may be that Modernism does not have much to do with the mediocrity of Southern poetry in this century. In "Why the Modern South Has a Great Literature," Donald Davidson points out that great writers, most notably William Faulkner, arise from all sorts of backgrounds. Faulkner, who seemed to spring from nothing, at least nothing one expects to produce a great novelist, possessed a talent that neither Modernism nor the Southern Renaissance could shape and that impoverished Mississippi could thwart. Perhaps, the reason that Southern poetry has not matched fiction is simple: no poet who influenced the direction of American poetry has emerged from the South. Sometimes, the rise of a singular talent—Shakespeare among the Elizabethans, Donne among the Metaphysicals, Keats

among the British Romantics, Twain among the Realists, Faulkner among the Modern Southerners—transforms a period of literary achievement into a literary movement that endures because that singular talent influences generations of writers to come.

Aside from the Fugitives, who as I noted earlier did not produce a great deal of poetry, few other poets are recognized from the Southern Renaissance. The trend continued as only a handful of Southern poets whose first volumes appeared between 1940-55 received national attention. *Southern Writers: A Biographical Dictionary* includes only eight such poets out of its 379 sketches—A.R. Ammons (in 1955); John Clarke, best known as an editor, published his only volume in 1948; Randall Jarrell; Reece; William Smith; Melvin Tolson; Margaret Walker; and Jonathan Williams. The best known and most representative of these is Randall Jarrell.

Jarrell, born in 1914, was a part of the Fugitive tribe—a graduate of Vanderbilt who studied under Ransom, Davidson, Tate, and Warren, and a friend of fellow tribesman Peter Taylor—and followed their paths as writer and as critic and editor. By the time his first poetry collection, *Blood for a Stranger,* appeared in 1942, Jarrell

was a regular contributor of poetry and criticism to *The Southern Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, and *The Sewanee Review*—the journals of Fugitives. By the time his third collection, *Losses*, appeared in 1948, he had become a poetry editor himself at *The Nation*. Eventually, he would publish a novel and books of criticism, and write reviews for the *Partisan Review* and *The New Republic*.

Though born in Nashville, educated at Vanderbilt, associated with the Fugitives, and employed for years at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Jarrell's subject matter is not located in or focused on the South. Like other poets of the World War II period (Karl Shapiro, James Dickey, Anthony Hecht, and Louis Simpson), his subject matter was often the war; however, the absence of Southern images and themes in his work transforms him from Southern poet to national poet.

The best evidence of the transformation, which many Southern writers of the period underwent, was his publication in both the Fugitive-edited journals and *The New Yorker*. Though these journals represented different provincial views, Jarrell's poetry appeared in each over a short period of time. (Peter Taylor's fiction enjoyed the same success.) One is left with two explanations: either

Jarrell wrote such diverse poetry that some poems struck the Southern reader while others suited New Yorkers or these journals were provincial in the same way. More than likely, Modernism served as the province these journals shared.

If the Fugitives' goal was to draw attention to Southern poets, they failed. Of the eight poets whose first volume appeared in 1940-55 mentioned in *Southern Writers*, only Jarrell was associated with the Fugitives, and he eventually distanced himself from them. So no one should be surprised that Byron Reece remained beyond the myopic view and closed arms of the Fugitive tribe.

Clearly, a new Southern poetry never emerged during the Renaissance; however, many critics still seek to define poetry of the period as Southern. Of course, these definitions are based almost exclusively on the work of the early Fugitives. For example, Kate Daniels summarizes Southern poetry as follows:

> that it is and has been characterized by the need for story, thus lending it a distinctively narrative impulse; that it has addressed itself to the largest of the philosophical abstractions (Time and Death and History); that it has

> exhibited a consistent fascination with its own distinctively southern character; and that it has not arisen from the lives of southerners as often as fiction, a genre perhaps more accommodating, in our time, to conventional narrative needs. (Humphries and Lowe 64)

In 1947, Jarrell, the most recognizable son of the Fugitives, defined poetry as Modern with the following qualities:

> Very interesting language, a great emphasis on connotation, "texture"; extreme intensity, forced emotion—violence; a good deal of obscurity; emphasis on sensation, perceptual nuances; emphasis on details, on the part rather than on the whole; experimental or novel qualities of some sort; a tendency toward external formlessness and internal disorganization [. . .]; an extremely personal style—*refine your singularities*; lack of restraint—all tendencies are forced to their limits; there is a good deal of emphasis on the unconscious, dream structure, the thoroughly subjective; the poet's attitudes

> are usually anti-scientific, anti-common-sense, anti-public—he is, essentially, removed; poetry is primarily lyric, intensive—the few long poems are aggregations of lyric details; poems usually have, not a logical, but the more or less associational structure of dramatic monologue. Pritchard 70-71)

The poetry of Byron Herbert Reece falls outside both definitions. While his work does address two of "the largest of the philosophical abstractions" (Time and Death), he does not address History, which seems essential under the definition Kay Daniels presents above, based on her study of the Fugitives. And though Reece uses the ballad, a common form of storytelling, the "narrative impulse" is not distinctive, but traditional. Of course, Reece has little in common with the Modernist: he wanted his poems to be "vigorous and intelligible," which is contrary to the strong desire of Modernists to be obscure, and he sought a communal style over a personal one.

Not only did Reece's work stand apart from these definitions of poetry, but nearly everything about his life and work separated him from the standards of Southern

poetry, both of the Fugitives and their Modernist descendents.

Of all the expectations of a Southern poet, history and place are central; yet, Reece did not devote his poetry to either. Then again, history to a poet from North Georgia—where time was measured quite differently, where the Civil War was more an abstraction than a reality, where reconstruction was the price others paid, where identity was local more than regional—meant something different from those Southerners who were defeated and occupied and defined by others. A poem like "Lee in the Mountains," Donald Davidson's great poem—in my mind, the best by a Fugitive—could never have come from Reece, since his "history" did not ponder such concerns about defeat and did not evoke such feelings about Robert E. Lee. While remnants of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the New South—battlefields, cemeteries, political systems, social order, family legacies—surrounded writers such as Davidson, Tate, Warren, and Ransom, they were only events in history books for Reece who grew up in North Georgia without the monuments, social changes, and family stories connected to the War, and certainly not subjects for his poetry.

While history would not inflame his imagination, one would think that place would inspire Reece, but he mentions few place names, describes the particulars of nature rather than the landscape that defines the mountains from the Piedmont, and depicts little of his cultural rituals and his community. Yet, much of what we identify as place is also connected to history. Again, one sees this in the Fugitives, who put great emphasis on place and used names of rivers and people freely to set a poem in place and in history (i.e., the Tennessee River to Davidson's poems; soldiers and battlefields to Tate and Davidson; hot Louisiana to Warren).

For the Fugitives, especially Davidson, place was inseparable from history. While some poets used the myths of Greece and Rome, the Fugitives (Davidson always, the others early) used the myths of the South for reference and context. Even Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead," with its confused, questioning narrator, depends upon the Southern myth—an amalgam of history and place ("Shiloh, Antietam, Malvern Hill, Bull Run), heroes ("Stonewall, Stonewall"), and ideals ("commemorial woe," "their chivalry," "knowledge/ Carried to the heart")—to contend

with questions about the virtue and sacred cause of the Confederacy (Shall we take the act/ To the grave?").

Neither Southern mythology nor classical mythology, which Tate, Ransom, and Warren often used, held much interest for Reece. The only myth evident in Reece's poetry is the Christian one, which had no relationship to the history of the North Georgia mountains. However, one fallacy of Southern literary criticism is that the South is monolithic, as if history and geography are uniform for all parts and people of the region.

One need not look too closely to see the folly of that: Tennessee, the center of the Southern Renaissance with many writers and critics and Vanderbilt University as their fertile ground, has three distinctive regions and people—Knoxville and the mountains in the east, which held Union sympathies in the Civil War and cultural ties to Appalachia; Nashville and the Cumberland plateau in the middle, which contains the state capital and financial center; and Memphis and the alluvial plain of the west, which relates culturally to the Mississippi River Delta. The same distinctions can be found in Georgia and many other states.

With such diverse history and geography and culture, one would expect that a poet as different from the Southern conventions yet a product of the region as Reece would be appreciated by his contemporaries, but he was not; instead many of his contemporaries, especially the more influential ones, sought writers from their constructed literary and cultural province, not from the whole of the Southern region. Instead, he gained allies from outside the most influential Southern literary circle, including one of their strongest opponents, Robert Hillyer. Hillyer, as I have discussed before, campaigned against "the cult of Eliot" and in doing so, offered Reece as an example of the direction poetry should go. In his attacks, Hillyer angered the Fugitives through a "foolish charge," a charge Donald Davidson called "the most hysterical of all," against Tate, Warren, and others that Southerners were conspiring "to advance their 'idiom'" (166).

While Hillyer feared a confused, obscure literature emanating from expatriates and Southerners, Tate feared something worse:

> For without regionalism, without locality in the sense of local continuity in tradition and belief, we shall get a whole new literature . . .

> . This new literature will probably be personal, sentimentally objective, tough, and "unsocial." (283)

Hillyer's efforts to reverse the Modernist trend failed, of course, and his support of Reece brought no more attention to his poetry. And Tate's denunciation of the new literature did not stop the ultimate arrival of Beats and Postmodernists. Since Reece neither advanced a literary revival nor found himself proclaimed an important regional poet, he remained outside nearly every literary school, North and South.

Ironically, Hillyer, with all his praise for Reece's "folk" qualities, missed the alienation felt by many of his characters, and Tate, with all his admiration for regional literature, presumed a universal identity for all Southerners. The alienation may, in fact, represent the history and place and culture that Reece knew. After all, the isolation of the mountains combined with the hardness of life and the strictures of tradition can create a person with a heart of darkness: the Rider determined to kill his wandering bride because his world means nothing without her; the man willing to marry the moon because of his

beloved's betrayal. And certainly such a man might ponder mortality, and on occasion doubt the divinity of God. In this light, Reece sounds Modern. But, the alienation of Reece's characters is not the result of society's failure as much as the failure of another individual, one's beloved, to live up to the promise of fidelity, love, and devotion. His is more of a romantic alienation.

Because the Fugitives dismissed Romanticism and tied it closely to the discredited old Southern literature, they rarely wrote poems about nature. The vivid descriptions of trees in bloom and trees in autumn, of a boy and a deer, and of darkness and light that one finds in Reece are absent in the Fugitives and uncommon in other Southern poets. Just as one might be surprised to note a lack of history and mythology in Reece's work, one should be surprised that nature did not attract the interest of more Southern poets. While I admit that Reece had in the North Georgia mountains the bounty of nature with him daily, I have also seen the Gulf and Atlantic coasts, the wild and once-wild rivers, and even the remarkable contrast of white cotton bolls on rusty stems above red clay—there is plenty of nature to write about.

There is also plenty of love to write about in the South, as well, though it does not identify one with a region like history or nature. Many of the Fugitives seemed to have plenty of romances and marriages, so the subject would not have been foreign to them, but this subject did not engage their poetic talents. Once again, Reece took on a subject that did not identify him as a Modern Southern poet, and instead aligned him with an older poetic tradition.

Though Reece's subject matter separated him from mainstream Southern poetry, a greater problem came from the circumstances of his life. Reece was a farmer by trade, not an academic, and as such had little in common with the Fugitive-Agrarians. As Jesse Stuart, a real farmer like Reece, remarked of those he met at Vanderbilt:

> Their farming was on paper. . . . We made a living and some to spare farming our Kentucky hills and valleys. We were not "gentleman farmers." (LeMaster and Clarke 20)

The Fugitives and their tribe were not simply poets or novelists; they were professional academics who taught courses, edited journals and anthologies, commented on

literary matters, reviewed books, and proclaimed theories of writing and criticism. Reece, on the other hand, taught only occasionally and only for money, commented rarely in public about literary issues and other writers, and never offered his theory of writing. And, little in Reece's letters or biography suggests that he would have wanted an academic life. Nonetheless, his devotion to writing left him outside not only of the Fugitive tribe but also the few other Southern literary figures of his age, nearly all of whom were professional men or women of letters.

The admirable profession of a man of letters also proves practical because many journal editors find their creative efforts well received by other journal editors. While Reece's work was welcomed by many editors, including William Davidson (Donald's brother) at the *Georgia Review*, which in those days fostered Southern writers, he would have enjoyed greater success had he possessed an interest in editing or an inclination for the academic life. But Reece pursued a career to create literature, not comment upon it.

Reece also showed no interest in the literary politics of his age. He was not a Modernist, but had no problem with them. He was not a local colorist, but did not

denounce them. Then again, he *was* a Southerner and a farmer and a mountain man, but made no particular point of it in his various writings. Yet, he may have been better served to have fashioned a flight of fancy about his verse, to declare his love poems allegories about the Southerner adrift in a corrupting society or his nature poems representations of Southern literature with the autumn leaves as the beautiful but dying literature of the past and the peach blossoms as the coming fruit of literary rebirth. Instead, Reece wrote his poetry and gave no thought to where he stood in the Southern pantheon.

The houses of poetry in which Reece dwelled, traditional and romantic, had been condemned from most influential quarters by 1950. The Fugitives looked with disdain upon romanticism: Tate criticized Davidson's work as romantic, as if in Davidson's words, "the non-romantic is of the superior, the winning order, and mine is (with exceptions) of the inferior and losing order" (Rubin 260). And, as noted before, Robert Hillyer had lost his battle to keep the "cult of Eliot" from displacing traditional verse as the leading movement in American poetry.

Still, Reece was blessed and cursed as a traditional and romantic poet: blessed because most editors and book publishers still welcomed traditional poets and readers favored those styles they knew best and found most accessible; cursed because traditional poetry would be under siege from all directions—Fugitives, Beats, Modernists, Confessionals—both at the end of his career and after his death. This explains, to some extent, how he could enjoy such a successful career yet have such a minor legacy.

Even the major figures of the pre-Modern traditional poetry of the century would come into relative obscurity by the 1970s, often only making a few anthologies. Edwin Arlington Robinson, who Allen Tate said in 1933 "wrote some of the finest lyrics of modern times" and was the "most famous living American poet" (358), is barely known any longer. In the recent and massive (over 2800 pages) *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Robinson, a three-time Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and lauded as one of the greatest, is represented by seven poems (fewer than Amy Lowell and Carl Sandburg), and is called a "New England regional poet like Robert Frost" (Baym 941). Frost is given much more attention in the anthology, as is befitting

the most famous poet of the century, but is viewed in Modernist terms—Pound, the editors imply, made Frost's career possible; and the editors suggest that Frost "rejected modernist internationalism and revitalized the tradition of New England regionalism" (1116). (Once again, the paradigm of Modernism versus regionalism rears its ugly head, as if the two are incompatible and as if they are the only choices for a twentieth-century poet.) With such influential and important American poets revisited as regionalists in anthologies, it is no surprise that Reece, not an influential or major poet, has fallen into near obscurity.

The Norton Anthology also provides some interesting insight into the Fugitives. Tate and Davidson are not among the twenty-two poets recognized for the period 1914-1945, though Genevieve Taggard and Sterling Brown are. Ransom does make the twenty-two, though the commentary ties him to Pound and Eliot. Warren, the other of the four great Fugitives, is recognized as a post-World War II author and discussed at length.

In two other recent anthologies covering the post-Civil War period, *The American Tradition in Literature* (McGraw-Hill) and *The Heath Anthology of American*

Literature, Allen Tate joins Ransom and Warren; however Donald Davidson remains unacknowledged, probably because he remained so closely aligned with the political and social conventions of the South. Of note, Randall Jarrell makes the Norton text but not the others, while his friend and fellow tribesman Peter Taylor is not included. As expected, Jesse Stuart and James Still also fail to meet any anthology criteria to be included as one of the 150 or so most notable American authors since 1865.

Of course, one of the consequences of the Modernist desire to "make it new" is that nothing lasts for long. When Donald Davidson published his *Poems 1922-1961*, he "received very little national attention except for a sneeringly condescending paragraph by Karl Shapiro in the *New York Times Book Review*" (Rubin 266). Yet the collection, published by the University of Minnesota Press through the efforts of Allen Tate, who had earlier failed to persuade Scribner's to publish the book, sold well even though by 1966, one of the leading Fugitives' "poems were, alas, 'out of fashion'" (Rubin 266).

Tate met a similar fate, as his *Collected Poems 1919-1976* reached the public only through LSU Press. (Let me say that the LSU Press is one of the finest university

presses for literature, but perhaps their primary contribution has been to preserve those books and writers no longer viable for mainstream commercial presses.) Ransom enjoyed a slightly better fate, as Knopf published *Selected Poems*, but since his death, criticism on Ransom has been moderate and most often focused on his prose. Warren, on the other hand, remained a force: he received his second Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1979, he was named the first poet laureate of the United States of America in 1986, and his last volume of poetry was published by Random House in 1985. Of course, Warren devoted less of his energy to poetry in the early years and only began to write verse seriously after leaving Vanderbilt. Warren's longevity, no doubt, reflected his willingness to experiment and refine his poetry.

At the end of this century, Southern Poetry finds itself only somewhat more respected than when the century began. Only four of the Fugitive poets are recognized and only Robert Penn Warren stands as an important figure, and his reputation is based largely on the poetry he published after 1960. John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate, if they stand at all, are considered minor American poets, and Donald Davidson's work survives only in Southern

anthologies. In fact, without the commercial viability of Southern anthologies and the regional interest in Southern literature, including anthologies on Appalachian writers, the reputation of Southern Poetry before 1960 would reside solely upon the work of Ransom and Tate. Despite all their talents and all their influence (much of which established Southern fiction writers as a major literary force in American literature), the Fugitive poets did not provide Southern poetry with anything more than a regional legacy.

CHAPTER SIX

THE LEGACY OF BYRON HERBERT REECE

Sylvia Plath. Hart Crane. Frank O'Hara. John Berryman. Randall Jarrell. These poets, like Byron Herbert Reece, have a legacy in which their biography often draws as much or more interest than their artistry. Their lives and deaths will forever remain an important part of their legacy; yet, one hopes that we will integrate biography with artistry to gain a better understanding of the person and the poet.

Interest in the life of Byron Herbert Reece has persisted since his death, though most of it presents a distorted image, and all of it, even Raymond Cook's fine biography, does not offer a complete picture of the man. One is tempted, as with all writers about whom little is known, to reconstruct his life through his poetry; after all, he wrote poems about suicide and he committed suicide; he wrote poems about loneliness and he confessed to his friends that he was desperately lonely. But that path is the slippery slope of literary biography: while we know it is absurd to assume that Reece killed someone because he wrote about murderers, speculation about his sexuality

because he wrote about same sex love in the Jonathan and David poems or presumptions about unreported and unsubstantiated personal events because of ambiguities found in any number of poems have swirled around Reece's "unofficial" biography.

The interest comes from many sources: the need to explain his suicide, the speculation about his future career, and the lack of private autobiographical remarks in his letters and essays. Part of the mystery of Reece derives from his mysterious nature. Mildred Greear, in the Winter 1995 issue of *The Chattahoochee Review*, tells of her first meeting with Byron Reece on New Year's Eve 1943. In brief, the story is as follows. Reece is among those gathered at a local home to ring in the new year. At one point in the evening, after most have consumed a good deal of eggnog and martinis, the beautiful wife of Philip Greear's brother asks Reece to dance, which he initially deflects by saying he cannot dance. The woman insists. After dancing, she wants Byron to accompany her to look in on the party host's fourteen-year-old son, who is asleep. The woman's husband, who knew Reece through his brother Philip (Reece's college roommate), becomes enraged and accuses Reece of trying to seduce his wife, which Reece

denies. A fight is averted. Shortly after, Reece volunteers to accompany the husband to get more eggs from a neighbor's house—the husband returns, but Reece does not. They search for Reece, worried because it is cold and snowing, but they cannot find him. When morning arrives, Reece is found sleeping on a cot in the very room of the jealous husband and his wife. Reece offers no explanation, and he and Mildred who later become close friends never discuss his late-night wanderings.

In many ways, this story typifies my own search for Reece, as I often lost track of him. Obviously, he is torn between his desire for intellectual fellowship and his obsession for privacy. Reece relished conversations about his poetry, but found gossip less desirable. He once remarked about gossip in a letter to E.V. Griffith, "I sometimes wish people would do a little more fornicating and a great deal less talk about it" (April 9, 1954). Perhaps his uneasiness with gossip came from his cultural background and maybe it came from his desire to keep his own life private. Even his closest friends Mildred and Philip Greear, as the account above proves, were kept away from some of Reece's inexplicable behavior.

So too, the Greears have no definitive answer to the primary question about Byron Reece: why did he kill himself? They were not surprised when word of his suicide came to them, but Mildred's belief that Reece reacted against his loneliness seems too simple. Not surprisingly, one hears more romantic explanations that he killed himself because he could not bear to live with tuberculosis or because of a doomed love affair. (Philip Lee Williams' *The Song of Daniel* has, perhaps unintentionally, stirred the romantic explanations as the novel contains a subplot, in which a college professor seeks to learn the truth about a Georgia writer who, years before, inexplicably killed himself in, it turns out, a suicide pact between star-crossed lovers—the writer is often assumed to be Reece.)

Yet, Mildred Greear's answer may be the best anyone can offer about such a private man; after all, she knew him as well as anyone, and Reece complained about the great loneliness he felt. Plus, if one can draw anything of a personal philosophy about death from his poetry—a slippery slope I am reluctant to descend—, one might assume that Reece, like many of his characters, reacted to an unnamed inner despair with self-destruction. Unlike his characters,

however, I suspect that Reece's anguish and wounds were not recent and were not born of a single, dramatic event.

One can descend the slippery slope of biography-from-literature or tour the sterile fantasy of the mountain poet or even follow the wisps of gossip that float around Reece's biography, but they do not lead one to a better understanding of Reece's poetic vision or his place in Southern poetry.

* * * *

Even though the most influential Southerners did not embrace Reece as one of their own, he gained recognition that most writers would envy—national reviews, notably *The New York Times Review of Books* and the *Saturday Review*; a *Newsweek* feature; writer-in-residence positions at UCLA and Emory; a Guggenheim; a loyal and respected book publisher in Dutton; and a Pulitzer Prize nomination. Unfortunately, Reece never seemed to enjoy his success because of the burdens of the farm, family, tuberculosis, or poverty. Yet, Reece never tried to escape the burdens: he did not readily accept writer-in-residence offers that would have allowed him to leave the loneliness of the farm, a loneliness about which he often complained to friends; and he did not demand that his family become more self-reliant,

so he could devote more time to his career, a career that, as noted above, was quite successful.

I do not know what kept Reece from pursuing his career, but I do know that a writer is responsible for his or her own career. While the support of critics and editors can be valuable, the writer, especially one producing work that may not sell widely or conform to mainstream standards, must be the advocate of his or her literature. Of course, Reece did some of this by sending poems to journals, by keeping in contact with Dutton editors, by cooperating with reporters and photographers, but he resisted contacts with college professors and other writers, the very people who may have eased his need for thoughtful, intellectual conversations. Whether his reluctance to promote himself resulted from modesty (McGill's mountain man reticence), from weariness, or from egoism (the writer's desire that his or her work stands or falls on its own), one can only speculate; however, I do know that most writers must promote themselves in the competitive and complex world of publishing.

While the poetry is primary, Reece's approach to his career is important as well because it tells us something about his purpose. Donald Davidson moved away from the

lyrical, traditional poetry of his first book, *The Outland Piper* (poetry akin to much of Reece's work two decades later), to the more politically- and culturally conscious blank verse that ultimately defined his poetry. Reviewers of *The Outland Piper* praised the volume but "remarked upon its lack of any distinctively Southern quality (Cowan 161). As Thomas Daniel Young explains in his essay on the Fugitives in *The History of Southern Literature*, Davidson made the change not as a purely artistic decision, though he defined it as such: "First, he had to identify those elements that are traditionally his as a Southerner; then, he had to suggest a way to preserve them." No longer the poet as a "detached observer of society," Davidson sought to write poetry explicitly Southern (324).

Reece seemed neither a detached observer of society, for his poetry rarely touched upon society and community, nor explicitly Southern or Appalachian. Perhaps Reece had no particular purpose in his poetry beyond a lyrical expression of random ideas and images, though it seems more likely that any intention he had was to express his own private vision of things. His teachers noted a lack of interest in history and his letters show no interest in politics and literary theory and transforming the world.

Yet, he did not just write poetry for his own pleasure; he submitted it to journal editors and book publishers, and he read his work in public. Reece wanted his poetry before the literary world.

Some writers pretend that their writing and their careers just happen, as if they have no control over their "muse" and over their public image. These "accidental" writers, the literary realization of Blanche DuBois—"I've always depended upon the kindness of strangers"—soon grow tiresome. (Remember, Blanche was an English teacher.) But, Reece was not one of these writers, though he did once remark:

> When the poem is ready to emerge it announces the fact by creating a mental state that is strangely exciting, a feeling akin to that induced by a tall drink of good homemade wine. (Cook 50)

Still, little else suggests that he tried to create the illusion of the accidental poet. Above all else, Reece remained committed to his style and themes. If he wanted more attention, he would have known by the third volume that he could attract broader critical interest and publicity by writing about the political events and social

trends of the day or by making poems more in line with the mountain man/ farmer-poet image others created for him, but he did not waver from his artistic vision.

* * * *

The History of Southern Literature mentions some poets aside from the four Fugitives and J.A. Bryant's *Twentieth Century Southern Literature* lists a great number of lesser-known writers who have made a contribution to the whole body of Southern letters, but while these books remind us of the multitude of writers to emerge from the South this century, they cannot explore the breadth and depth of that multitude.

Too often, without books to illuminate these lesser-known writers, one depends upon the common assumptions about a monolithic South, proselytized even by leading scholars, on which to judge the Southerness, not just the literary worth, of writers. For example, in his essay "Southern Literature: The Past, History, and the Timeless," Cleanth Brooks presents the South and its writers as if they are all the same:

> To sum up, the southern writers of our century present a culture in which interpersonal relationships are close and important. The

> family still exists as a normative and stabilizing force. It is culture that is indeed immersed in place and time. Within it, history is vivid and meaningful. Related to the southerner's vivid sense of history and the closeness of his interpersonal relationships is a pervasive religion that undergirds his whole cultural complex. (Castille and Osborne 10)

One is reluctant to challenge a great critic like Brooks, but he is wrong. And his own books on Faulkner, who hardly presented a harmonious view of family or culture or religion, would be ample evidence that Southern writers do not present the world he describes above. Moreover, his remarks about interpersonal relationships, family, history, place, and religion could be said about other regions. This simplistic characterization leads to a narrow and misleading concept of the South and Southern writers.

Reece *is* a Southern writer, just not a stereotypical one. His family had their roots for generations in North Georgia. They, like Byron, farmed the land. He was reared and educated in North Georgia. He lived only in the South until his trip to California at age thirty-two. His

poetry, though often played out on a mental landscape rather than a geographical one, takes place nowhere else. Moreover, if one truly believes that place and history help shape a writer, then one must accept that Byron Herbert Reece has been duly shaped by the unusual and atypically Southern North Georgia Mountain culture. At the very least, he is the odd relative that Southerners often boast about.

While I contend that Reece cannot be anything but a Southern writer, one could reasonably wonder if Reece, whose work seems not to represent his place, fits Flannery O'Connor's line about rootless people: "they ain't *frum* anywhere." Yet, Reece did not, like many Southern writers, denounce his homeland, set his work elsewhere, or move outside the South. And, one would be hard-pressed to deny the possibility that Reece, with his emphasis on the individual, is merely a product of the isolation and the history of the North Georgia Mountains. Reece, with his particular cultural and personal background, may be *frum* somewhere that we do not fully understand. After all, Reece remains one of the few writers ever to come from the North Georgia Mountains. Reece may not be as peculiar in his moderate identification with place as one might think.

Unless one insists upon Brooks' definition. But why? Why should Southern writers be defined not by their writing, but by critics creating their own fiction about the South? Not all Southern writers are forged from the same crucible: Peter Taylor and Byron Reece were born the same year, but had almost nothing else in common—one surrounded by status and wealth, the other by relative poverty; one reared in towns and cities, the other in the same North Georgia mountain region; one conscious of politics, the other indifferent to it. Nor are all Southern writers determined to remake the image of the South or construct the identity of a whole region: Davidson wanted his work to preserve Southern elements; Reece remained silent about any intention beyond wanting his work to be read.

In another way, Reece the poet also points out the weakness of Brooks' generalization about Southern writers and writing. Reece, for example, did not write poems about family or history or culture. As I discussed before, history and place are different for anyone from the North Georgia mountains than it is for those from middle Tennessee, which may result in different themes, traditions, and perspectives from a poet like Reece. And,

poetry, particularly lyric poetry, may not be as well suited to present some topics like culture and family. As Allen Tate wrote:

> For poetry does not explain our experience. If we begin by thinking that it ought to "explain" the human predicament, we shall quickly see that it does not, and we shall end up thinking that therefore it has no meaning at all. (xv)

Moreover, what if family is not always "stable and normative" as Brooks assumes? If poetry does not explain experience, a poet might be hard-pressed to write about experiences he does not fully understand, or a poet might decide not to write about some experiences altogether. For example, Reece did not compose poetry about family—not about his father or mother or siblings, or about interpersonal family relationships. One cannot help but wonder if the curious relationship with his family—an older brother who leaves the family and the farm for Byron to bear; parents with tuberculosis who depend upon Byron to work the farm and care for them; a sister who relies on Byron to take her in and take a second job when she loses hers; a family who after his death offers little insight

into Byron's life, though they do pass along some gossip—brought about the absence of the family theme in his poetry; after all, family should figure in his themes of death, love, even religion. Family can be a destabilizing force and one way for a poet to reflect that experience is to deny its value by *not* writing about it.

* * * *

In light of the literary sound and fury of the century, which in some ways signified nothing, Reece is one of the most interesting Southern poets. His work leans toward the romantic and traditional in an era of Modernism; his Southern and Appalachian heritage plays no clearly definitive role in his poetry; his themes feature love and nature, and avoid politics and history; and his literary career developed outside the university. So much of how one perceives Reece's poetry derives from what he is not, which is understandable given how different a poet he was for his time. Still, Reece was not merely a traditional poet with romantic themes alone in a literary world remaking itself as untraditional and unromantic, and closer to home as Southern.

Is it enough to admire Reece because he is different? I think so. Difference does not mean superior, and I am

not interested in rating Reece against other poets; however, his difference does signify an artistic vision defined not by trends or critics or editors. A poet as different as Reece who emerged outside of the inner circle of Southern letters should illustrate the remarkable vigor and variety of twentieth-century Southern literature.

Though he had a splendid lyrical sense, Byron Herbert Reece should be recognized for distinctive qualities he brings to his themes of nature, love, and religion; for his reinvigoration of the ballad form; and for his presentation of alienated men. Reece was not influential and his work may never spark a renaissance of traditional themes or the ballad, but his distinctiveness should receive serious consideration and greater appreciation.

Reece's poems on nature reflect a love of its beauty, its transformations, and its cycle of death and rebirth. That aspect is not remarkable for nature poems, but Reece's poems often fall short of the exaltation common to such poetry. Instead, he describes the peach blossoms or the color of the autumn leaves, acknowledging their beauty, but not transforming them into something with a greater meaning. For Reece, appreciation of the beauty in nature is enough.

Surely, his appreciation for nature came from living amid it every day. And perhaps, his lack of exaltation comes from the same fact. Most romantic nature poems were written by city dwellers who sought to find, from their visits to the country, in the trees and flowers and wildlife some larger meaning about life or some secret for harmonious living in a discordant world. But nature was too much a part of Reece's daily life for him to search for a grand revelation from common things, such as the song of a nightingale or the green of a valley.

For Reece, love not nature concerned harmony and discord. He abandoned traditional conceits and conventional ideals of love in order to emphasize the most private responses to love. And, rather than describe the formality of romance or the common feelings of love, his love poems dwell on the emotional cost of love and how that despair leads one to self-destruction. In place of exaltation, Reece expresses lamentation.

His approach to love poetry is special for two reasons: first, he infuses traditional forms with nontraditional content—love is a deeply private matter, not for public approval; second, his content deals with an individual's concern for his love—how important the beloved

is, how the beloved realizes (or denies) his fulfillment of the love affair. The latter is particularly important because it stresses the genuine love men possess, a love greater than mere physical attraction (which Reece's poems do not often feature), a love as consuming as any can know.

For the most part in Reece's poetry, passion springs from love, not from religion. His religious poetry does offer one different aspect than most: religion and history mix in a most curious way in Reece's poetry, for he presents religion as historical, not divine. Many of these poems stay close to the biblical stories, retelling them in the way one retells historical events. With this narrative approach, rather than personal declarations of faith, his poems take on the effect of history, perhaps myth—Ezekiel is real, but confirmation of the divine nature of the events in "Ballad of the Bones" is absent. As a result, the Bible provides the history and heroes for Reece's narrative poems about religion.

Reece also should be remembered because he liberated the ballad from its customary role as a popular tale designed to reinforce community values. By using the ballad to carry different themes, he showed how valuable the form could be to present private feelings of love betrayed or to

express the obsessive thoughts of a murderer, as well as historical and folk stories. The ballad provides a clarity of style in which to pour disconcerting emotions and a controlled form to contain, for the reader, uncontrolled feelings. Most poets express tortured feelings with tortured language and convoluted forms, which makes clear the emotional turmoil but often makes the meaning of the poem confusing to the reader; Reece, on the other hand, dispenses torment in a familiar poetic form so that the reader can focus on the poem's content.

Perhaps, Reece's representation of modern man is his most intriguing contribution to poetry of his age. These troubled men of "Ballad of the Rider," "Marry the Moon," "Lest the Lonesome Bird," and other poems were not like other male characters of his age: "etherised" men like J. Alfred Prufrock who ask, "Do I dare?" but never does, or "An outlaw fumbling for the latch" like General Lee who languishes as head of a boys' school because "The rest must go unsaid, the lips be locked." Reece's male characters respond to the harshness of the world with decisive, albeit violent and irrational, behavior. Eliot's hollow men are no more representative of modern man than Reece's self-

destructive ones; while modern man may be alienated and impassive, he is also disillusioned and violent.

Also, Reece's male characters represent something quite different than one may expect. Many of his poems show men as deeply moved by love and deeply concerned about their romances, which is contrary to the common notion that men feel less intensely about love affairs or to the poetic tradition that men suffer from unrequited love but accept it as their plight. These male characters possess genuine feelings of love—a love greater than mere physical attraction (which Reece's poems do not often feature), a love as consuming as any can know.

These men in Reece's poems, though they appear in ballads and lyrics, are not merely manifestations of traditional men; they are disturbed men, deeply wounded, confused, who are compelled to act upon private feelings. Though alienated, they are not wounded by society, but by another's failure to fulfill the promise of a private agreement. The foundations of private relationships—fidelity, honesty, love, and trust—matter to most of Reece's male characters, and when that foundation cracks, so do they.

* * * *

As long as Reece is remembered and read, people will speculate about his life and his death, and scholars will analyze his work and compare it to literature from other times and places. Just as Reece the man did not seem to fit anywhere, Reece the poet will also never find a fixed literary home. I think that is the way it should be, for as Reece wrote Pratt Dickson, "I am committed to the insuperable separateness of the individual" (May 5, 1957). Such a commitment made a most unhappy life, but also made memorable poetry. And it is, always, the poetry that endures.

Perhaps, the closing lines of his poem "Invocation" sum up Byron Herbert Reece's legacy best:

Let what the tongue repeats
Of evil and death be drowned
By a lovelier sound.

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VITA

Clarence Alan Jackson holds degrees in English from the University of Southern Indiana, the University of Dayton, and the University of Tennessee. He is an assistant professor of English at Georgia Perimeter College in suburban Atlanta and serves as Editor of *Humanities in the South*, a nonfiction journal that explores a wide range of issues in the Humanities. In addition, Jackson has published essays on composition theory and pedagogy and on Southern literature. He is Co-editor, with Ray Wallace and Susan Lewis, of the forthcoming book *Reforming College Composition: Writing the Wrongs* (Greenwood Press, 2000).