

The Fourth Ghost: White Southern Writers and European Fascism, 1930-1950. By Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009. xv + 413 pp. \$49.95 cloth.

Scholarship concerning the U.S. South has been relatively limited at the annual conferences and in the journal of the Space Between Society, a distribution that may well reflect preexisting trends in southern studies. This association defines itself in part through chronology, after all, and though the US South was affected as profoundly as any other part of the nation by the First and Second World Wars, as well as by the international dynamics that shaped the intervening years, it has, since that very period, often been understood to have inhabited a distinct temporality. Looking back at the “literary excitement in other regions” of the US at the onset of World War I, Allen Tate, for example, argued in 1942 that despite a somewhat similar “quickenings of the imagination of the South,” “it had a memory of another war”—implicitly the Civil War—such that “entering the world once more meant not the obliteration of the past but a heightened consciousness of it.” Following the lead of Tate and other influential Southern Agrarians, generations of scholars have sought to illuminate this “double focus” in the region’s interwar culture, and in articulating a unique southern encounter with modernity, they produced, unsurprisingly, the image of a region far removed from the cataclysmic political changes convulsing Europe during that period (Tate 83).

Challenging this “xenophobic” account, as Robert Brinkmeyer aptly names it, more recent studies of the South have tended to concentrate on its contiguities and commonalities with societies further south, in Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America (2). This new volume, however, traces southern literary responses to a global theme that has always been central to the concerns of the Space Between Society: that is, the way in which the build-up to and aftermath of World War II imparted new inflections to local ideologies. Crucial for anyone teaching southern literature from 1930 to 1950 and for persons interested in how the emergence of European fascism shaped political thought in the US South and perhaps even more broadly, *The Fourth Ghost* offers thoughtful and well documented answers

to questions urgently incited by this literature while also providing the kind of broad, provocative survey that will likely stimulate new areas of academic inquiry.

Brinkmeyer concentrates solely on white writers because, as he explains, black southern writers tended to compare fascist nations with the US as a whole; white southerners, in contrast, “focused on what Fascism and totalitarianism did or did not reveal about traditional southern culture” (16). Of course, traditionalism, along with anxieties regarding modernity and racial hierarchy, are long established themes in southern studies, but they were also vital to analyses of fascism in the interwar era. As Brinkmeyer demonstrates, comparisons between fascist nations and the South were quite common in the journalism and political commentary of the US, influencing both the development and reception of white southern writers’ work. Read against Brinkmeyer’s chapter on the Agrarians, for example, Tate’s pronouncement above concerning southern distinctiveness seems almost strategic, in that its isolationism displaces the perpetual struggle that he and other members of the Agrarians fought against charges of fascism: promoting southern (which was also, in their account, European) traditionalism in response to economic and social change, they seemed to onlookers alarmingly aligned (and, in their relationship with Seward Collins, briefly allied) with supporters of Hitler and Mussolini. Observing that the Agrarians associated fascism with the totalitarian modernity they so vigorously criticized, Brinkmeyer also demonstrates how their ambivalence concerning authoritarianism and their unequivocal support for racial segregation facilitated “worry that their line of thought might ultimately lead to an American Fascism” (45). For William Alexander Percy, who placed greater emphasis on the paternalism he identified with the Mississippi Delta elite, the effort to distinguish a putatively pastoral past from an authoritarian modernity fails even more starkly: though Percy loathed fascism and feared that southern poor whites sought to introduce it into his region, Brinkmeyer exposes how Percy’s memoir repeatedly founders in its attempts to separate the gentry from poorer whites, as each seeks absolute control over other groups within their society in order to secure profit.

In contrast, writers critical of the southern social structure were quick to explore its similarities with or potential for fascism, and their analyses included a far less bifurcated understanding of time, in which fascism and traditionalism were hardly antithetical. Though W. J. Cash, for instance, initially argued that “the Southern Mind represents . . . a heritage, primarily, from the Old South,” his study of fascism and Nazism led him to view the continuities in southern culture differently and to argue that, after the demise of an already-totalitarian Old South, the existing authoritarianism in the region’s ideology had been honed and intensified (qtd. 73). Lillian Hellman associates this transformation directly with the manipulations

of profit-seeking elites: her plays on the South suggest a long history in which economic misinformation, expropriation of wealth, political deceit, and authoritarian patriarchy have deprived the society of civic courage and democratic potential. While these writers focused on southern history in developing their critique, Lillian Smith viewed the South in a broad geographic context, comparing dynamics in her society to those found in British imperialism, as each necessitated strict ideological control to sustain the coexistence of racial oppression with proclamations of democratic beneficence. Smith argues that white southerners are “haunted” by the black and mixed-race figures with whom they are intimate and yet whom they simultaneously subjugate; these figures are perceived as “ghosts” rather than persons because white southerners seek to suppress direct comprehension of black southerners’ lives. These concerns with displacement, repression, and awareness are reflected in Brinkmeyer’s title: the evils of fascism, he explains, comprised yet another “ghost” that threatened to confront white southerners with full awareness of the injustice and repression shaping their own society.

Thus, though Brinkmeyer’s method might best be described as careful and comprehensive literary and intellectual history, this work is rich in theoretical consequence also. Examining the entire oeuvre of a large group of writers, Brinkmeyer delineates how and at what points their changing understandings of European fascism—which frequently developed through travel in Germany or Italy or contact with persons who had fled persecution—altered other aspects of how they viewed politics and culture. Though these changing perceptions center on southern ideology, they often lead the authors—and *The Fourth Ghost*—into broader investigations of political behavior and artistic mission. Brinkmeyer is especially precise in describing how Faulkner’s nationalistic writing developed intentionally from his committed anti-fascism: this context for Faulkner’s effort to articulate a democratic personality and tradition sheds needed light on a crucial ambivalence in the writer’s literary trajectory. The impact of fascism on the political, social, and regional thought of Robert Penn Warren and Carson McCullers is here vividly traced through time; their meditations on the relationship between individual personality and political transformation are sufficiently fascinating, as depicted by Brinkmeyer, to stimulate further exploration of the topic. The same is true of chapters on Thomas Wolfe and Katherine Anne Porter, whose horror at fascism coexisted uneasily with their racism and distrust of democracy, tensions they were ultimately—despite numerous reversals in their thinking—unable to resolve.

Brinkmeyer fittingly concludes with a coda demonstrating the continuing importance of European fascism in white southern writing, focusing on how, during the 1970s, Walker Percy and William Styron depicted characters for whom fascist regimes provide the crucial framework

that enables them, for better or worse (as in one character who embraces what Allen Tate once called “the whole hog of reaction”), to comprehend the southern past (qtd. 31). Continuing scholarship may find this trend to be both more widespread and longer lasting than even depicted here. As I was conducting an oral history in spring, 2009, a white interviewee who was reflecting on his adolescent visits to Fayette County, Tennessee—a site of especially difficult struggle in the Civil Rights Movement—spontaneously offered,

Speaking to you now, of a different generation, I have a little more sympathy for the Germans that I knew and spent so much time with, who would say, “We didn’t know. I didn’t understand.” And you think to yourself, “How could you *not* know?” . . . And *you* [the interviewer] would look at me and you would say . . . “How was *he* not intimately involved in that struggle [for Civil Rights]?” Well, I was later, but . . . [as a teen] I was so busy living my totally enclosed, selfish little life. (Garrett)

Though isolationist approaches to southern studies often curtailed analyses of racial oppression by treating it as a specifically southern trait, actual southerners have—as *The Fourth Ghost* reveals—long sought to understand the workings and meanings of their society through comparing it with geographically distant abuses; for white southerners, this process is often uncomfortable but revelatory. Dense with implications for so many vital concerns in southern and American literature and culture—and, more broadly, for analyses that seek to understand the relationship between literature and politics—this wide-ranging and accessible book provides a vital scholarly contribution.

Works Cited

- Garrett, Floyd Bruce. Personal interview. 16 April 2009. Memphis, Tennessee.
- Tate, Allen. “*The Fugitive 1922-1925: A Personal Recollection Twenty Years After.*” *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 3.3 (April 1942): 75-84.

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